References


Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the following individuals for the collection, transcription, and discussion of the data: Mohd Aldoyhi, Carol Cruickshank, Michele Kaye Darling, Shawn Gatton, Paul Hooge, Donna Long, Motepele Malebana, Camille Miranda, Jamil Molaeb, Janet Montgomery, Deborah Ramage, Gary Shaw, and Carol Tizzano.

Popular Culture's Revolt Against the Normalizing Consequences of Tradition

Pat Rafferty

For several years there has been an ongoing debate regarding whether street art (graffiti) qualifies as art or could be more aptly described as vandalism. While this paper does not claim to resolve the issue, a discussion of the corollary of that - the extent to which we are willing to tolerate divergence from normative expectations, lends insight into the topic of the means and limitations of what is representable as art.

An attempt will be made to look at social processes by which active relations of domination and subordination are made manifest in the context of accepting and rejecting art. Street art will be described as one aspect of popular culture that has contributed to an active reworking of the means to and the boundaries of what is representable as art.

While faceless persons who leave unsolicited messages in public are seemingly despised, they attract a following who see promise in such initiative; for them the act reasserts the importance of alternative forms of human expression and regional differences in art. The act signals a kind of emancipation of the creative spirit away from the lifeless values of an overly prescribed mainstream art deemed as antithetical to the artist as an independent thinker.

The work found in Vancouver, British Columbia reveals several different subcultures linked by significant crosscurrents. In the late seventies, a series of provocative little remarks began to appear on downtown walls in that City. They taunted the pedestrian in a playful yet provocative manner: “Free Love: Can you afford it?” “Despise Authority” and “Post Atomic Cow: Precooked.” The work was socially as well as visually provocative - a level of sophistication that dispelled any notion of graffiti as banal messages suitable only for washroom walls. This kind of street art (after this graffiti) exudes social and political satire and as a tradition it can be traced back to the early seventies.

Concurrent with this, a proliferation of a second kind appeared and was labelled Tag Graffiti by its makers. Interpreted earlier as an outright assault on the urban architecture of New York, it spread to Vancouver with local teenagers writing their aliases in highly stylized form on every available surface in the downtown core. Making your signature visible around town seemed to help establish the identity of an individual or gang.

A third kind of graffiti grew out of a sustained interest in Tag Graffiti. As signatures were drawn increasingly larger and the artists became more adept at using spray paint. Diagonals, dots, arrows, spirals and highlighting techniques gave character to scaled-up letters creating an overall razzle-dazzle of vibrant colours appropriately labelled, “Wild Style.”
Social and Political Graffiti

During the early seventies a loosely woven network of aspiring artists and writers made a break into the public venue by raising graffiti to a new level of significance. These people would demonstrate - more than any of the other local graffitists before them - a sense of precision regarding the process and its utility.

Whatever their differences, by choosing graffiti as a means for expression and circumventing the whole question of what is and what is not art, these young initiates acquired direct access to the public. As 12 Midnite explains, "Graffiti is the best way to advertise an idea." In reclaiming responsibility for art making as a lifestyle, these artists were assuming control over the means for reaching their audience - thus reaffirming the particularity of their own personal vision of art as an integral part of everyday life. Feeling betrayed by institutional constraints that limit access to conventional channels of communication, they turned to the streets for access without censorship. By nature they were too energized to get stuck on reduplicating the achievements - methods and icons - of past artists.

Lincoln Clarke, Richard Hambleton, Ed Varney and Michael de Courcy were part of a growing number of artists who came to be known as "illegal street artists." They seemed undaunted by the consequences of being perceived as vandals and they moved in and out of the urban alleyways, leaving behind a wake of paper paste-ups, freehand drawings, photos and stenciled images.

"Part of the reason why I started doing stencils was because of the neatness of the idea. It's so neat. It's concise. It's quick. You can't miss making your point. It's there! It's discreet." (12 Midnite, 1988)

Skillfully engineered, this kind of graffiti had the authority of a corporate logo repeated in rapid-fire succession all over town. Stencils, freehand painting, photos and paper paste-ups were used to create multiple images giving the appearance of small advertisements. In an ironical twist - they set in use the very tactics of a system they felt had been ignoring them. Mimicking symbolic techniques of the advertising trade - its style, strategy and form - their work was as purposeful as any advertising executive charged with accelerating an image flow. They were sarcastic enough to deliver contradictory messages in an agitative manner that mimicked the language and visual form of mass media promotion, thus luring the spectator into reaction. Urban shamans of sorts, they purposely mixed messages by masquerading subversive ideas in the symbolic paraphernalia of high-tech graphics. Leaving the message insinuated rather than obvious, they knew full well that such a potent combination was liable to drive the passive urban eye into a state of culture shock. A public constantly bombarded by advertisements for Trident Mints, Wonder Bra, Pampers and Ex-Lax is going to wonder what the inducement is in a message that reads, "1984: Coming Soon."

