



Griffith Journal
of Law & Human Dignity

GRIFFITH JOURNAL OF LAW & HUMAN DIGNITY

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PUBLIC SPACES: PUBLIC PEOPLE

ANTHONY LISTER*

City councils and the police villainise street art, convincing the community that it is dirty, unproductive, and antisocial. Street art is the opposite — it is visual and creative freedom. Uncommissioned public art is the true mark of a community that wishes to be involved with itself. Public spaces are built so that the people can use them. Thus, the legal system's harsh prosecution of creativity lacks an understanding of the dynamics of contemporary society and is in need of a drastic revision.

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I INTRODUCTION

The problem with being a public painter, street artist or graffiti artist is that there is basically nowhere to legally practice, let alone be permitted adequate time to make work that is any good. Australian City Councils and the police have villainised my craft. They convince the community that it is a dirty, unproductive and antisocial plight on the urban environment, when it is actually the opposite. When I see tags and uncommissioned public art in a particular area, I get a feeling of hope — a hope that people may finally be learning to live with my kind. I believe that public spaces were built to be used by public people. I am a public person.

II FREEDOM THROUGH CREATIVITY

The way I describe myself in regards to being an activist is that of a freedom fighter — fighting for the freedom of visual speech. Visual speech is everything we see in our immediate world that communicates with us on an aesthetic level. When a homeowner builds a fence between their yard and their neighbours, it would be ridiculous to propose that they had the right to decide the colour of the fence on both sides. In the same vein, it is within reason that a similar approach be considered when it comes to property in the public realm. The fact that most property and respective paint jobs will not be in existence as they are now in the next 20 years begs the question, why do we care at all? Any current paint job is just an undercoat for more paint.

When asked about uncommissioned public art, people usually comment positively about colourful, detailed images of pictures, and negatively about bland, simple, text-based work. The majority of people that take offence to street art and graffiti have not been properly educated on the matter. The best way to describe the fundamental difference between street art and graffiti is that street art is a picture made up of shapes that have not yet become letters while graffiti is letters that are made up of shapes that have not yet become pictures.

III PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND PUBLIC CONTROL

The public has been desensitised by television and advertising to the extent that they have become consumption-obsessed and creatively dulled. This has made them friendly to product-endorsed visual pollution. Somehow a billboard advertising a poisonous fizzy

drink is less offensive than a brick wall in a tunnel with a colourful image selling nothing — that is when you know the world is in a mess.

The problem with the state of our public visual landscape is that there is nowhere to be free. We are told that this is a free country and that we should be thankful for our human rights being respected, yet we cannot even write a “Rest in Peace” or a “Get Well” note on a wall without it being removed (and this is the worst part) by unqualified public curators dressed as cleaners. I liken the condition of the community of Queensland street artists and graffitiists to that of an endangered species. We have been facing the extermination of creativity in Queensland for more than 30 years. It was not until I had been commissioned by the Brisbane City Council to paint electrical boxes that I started making public installations of my paintings. It was not until I left university two years later that I realised I was addicted to public exposure and had, in fact, contracted the “graffiti disease”. This gave me the ability, hunger, and audacity to activate public space.

IV THE BATTLE BETWEEN DESTRUCTIVE AND CREATIVE FORCES

When considering painting actively protects most surfaces from wear and tear, it is ridiculous to think that cleaning it off a seat or a train serves the objects’ functionality. It is, in fact, more likely to cause the surface harm. Every cleaner should know the long term negative effects that repetitive cleaning has on any surface. Cleaners who are targeting peaceful acts of communication in the public realm are put in control of editing everything that we, as the people, may never see by the wake of their sterilised brush. The financial costs that councils and police project to the public in regards to cleaning off graffiti and uncommissioned public art are outrageous and exaggerated, to say the least.¹

Bloggers, such as the Don’t Think Team have implied that the common misinformation and billing of graffiti removal is an inflation of the real cost, and that futile preventative measures are actually a black-hole trapdoor used by corrupt politicians to embezzle and provoke the community’s anger towards public creatives.² They spend huge amounts of

¹ Kim Stephens, ‘Brisbane’s \$3m Graffiti Bill’ *Brisbane Times* (online) 3 March 2014
<<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/brisbanes-3m-graffiti-bill-20140303-340oe.html>>.

