

The Addressing of World Issues in the art of Banksy and Basquiat.

How do street artists in modern society convey and critique World issues?

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my life I have been exposed to the many controversies and social issues in this generation and the last, that is yet to be solved, noticing the many ways in which the public attempt to bring attention to certain affairs such as racism, poverty and violation of human rights. Specifically, I noticed many modern artists sharing a common theme of bringing alight social injustice they too have either observed or experienced being used in their art. A clear memory of an artist whose inspiration stemmed from such a theme that I recall often seeing growing up was Banksy who left a trail of controversial art in all corners of London symbolising the many affairs that needed to be discussed in England and Worldwide.

Last summer upon visiting New York City's art museum, Brooklyn Museum, I had the chance to see Jean Michel Basquiat's most celebrated works. Through seeing his work I remember feeling a rush of different emotions as each painting portrayed powerful images embodying different social injustices from his own time whilst also having a contrast in style from the other artists in the museum. I was left fascinated by the thought of how artists in this modern society portray a social realist function in their work. I later that day came across a quote by John F. Kennedy which said, "We must never forget art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth.", which I found to all be quite coincidental.

This event led me to think back on the many times I pondered in mesmerization in front of Banksy's work in the streets of London as compared to standing in front of Jean Michel

Basquiat's art capturing my whole attention at my visit to the Brooklyn Museum; Finding a correlation between the two experiences I felt this worthy of exploration as these two artists were able to illustrate world issues well through their art and art styles leaving large impacts on me leading to the question: **How do street artists in modern society convey and critique World issues?**

THE HISTORY OF STREET ART

Street art, usually created on the surface of public areas such as walls or sidewalks in urban districts with hopes of conveying a message related to a social commentary or political ideas to the general community of people. Although it does stem from Graffiti, a form of art “made up of writings or drawings made on surfaces in public places”¹ , it is easily arguable that the two are not the same. Whilst both styles of art are forms of public expression without the consent of property owners, bringing in the element of vandalism, street art has larger goals to fulfil through the composition thus giving us one difference between the two styles and that being intention.

²Street Art found all over the world and majority in New York, quickly became a popular art style in the 1980’s, originating as a modern art form in the 1960’s. Although Street Art can appear to have a rebellious undertone, it usually is regarded as a form of conventional art, however, was often viewed in a negative light by politicians and those from upper-class society as it was seen to be associated with gang culture. It was also closely related to the hip-hop culture as many of the first street artists working in New York were tied to those in the hip-hop industry such as artists Jean Michel Basquiat or Keith Haring yet the style quickly expanded internationally appearing in cities such as Paris where the artist, Blek le Rat, established stencil art there or Banksy in Britain, where he began creating work in Bristol in the 1990’s.

Most street artists of today prefer the simple public setting as their work is exposed to all types of people. Within Street Art, there are many forms in which artist nowadays use to create their work

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/graffiti>

² <http://www.arthistory.net/street-art/>

such as the progression from using spray cans to using stencils, poster-sized stickers, mosaic assemblages, street installations and video projections.

Whilst few consider Street Art to be criminal, many others have proceeded to embrace the style as a viable form of art as the techniques continue to advance and new forms of street art prevail.

As the fundamentals of Street arts appeal unfold, we learn that it addresses hypocrisy and inequality in society as it assists in self-affirmation for those artists whose works lie outside the gamut of the traditional function of fine art.

THE FUNCTION OF ART

Throughout history, Art has visually expressed what can be difficult to articulate into words. As a result of this, art can be tremendously beneficial to society in bringing us together or in identifying a serious issue in which we must deal with bringing order to a disorganised world. On the other hand, art can be used to create chaos when an artist feels their life may be too staid and habitual; because of this art can be therapeutic for both the artist and the viewer. However, when trying to determine the function of art one must be cautious that no art piece can be assigned a function in either an essay form or in conversation if not considered first within a proper context as the classification of the function of art does depend on the context in which we put the piece in.

