

# Graffiti as Art as Language: The Logic of a Modern Language

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The notion of communication is in essence that of information transmission in its simplest form—the semiotic encoding and decoding of messages that occur in every type of language, be that written, verbal, non-verbal, or animal. Taking form in an Aristotelian syllogism, this paper argues that graffiti constitutes its own art form that must be equally represented, examined, appreciated, and documented. By exploring how graffiti is art, how art is language, and therefore how graffiti is language, this paper seeks to expand its audience’s understanding of how artworks are underpinned by a similar semiotic structure to that of the written or verbal. Through theory and case studies of contemporary graffiti artists and their works, the notion of graffiti as a language that can be read and contextualized comes to life in a way that is both grounded in history and stunningly creative.

*Keywords:* graffiti, semiotics, language, art

## Introduction

*How do we communicate?:* a question whose answer has been sought after throughout time, discipline, and media. Communication as content and process of knowledge transmission rules our everyday lives in both simple and significant ways. The notion of communication in its simplest form essentially defines itself as information transmission—the semiotic encoding and decoding of messages that occur in every type of language, be that written, verbal, non-verbal, or animal. But communication extends beyond that which we recognize in words spoken or written, and taps into our creative, artistic sensibilities.

In acknowledging the variable relationship(s) humans have to representation—and therefore words—images or objects must be understood as *dynamic*; their significance cannot be understood as a one-way process from visual material to individual or vice versa, but the result of complex interrelationships between the material, individual, and various factors of culture, society, and respective intersectionality. Noting that “different languages influence our minds in different ways”, it becomes necessary to build upon this sustained notion of the ordinary in terms of our ingrained conceptions of language (Deutscher, 2010). Thus, this endeavour ultimately aims to update and broaden the way that we understand the deep-rooted, conventional structure of information transmission. Through theory and case studies of contemporary graffiti artists and their works, the notion of graffiti as an art form and a language that can be read and contextualized comes to life in a manner both grounded in history and stunningly creative.

## Graffiti as Art

Art has often been associated with a language of its own; a visual vocabulary that conveys meaning in a way separate and distinct from that of the verbal or written. As a form of communication seemingly beneath the

surface, art as visual text functions as a guide, causing feeling and reception of information in a different manner. But despite these more ingrained, functional notions of art, art as concept must be understood in context.

### **Graffiti Throughout History**

Representations of graffiti as a concept find its roots in Italy; *graffiato* translates to “scratched” or “etched”, but originates from the Greek *graphein*, meaning “to write”. Inscriptions and figure drawings characterize early Italian graffiti, lining the walls of ancient ruins, the Roman catacombs, and Pompeii, as well as across the Middle East. But the earliest example of graffiti comes from the town of Ephesus in present day Turkey, taking the form of a handprint vaguely resembling a heart, believed to indicate directions to a brothel, giving us one of the earliest examples of pictorial-based information sharing techniques (Von Joel, 2008). Other examples of ancient graffiti were rampant throughout Rome and Egypt, displaying love declarations, words of thought, curses and spells, alphabets, quotes of literature, and political rhetoric, much of which was preserved by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE (Ancelet, 2006). Graffiti in this sense is also seen amongst the Quiche Maya, Ireland, the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and even along the Oregon Trail. While graffiti markings were evidently used as a widespread form of communication throughout and across the ancient world, graffiti as an art form has evolved to embody a language of information transference on a much larger scale.

Graffiti in our contemporary conception is rooted primarily in the 20th century. World War II-era images and phrases began to appear all over the world, most famously the American icon “Kilroy was here”. As this infiltrated American mainstream popular culture, it instigated a wave of expression through artistry. This political basis naturally gave way to both the tagging of the latter half of the 20th century and the often political bent to graffiti images, as modern graffiti began to take hold in major hotbed cities across the United States and beyond.

Tagging and aerosol-based graffiti rose to fame in 1970s America, producing such iconic representations as “Clapton is God”, “Frodo Lives”, and Taki’s tag, but this era also made famous the countercultural art scenes in Philadelphia and New York that so often characterize our embodied representations of graffiti. It was during this time that graffiti’s association with the rising counterculture originated, as attributed to Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy, Lee Quiñones, and others.

The value of graffiti has consistently risen in the art world over the last few decades. In 2011, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) New York opened a three-month show entitled *Art in the Streets*, the first major museum exhibition on the history of graffiti and street art from the 1970s to the global movement that it has become today. This inclusion in a taste-making museum spurred an influx of exhibitions in and on other high-brow cultural and artistic sites, including *City of New York* (Museum of the City of New York, 2013), showcases from the Martin Wong Collection, and exhibitions of photographs of graffiti lining the walls of subways and buildings, long erased by city living.

