

Arguing Over Art: The Conflicting Sides of Graffiti

The debate surrounding graffiti and its significance in our society has been heated as of late and there are several opinions surrounding the issue. All eight of the authors within this essay present examples of these opinions, and they must be analyzed to point out their similarities and differences, with the ultimate goal of finding a point that they can unanimously agree on. The articles all agree on the existence of graffiti, and they partially agree on the definition of graffiti; all concluding that it is a crime, yet some saying that it is also art. From this point the articles only diverge in their opinions of the quality of graffiti and the proposed plans of action concerning it.

All of the articles start by agreeing on one point: the existence of graffiti. They never openly state this, however it is implicit in all of the pieces. None of the authors speak of graffiti's existence; they simply start by giving their definition of what it is (Felisbret, Para.1; MacDonald, Para.1; Pink, Para.2; Olivero, Para.1; Scott, Para.2; City of Knoxville, Para.1). Not only do they acknowledge that graffiti exists, they acknowledge that it exist on a national and global scale. For example, Lady Pink acknowledges the presence of graffiti in New York City and Olivero gives an example of graffiti's influence in Brazil (para.7; para. 5). This gives a greater sense of where graffiti exist and helps to expand the argument beyond the domestic by giving new perspectives to consider when defining, qualifying, and suggesting action for graffiti. Essentially, they are all assuming that their readers acknowledge the fact that graffiti and public art exist. The

implicit argument of graffiti's existence is the only point that all articles agree on completely and it is key for them to agree as it serves as a foothold for them to progress to their diverging arguments by giving them a base to build upon.

Next we must look at how Felisbret, Lady Pink, Olivero, and Scott define graffiti.

Though they use the terms "graffiti" and "vandalism" which in our culture have negative connotations, the authors agree that graffiti is an expression of individualism, and therefore art. An example of this includes the following from Olivero: "Vandalism is expression and that is what makes it art" (para. 1). By defining graffiti as art the authors are setting up the basis for the deeper portions of their arguments, which build off of this definition and our traditional thoughts towards art.

On the other side of this opinion, we have MacDonald and the WATE article. These pieces use the terms "graffiti" and "vandalism" in a way that is very familiar: referring to crime. "Graffiti's most salient characteristic is that it is a crime" (MacDonald, para. 3). This quote sums up the arguments of these two articles: Graffiti is a crime, regardless of circumstance. As with the opposition, it is vital that these two articles agree on this fact, as the rest of their arguments will be built on this point and our conventional feelings and actions toward crime.

Moving along we analyze how the authors view graffiti. The writers who defined graffiti as art present the argument that since graffiti is art, it is expression, and therefore a positive thing for the artist and the viewer. Lady Pink states, "If graffiti is inspiring, it's because it's fun, cool and does not take formal training" (para. 5), and Eleanor Scott says, "A lot of Knoxville graffiti art displays sweetness, humor, and an earnest desire to engage with the world." (para. 13). They approach graffiti as art and give it qualities that one would give to conventional art, however, MacDonald and WATE have a very different opinion of the quality of graffiti.

In opposition MacDonald and the WATE article give graffiti the same attributes one would assign to crime: deviant, bad, and harmful to society. The WATE article gives testimony to the fact that graffiti lowers property values (para. 8) and MacDonald cites a 2008 journal that states graffiti and physical disorder have a contagious effect, thus confirming the "Broken-Window Theory" (para. 4). The way they view graffiti goes hand in hand with the way they defined it, and it will continue to correlate into both sides' proposed ideas of action.

Interestingly, proposed courses of action vary even between the pro-graffiti authors. Plans such as creating legal areas for graffiti (Felisbret, para. 7) and keeping graffiti illegal simply so it can exist in its purest form (Olivero, para. 9) are just two examples of this. However, a common thread can be found in all of these plans of action in that they all call for the advancement and encouragement of graffiti and public art. This fact fits in with the other arguments made by the pro-graffiti side because it too stems from their argument of definition. They view graffiti as art and treat it as our society commonly treats art: by supporting its progression and fighting to maintain its relevancy. This is the final stage of Felisbret's, Lady Pink's, Olivero's, and Scott's arguments that they formed when they defined graffiti as art.

Contrary to the graffiti-positive group, the action policies do not vary between the two anti-graffiti articles. Both call for action to be taken to cover graffiti and prevent taggers from offending again. MacDonald praises an example of the New York Police Department stopping and removing graffiti from their subway network (para. 6) and the WATE article tells the public to call the Knoxville Police Department in incidences of graffiti (para. 9). These, like the pro-graffiti articles, are directly related to their definition of graffiti. If they view graffiti as a crime, they will plan action for it as they do for crime, thus wanting graffiti to be dealt with and wanting it to occur less frequently.