They familiarized themselves with pathways through the city that bore little resemblance to the experiences of the banker, lawyer or accountant. The Neo-graffitist was the manifestation of Toffler's (1970) modular man surviving in a time of accelerated change by meeting invention with invention.

Michael de Courcy actually mapped some of these pathways in his Urban Wilderness project. He provided a map with three walking tours through the city complete with stenciled messages on the sidewalks pointing to "mountain views" in between buildings, "urban wildlife," etc. A more recent project involved putting up posters of composite images of urban walls and billboards with the message "poster" printed across it in several of the different languages spoken in Vancouver.

Richard Hambleton had left Vancouver for New York in 1980 leaving behind several hundred large-as-life diazo prints of himself plastered all over the city. These gaping, life-size figures earned him the label "pop-expressionist" - a parody on generic expressionism.

Away from Vancouver, American artists Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf and "out-of-towner" Hambleton, began to achieve success as up-and-coming stars of the New York art circuit. Hambleton was invited, along with a number of other street artists to show in commercial galleries in New York. Astute gallery owners observed the animated interaction between the public and these brash young upstarts and recognized their chance to animate the mainstream art circuit.

The edition of Hambleton paste-ups that had become a hot item in New York succumbed to the Vancouver rain leaving an aftermath of ghost-like images about town - an unpleasant reminder that even the climate could be dispassionate about the effort of a young aspiring artist.
Lincoln Clarke came to Vancouver from Toronto in 1979 with a portfolio of photographic scenarios, collages, paintings and sculpture intended to jar the public by defacing what we take for granted. He soon turned to graffiti.

Nobody knew it was me in the beginning, because I wasn’t signing my work. It wasn’t for about a year afterwards that I started signing my paintings. And when I started doing my stuff I did so much of it that everybody started talking about all this stuff that was creeping up around town. I can remember going to Hamburger Mary’s on Denman Street, with Ann, and we’d just spent a few hours zipping around town spray painting and we went to this hamburger place and ran into some friends, a group of four artists. Bob Alexander is a 45-year-old sort of older artist that’s been around for years and is pretty well known in the art circles and he was talking about these spray paintings that were creeping up. I was talking to them and said, ‘Yeah, I see those things all over town, they look quite neat’ and all those people started talking. They didn’t know that it was me and I didn’t tell them and I just thought, ‘Oh my god they’re talking about me, and didn’t even know it.’ That was the first time. It was a real turn-on! (Clarke, 1985)

In the mid-eighties, Clarke had settled into a sort of patriarchal figure and his work shifted away from graffiti to more commercial photography. He became a mentor to young graffiti artists seeking him out:

N: Probably, he is one of the outstanding fathers of graffiti in Vancouver. Lincoln was military—he’s a big figure there—he must be so knowledgeable... so well informed. He gives me simple quotes, and said, ‘Why isn’t it up there?’ (N. 1984)

Several of the social and political satire graffiti artists gambled on making the leap from fame as a graffiti artist to the realm of art on their own terms. The prestigious Heffel Gallery in Vancouver held a one-man show of Clarke’s work but it did not sell. Unsurprisingly, the developmental aerobics required to meet gallery demands proved to be overly constraining for a kind of work that received its essential vitality on the street.

Big Dada a middle-aged working man with a family prompts the question of what motivates a person to do graffiti art.

There are a number of things. On a personal level, it is fun. It’s a little bit dangerous because you can get caught. That flirting with danger is fun. It brings you immediately into the present where your major concern is how you are going to accomplish this without getting caught. It forces you to become hyper-aware of your surroundings. I’ve always been a little naughty. It perpetuates this image of me. And I feel that I am doing a service, I am getting a cosmic message out without the overlay of the ego... I started doing graffiti in the early seventies. For $1.99 you could get a few words cut on stencil paper at Hewitts and I’d walk around with a can of paint and do what I called Commando Art. Most graffiti is very concise. Often it is very directed politically but there is no way of finding out who is doing it. That’s why I say that it rises out of the cultural consciousness, it’s like the walls are expressing themselves. It isn’t selling anything except a world view. Anonymity is important because it keeps you from getting caught and it keeps the messages universal, sourceless. It draws its power from its aggressiveness and its accessibility.

