
Graffiti as Artistic Appropriation of Public Space

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Abstract

Graffiti has become a global phenomenon of sociological significance. Literature concerning graffiti addresses identity politics, criminality, the concept of "Broken Windows", and questions of whether graffiti is art. For 15 years I have been photographing graffiti in Bogotá, Colombia, documenting its proliferation throughout the city, its de-criminalization, and the transformation in its content.

Graffiti, as art of the proletariat, uses property of bourgeoisie as canvas, redistributing its use to the people. An ephemeral production, graffiti opens itself to degradation, destruction, and over-writing. In a cultural turn, graffiti is no longer always transgressive. Funding, gallery sponsorship, and commissioned walls are evidence that artists are challenging the capitalist notion of who determines which walls will be painted. I see the presence of graffiti as a mark of democratic use of public space, and note its resonance with street performance and informal street economy. A democratic society can be measured by ways that streets belong to the citizenry.

What is the unifying element of graffiti that explains at once its proliferation, decriminalization, and shift in content? I hypothesize that graffiti is, and always has been, a folk art. My analysis uses folklorist criteria: the artist finds inspiration in critique of the local environment, envisions the community that lives or passes through the specific location, selects icons and physical characteristics recognizable to the viewer, and intricacy of the work is an indicator of authority/criminality/legitimate funding. My analysis identifies the locations, themes, and artists of graffiti in Bogotá; and deepens understanding through interviews with crews.

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