



GRAFFITI AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ART AS PARADOX OF CULTURE AND AS VALUES

*Lolita Nikolova**

ABSTRACT - In the contemporary world art is a primary means of the development of human social and aesthetical values which complement, compete with or exclude each other. The study of graffiti and archeological art enriches the understanding of the role of art in building historical-cultural values.

Results: In contemporary culture graffiti are extremely socially sensitive. In Salt Lake County, Utah, they mostly socialise empty spaces, enliven old sites and equipment or become part of pop culture, taking some of the components of fine art (authorship, picture formats or whole wall fine-art themes, etc). However, the limited distribution of graffiti reflects a very active and strong community negativism about the values of this artistic street expression. Comparison with other countries, in particular in Europe (Italy, Slovenia, Greece, Bulgaria, etc) indicates that graffiti may have in some places an important role as an artistic expression of social protest.

The comparative data for graffiti in this research come from archeological art, which has been developing as a specific branch of pop (fine) art. Although connected with pop culture, archeological art contrasts the graffiti in the ways in which the values have been built. The graffiti artist would go and add some values on the site while the artist of archeology would create a completely new value. Both depend on the social response to determine the scales of the created values, although the latter has a more individual character. In contemporary styles life stimulates pop culture and art expression and in turn increases the role of pop art as a historical record.

RIASSUNTO - Nel mondo dell'arte contemporanea i mezzi primari dello sviluppo di valori umani, sociali ed estetici, si completano, competono o si escludono a vicenda. Lo studio dei graffiti e dell'arte archeologica arricchisce la comprensione del ruolo dell'arte nella costruzione di valori storico-culturali. Il risultato è che nella cultura contemporanea i graffiti sono estremamente importanti per la sensibilità sociale. Nella Contea di Salt Lake, Utah, essi socializzano prevalentemente spazi vuoti, ridanno vita a luoghi e attrezature dismessi, o diventano parte della cultura pop assumendo alcuni connotati delle belle arti (autore, formato dell'immagine o tematiche quasi artistiche che ricoprono intere pareti, ecc.). Tuttavia, la distribuzione limitata dei graffiti riflette un atteggiamento negativo molto forte e attivo da parte della comunità contro tali espressioni artistiche di strada. Il confronto con altri Paesi, in particolare in Europa (Italia, Slovenia, Grecia, Bulgaria, ecc.) indica come i graffiti possano avere in alcuni luoghi un importante ruolo di espressione artistica della protesta sociale.

I dati comparativi per i graffiti in questa ricerca provengono dall'arte archeologica, che si è sviluppata come un ramo specifico dell'arte pop (belle arti). Sebbene connessa alla cultura pop, l'arte archeologica si differenza dai graffiti nel modo in cui i valori sono stati costruiti. L'artista dei graffiti va ad aggiungere dei valori al luogo, mentre l'artista archeologico crea un valore completamente nuovo. Entrambi dipendono dalla risposta sociale nella determinazione della scala dei valori creati, sebbene il secondo abbia un valore maggiormente individualizzato.

Gli stili di vita contemporanei stimolano la cultura pop e l'espressione artistica e allo stesso tempo amplificano il ruolo dell'arte pop come dato storico.

PARADOX OF CULTURE: SETTING

Graffiti are an ambivalent product of human culture, while archeological art is an emerging value in contemporary culture. There is an attempt below to define the parameters of both categories as paradox of culture and as value.

Graffiti

Just to place graffiti on the table of scientific debate (e.g. Reisner and Wechsler, 1974) is a fire that can burn the authors since even the most sophisticated conclusions can be misused, not well understood and misinterpreted. For many researchers, graffiti are illegal or semi-legal, but many if not most of them represent a visual history of how society responds to our culture in a destructive artistic way, often as a form of visual terrorism (e.g. McAuliffe and Iveson, 2011). They are also less expensive means of art used for mural painting with art values that compete with standard artistic techniques (e.g. Martinez, 2009). Another group of graffiti represents creativity in special social spaces designated for such artistic activity. And another cluster belongs to graffiti

* International Institute of Anthropology, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA



in empty spaces, which can be formally illegal but in fact do not damage society, expressing one of the main functions of the graffiti art, the aestheticization of empty social spaces, and filling them with the culture of such spaces (Nikolova, 2011). Another cluster consists of mobile forms of graffiti art, which may have the style of mural graffiti, although they follow the principles of mobile art. In some cases they are very popular since they represent non-expensive pop art liked by different generations and social segments. The final cluster would be digital graffiti art as a documentation of the above categories or as independent art. Because of the variety of graffiti expressions, we reserve a cluster for others that may be analyzed in the future.

