

Pop Aesthetics in Graffiti Praxis

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Abstract:

This study examines the interplay between graffiti art and Pop aesthetics through a transhistorical analysis spanning from graffiti's prehistoric origins to its digital-age transformations. Employing iconographic analysis and sociocultural critique, the paper traces graffiti's evolution from its countercultural roots in 1960s New York to its institutionalization as a hybrid art form engaging with Pop Art's visual strategies. Key findings reveal that graffiti and Pop aesthetics share symbiotic relationships in their subversion of traditional art hierarchies, appropriation of mass culture symbols, and deployment of bold chromatic palettes. However, critical divergences emerge in their sociocultural positioning: while Pop Art often critiques consumer culture from an institutionalized vantage, graffiti remains rooted in working-class vernacular, embodying raw sociopolitical dissent through street-level praxis. The research further documents graffiti's contemporary metamorphosis via digital platforms such as augmented reality (AR) filters and virtual reality (VR) tools, arguing that these technological mediations have democratized graffiti's accessibility while diluting its insurgent ethos. Case studies of Keith Haring and Banksy illustrate how graffiti negotiates Pop's commercial appeal while retaining street credibility. The paper concludes by positing graffiti's future trajectory as a contested terrain between commodification, technological innovation, and grassroots activism, emphasizing its enduring role as a barometer of societal tensions. These insights contribute to ongoing discourses on art's permeability to technological change and the persistent duality of institutional co-optation versus subcultural authenticity.

Keywords:

Graffiti Art, Pop, Visual Art, Symbols, Integrated Applications

1. Overview of Graffiti Art Theory

1.1. *Graffiti and Graffiti Art*

Graffiti, derived from the Italian "graffio," refers to a method of writing by pressing on wax [1]. Traditional descriptions of graffiti vacillate between writing and painting, text and image. The origin of the graffiti concept can be traced back to cave paintings in primitive times. During prehistoric eras, cave paintings and hieroglyphics served as the initial forms of graffiti, primarily using animal bones and natural materials to depict religious content or daily life [2].

In current contexts, graffiti art primarily refers to modern graffiti that emerged in New York in the late 20th century and its derivatives in the industrial field. Susan Phillips, an American scholar, categorizes the term "graffiti" in different languages into two types: one referring to writing on walls without value judgments, and the other describing graffiti as dirty, polluting, or immature. In China, there are also early records of graffiti [3]. The Tang Dynasty poet Lu Tong wrote a poem, "Adding a Son," describing his young son's playful scribbles as "like an old crow dipping into ink and smearing poetry and books." Graffiti is often seen as an unconventional, rebellious, unhealthy, or even illegal activity.

Graffiti art has always faced contradictions: on one hand, respect for art and the importance and proficiency of writing have been diminished; on the other hand, graffiti's rebellious violence and the obscurity of written content have led to misunderstandings [4].

1.2. The Development of Graffiti Art

Graffiti, which emerged in the 1960s, is represented by the New York style and subway art. Often referred to as "old school," hip-hop graffiti typically refers to works created before 1984, with subway art being one of the most familiar forms. In the 1960s, the Bronx in New York was filled with various graffiti everywhere, but most of them were just scribbled gang symbols or obscene patterns mixed with "bathroom literature." [5] At that time, the Bronx was also known as a "gathering place for primitives." However, a few talented young artists in the area were not satisfied with these simple tags and began creating their own new tags, trying to make them more aesthetically pleasing. Thus, graffiti evolved from simple text forms, known as TAGs, into a combination of text and images, such as pairing text with crowns to showcase the solemnity of the TAG.

In 1971, a young man named Demetrius, who lived on 183rd Street in Washington Heights, Manhattan, due to his job distributing flyers, traveled through the streets every day, leaving his name "TAKI 183" inside and outside the city's subways and in every corner of every station. This act caught the attention of a reporter from The New York Times, who interviewed Demetrius. The interview was published in The New York Times on June 21, 1971, and resonated strongly with Demetrius's peers. Hundreds of young people began to imitate his behavior, leaving their own tags on public buildings such as trains, subways, and neighborhoods [6].