³According to Donald Walhout, there are many ways in which art functions can be classified but most commonly they are divided by Non- Motivated Functions and Motivated Functions. The non-motivated purposes of art are those that are seen to be fundamental creations, do not hold a specific external purpose or do not convey any specific message for a viewer. Examples of non-motivated art pieces are Architecture, weaving or even furniture design which is all commonly used as integral pieces.

Art, in its simplest form, is a means of communication. Most forms of communication have a set goal-directed to a specific individual, thus showing a motivated purpose displaying the difference

³ Walhout, Donald. 'The Nature and Function of Art', 1st January 1986; Page 8

in Motivated and Non-motivated functions of art. The motivated purposes of art often indicate premeditated, conscious actions on the part of the creator. These may be to bring alight a clear cut point the artist wants to be raised when viewed by an audience, in hopes of conveying a specific emotion as a form of communication.

Within the Motivated Functions of art, we find 5 categories in which we can break down the purpose and function of a specific art piece. These 5 categories being Personal, Social, Spiritual, Educational and Political functions of an artist.⁴

A Personal function is to create art to express one's personal feelings. However, there are many types of personal functions and are subjective and will vary from each individual artist. An artist may create a piece out of a need for self-expression of a personal topic or may want to communicate a thought to the viewer. It also could be that the artist wants to provide an aesthetic experience for both themselves and the viewers. Sometimes it is found that a piece may not have a meaning to it at all and it merely produced in hopes of entertaining others. Art may also serve the artist a personal function of control. For many instances, art has been used to attempt an excerpt of magical control over things such as time, the seasons or even the attainment of food. An example of art holding a



The Two Fridas - By Frida Kahlo in 1939,
Oil Paints on Canvas, 1.73m x 1.73m.
<https://www.fridakahlo.org/the-two-fridas.jsp>

⁴ <http://mvhsibart.weebly.com/functions-of-art.html>; 16th September 2018

personal function is Frida Kahlo's many self-portraits, which have had many different inferences but most commonly is seen as a reflection on herself through her art.

A Social function is to reinforce and enhance a mutual sense of identity of those with families, in communities or overall civilization addressing aspects of life as opposed to a single point of view or experience. For example, during the 1930's in Germany, public art had an overwhelming



Hitler Youth Propaganda Poster from Nazi Germany in the 1940's. Text reads, "German students fight for the Fuhrer and the people."
<https://allthatsinteresting.com/nazi-propaganda-posters#8>

symbolic theme as an exerted influence on the German population where propaganda posters and other art forms allied the country in such a crucial time. Any art that depicts the social conditions executes a social function. For example, in the early 20th Century Dorothea Lange⁵ and multiple other photographers captured moments of the Great Depression forcing those more fortunate at that the time along with the general audience to reflect on situations which don't have enough light shed on them through their art.

The Spiritual Function of art is seen as an expression of spiritual beliefs from the artist about the force of a higher power and the destiny of life as controlled by those higher powers. Many artworks from the Renaissance art era⁶ show aspects of spiritual functions such as the painting,

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dorothea-Lange>; 16th September 2018

⁶ <https://artsandculture.google.com/usergallery/1wISpDWs4ZhBJA>; 16th September 2018

Madonna and Child, by Duccio in the 1300's. These works all convey the artist's and the communities spiritual beliefs at the time of the piece's creation.

The Educational Function of art can be found to be symbols and signs which illustrate knowledge that isn't published in books whilst the Political Function of art is to reinforce and enhance a common sense of ideological connection and identity to a specific political view of parties, different people, or issues brought up due to a parties policy and behaviour. A political function in art is more commonly found in today's society as we begin to question and revolutionise the backward ideologies of today's modern era. The change in society often leads to a change in the overall common trends in an artist's work leaving us to wonder, **what is the function of art in society?**

In today's society, I feel the function of art it is more to connect with others not only around you but around the world whilst raising important questions and points, criticising our society on topics such as police brutality or applauding our achievements such as the Gay Pride movements found worldwide. The function of art in society is more Personal where artists share their emotions raising questions leading to their art having a Social Function and exploring these emotions which sometimes lead us to find a Political Function. Through these functions, we often see that in modern artwork, artists tend to begin their creative process with a predetermined function in mind to convey their opinions and critique any social injustices.

