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Abstract

This thesis provides an analysis of the New York Style letter-based, signature graffiti subcultures as well as the contemporary international street art, or post-graffiti movement. The primary intention is to explore the function and meaning of graffiti traditions as they exist in the context of cities, art worlds, and urban visual culture. During the 1970s, the letter-based signature graffiti style exploded as a movement on New York City subway trains. By the mid-1980s graffiti subcultures were developing in numerous urban centres throughout the world. In my assessment

of traditional graffiti writing from the 1970s to the 1990s, I focus on key issues that sustain this cultural form, including motivation, identity, criminality, gallery exhibitions, subcultures, and style. By reviewing the graffiti's genealogy, its formal composition, and its evolution into a complex art form practiced in cities around the world, I emphasize its function, namely as a tool for identity negotiation and visual subversion. By accessing graffiti's problematic history both as a sub and a pop culture, unpacking its difficult relationship with galleries and legality, and countering its incessant association with hip-hop, I insist upon graffiti's role as a long-standing and culturally relevant pictorial tradition. While signature-based graffiti subcultures continue to thrive today, the second part of my thesis, shifts focus onto international street art practices. I evaluate urban painting's role as a public art, scrutinize the work of some artists as both performative and at times site-specific, and address the contemporary debates regarding post-graffiti exhibitions and the movement's livelihood on the Internet. Through this analysis, I describe post-graffiti practices as thoroughly connected to graffiti writing, yet ideologically and visually separate. Because of the prevalent use of figuration, legibility, and frequent socio-political relevance of street art, these art practices are constituents of the urban landscape that artfully communicate with both the citizens and the material structure of a city. The overwhelming pervasiveness of these coexisting art genres confirms that urban painting is a quintessential art movement of the twenty-first century. My project explores how signature graffiti and street art contribute to the experience of the urban environment and to the history of art.

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