In 1972, Hugo Martinez, a student in the Department of Sociology at New York City University, gathered a group of graffiti artists to form the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) and invited graffiti masters from various districts to create graffiti on a wall covered with paper at New York City University. From these graffiti artists, representative individuals were selected to hold an exhibition in New York, which was the first large-scale public event in the history of graffiti art [7]. As most of the graffiti in the early 1970s was satirical towards the government, the New York City government launched a major crackdown on graffiti in 1973. However, this graffiti cleanup campaign not only failed to eliminate graffiti but also provided graffiti artists with new spaces to create. It didn't take long for the graffiti artists to cover the newly cleaned surfaces of trains and walls with their art. Due to financial constraints, the government eased its restrictions on graffiti, leading to the flourishing development of graffiti in New York in the late 1970s.

Over time, graffiti gained recognition in both art and cultural status in New York in the 1980s. In 1981, the first commercial gallery dedicated to graffiti art, Fun Gallery, was established in New York. The gallery's initial exhibition of about 20 works sold out quickly. After four or five exhibitions, collectors sensed the potential for profit and began opening galleries, inviting street graffiti artists to exhibit in them. Various graffiti culture exhibitions were held in New York galleries one after another, and graffiti thus transformed from its previous form into an elegant art form.

After the 1990s, due to changes in people's attitudes, graffiti gradually became commercialized and acquired the name "Street Art." It spread from New York to Europe, North America, South America, Asia, and other places. The internet provided graffiti artists with new walls to create on, and in 2000, Futura founded the largest graffiti website, www.graffiti.org, allowing graffiti artists to learn from each other at the fastest speed. Graffiti was no longer just a tool for a small group of people; it even became a form of cultural exchange between different countries.

Over the decades of its development, graffiti art has faced many challenges and gradually entered the world of fashion and culture, becoming a popular art form loved by youth around the world. Today, graffiti art has established itself in the fields of art, fashion, and design, and continues to evolve under the influence of new media, presenting a new visual language in our daily lives. With its unique charm, it attracts scholars and designers to explore, cross boundaries, and innovate.

1.3. The spirit of graffiti

The spirit of graffiti is often expressed through rebellion against the social system. Artists challenge authority through bold graffiti works, conveying their queries and dissatisfaction with institutional rules. This spirit makes graffiti art a means of expressing voices from the bottom, allowing the viewpoints of different social groups to be presented concretely and vividly. This subversive and satirical design is actually an impulse for compulsory identification from the civilian class that exists in every era. However, in the contemporary Western context of multiculturalism and diverse values, it has clearly been endowed with more postmodern entertainment cultural elements [7].

The spirit of graffiti emphasizes breaking the rules of traditional art and pushing the boundaries of traditional creation [8]. Graffiti artists often have a strong creative instinct and choose street walls instead of galleries to showcase their work in a free expression. This unrestrained creative instinct makes graffiti works full of personality and originality. Graffiti art often focuses on social issues, with artists expressing their observations and thoughts on social phenomena through their works. From urban poverty to environmental issues, graffiti works convey artists' concerns about social problems and serve as a visual social commentary. This social concern makes graffiti an art form with a sense of social responsibility.

Graffiti artists often choose to remain anonymous, not just out of legal concerns, but also as a continuation of the spirit of graffiti art [9]. By remaining anonymous, artists shift the focus from the individual to the work itself, emphasizing the power of art and the importance of information transmission. This anonymity injects a sense of mystery and universality into graffiti art. The spirit of graffiti is deeply rooted in street culture and fuses with elements such as music and fashion. This fusion makes graffiti art not just a static visual art but also a dynamic cultural expression. Graffiti works often resonate with the urban environment, creating a unique street style.