ANALYSIS OF WORKS

Prime examples of artists famous for their contribution to the topic of social injustices in this modern era are Jean Michel Basquiat and Banksy. Both Jean Michel Basquiat and Banksy's work participate in the many movements evoking change to social prejudice through their use of street art amongst other forms of art, showcasing their work to large audiences in rather different ways where Banksy uses the surfaces of public places easily visible but equally as hidden, catching people off-guard, often evoking shock whilst Jean Michel Basquiat displayed his work through paintings on canvas leading to different reactions from audiences as people who wish to see Jean Michel Basquiat's work know exactly where and when they will be able to see it, anticipating a change in perspective on a certain topic Basquiat is exploring contrasting with Banksy's element of surprise as there is no advertisement to his new work from the artist himself but rather fans who have discovered them whilst exploring in different cities. Due to their similar and contrasting traits as artists, we are able to decipher the effect they have had on an audience and explore how different artists convey and critique world issues.

⁷Jean Michel Basquiat, a well renowned African - American artist broke many barriers and records with his work. Considered to be the black sheep of his family as he strayed so far from his parents principles he left home and moved to New York, Manhattan at a young age. He pursued his art career painting on walls rather than canvases as he couldn't afford it. In order to make his money he began designing post cards selling them for a dollar each whilst his popularity amongst the art community grew larger everyday progressively earning him more

⁷ Emmerling, Leonhard. 'Jean - Michel Basquiat', 1st November 2003; Page 12

money. Eventually he was able to purchase canvases and adopt his unique take of Primitivism Contemporary art,⁸ a less an aesthetic movement than a sensibility or cultural attitude that has informed diverse aspects of Modern art, inspired by the frustrations he faced in everyday life such as poverty and inequality.⁹ Curator of the Brooklyn Museum, Arnold Lehman says, "He was the voice of a generation," as Basquiat left a very prominent legacy being one of the most influential Afro-Latino artists that defined this decade for he was more than his iconic crown symbols, more than his relationships with celebrities and so much more than just Andy Warhol's friend.

Basquiat specialised in the art style Neo-Expressionism; An art style that emerged in the early 1980's. The style is easily characterized through the use of expressive and occasionally insolently aggressive works. Neo-Expressionists are often said to of reinstated the formal elements of German Expressionism as well as Abstract Expressionism however there are many interpretations of the style as artists make it their own. For example, "¹⁰A revival of



'Large Girl with No Eyes'. Oil and Wax on Canvas.
Dimensions 62 X 148.
<http://www.julianschnabel.com/paintings/versions/big-girl/no-eye-girl-with-no-eyes>

expressionism in art characterized by intense colors, dramatic usually figural forms, and emotive subject matter", is another description of the unique style. Another artist that is still famous to this day due to their encouragement of Neo-Expressionist is American artist, Julian Schnabel famous for his artwork called, 'Large Girl with No Eyes'. The clear difference in his

⁸ <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/movement/primitivism>; 17th September 2018

⁹ Personal Interview with Curator, Arnold Lehman, of the Brooklyn Museum

¹⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/neo-Expressionism>; 29th September 2018

Neo-Expressionism style as compared to Basquiat's proves the various interpretations artists took of the style. By understanding the formal qualities of Neo-Expressionism and analysing Basquiat's work we are easily able to see his take on the new style at the time; Constantly filling his artwork with energetic colours and raw subject matters. His iconic artwork symbolised as an interpretation of the black identity in America during the 1900's which led to having a significant role within the artistic explosion in New York City during the mid-1980's.