It is not entirely safe to say that the general understanding of graffiti as vandalism—or even as commercial tool—has escaped the modern mindset; rather, the phenomenon has morphed into one of hipster acceptance and embrace. With graffiti artists now being outrightly *invited* into the mainstream via galleries and museums, the post-2000 graffiti art boom has consistently made headway in legitimizing graffiti as an accepted form of art.

### **Criterion for Consideration: Graffiti as Art**

Individual art objects are both embedded in and necessarily inextricable from the experiences of a local culture; these factors in part influence differences in visual form embodied by graffiti and street art. As a result, these forms have historically evolved to take on more elaborate, calligraphed, and stylized representations of both words and images, in conjunction with an embodiment of complex societal evolution. Though “street art” is arguably more recognizable to the modern consumers’ eye, as these works are often expressly intended, commissioned, or marketed as artistic representation, both street art and graffiti art take on the primary form of images and provide a relation between the viewer, artist, and their worlds.

Graffiti as a form of self-expression is often shorted the opportunity of its designation as *art*, but it cannot be denied genuine status for a lack of form or base aesthetic elements. Graffiti artists have historically approached much of their work with intent for its apprehension as an artwork that communicates feelings, ideas, and memories to its audience, regardless of its relation to an institutionalized setting. Tolstoy’s mandate that art must allow people to express ideas and share in each other’s feelings cannot be lost on the audience to a graffiti artist’s work. Meant to cause a reaction or invoke a feeling, the fact that a work stirred you in some manner is arguably the sole purpose of many artists who line either the city or gallery walls with their works.

It has been argued that, because graffiti has not (yet) been *systematically* showcased in galleries and museums, it does not embody art in the “art world” sense of the word. But in recent years, this logic has been flipped, as more and more galleries have gradually welcomed sections of graffiti behind the thinly-veiled walls of the apropos “art scene”. This growing institutional acceptance of graffiti constitutes one of a select criteria for considering graffiti as art, the others including, but not limited to: artist intention to produce a work of art; its established history of development in style and technique; exhibition of base tenets of art (including form, colour, composition); and the public response, among other markers (Stowers, 1997, p. 8). Once brought into the space and mindset of the gallery, graffiti garnered a whole new level of respect, as it transitioned from lowbrow vandalism to high art.

In general, art can function to question the limitations of subject matter set by convention. Beginning as a way to creatively test the limits of convention, graffiti evolved and branched off to constitute the first thing that many think of when contemplating contemporary art, but also holds a powerful place in our classification and categorization of our world.

## **Art as Language**

### **What Is Art?: Competing Theories**

Art has historically encompassed innumerable media, subject areas, movements, time, and conception. By virtue of this nature, it becomes necessary to attempt to define *art*. This is, as it turns out, not so simple. The qualifiers for *art* vary depending on who and when you ask, and the answers are often equally as incomprehensible as its criteria.

Spanning millennia, what is considered *art*, has evolved alongside societies, its primary focus and apparent purpose evolving in conjunction. From Renaissance friezes to the Dutch Golden Age to Romantic portraiture, beauty served as art’s primary purpose until the early 20th century. With the rise of cubism, Dadaism, neoplasticism, surrealism, and other movements that characterize the shift toward the avant-garde appeal of the 20th century’s first few decades, the notion of only “beauty as art” faded, eclipsing the ideal that if a work is not striving to represent beauty then it is not art. On the heels of this albeit dramatic shift in the

broad conception of art, cracks formed within genres to create subgenres of art, as well as new artistic movements, such as that of graffiti.

Art's purpose has been fluid throughout time and space, its media and content filling whatever vessel requires it. Tolstoy defined *art* as “a human activity consisting in... that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them” (Tolstoy, 1897). Art embodies goals that are creative, formal, philosophical, spiritual, aesthetic, perceptual, expressive—it fulfills a different purpose for everyone and everything, and is therefore valued differently by different bodies.

**Heidegger on art & aesthetics.** Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), German philosopher and Continental hermeneutical thinker, has been very influential on art and aesthetics discourse. At its core, Heidegger's theory of aesthetics attempts to describe artworks as objects that both express and intensify the human experience (in my opinion, in similar fashion to Tolstoy's approach). Understanding that works themselves often mediate our worldly experience, Heidegger claims that art appeals to us the unending possibilities inherent in intelligibility—that meaning, understanding, and coherence are not one-sided or always presented in perfect or like packages. Art in this essential sense can be understood as a continuous creative struggle to express that which conditions and informs our universes of meaning and understanding, and yet resists being exhaustively articulated in the terms of these universes (Thomson, 2015).

Unlike philosophers up to and of his time, Heidegger does not seek to uncover a single timelessly valid determination of art and its meanings, but rather endeavors to convey the essence of art as less determinable. Definitions, and therefore understandings, appreciations, and uses of art evolve, and no longer apply retrospectively; therefore, no timeless or absolute conception of art does or can exist.

