

Art and Culture- Graffiti as an Original Element of Hip-hop
By Emily S. Hanson

The beginnings of the Hip-hop cultural movement were built on a foundation of the principle elements of the culture. These elements are emceeing, dj-ing , b-boying (break dancing), bombing (graffiti), and knowledge of self and culture¹. Each of these elements plays a considerable role in establishing legitimacy to the Hip-hop culture and encouraging scholars to investigate the movement as a cultural phenomenon.

The first argument one faces in a study of Hip-hop is, what delineates this set of behaviors and beliefs as a separate and unique discipline of cultural study? In other words, what makes Hip-hop a culture and what quality of this culture makes it a valuable area of study?

Molefi Asante, author, professor, and the founding and preeminent theorist of Afrocentricity, provides an answer. He argues that there are four hallmarks of culture: history, myth, ethos (character, values, customs), and motif (slang, clothes, art). If these criteria are fulfilled, Asante states that this way of life is a distinctive culture.¹

To investigate this idea on a more specific level, it is helpful to look at one element of Hip-hop, bombing, or graffiti, as an indicator of culture and a key player in the foundation of Hip-hop. When using the word *graffiti* in this context, it describes what "Art Crimes," and online gallery of graffiti art from around the world, calls:

[the] term applied to an arrangement of institutionally illicit marks in which there has been an attempt to establish some sort of coherent composition: such marks are made by an individual or individuals (not generally professional artists) upon a wall or other surface that is usually visually accessible to the public.²

Within the context of Hip-hop culture, graffiti specifically describes the practice of marking public locations with letters, numbers, and images symbolizing a person's persona using spray paint or pens³, which began in Philadelphia in 1967 and almost simultaneously appeared in New York City⁴, where it expanded in practice and notoriety, particularly in response to the massive anti-graffiti campaign of Mayor Lindsay and other city officials by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA).⁵ This practice of graffiti is considered a principle element of Hip-hop culture on the foundation that graffiti is a motif of the culture and that specific customs surrounding graffiti writers and their work are a form of ethos.

However, with any element of Hip-hop culture, the question of what qualifies as art becomes a relevant and significant issue. Particularly, this matter becomes a controversial one in the case of graffiti, which is a visual form of expression but has also been deemed illegal in many, if not most circumstances.

In order to better understand graffiti as a form of expression and, perhaps, an artistic medium, it is necessary

to investigate a number of questions: First, what is art and who decides? Next, must legality play a role in what is considered art and what is considered vandalism? Is it possible that some graffiti can be art while other graffiti is nothing more than illegal defacement? In other words, is bombing in its purest and most natural state illegal by definition, or are the pieces of artwork created by graffiti writers then placed in museums as legitimate forms of graffiti as any other? By exploring these questions and looking at both historic and current trends in graffiti, it might be possible to gain a better understanding of what makes art. Further, by appreciating the role of art in the establishment of a new cultural movement, it is possible to see how graffiti helped establish Hip-hop as a rich and thriving culture.

The most fundamental issue that must be considered is the question, what is art? On a concrete level, the word "art" is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as *"the conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty; specifically, the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium."*⁶ However, the application of this unambiguous definition to something as fluid as artistic expression has proven problematic. For example, artists from Pablo Picasso to Andres Serrano have challenged the idea that art must be beautiful, pleasant, or calculated.

As the classic definition has proven to be inadequate, a less restrictive explanation of art might be more appropriate. Author Leo Tolstoy composed an essay entitled "What is Art?" in which he addresses the issue on a philosophical level. He writes:

Art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications...To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art... Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.⁷

By Tolstoy's definition, the act of emotive and emotional expression is intrinsically artistic; therefore, to express oneself is to create art.

Graffiti in its fundamental and/or most elaborate states meet the criteria for art through both the traditional and theoretical definitions. However, the illegal nature of graffiti in its purest form causes the additional complication of whether graffiti is still art if it is illegal and if bombing on subway trains and buildings

is inherently the same as the graffiti now featured in galleries and private collection throughout the world.

An investigation into the history of graffiti and the first appearances of this practice can go back as far as the first cave paintings or, and more notably, the civilization of ancient Egypt. The scholar Gay Robins writes in The Art of Ancient Egypt, "Certainly they [ancient Egyptians] had no notion of gathering pieces of 'art' together in a gallery or museum for the sole purpose of viewing it, although later generations were not averse to visiting earlier monuments and leaving their comments in the form of graffiti."⁸ As shown by these ancient writers, the exercise of using public property as a place for personal expression is a tradition begun long before the streets of Philadelphia in late 1960s. Since they did not distinguish one form of art as having a superior or more legitimate place in public recognition than another, the "illegal" marking of old monuments is giving the same attention as the monument itself in current historical studies of art. Following this line of thought, in conjunction with the definitions of art, it can be supportably argued that graffiti, whether illegal or authorized, is a form of valid artistic expression worthy of recognition and study.

When applied to Asante's four cultural hallmarks, this qualification of graffiti as art means that Hip-hop has a motif in the pieces themselves. In addition, the customs of the graffiti writers can be used to demonstrate the ethos of

the early Hip-hop generation. In the book The Experience Music Project: Yes Yes Y'all - Oral History of Hip-hop's First Decade, founding members of the Hip-hop generation including the earliest graffiti writers discusses the sub-culture of bombers. Bombers had their own rules of courtesy; for example, it was considered inappropriate for one write to copy another's style or write over someone else's work. In bomber culture, there were also centers of operation and evaluation. The train yards were the scene of late-night production of new pieces, and the Writers' Bench was a place where the trains passed and pieces could be discussed and evaluated.⁹ Without question, the customs of the sub-culture of graffiti writers fulfills the ethos area of Asante's hallmark of culture.

By investigating the Hip-hop element, graffiti, and applying Molefi Asante's hallmarks of culture, it is possible to argue that Hip-hop is a culture unique from any other, and therefore, it is an area into which further study needs to be done. The belief is made on the foundation that graffiti is art and art is a marking characteristic of culture, regardless of the issue of legality. Additionally, the sub-culture of graffiti writers provides further evidence of the phenomenon as a cultural indicator. By applying a multi-disciplinary approach to the investigation, this type of evaluation is possible and illuminating on the evolution of American culture as shown through the Hip-hip movement.

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