The 80's consisted of the endless pattern of police forces shooting Afro-Americans without legal reason and not being persecuted. Basquiat's painting "*Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*" symbolises the harsh reality of the 1980's. Michael Stewart, whose story inspired the piece, was a graffiti artist, arrested, as he allegedly pulled out a marker from his pocket to write on the wall leading to him being beaten twice on separate occasions, once where he was arrested¹¹ and another at the police station putting him into a coma he was unable to come out of. His innocence inspired Basquiat's painting and shows clear illustrations of this injustice through the composition and use of colour in this piece.

¹¹<https://www.artandeducation.net/announcements/105340/basquiat-s-defacement-the-death-of-michael-stewart-centerpiece-of-conversation-series-about-black-lives-matter>; 29th September 2018



Defacement - By Jean Michel Basquiat in 1983, Acrylic and marker on wood, 63.5cm x 77.5cm
<https://wcma.williams.edu/news-item/basquiats-defacement-the-death-of-michael-stewart-becomes-the-centerpiece-of-conversations-about-black-lives-matter-at-the-williams-college-museum-of-art/>

In this piece, *Defacement*, Basquiat drew three figures in the centre automatically drawing the viewer's attention straight to the crime scene. The effect of having the three figures in the centre is having the viewer look at a scenario one would normally turn away from if this were, in fact, their reality. The two figures seen either side of the black silhouette (resembling Michael



Detail of Basquiat's, 'Defacement'.

Stewart) are the two policemen resembling his two separate beatings, drawn in a juvenile style and portrayed as monsters symbolising the reputation the police have to the African American society. To further accentuate the childlike style of drawing, the black figure in the middle being beaten by the batons of the police has star doodles around its

head creating a cartoon presence. By having these stars around the head of the silhouette Basquiat is censoring the abuse in order to downplay the true graphics of the scenario leaving the real image up to the imagination of the viewer, further forcing the audience to think and reflect

upon this one of many stories. This piece contains only the use of primary colours; By using this specific colour palette it adds to the childish illusion created through Basquiat's style. The audience for this piece is for the more privileged white class of society who face little to none discrimination. Through each element in this piece, Basquiat well convey's the fear of the African-American society towards the Police force where the childlike form evokes a sense of empathy to those who have suffered this brutality raising the question of when will justice prevail. This work from Basquiat's collection to this day can connect to the attacks and death of people from the coloured community such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Rodney King and our struggle and fight for equality.

Throughout his work, Basquiat addresses multiple injustices whilst celebrating African American culture for he would frequently put the people of colour as the protagonists in his artwork. The underlying theme in a large sum of Basquiat's work, says Fred Hoffman (MOCA Curator), *"is a concern with his identity as a young black man in a white art world."* Further, he says, Basquiat *"explored other dichotomies he came across in the world, such as wealth versus poverty, integration versus segregation, and the tension between the inner and the outer experience of an individual in a society."* Although his life was short-lived, he continues to inspire artists today.

Much like Basquiat, anonymous artist, Banksy, began his artistic career painting on the walls and streets of his neighbourhood. Demonstrating the many hindrances he came across in his personal life or even the news bringing alight topics such as children in war, governments tendency to

‘sweep things under the carpet’ and sexist remarks made by public figures. His style and profession soon became easily recognizable due to his unique take on street art rarely seen before him using man-made elements such as signs, walls and roads as puns to his graffiti art symbolising his messages. Over the years, Banksy enthusiasts have picked up his artistry begins in his ability to use both humor and wit to trick viewers into contemplating the underlying gravity of his messages. It’s known his very sense of innocent playfulness along with his daring truths about our society is what lifts him to the role as a compelling social mediator all under the demeanor of art. Due to Banksy’s choice of displaying his work on the streets, he is seen as an artist who remains true to the Guerilla Art Philosophy; That being the specialty of his art is visible in a profane way in order to validate the artist within a specific social region.

Over the years he has produced numerous street arts illustrating social issues; for example, his well-recognized piece, ‘*Crayon Boy*’, found in Los Angeles California. This piece symbolises those children forced to go to war or growing up in a war inflicted environment as well as highlighting the corruption of innocence in children for it is not uncommon for us to see a child brandishing a gun and being involved in the highly volatile conflicts around the world.



