

Is urban graffiti a force for good or evil?

By The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.30.17

Word Count **907**

Level **1020L**



Street art on Nelson Street as part of the See No Evil Art Festival in 2011 in Bristol, Great Britain. Photo from Wikimedia.

In 2008, the Tate Modern museum in London, England, invited six artists to decorate its building with enormous, eye-catching murals. It was the world's first major public museum display of graffiti and street art.

Meanwhile, not far away, eight members of London's well-known DPM crew were tried in court for \$1.3 million in graffiti-related damages. They were sentenced to a total of 11 years in prison. This was the biggest prosecution for graffiti that the U.K. has ever seen.

The Anti Social Behaviour Act of 2003 defines graffiti as "painting, writing, soiling, marking or other defacing by whatever means." Under this definition, anything from a small "tag" to a detailed mural could be considered against the law. An artist could be charged a \$6,500 fine or prosecuted. But despite this clear-cut definition, there are double standards in the way graffiti is perceived. The law permits some artists to make graffiti while punishing others.

No Clear Distinction Between "Good" And "Bad" Graffiti

In 2013, for example, a city official glowingly described a Manchester graffiti artist as "the next Banksy," referring to the famous graffiti artist who appears in the film "Exit Through the Gift Shop." The Manchester artist didn't go to jail. However, when sentencing London tagger Daniel "Tox" Halpin to jail in 2011, the prosecutor told the jury, "He is no Banksy. He doesn't have the artistic skills." But this distinction between "good" and "bad" graffiti does not have a place in the rulebooks.



Graffiti first began in Philadelphia in the 1960s. Since then, city leaders have tended to condemn it as mindless vandalism. In the 1980s and 1990s, police began cracking down on graffiti. They were following the "broken window" theory. This is the idea that ignoring small crime like graffiti could inspire more serious crimes. The U.K. spends \$1.3 billion on cleaning up graffiti each year.

But as cities seek to "clean up," could graffiti actually be good for cities?

Ben Eine is a respected graffiti artist in Britain. In 2010, British Prime Minister David Cameron gave President Barack Obama one of Eine's paintings. Eine says graffiti does not lead to drug deals and robberies. Instead, it leads to something very different. "If they [city councils]

stopped painting over them, they would get tagged and then they'd do silver stuff over it. And then eventually, people would do nice paintings over it ... The natural evolution of graffiti is that it will just turn out looking nice," he said recently.



Adam Cooper, a cultural strategy officer for the mayor of London, agrees. He thinks graffiti is a positive force. Cooper questions whether graffiti artists are vandals or “pioneers of a new kind of visual arts.” He also suggests that the mayor’s office could provide more spaces for graffiti, as they do for street performers.

Graffiti As A Symbol Of Life In The City

Embracing graffiti's cultural value can do wonders for tourism. In Bristol, England, the 2012 See No Evil festival saw 50,000 people flock to the streets. In Stavanger, Norway, the city walls are transformed into a blank canvas for the highly successful annual NuArt festival. And for every painted wall in a city there is most likely a tour to go with it. A three-hour graffiti walk around the streets of Shoreditch, London, could set you back \$26. In colorful Buenos Aires, Argentina, a tour of the decorated walls can cost \$25.

Buenos Aires is a fascinating example of a city where the walls talk, telling tales of a troubled past. Here, graffiti has been used as a tool of resistance and activism. Although there are laws prohibiting graffiti, the city has gained worldwide recognition for its street art. Now a new bill proposes to assign a registry of graffiti artists to certain spots in the city. The bill's aim is to decrease undesirable markings elsewhere.



British law is clear that an artist's work may be removed if the government considers it a blight on the environment. Many areas now set aside "legal spots" for artists to paint. But the restricted nature of these spaces is what many graffiti artists seek to challenge. Does this legitimacy ruin their fun?

"Legal painting? It's just not the same feeling," says Glynn Judd, a former train writer who now only paints in legal spots since his "NOIR" tag got him thrown into prison. "Graffiti is always about being slightly naughty ... It's a different mindset from painting legally."

The Evolution Of Graffiti

Legal or not, as graffiti seeps into the fabric of neighborhoods, it becomes a natural part of everyday life in the city. From its roots as a means of visual communication for disenfranchised youth, graffiti has developed into an art form. It is now a recognized force for

economic, cultural and social good. As we continue to shift towards increasingly sanitized city environments, graffiti is also one of the few remaining ways we have to respond to our surroundings in an expressive, public way.

Government leaders might continue to argue over "good" versus "bad" graffiti, but Eine says the public has moved on. "The whole world is covered in graffiti. No one cares. It's just part of urban noise."

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "No Clear Distinction Between Good And Bad Graffiti."

Adam Cooper, a cultural strategy officer for the mayor of London, agrees. He thinks graffiti is a positive force. Cooper questions whether graffiti artists are vandals or "pioneers of a new kind of visual arts." He also suggests that the mayor's office could provide more spaces for graffiti, as they do for street performers.

Which word from the paragraph helps you understand that some people see graffiti artists as innovative?

- (A) strategy
 - (B) vandals
 - (C) pioneers
 - (D) performers
- 2 Read the sentence from the section "The Evolution Of Graffiti."

From its roots as a means of visual communication for disenfranchised youth, graffiti has developed into an art form.

Which answer choice is the BEST definition of the word "disenfranchised" as used in the sentence?

- (A) having little opportunity
- (B) neglected by parents
- (C) prone to vandalism
- (D) having little education

- 3 Which of the following pieces of evidence is MOST relevant to the author's argument that graffiti should be understood as a meaningful public art form?
- (A) In 2008, the Tate Modern museum in London, England, invited six artists to decorate its building with enormous, eye-catching murals.
 - (B) In 2013, for example, a city official glowingly described a Manchester graffiti artist as "the next Banksy," referring to the famous graffiti artist who appears in the film "Exit Through the Gift Shop."
 - (C) In Stavanger, Norway, the city walls are transformed into a blank canvas for the highly successful annual NuArt festival.
 - (D) As we continue to shift toward increasingly sanitized city environments, graffiti is also one of the few remaining ways we have to respond to our surroundings in an expressive, public way.
- 4 The author argues that the "broken window" theory is not an effective policy with respect to graffiti. Explain whether there is relevant and sufficient evidence in the article to support this claim.
- (A) The claim is not fully supported because the article does not consider the negative effects of graffiti.
 - (B) The claim is fully supported because the article provides details on the amount spent for cleanup in the U.K.
 - (C) The claim is not fully supported because the article does not discuss more serious crimes going on in the U.K.
 - (D) The claim is fully supported because the article explains how some graffiti artists become very famous.