After graduating from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design 12 Midnite spent some time exploring urban centres in California that had an impact on his frame of reference in art.

I moved down to California hoping to pull it off that way. And then I thought, well, this is scary. This is bad news. I can’t walk down the street without the police talking to me or someone asking me to buy drugs. I mean I don’t even know it. That was the first time. It was a real turn-on! (Clarke, 1985)

I am trying to save the world. By going out there and saving Canada at least. I am trying to open people’s eyes by using the best method available to me. It is not just what I think is going on. It is going on. Its the annexation of Canada into the United States and the disintegration of our country. I don’t agree with violence, I don’t agree with drugs or religion and I deal with those things through my art.

Thomas Anfield, alias Pablo Fiasco regularly shows his work at the Jacqueline M. Gallery in Vancouver. He is a graduate of the New York Academy of Art and approaches his neoexpressionistic portrayals of the human form in a very disciplined manner.

When I started I wanted the public art to be decorative and lighter than what I was doing at home on canvas. I started to do them on little pieces of canvas and I put them up
around town but they got ripped off so fast that I started to paint them directly on the wall... You know my reason was that I was an artist and my work deserved to be seen. So, I took my art to what seemed to be the logical place to take your art at the time which was directly to the public, especially in Vancouver. Art galleries don’t have much life here. Its a very small percentage of people who will venture to the art galleries. Which is like any city I guess.

When people introduced me as Pablo Fiasco it rubbed me the wrong way. I just hated it! Well, it is a double edged sword, because I never tried to get rid of it because I was quite aware of the value it had. I don’t know if you saw that I was in Vancouver Magazine this month. There is a perfect example. There’s no way that they would have said ‘Thomas Anfield he’s not a bad painter. Let’s put him in this Magazine.’ Forget it! It’s useless. But, Pablo Fiasco, to them—the media, is a very interesting thing. So, as I said it is a double edged sword. Here you are in the art world trying to get respect for what you do, to make a decent living to pay the rent, you’ve got to say to someone ‘Pay a thousand dollars for this canvas,’ so you don’t want to be associated with something less serious like the kid on the street with the spray can. So, it has been very useful. There’s no way that I would have been in that Magazine if it weren’t for Pablo Fiasco.

Toby is a young graffiti artist who achieved a bit of transitory fame when he was fined $200 for painting a series of figures on the sidewalks of Stanley park. A developer became interested in Toby’s ambition to take his art to the people and offered him space on a hoarding on Robson Street with the intention of auctioning off the work at the end of the project. None of the works sold. Toby was discouraged by the outcome and left for Toronto.

When I go down and paint on the sea walls, I feel that I am doing cave art and I almost feel myself back in the caves painting on walls. There, I’m painting Michaelangelo’s on canvas and I can sense what it must have been like to paint all those frescoes. You have a link with these artists so that you become a part of that level of art, and you can go right back to the days of the Egyptians and you can feel that art. And you’re a part of that—you’ve never really died. You know what I’m saying? and you’ve never really been born, you’ve just always sort of been here. This life that you’re living now is a physical manifestation of that.

I was painting apartment suites and I had started to earn enough money that I had a single little apartment and a studio down in Gastown. So, I could go work in my studio, I could do bigger paintings, and I had my living quarters separate from my studio which was so nice because I could have a nice, neat, clean apartment to live in, and a place to work. It was wonderful! Then, I lost my job, so I went on UI. I ended up living in my studio and I did that for awhile. Then I moved out of my studio and into this place. I got another job working in a massage parlor. I was like a desk clerk in a massage parlor. That was part time, and that allowed me enough time to work, go to work, earn enough money to pay my rent and so on, and do all the things I wanted to do. and that’s when I started doing street art, I had to do something, because if I kept going the way I was going, it was going to be rotten—you know, work at a job then go home and work, and then you don’t have time to get your work outside your apartment. So I figured, I’ve got to do something now. If the galleries won’t take my work and I can’t get anywhere, then I’m just going to give it to them free. And the best thing I can do is just take it on the sidewalk.