Bent toward the phenomenological, Heidegger desires that viewers of art restrain themselves from “the usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking”, in order to linger within the truth that is assumed to be occurring within a work of art (Thomson, 2015). He claims that only the restraint of this lingering will allow the work to first and foremost speak for itself, and only then can viewers come to individually and experientially absorb that which is conveyed to them. Art teaches us to embrace the notion that life will never be completely revealed in any time or media, and that the very thing that makes it possible for human beings to continue to understand what *is* in meaningful ways is that very fact and human endeavour. Insofar as the concepts, symbols, and languages we use to make sense of our world and experiences remain uninterrogated as to their own implied biases, we tend not to even take notice when incongruous conceptual categories lead us to unqualified or distorted apprehensions of phenomena before us, such as that within the work at which we gaze or even the notion of *art* itself.

Heidegger also observes that “we read, see, and judge literature and art the way *one* sees and judges”; for example,

everyone knows that Da Vinci's “Mona Lisa” is a great work of art; we think we “know” this even if the painting has never spoken to us at all, or if we have only heard that “they say” the enigmatic hint of a smile on her face is supposed to suggest the numinous presence of God. (Thomson, 2015)

The problem, expressed metaphorically, is that receiving a “souvenir from someone else's journey” makes a poor substitute for taking that voyage on one's own. That phenomenological journey we take toward developing our own understanding of information becomes lost in this inherent yet simultaneously suspended

“knowing”, and this affects our own ability to interpret that conveyed phenomenon in any meaningful, constructive, or personal way.

For Heidegger, art embodies what really *is*; what is created captures and preserves that essential tension between revealing and concealing which is at work in all *art*, indeed, in all representation, and that which is brought into and maintained in intelligibility. Art exists where and when inner meaning becomes intelligible; a place where inner impulse meets environment, and where the exercise of active receptivity transforms into the establishment of possibility, and the moment of the artist bringing that to light in their own interpretive way for the first time. An artwork both constructs and extrapolates an essential conveyance of meaning and experiential knowledge gained from the insight of and message transmitted from another humanistic source.

**Anti-essentialism and the “open concept” of art.** The anti-essentialist view of *art* operates primarily on the lack of a singular definition of art. This “open concept” therefore reflects our treatment of it—the necessity of broadening one’s boundaries and the use of concept holds a mirror up to the tradition of artistic interpretation: expanding one’s mind to encompass and attempt to understand its content. Determining “what is art” therefore constitutes a decision problem, where the verdict turns on whether we enlarge our set(s) of conditions for applying and accepting the concept. This expansive, venturesome character of art, its unconventional creations and ever-present changes, makes the concept nearly impossible to capture in a classical or timeless definition, or as some static, univocal essence.

**Is a definition possible?** Art as concept and object does not transcend time and place; the definition, use, function, and purpose of *art* evolves as much as their styles and manifestations. In this understanding, then, is a definition of art even or ever possible?

Recent approaches to the meaning of the word “art” argue that it is simply a shortened version of *fine art* or *creative art*. In this sense, some level of skill or expertise is utilized to express the artist’s creativity or engage with the viewers’ aesthetic sensibilities. This, of course, brings with it a whole suite of assumptions and interpretations that are far too expansive to address within the scope of this paper, but should not be overlooked in future discourse.

It is perhaps most useful, then, to define art in terms of the institution, as that is where “Art” often exists in historical and genre arguments. In its most rudimentary sense, we understand art within the context of *the art world*. The art world as a construction functions in like form to how money functions in a capitalist, democratic economy: its value and meaning is not in the physical currency itself, but rather sanctioned through conventional social usage within an existing system that places value on it as currency. In essence, the art world exists because people agree that it does. This institutional definition of art understands it as that which is placed in the context of art, for instance, a piece that is put into the space of a gallery, thus imbuing it with meaning, significance, power, attention, and therefore monetary and intellectual value. The highly pluralistic theory of art represents the nature of art as a concept, but within the context of the institution, what’s art is art, and what’s not is not.

Why then, in this understanding, could graffiti not be *art*? If simply placed in context, or by expanding the context (or breaking down the literal and metaphorical walls) of what constitutes the “art world” itself, could we not redefine graffiti’s place in this vocabulary? This whole issue is, after all, simply a matter of terminology and classification, not of taste and technique.

