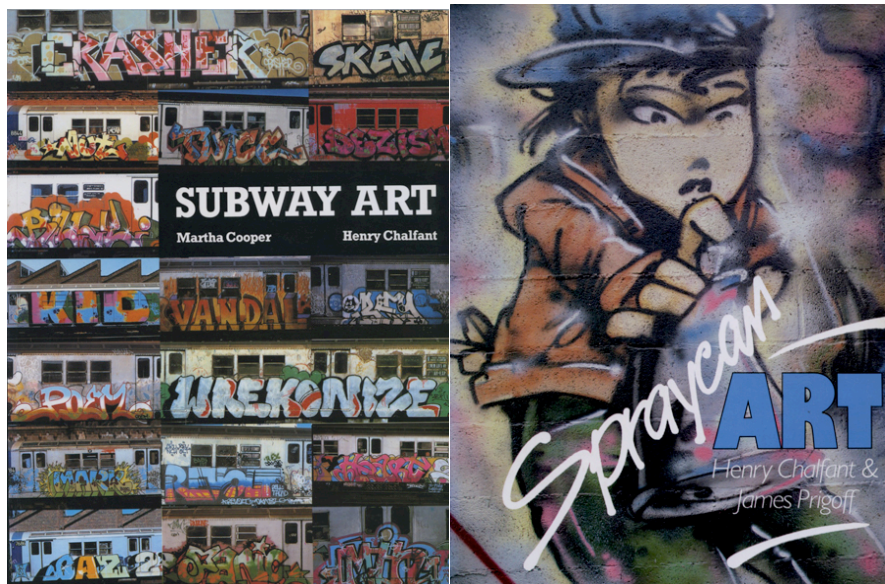


Appreciating and Attributing Street Art

Back in the now-distant 1980s when I started taking street art seriously, the latter was almost an urban myth represented mainly through a handful of illustrated publications. The latter included the highly regarded *Subway Art* (1984) and *Spraycan Art* (1987).¹ Books like these helped to break open the 'ghetto' of this burgeoning art form and introduce it to a much wider audience. Even so, this was merely the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Most art works were, by their very nature, local, transient and therefore known only to locals, if at all. Then, as they say, everything changed. Or, more specifically, the Internet changed everything.



Today no artwork need ever appear for a brief time only to ignominiously decay. Now, with the advent of digital photography, everyone can take pictures at near-zero cost and post the results where they can be seen by literally anyone. A web search of the 'street art (city)' variety will turn up literally thousands of images in mere seconds. The point then is – what next? For all its flexibility and reach the digital domain is flawed because digital objects are volatile. Despite the rise of 'cloud storage' there is no guarantee of longevity.

Over the years I've accumulated thousands of images of street art. Many of them are from Melbourne where I used to live, and for which I have a particular fondness. A growing number, however, are from other cities including New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, London, Brussels, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Berlin and Wellington. A few things stand out. First, the art form is anything but static. It has evolved and is continuing to do so. Second, it has achieved a measure of acceptance and legitimation in many places. Third, what one might call a process of 'open and relentless competition' has led to ever-higher levels of quality. Along with all this has been the rapid growth of impressive giant murals, often on the end walls of in-use multi-storey buildings. Some of the more banal examples might be lumped together under the heading of 'urban decoration'

while others continue to push the boundaries and to challenge social conventions.

In an accompanying piece (*Views from the Edge: An Introduction to Culture Jamming and Street Art*) I set out reasons for my long-standing interest in street art. Briefly, I think it criminal for corporations to imagine for one moment (a) that they in some sense 'own' public space and (b) that they have any right whatsoever to push their dangerous and out-dated consumerist fantasies on everyone. It's simply wrong – not only because merchants and merchandising have become far too powerful, but also because it no longer requires a genius to realise that we need to scale down human demands and learn to live more lightly upon the earth. Not to become too serious about it, I also enjoy being surprised when I turn a street corner and see something new, unexpected and stimulating. Finally, I think that a bit of cultural transgression is a mostly 'good thing' in an age when so much of public life and public space is homogenised, 'approved,' packaged and tamed. Enough is enough. A bit of artistic anarchy, originality and free-thinking expression is in my view mostly a public good. I'd like to see more of it.

Campaigns by civic authorities to 'clean up graffiti vandalism' are OK with me as long as they stick to the tagging mess and focus exclusively on the actual vandals. But they should leave artists alone unless they are really getting in peoples' faces. Then, and only then, should they be required to find somewhere else to work. Even allowing for the crap (and, yes, there's a lot of it around) I would argue that, on balance, street art has given so much more than it has, in any sense, 'taken away.' So instead of demonising street artists they should at the least be allowed to do what they do and let the 'competition of the street' sort out the wheat from the chaff. One way of giving the best artists due credit for their efforts is to draw attention to some of their works - to, in effect say, 'I think this is worth looking at, how does it strike you?' Street art is nothing if not shareable and its currency is respect.

As a former teacher and academic, and now a writer and photographer, I do have a view on copyright. It is that if we want content creators to have any kind of future in the digital era we should be prepared to pay for their work in whatever medium it occurs. Street art, on the other hand, is not really a career – although it can lead to one. Rather, it springs from other motivations and needs to be treated differently. Content creators here use the collectively owned urban fabric as their canvas. They use public space in the knowledge that their work will be seen - and very likely photographed - by many others without restriction. In other words it is created specifically and intentionally as *a public entity* and therefore should be treated, in a sense, as commonly owned. The critical factor is not that the public be expected to provide income but, rather, give recognition and respect where it is due. It is with this understanding that I continue to promote and reproduce certain images gleaned from the street. In this view the key requirement is to give credit to the artist who created the original and also indicate from where it came.² I'll explain in a subsequent article why I think that this process adds value to the originals and to those who created them. In a nutshell - everyone can win.

Notes

¹ Cooper, M. & Chalfant, H. *Subway Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1984.

Chalfant, H. & Prigoff, J. *Spraycan Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1987.

² Artists who are in any disagreement at all with any of the above are encouraged to contact the author to outline of their views.