Crayon Boy - By Banksy in 2011, Los Angeles, Paint on Wall.
<http://culturebanksy.weebly.com/crayon-boy-2011.html>

The use of childlike drawings helps emphasise the lost youth of the child as it contrasts with the harsh white and black graffiti above of a child and a gun where the bullets are crayons. The portrayal of children in the war for society is commonly seen as them avoiding and growing up around it however very little is spoken of the children directly involved in wars such as mobs in Nigeria, Syria and many more countries. As well as this, the piece plays with the theme of reality versus imagination. Reality is shown through the child with the gun emphasised by the stencil being realistic and Imagination is shown through the colourful drawings surrounding the child like a field of flowers and a smiling sun thus why it is done in a childlike manner again emphasising and raising the question to society as to why are there children around the world growing up in this environment when every child deserves a childhood, a time to be immature

and learn from mistakes. This imposes us to think of all the very small simple things we take for granted such as our childhood in a modern society.

IMPACT ON THE VIEWER

The intent of street art is that the message will communicate directly with the public and attract attention to an issue through the form of art. After analysing both Jean Michel Basquiat and Banksy's work I feel artists are able to captivate people's attention long enough to reflect on current social injustices through the formal qualities, form and the function.

For example, Banksy's common colour palette of harsh colours within his works tends to mimic the harsh reality of a situation at that present time he created the piece or in the area it has been produced helping to bring attention to his work as it is unoften one would see street art or what is often mistaken to be graffiti with little colour but black and white; along with this the form of Banksy's piece tends to leave the biggest impact on the viewer as he always plans out the perfect location for the context of the message he wishes to portray, for example, *Crayon Boy*, was placed in Los Angeles, where many socialites and celebrities live, unaware of what happens in the countries around them, as well as this LA is a large tourist area and so the piece gained great recognition sharing not only the new Banksy piece but the large message behind the piece.

From analysing '*Defacement*', the impact left on the viewer through the use of formal qualities such as colour and composition is poignant as the bright colours immediately draw you to the movement of the painting forcing you to indulge in every line, word and mark contrasting to

what an audience would do if this were happening in front of them. This forces the viewer to put themselves in the black silhouettes shoes evoking emotions one would use to fight for change. In addition , having the main images in the centre of the canvas as Basquiat often did in his works, helps to emphasise the importance of any message he wishes to portray as well as the use of brush strokes, words, and small doodles, accentuating the function of the piece. This often leaves the viewer informed on another perspective of popular and common scenarios the government and upper-class don't shed a spotlight for.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, street artists like Banksy and Jean Michel Basquiat have made an impact in Modern Society through their ability to relate to other people's understanding of the human condition in the current times conveying these struggles or accomplishments well through their street art. Political artist, Adam Rodriguez, once said,¹² "Artists have to be the voice of the people, to speak for those who can't speak for themselves." As seen through the analysis of 'Defacement' and 'Crayon Boy', the impact of street art on the Modern Society stems from the artist's predetermined message and function within the art which shapes the formal qualities of each and every individual street art piece. With this in mind, I feel Jean Michel Basquiat's art, with his growing fame in the 80's, was the voice for the African-American race and the minority of America as well as having a lasting impact on this society for issues he addressed are still current in today's age whilst Banksy in the present day is the voice for political pleas such as child labour, poverty and many more as he continues to critique and convey world issues in Modern Society. Now as technology progresses I feel that one major source for everyone to be able to convey and critique world issues through their art is via Social Media. Social Media is a platform inclusive for all, allowing works to be more popularised as well as helping to allow artists to have their voice heard where no boundaries are found. As years progress I predict that any form of art shared on Social Media within the 21st century will help to bring about a larger change than ever seen before due to the instant spread of communication.

¹² <https://rgnn.org/2015/01/19/political-art-or-vandalism-how-street-art-has-helped-our-society-question-reality/>

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