Conclusively, we must look at this contested issue from both sides, and attempt to draw topics and points that both groups can agree upon, and ones that they can agree to disagree on. An agreement can be reached in the argument of existence because all of the authors implicitly agree on graffiti's presence in our world. Also, agreement can be found to an extent when defining graffiti, as both sides agree that graffiti is a crime; However, this leads to the first divergence in opinion, with Felisbret, Lady Pink, Olivero, and Scott all agreeing that it is also a creative expression and therefore art, while MacDonald and the WATE article believe graffiti is a crime only. Agreement cannot be reached within the arguments that qualify graffiti, due to the pro-graffiti authors saying that it is fun, expressive, sweet, earnest, and a good outlet, and the anti-graffiti writers say that it is vandalistic, detrimental, and bad for society. Similarly, agreement can't be reached regarding the suggested plans of action, as they are essentially split between one side wanting to expand and celebrate graffiti and another side wanting to reduce and cease it. To continue the conversation, the authors should consider finding common ground in qualifying graffiti by agreeing that it is artistic and creative, yet criminal and wrong in placement. This coming together of qualitative ideas would then lead to more similar proposed policies to deal with graffiti and public art.

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The Great Art Argument

The argument of graffiti in public spaces is an ongoing one. It is mostly revolved around how distracting or wrong graffiti is. Six article writers give their opinions and knowledge of the conversation and try to shed some light on the matter. These individuals are Eric Felisbret, Lu Olivero, Heidi Wigdahl, Kayla Strayer, Heather MacDonald, and "City of Knoxville". Although all these writers agree the issue exists, they have opposing views on what this issue should really be defined as, how wrong or right it is, and what exactly should be done about it in terms of a new law or policy.

In this particular argument, one thing is certain: everyone arguing agrees the issue exists. No one denies the fact that graffiti art is present and in Knoxville. This is the first stepping stone to the argument, for if no one agreed on this, they would be quite stuck. They have reached a point of stasis at this point in the conversation. Obviously, graffiti is everywhere in the world, but these arguers are particularly talking about the Knoxville and New York City areas. It is without a doubt graffiti has become more prominent in Knoxville and New York City. That is reinforced by things said like, "The City of Knoxville is experiencing a significant increase in graffiti within the past two months." (Wigdahl) para. 1). This is a common point made in many of the articles. Basically, they are just acknowledging the fact that this issue exists.

There are a few different terms that are used to define this issue. Most writers are calling it graffiti. However, it is apparent that the people that are calling it graffiti and associating it with

the concept of art, are art lovers themselves or in some way affiliated with art in their life. In Felisbret's article, he states, "And yet, modern graffiti is widely acknowledged as art" (para. 3). He is arguing or assuming everyone knows graffiti is art. Felisbret is also a co-founder of a graffiti history website) and obviously a graffiti enthusiast.

On the other hand, some individuals use the words "nuisance" or "vandalism" when regarding to graffiti. They do not associate graffiti with art whatsoever. Rather, it is viewed as a distraction to society or a meaningless crime that just conjures up more vandals. Heather MacDonald supports this claim by saying, "Graffiti is always vandalism" (para. 3). Strayer, a reporter from Channel 6 News in Knoxville, receives some of the same opinions. She interviews a man, Tony Rando, who works close to Broadway and North Central Streets. He says, "I don't see it as artwork," then later says how it can be a "nuisance" to business owners (qtd in para. 10). He is arguing a term that is associated with annoyance. Both of these statements clearly illustrate what people are calling this issue) and draw the line between "art" or "vandalism".

Possibly the biggest factor that goes into this ongoing debate, is whether or not graffiti is a bad thing that brings in bad people, or if it just an artist's way of expressing themselves and causes no harm to society or to the public eye. This is the main issue why graffiti is in fact illegal in almost all places) and why it sparked such a relentless argument. Everyone has an opinion, and some believe that graffiti is just truly bad for Knoxville. *cliche - How can*

In the article by MacDonald, she expresses pure discontent regarding graffiti art. She associates it with vandals, or criminal people that do criminal things. She said, "There is nothing 'progressive' about allowing public amenities to be defaced by graffiti; anyone who can avoid a graffiti-bombed park or commercial thoroughfare will do so, since tagging shows that an area is dominated by vandals who may be involved in other crimes as well" (para. 5). She is very *good!*

opposed to thought of graffiti and truly believes graffiti goes hand in hand with crime. The voice of the individuals who dislike the thought of graffiti or vandalism, really do not even give graffiti the time of day. Their only statements are really revolved around how it is illegal and how much it costs to remove it.