2. Pop Attitude in Graffiti Art

2.1. Connection between Graffiti Art and Pop

Graffiti art and pop design emerged during the same period in the 20th century, exhibiting close ties not only in their artistic expressions but also in their creative motivations, aesthetic concepts, and responses to society. Both graffiti art and pop design emphasize a profound understanding of popular culture and convey messages through bright, vivid, and concise visual language. Color plays a significant role in the visual communication of images. During the artistic creation process, artists often choose different colors based on their varying moods, resulting in distinct artistic styles that physiologically influence and impact viewers. In contrast to the rational beauty advocated by traditional neoclassical art, pop art emphasizes sensibility, paying great attention to exaggerated tones and impactful visuals [10].

Color is a crucial language in pop art, with artists pursuing bold color combinations and strong contrasts to imbue their works with a strong decorative flair. Keith Haring is a renowned graffiti artist whose work quickly gained prominence in the 1980s. Haring's graffiti style is characterized by simplified graphics and lively colors, often displayed on city walls and subway stations [11]. His works are not only social satires of the time but also demonstrate a profound understanding of mass culture. Meanwhile, Haring's work is clearly influenced by pop design. He incorporates symbols of mass culture, such as drones, televisions, and musical notes, simplifying and bringing these symbols to life. This echoes the approach of pop artists like Andy Warhol, who used symbols of mass-produced goods. The lively figures and bright colors in Haring's graffiti bear similarities to the exaggerated, brightly colored images commonly seen in pop design, reflecting the connection between graffiti art and pop design in terms of expression and aesthetic concepts. Both graffiti art and pop design express attitudes towards consumer culture, particularly in response to commercialization and mass media. Pop art transforms everyday consumer goods into art through exaggeration and deformation, reflecting society's fervor for consumerism at that time. Graffiti art similarly responds directly to consumer culture through its presence in the urban environment, emphasizing art's accessibility and anti-traditional nature. Both graffiti art and pop design contain elements of social satire, using exaggeration, deformation, and subversion of traditional images for irony. Pop art is renowned for its mockery and ridicule of socio-cultural phenomena, while graffiti art expresses a rebellious spirit through its urban graffiti and challenges to authority and norms. This social satire and rebellious spirit make graffiti art and pop design a common anti-traditional force in contemporary art [12]. Banksy is an anonymous British graffiti artist whose work is filled with social satire and a rebellious spirit. He uses graffiti as a medium to express viewpoints and comment on society, aligning with the social commentary nature of pop art. Banksy's work "Vase Projection" is a striking example. The piece begins with an image of a vase but, under light projection, transforms into a metaphorical shadow of war, expressing the delicate relationship between war and peace through simple graphics. This use of everyday symbols to convey profound social ideas corresponds with the aesthetic transformation of everyday life often seen in pop design. Both graffiti art and pop design elevate ordinary things to the status of art through the absorption and re-creation of mass culture. Pop art creates new aesthetic experiences by reinterpreting symbols of mass culture. Graffiti art, on the other hand, emphasizes art's ubiquity by transforming ordinary city walls and buildings into artworks, turning urban spaces into creative

mediums. This absorption and re-creation of mass culture endow them with unique artistic qualities. In these aspects, graffiti art and pop design exhibit clear correlations, indicating commonalities in creative inspiration, aesthetic pursuits, and responses to contemporary society. This correlation is not only reflected in superficial forms but also deeply reflects artists' sensitive insights into the culture and values of their era.

2.2. Differences between Graffiti Art and Pop

Graffiti art shares a spiritual consistency with Pop art to some extent and inherits and develops Pop culture, focusing on popular culture. However, nearly all Pop artists have received professional art education, distinct from graffiti artists who are often working-class and nourished by popular culture. Although popular culture is a common core for both graffiti art and Pop art, Pop artists' educational backgrounds and family origins mean they only superficially understand popular culture, expressing their intentions and thoughts without truly engaging with it. They often observe popular culture with a "neutral" attitude, lacking credibility and persuasiveness, making it difficult for their works to resonate with many people. Graffiti artists do not face such issues. They live in popular culture, feeling its impact daily and being direct experiencers and creators of popular culture. Graffiti art inherits and develops Pop art, sharing the same soil and culture, and aligning spiritually. It leans towards the masses, closely linking people's lives with art.

