

In defence of graffiti

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One large obstacle in the way of defending graffiti is simply the dismal quality of the vast majority of the stuff. If most street artists were even only half as talented as Banksy, the task would be easier.

Yet isn't the quality of the urban landscape often enough just as dismal? A crumbling overpass isn't made any more unsightly by tags and scrawls, however stale or uninspired. When buildings are ugly and empty lots are surrounded by rough plywood sheets, insipid art doesn't render the scene any less appealing.

Let's just say, then, that there's fault on both sides. If cities and landowners were to make their property attractive and interesting, the vandals would come to understand that they, the landowners, care about the visual environment. This might move the artists to find proper venues for their work, or at least inspire them to pick up their game. And if the vandals were to learn to draw, and were to develop new styles and fresh ideas, then we all would be more inclined to accept their offerings, perhaps even to cherish some of them.

Yet expressive vandalism remains vandalism, even if it marks up nothing worth looking at in the first place, and even when it marks it up well. How can that be defended?

To begin with, by emphasizing the "expressive" part. Graffiti and other forms of expressive vandalism are attempts at expression and we should all be free, and encouraged, to express our ideas, beliefs, and emotions. Life is awful when one is prevented from hanging oneself out for others to see.

But the walls, bus-shelters, and underpasses don't belong to these people, one might object. Artists ought to rent space or buy property themselves if they want to display something, or submit their work to magazines or put it on the internet. Apart, though, from the fact that street artists lack the means to buy space, this objection implies that it's the people with money who should determine how our urban environment looks. Well, maybe it's your wall, but it's everyone's common space.

Many of the walls and telephone poles in our common space do belong to these people, though, for they belong to the public. Surfaces owned by municipalities and governments are a resource for artists and could be distributed as such, just as space for buskers is in subway systems. Moreover, people who own buildings can lend out walls for murals.

Of course, in the end, property rights must take precedence. But that doesn't mean that property owners, including the city, should either deny artists venues or jealously guard their control over the visual environment.

To summarize the defence: much in our cities is already too ugly to be made worse by graffiti; graffiti enables impecunious artists to reach a wide audience; and it's unfair that civic officials and property owners alone should determine the look of our streets. In the end, though, defending graffiti on these grounds will fail if the quality remains so low. Graffiti can be successfully defended only when people are happy to look at it. If you are going to grab surfaces, especially ones that aren't yours, make what you do with them worthwhile. Then you can rightly claim to be improving the visual environment and enhancing people's experience of the city. Your argument that it shouldn't be only the owners who get to call the shots will acquire the authority of your accomplishment.