In Salt Lake County, Utah, graffiti mostly socialize empty spaces, enliven old sites and equipment and means of transport, or become part of pop culture, taking some of the components of fine art (authorship, picture formats, mural art, etc).

In Europe (Italy, Slovenia, Greece, Bulgaria, etc) graffiti may have in some cases an important role as an artistic expression of social protests. The scale may break the frame of non-vandal creativity and damage the urban landscape, like in downtown Ljubljana (Slovenia).

Comparative line: archeological art

Although contemporary scientific interest in the interaction between archeology and art (including sound) is considerable (e.g. Bailey, 2008, 2013; Bailey, Cochrane and Zambelli, 2010; Roelstraete, 2009; Mills, 2011, 2013), a paradigm on archeological art as value that in turn reflects on the absence of development of this branch of pop or fine art is missing.

The common ground between graffiti and archeological art is that both belong to the paradox of culture, although they have different destinies. Graffiti have been blooming in some contemporary cultures although some artists have been even put in prison. On the other hand, although getting the warmest support, archeology has missed developing this branch of archeological art as a response to archeology. The topic of archeological art is more like a call for a new direction for archeology, documenting archeology through art which may build in time an even higher value than archeological artifacts, documentation and publications.

GRAFFITI AND ARCHEOLOGICAL ART: FROM A PARADOX OF CULTURE TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF A PROBLEM

There are many categories of human activity which can be connected as examples of the paradox of culture. Paradox has many synonyms: inconsistency, absurdity, irony, contradiction, oxymoron, enigma, puzzle, impossibility, or illogicality. All these synonyms describe overlapping or complementary aspects of different paradoxes of culture (e.g. Bouchet, 2007), including contemporary graffiti and archeological art.

- *Thesis:* graffiti, as a paradox of culture, emerge very often as an illegal folk art which irritates the viewers and taxpayers since they destroy the city landscape (they are usually not popular in villages either). Archeological art is missing from archeological excavation where the scientific documentation is mandatory, while producing art seems like a non-archeological activity, although the value of the art work may become much higher than the archeological publication.

- *Theory:* since contemporary graffiti belong to ambivalent cultural phenomena, the scientific interest in graffiti requires a very clear theoretical frame. Just writing about graffiti and having the subject of graffiti at a scientific forum may harm contemporary culture since it may add positive value to an activity which by its nature is a violence, from societal perspectives. At the same time, deconstructing graffiti as a cultural phenomenon may help reveal values, functions and parameters that would increase the positive values of graffiti in contemporary ambivalent culture.

Archeological art would be a branch of pop or fine art which represents archeological art, objects and sites in the framework of art concepts. Two categories are offered which embrace the variety of interrelation between art and archeology. The first category is archeology art which includes past and present art related to archeological excavations and/or documentation. The second category is archeological art which is a creative response to archeological excavations, sites and objects.

Curiously, despite the marriage between archeology and art, archeological art is still not developed in world culture, although the value of an art work whose theme is an archeological site, excavation or discovery may increase in time. Also, blooming contemporary archeology makes it impossible to include all contemporary archeological sites in scientific documentation, while artistic documentation may become a historical piece of information, with the increasing value of fine art as well. An example is the author's art work from 2012 which represents an archeological site at Wheeler Historic Farm in Utah (online). For the time being, the picture is the first documentation of the site, together with unpublished photos and sketches by the author. The site includes a fireplace, old shelves and an old agricultural machine which was probably used on the farm (Figure 1).

The problem is why do contemporary graffiti, although in many cases illegal art (including even prison works), develop as a popular aspect of pop art while archeological art is almost unknown as a branch of fine art or is embedded in other branches of knowledge?

PARAMETERS OF VALUE

We may need to point to the fact that the theoretical response to visual culture is an ambivalent constructor in culture, since there are old (out-of-date) and new theories, while there is no out-of-date art, although it may change its values on the scale of good to bad. Since graffiti represent creative artistic activity in a specific social context, they have steady and mobile parameters. The theme, artistic expression and the place are steady, while time is a dynamic value that may considerably change the values of graffiti as well. Another dynamic value is how much it is liked: as a rule, the more liked the art the higher its value, although graffiti break this rule since the items which are more liked and more distributed in some cases cross the borders of aesthetics and enter the world of violence and anti-aesthetics (e.g. city graffiti in many former eastern European areas – Ljubljana, Warsaw, Plovdiv, etc).