² Don’t Think Graffiti, ‘ASKEW ONE’ on *ASKEW ONE* (9 November 2010)
<<http://cyprusgraff.blogspot.com.au/2010/11/askew-one.html>>.

money on campaigns to discourage public awareness of our ability to communicate with each other in the public realm and campaign against the peaceful acts of public mark-making. Meanwhile these same politicians and government bodies accept and encourage corporate advertisers by funding billboard space to exhibit their public slogans and imagery. The double standards are outrageous.

V THE BENEFITS OF PUBLIC ART IN PUBLIC SPACES

When I was a youth, I would look forward to catching the train to school or the city on the weekend. What I enjoyed most was seeing all the great artwork flash past me from the fences and walls of the discarded track lines. These days, the same walls are painted a plain, boring nothing. The taxpayer can be assured that they are paying for this induced boredom. Now that I am a taxpayer, I do not want to be bored on the train or in traffic, so I paint walls. It is an ongoing battle between those who want to destroy and those who want to create. The confusion lies between how we define creation and how we define destruction. Frustration lies within the cleaners believing that they are creating a clean environment, when in fact they are destroying the public's own artwork. Artists are being blamed for destroying public property when they are just trying to communicate creatively with each other through beautiful marks and designs.

People say to me, 'I like the art but hate the tags.' They do not realise that the tags are an informative part in the art of graffiti and, in turn, street art. The natural process is that after tags are laid and it is clear that they are not being removed, a larger, more detailed painting is produced over the tag and so on. The example that I like to use to illustrate this undiscovered beauty is to compare tags to the details on a gilded frame or the signature of a sports star. These are similar gestural expressions of mark-making that are sometimes more easily understood by the public.

I have said you cannot grow a garden of flowers without water. Would you rather a garden of dirt or a garden of weeds? Creativity is the water that feeds us all. One man's weed is another man's flower, just as one man's mess is another man's message.

VI CONCLUSION

If it were not for ancient creative pioneers like the Indigenous Australians who marked the rocks and caves of this great land, we would not be as aware of the stories they

possessed and passed on. Without the innate human desire to scratch into and onto the surfaces by which we are surrounded, we would be without the hieroglyphics of ancient Egyptians and without a fundamental visual understanding of our history. These markings have been the way our ancient ancestors have communicated to us throughout time. I see graffiti and street art as a form of time travel in that 'wherever you are — there you are', but as a graffiti or street artist 'wherever you have been — there you are'. There is a special feeling that goes along with this type of existence, a feeling of belonging to and being at one with your environment and those who interact with it. If an in-depth anthropological and psychoanalytical study were to be conducted on the effects of areas of a society set free to express visual speech, I am sure that society's sense of community would dramatically improve.

The broken window theory is true to a degree, however it also works in the opposite way. This means that if a great piece of art is built, then an even greater piece of art is installed to compliment it and so on. The famous New York graffiti artist LEE wrote in 1972, 'Graffiti is an art, and if art is a crime, let god forgive all.'³ This is a bold, but honest and enlightening statement. Surely the sheer number of men and women jailed for acts of creativity did not do so for the system to continue wrecking the lives of others just like them. When I tell people there are artists like myself imprisoned for having done the same amount of mindful beautification in similar spaces, they are shocked at the realisation. In the bewilderment surrounding the imprisonment of creatives, it becomes clear that the justice system's harsh prosecution of creatives lacks a modern, dynamic understanding and is in need of an immediate, drastic revision.

³ Caroline Gabrielli, 'Exhibitions: Graffiti Art MCNY' on Mixed Media Archives (16 August 2014) <<http://www.mixed-media-archives.com/blog/2014/8/23/exhibition-review-city-as-canvas>>.

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