Of course, there are those who are all for graffiti art in ^{we} many places. Like I mentioned earlier, the people that are enthusiastic about this topic and want graffiti to be spread everywhere are in fact art enthusiasts themselves or in some way or form are associated with it in their lives. Eric Felisbret and Lu Olivero both not only think graffiti is okay, but they think it even serves a public good. For instance, in Olivero's article, when talking about police and graffiti in Brazil, he says, "They understand that graffiti can be a career opportunity for youth in low-income neighborhoods." (para. 6). He is arguing that graffiti gives impoverished young people a chance at a decent career, and doing something that they are not only passionate about, but talented in the skill of graffiti art. However, it is clear that both sides are not really agreeing on anything in ^{we} the aspects of right or wrong.

Lastly, there are those who are in the middle of the situation. Both Strayer and Wigdahl do not express any of their own concerns or opinions, but other individuals' instead. They get feedback from both sides of the argument, and no new points or claims are made. Everyone on either side is really saying the same things. In Strayer's article, she says property owners claim it causes damage, and also costs them money (para. 16). Property owners are arguing for the sake of their businesses, and by default do not support graffiti in any way. ^{we} While in Wigdahl's article, she interviews a man, Chris Cornett. He said, "Instead of just covering it up, why don't you talk to someone who does art and put something beautiful there?" (para. 12). He believes art is a good addition to a blank space rather than a costly burden. Cornett is part of a project called the

Artist Alley Revamp Project. This just demonstrates even more the kind of people behind the graffiti movement. Non-art lovers seem to not agree or relate to graffiti nearly as much.

When it comes down to it, not a whole lot has been done to eradicate this situation in terms of the law or new policies. From the research I have seen, however, much more is going to be done most likely. It is just a matter of when and how. Although, the arguers have different agendas when it comes to this point in the argument. There are some common points, and some more divergent and different points.

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The common points are expected. In the "City of Knoxville" article, they seem very determined to get rid of graffiti indefinitely, using a pressure washer and the help from Knoxville residents to report graffiti. The Public Service Director for the City of Knoxville, David Brace, states "We have a strategy, and it seems to be working, but it's expensive, and there are certainly better ways to spend taxpayer dollars than to repaint or clean off the sides of public buildings," (para. 2). *add. in "City of K"* Brace and the individuals performing these duties of extinguishing graffiti are obviously tired of the issue. There is some more action concerning covering up graffiti, but not a lot of action. Knoxville Police say that they send out crews a few times out of the year to cover up or get rid of graffiti (Strayer para. 16). On this side of the argument, the people involved do not seem patient with graffiti or any activities its related to.

Some of the different points made about new laws or policies come from Felisbret and Olivero. In Felisbret's article, he talks about how there are now legal venues to perform public art or graffiti in New York City and surrounding areas (para. 7). He pushes for more legal venues, because it can provide a much safer work area than a dark train tunnel filled with hazardous objects or dangerous people. Olivero says similar things to this. He talks about how in Brazil, like mentioned earlier, that graffiti is completely legal, excluding historical buildings,

now since they discovered how it can help people start a career and deter crime (para. 8).
Compared to what MacDonald said, ^{rephrase} this seems odd, for she said all graffiti does is bring in vandals and more crime. This may be a future point of agreement if the two sides would discuss it.

All in all, this argument is pretty tough one to crack. There are many different views and several types of people arguing them. As mentioned earlier, it all really comes down to an argument of what this issue should literally be called, how wrong or right it is, and what exactly should be done or has been done about it in terms of a new law or policy. Most of the sources given think graffiti or vandalism is a very bad thing and also illegal. They think that all graffiti should be removed because it is a nuisance to all. On the other side, there are those who believe it causes no harm, beautifies areas, and serves as a public good.

I really think there could be some solutions to the argument. If officials just established areas where graffiti did not affect business owners or residents, maybe the problem would solve itself. This way graffiti artists can do their works, and not disturb people who are less appreciative of public art. Also, this would eliminate the task of having to remove or cover up graffiti, thus saving cities money. If this was discussed between both sides of the debate, maybe some exceptions or changes could be made. The bottom line is, the two parties will have to agree on this point or something similar to solve this issue.

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