To build the best paradigm of graffiti as visual history, we need first to reveal the constructive components of graffiti and then to choose the foundation of comparative analysis, because of the relative character of graffiti as art. For instance, increasing the closeness of graffiti to fine art may make some of them extraordinary pieces of art (Banksy art).

Accordingly, the term ‘history’ as a focal point of the theoretical research is most controversial, since history as a value in culture in fact flattens the diachronic process and makes it two-dimensional from the perspective of the theory of art. It is very well represented in the dichotomy present–past.

Graffiti on the wall have been going through the process of historicization. Graffiti painted at t time ago obtain a ct culture parameter (c – cultural value). If we accept this theory, time, respectively history, is something added to the cultural value. However, one wall of graffiti with y cultural value at the time of production would have c cultural value, while in 10 years its value may increase or decrease (tc value). In other words, graffiti themselves represent the history of pop art in value.

Similarly, historical monuments as cultural value (ct) have a secondary function in comparison with artistic values in archeological art (a – artistic value).

The historical value is embedded in both – in the time x and in the cultural value y . Artistic value z adds the style component in the cultural value, respectively in the historical value.

Thus, graffiti and archeological art may have similar parameters – x , y , z – which combination creates a specific historical value. Because of location (= violence), many contemporary graffiti have 0 cultural value, although in time they may have a high historical value (h). Comparably, archeological art with no artistic significance may increase its art value in time because of its historical meaning that in turn may impact on the artistic assessment.

CONCLUSION

Graffiti and archeological art have been developing with no or invisible impact of science, although science can powerfully direct the cultural process in positive and negative directions. This work is not propaganda for contemporary graffiti since very often they damage society. The author’s understanding is that knowing more about graffiti may help to redirect this creative activity towards completely positive responses to society. Many artists become graffers since graffiti as art includes the art of letters which is avoided by all other aspects of fine art. As well, there are examples of very successful artists who started as graffers. In addition, graffiti are an aspect of pop art as visual culture, and have been blooming together with the fashion of tattoo in the contemporary world. More discussion and analyses in depth of a, c, t, h (art, culture, time, history) values may help graffiti to develop as positive culture. By introducing archeological art, the author shows how it is possible that an amazing creative field is not being developed because of the limitations of the human mind and reproduction of a disable paradigm (archeology as value is only subject of science, but not of art).

The time-based, cultural, artistic and historical values of these categories often have different parameters, while studying graffiti from the perspective of historical values may help to increase the popularity of archeological art in society.



REFERENCES

- Bailey, D.W. (2008). Art to archeology to archeology to art. Lecture online.www.ucd.ie. Retrieved from <http://www.ucd.ie/scholarcast/scholarcast9.html> (May 24, 2013).
- Bailey, D. (2013). Going beyond and letting go: Non-archeological art and non-artistic archeology. 2013 Theoretical Archeology Group University of Chicago, 9 May 2013. *Vimeo.com*. Video-presentation retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/66192443> (May 24, 2013).
- Bailey, D., Cochrane, A. and Zambelli, J. (2010). *Unearthed: acomparative study of Jomon Dogu and Neolithic figurines*. Sainsbury Centre for Study of Visual Culture.
- Bouchet, D. (2007). The ambiguity of the modern conception of autonomy and the paradox of culture. *Thesis Eleven*, 88, 1, 31–54.
- Martinez, S. (2009). *Graff: the art & technique of graffiti*. Impact books.
- McAuliffe, C. and Iveson, K. (2011). Art and Crime (and Other Things Besides ...): Conceptualising Graffiti in the City. *Geography Compass*, 5, 3, 128–43.
- Mills, S.F. (Ed.) (2011). *Interventions: Măgura past and present*. Renaissance.
- Mills, S.F. (2013). *Auditory archeology: studies of sound and hearing in the past*. Left Coast Press.
- Nikolova, L. (2011). Graffiti and resocialization of the abandoned buildings. *Examiner.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.examiner.com/article/graffiti-and-resocialization-of-the-abandoned-buildings> (May 24, 2013).
- Reisner, R.G. and Wechsler, L. (1974). *Encyclopedia of graffiti*. Macmillan/McGraw-Hill School Division.
- Roelstraete, D. (2009). The way of the shovel: On the archeological imaginary in art. *E-flux online*.
- Wheeler Historic Farm (online). *Wheelerfarm.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.wheelerfarm.com/> (May 24, 2013).



Figure 1. Lolita (2012). Wheeler Historic Farm, Utah. Archeological art.