Graffiti art also shows rebellion against traditional art, similar to Pop art. However, graffiti art rejects traditional art and its inherent systems, not just artistic forms. Graffiti artists are unconstrained by traditional art, creating freely without any restrictions.

3. Modern Applications of Graffiti Art

3.1. The Current Status of Graffiti Art

Graffiti still faces legal issues as it is often viewed as vandalism of public property. However, some cities have become more inclusive, embracing graffiti as part of urban culture. Societal acceptance of graffiti is gradually increasing, recognizing it as a unique art form [13].

Some graffiti artists have successfully entered the commercial sector, collaborating with brands and companies to provide unique graffiti styles for product design. This commercial cooperation offers graffiti artists new revenue streams and broader exhibition platforms for their works. In the digital age, graffiti is no longer limited to physical walls. The rise of virtual graffiti and digital art allows graffiti artists to create in virtual spaces and share with a global audience.

3.2. Examples of Graffiti Art Applications

Snapchat, a popular social media platform, introduced Augmented Reality (AR) technology, allowing users to add virtual elements to their photos and videos, including AR graffiti. This digital graffiti provides users with creative entertainment and makes graffiti more accessible and shareable [14]. Graff.io is an online platform introducing graffiti art to the digital realm. Collaborating with graffiti artists, it offers digitally copyright-protected works that users can purchase on the website. This digital graffiti market provides artists with a new revenue stream and makes graffiti art more accessible for collectors and appreciators. Google Tilt Brush is a virtual

reality painting application where users can create in three-dimensional space using virtual brushes. This digital painting tool offers graffiti artists a new creative environment, enabling them to create complex, dynamic graffiti works in virtual space. Moreover, Tilt Brush allows users to share their virtual artworks with others, promoting the socialization of graffiti in the digital domain.

Many social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, offer graffiti-style AR filters, allowing users to add virtual graffiti elements to their photos and videos and share their creativity with audiences. This form of digital graffiti is popular among users and provides artists with a platform to showcase and promote their works digitally.

3.3. Future Outlook for Graffiti Art

With the continuous advancement of technology, digital art and virtual reality have provided graffiti artists with new creative platforms [15]. Virtual walls and digital canvases offer them more space for experimentation, while also making graffiti art easier to preserve and share. Graffiti artists may place greater emphasis on conveying social responsibility and concerns about social issues through their work. Through graffiti, they can draw attention to issues such as the environment, social justice, and cultural diversity. Graffiti artists are likely to engage more in international cultural exchanges and cross-disciplinary collaborations. This helps promote the collision and fusion of graffiti styles from different regions and cultural backgrounds, creating more innovative and globalized works. Cross-disciplinarity represents both integration and adaptation, as well as continuation. At the turn of the century, graffiti began its cross-disciplinary journey with design. Naturally, opinions on this are divided, given their distinct developmental trajectories, creative philosophies, and categorization into different art forms. However, as curator Xiao Ge noted, “I can accept any well-executed cross-disciplinarity, whether it’s between industries or artistic mediums. Because the value of cross-disciplinarity lies in activating previously unrelated, even contradictory or opposing elements, generating new possibilities and new appearances. This is a positive development, but it should be done in moderation. When individuals from other fields cross over to become artists, it enriches the possibilities of artistic creation. Artists integrating different artistic mediums into their work expand the horizons of artistic expression.”

4. Conclusions

Graffiti art is likely to continue making progress in legal and social recognition. The digital era offers graffiti artists a broader development space, and their concern for social issues is expected to become a significant theme in future works. The evolution of graffiti art will continue to be influenced by social and technological changes, leading to more diverse and vibrant forms of artistic expression.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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