Wild Style and Tag Graffiti

In the early eighties the then forward looking social and political graffiti of Vancouver was rivalled by a new kind of work on the streets called Wild Style. This unique form had grown out of the Hip-hop movement which originated in New York in the early seventies. The movement is an authentic indigenous street culture inspired by the youth of New York who use the city as a backdrop for its manifold forms—break dancing, rapping, scratching and graffiti. It emerged as an alternative to gang warfare—a level of violence among youth that gripped that urban community between 1968 and 1973. Wild Style began as Tag Graffiti—the signing of an alias on the city walls.
to create an unsettling effect. That is, an understanding of the importance of diversity to the process of change might be achieved by scrutinizing taken-for-granted ways of bringing about cohesiveness and sense of community in society — ways based on a prefigured sense of uniformity, linearity and permanence, which might no longer be effective. Habermas (1983, p. 9) suggests that the project of modernity formulated in the 18th century was an ambitious effort to develop objective science, universal morality, law and autonomous art as an all pervasive rationality freeing each from the burden of a seeming indeterminacy. He goes on to suggest that the extravagant expectations of such an imposition that promised "to promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings failed to deliver its promise. The evolution of each over time has come to mean self determined segments of a rationality detached from each other and everyday life."

Modernity generated in the 19th century a taken-for-granted notion of artist's behavior as idiosyncratic (art-for-art's sake) and this was tolerated as a phenomenon contrary to the status quo. Artists, it seems, have always suspected a great hollow in this faith wherein they are positioned both outside the constraints of survival while simultaneously being invited to adopt the conditions of status as "professional" artists. This control of the conditions for doing art has enabled institutions of dominant cultural production — museums, universities, galleries (Gablik, 1984) to attempt to secure and legitimate the means and limits of production in art. Recognition of the weaknesses inherent in such intentions does not mean to suggest the need to abandon established traditions, rather, it invites us to scrutinize a faith that has become overly cautious in respect to how it deals with displays of contraries and differences. It would seem that, differences that fly in the face of what tradition holds to be true, that set up situations of opposing tendencies require an arena in which to be heard and responded to in reciprocal terms. This seems to suggest more reflective attention be given to those conditions favouring association, unification and containment in the context of tendencies toward flux, unrest and resistance. What we speak of here is the inevitable presence in action and interaction of opposing tendencies continually in a state of creative flux wherein some contextually conditioned elements exert an influence over what we come to accept as real. Thus, the actualization of a state of difference in any context may be regarded as a healthy form of dialectic and in the larger scheme of things it should not necessarily mean the collapse of order into perpetual chaos.

Institutional ideals which promulgate what art is by measuring the fit of an act and the ensuring artifact with "the facts" have, it seems conveniently ignored some contingencies while reifying others. There seems to be an assumption that communication among members of a collective can be underscored by a valid, shared-in-common belief about art's transmittable as such from one member to another. The dynamics of any occasion that invite people to enter into communication on this premise can also be seen to operate by setting up sanctions for normative control and empowerment.
It is in this context that we begin to see street art as an attempt at the reappropriation of the representation of meaning away from institutional control. Street art stands in an active relationship of acceptance and rejection when it exposes institutional attempts to precondition what gets done as art. It is not the artifact that is the exclusive focus of this active reworking of the ground. As we witness the drama that is played out when commercial galleries invite street artists to come inside, there is the realization that the real artistry is as much in the drama of acceptance and rejection as it is in the residue left on walls. The residue left as a mark on walls merely signals that the play is in progress.

Street artists interviewed over an extensive period of time talk about how their work is indeed an active reworking of the grounds of acceptance and rejection with individual difference in mind. Firstly, doing art in unconventional places establishes the act as a possible criminal offence resulting in a rush of adrenalin and a creative high that comes with working in risky situations. Second, the possible condemnation of the act as criminal, with a threat of arrest, has come to be seen as a way of promoting the work of the artist by publicizing that expression is not the property of institutions, and third, subversive messages in street-smart graphics, utilizing corporate advertising gimmicks marks a reflexive harkening back to the task of reconciling art in the context of present day culture.

What is becoming obvious is that modernity's rational modelling of conditions for art, where only certain phenomena get sanctioned, has in the hands of the street artist drawn us into a drama that, however inadvertently, stands to rework what is representable as art.

References


