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### Artwork Through Vandalism

Walking down the streets of San Francisco, we pass by buildings, paying little attention to the walls kept so clean and pristine. Walls painted a singular color and carefully maintained by the city to uphold the pure appearance so desired. What many of us don't realize when passing the buildings of San Francisco is that the walls hold decades of history trapped behind their fresh paint. The early 1980s was a time when the art form now considered vandalism by the majority of citizens exploded in the streets of San Francisco. With its origin rooted in the subway system of New York City, the creative lettering rapidly spread across the country and became a vital part of San Francisco's heritage and history.

The 1980s were a time when graffiti really began to take off in the Bay Area. The artistic lettering began to take a style of its own completely unique to the Bay Area, becoming more colorful and funkier, a style referred to as New Wave. Many influential graffiti artists emerged at this time, starting with tagging and moving up to larger, more intricate pieces. Each graffiti artist has a tag, a unique name or image that represents them. This "tag" can be found hastily scribbled along walls, street signs, and public transportation. The tag is the signature of the artist and holds a lot of power in the graffiti world. Following tagging, the artists move up to bigger, more detailed pieces, including *throw ups* and *burners*. A throw up is a more intricate version of the tag, but isn't the artists absolute best work. A piece that displays all of the details and intricacies,

depicting the artist's best work, is called a burner. These pieces are often very large and colorful and are found on walls in public spaces. Graffiti initially began in the subway systems of New York, but the Bay Area's street art scene is unique in itself. Spray painting on the subway systems, it's crucial to keep the design simple, allowing viewers to make out the graffiti piece as it rushes by at 40 miles per hour. However, in the Bay Area, where there are no subways, artists took to the streets and began throwing up their designs on static walls. This gave people the freedom to make their designs more complex and really experiment with different styles of graffiti. New wave is a style of graffiti that originated in the Bay Area, completely different to what had been done in the past. Artists adopting this style were influenced by street art from countries all over the world such as England and France. They started making their pieces bolder, bigger, more complex, adding more color, and even incorporating images. The increase of graffiti in the 70s and 80s was largely connected to the surge of hip hop culture. Many individuals who listened to hip hop were involved in graffiti and used it as a form of personal expression that combined with their love for lettering and writing. Both hip hop and graffiti "became an avenue for inventiveness and an alternative to gang violence" ("Hip Hop: A Culture"). It helped bring individuals "together for a common cause; expression of their artistic creativity" ("Hip Hop: A Culture"). Not only did the graffiti community flourish as a whole, but each artist was competing with one another, trying to create something better and more intricate in an attempt to be recognized and appreciated in the community.

Graffiti is defined as "unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface" (Merriam-Webster), and is illegal all across the United States. In 1992, Frank Jordan, a former police chief, became mayor of San Francisco, and as a part of his campaign, he vowed to clean

up the streets of San Francisco. A part of this cleanup entailed getting rid of graffiti, and along with the help of the police force, he began cracking down on these so called vandals and their work. Groups of people involved in graffiti became classified as gangs, increasing the punishment for those involved in the act. This was a stark difference from how graffiti was initially treated in the Bay Area. Originally, street art had been something the local community didn't try and stop and local business owners actually allowed the youth to paint on their walls. However, with the introduction of a new plan of making San Francisco safer, the stakes of painting the walls became a lot higher. Frank Jordan's initiative began to gain traction and became more and more popular, with people supporting the idea of making the city safer and taking any action necessary to achieve that goal. Graffiti artists are seen as vandals and considered to be defacing the city. SGT Neval of the SFPD describes the negative aspect of graffiti as "the idea of destroying other people's property and the idea of defacing places in the city". He goes on to say that "it's personal property most of the time being affected and...it looks bad and...like people don't care about their property"(Hill). Not only does a member of the San Francisco Police Department describe the negative appearance of graffiti, many citizens in the area are fed up with tagging on trains and on public shop windows and walls. Graffiti artists are described as having no respect for the city and for ignoring the rights of the owners of buildings. Their work is dragged as ugly and unclean. Considered a criminal act, graffiti also holds no artistic merit in the eyes of the law and many community members.

However, graffiti artists themselves have a completely different view on their act of painting the city. Whereas many people describe it as vandalism, the people who partake in graffiti have a true, deep love for lettering. Many graffiti artists start with a love for comics

which then grows into a passion for drawing and writing. As one graffiti artist puts it, “People say we hate the city. We don’t hate the city, We love the city. This is our city”(Hill). Graffiti artists take pride in their work and believe they’re displaying their love for the city by marking the walls for the all to see. It is seen as a form of public art that has the potential to reach a wide audience. This perspective is far from the view of graffiti as vandalism. As an artist puts it, “Vandalism is throwing a brick through a window. This is a study. It’s a craft; it’s a science. Every piece has a structure to it. It has a form, it’s got movement, it’s got colors, it’s got a flow”(Hill). Graffiti artists all share a passion for this “craft” and have formed a community around the art. Graffiti artists are constantly pushing each other and themselves to make bigger and better pieces. It was a competitive group, with graffiti writers battling each other “in their quest to be ‘King of the Line’”(The Golden Age). Although competitive, “It was based on skill, not the color of your skin, your religion, or anything else that didn't translate to the pieces you made”(The Two Today). Graffiti is a nondiscriminating culture that allowed anybody and everybody with the interest and the skill to join. Graffiti writers use this outlet to express personal ideas and is “utilizing the public to spread its ideas”(Brown). “One common use of graffiti is to disseminate political ideas. The subculture of graffiti artists tends to rebel against authority and the mass media. The political agendas being promoted by the artist varies from individual to individual. Both sides of a political issue may have their own forms of graffiti”(Sanchez). With this outlet, people had the power to express views not generally accepted by mass media. Just because something isn’t accepted by popular culture, doesn’t mean that view should not be heard or be given the means of reaching many people, and graffiti allows just that.

Steven Free, also known as Girafa, is a graffiti artist from the Bay Area who is infamous for his pieces incorporating his iconic giraffe image. His work can be seen all over the Bay Area and he's often regarded as the Banksy of the South Bay. Steven Free is an orphan whose mother left him when he was three years old. As Free describes it, "At the time, I felt worthless. My own birth mom kind of just threw me out. Graffiti kind of filled me up. It made me feel like I am special. I am worth something" (Veronin). Graffiti isn't an activity seen as vandalism in the eyes of the artist. Free used graffiti as an outlet from the distresses of his world, something many people turn to art for. As his brightly painted yellow and black images started becoming more and more popular in the Bay Area, Free was able to start selling his artwork and began getting hired for commissioned pieces of work. "Free wouldn't be where he is today—that is, making money as an artist—if he hadn't put in the time as a street artist (or, in the eyes of the law, a vandal)"(Veronin). Graffiti gave Free, and many other artists, the opportunity to expand on their love for aerosol painting and public art and to explore and improve on their own style. Although the artwork initially started out as vandalism, the same artwork and skill was then used to create "legal" art.

Vandalism is a strong word to use for graffiti. The graffiti community is made up of individuals who have a genuine love for lettering and the art form and the city they choose to decorate with their work. Graffiti artists push each other to make better pieces and use graffiti as an outlet as holds true with any other art form. Graffiti, in my opinion, is the rawest form of art, with the artwork displayed for the public to see with no regard to who the audience is. The artist makes no money off the piece and is making art completely for art's sake with no ulterior motive. Graffiti is a widespread form of art that needs the space and freedom to be expressed

without fear of prosecution. With the continuation of increased security and negative consequences of graffiti, the artform will be wiped out completely, destroying an entire culture and community of people with a passion for graffiti.

## Works Cited

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