### **Constructions of Language: Meaning and Vocabularies**

In artistic creation, an artist responds to what offers itself up in the world, creatively discerning, establishing, and realizing the outlines of the world in the manifold possibilities granted by the earth, its peoples, and experiences. Language is defined as *a system of abstract codes which represent antecedent events and concepts*, but can also be understood as a construction that is “developed by the people who use them and carry meaning because they agree to the meanings and follow certain rules of the language” (Hall, 1997). Citing Sapir, Deutscher notes that with language a host of habits is acquired that in turn shapes experience (Deutscher, 2010). In this way, language functions as a process rather than a static object or entity; worldly perception is understood through language, and therefore language is understood and evolves through worldly experience. The author is simply asking you to consent to an expansion of your perception of the rules of language.

**Art’s role in semiotics.** As a discipline, semiotics primarily concerns itself with the construction of meaning. Dedicated to the study of how representation (whether in language, image, or object) generates meaning, or the process by which we comprehend or attribute meaning, semiotics presents an inquiry into how symbols and visual representations challenge existing understandings of our world. In his endeavors to define meaning-making structures for visual materials, Roland Barthes essentially sought to analyze how the meanings we attribute to images are not a “natural” result of what we see—rather that images are not self-evident and universal in how humans understand what they see or experience (Dillon, 1999). As language both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of its respective culture(s), the meanings given to symbols or images are linked to culturally specific associations and the personal characteristics and understandings that individuals from these cultures embody.

It is important to acknowledge that “[a]ny sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organised with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning” will heretofore be considered a “language” (Hall, 1997, p. 19). But according to popular thought, there has been a strong tendency to think of visual images as uncoded symbols, rather than language, and even mistakenly universal in the meanings they convey. This is, of course, simply untrue. When used to express meaning, written or spoken systems within a particular language may be obvious in their designation as “languages”, “[b]ut so are visual images, whether produced by hand, mechanical, electronic, digital or some other means” (Hall, 1997, p. 18).

Because of this seemingly inherent confusion and dichotomization of representation, it may be useful to think of visual images as text-like, in that artistic representation is produced and understood within the same semiotic structure in which written and spoken languages function (in that they can be “written” and “read”). Representation is constructed simply by the combination of “concept” and “language”, concept being that which functions as a system of mental representation that organizes and classifies our world into meaningful categories, and language being the system of those signs organized into various relationships.

Curtin writes that “images work via a second communicative system, one fully as expressive as natural [read: written or spoken] language, but separate and structured independently of it” (Curtin, 2009, p. 4). Often, this lingual division attributes itself to the understanding of images, but not words, as polysemous. Traditional verbal language functions as a medium with relatively explicit, determinate meanings to which the “meanings” of images may on the whole be contrasted (in terms of an emic system to its respective culture/society); the meaning(s) of images therefore are not accepted in the canon as necessarily concrete, and may be treated as

“incorrect” or “unacceptable” interpretations.<sup>1</sup> For verbal and written language, rhetorical structures and arrangement of the elements of signification may be a secondary signifying system, following the words themselves. But for visual material, the author argues that these structures and arrangement are *also* secondary to the *images* themselves; the meaning transmitted through images are in fact subject to their own polysemousness, and are therefore left open to many interpretations by multiple audiences.

Because of the pervasive link between visual representations and the idea of expression, *art* has historically been thought of as more intuitive, unconscious, and basic than other forms of language. But rather than arrangement and association being the only mechanisms for interpretation of artworks, it can be understood as a structure wherein symbols for which individual meanings can already be derived—like individual words—can be framed to convey a comprehensive and comprehensible piece of information, presented for interpretation by a viewer. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen radical realignments in how we choose to communicate, and therefore our assumptions of how art forms communicate through words, images, or the conjunction of both, have to evolve in tow.<sup>2</sup>

### Graffiti as Language

Art transcends “natural” language, essentially speaking through a language of its own design. While originally used to send messages and mark territory, graffiti as an art form has evolved to embody information as language on a much larger scale. Going one step beyond what society has taught us about language and information transmission, visual images exist as a form of representation that conveys information in a legible and broadly understood way. The notion of abstraction has challenged the possibility of visual art being understood semiotically as a sign, which becomes problematic when we realize that we inevitably seek significance and meaning as we would from even the most explicitly coded image.<sup>3</sup> But a significant way to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of abstraction and therefore visual representation is the fact that our perception, or essentially our reading, of images and objects is socially conditioned and learned behavior. Let us then learn how we can understand artistic representation like graffiti as a semiotic language.

Despite its history as an illustration of beauty, art has taken on new meaning as vessel for the communication of information in a unique and affective way. Visual representation as a semiotically constructed and understood language allows artists to encode, and viewers to decode, information, discourse, and nuance through artistic expression. Because of this structural landscape, artists have emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that utilize artistic forms, namely graffiti, as a means of expression and information conveyance. Two of the most well-known—and critically acclaimed—graffiti artists to consider further are Jean-Michel Basquiat and Banksy.

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<sup>1</sup> The more discrete nature of written language is in and of itself a dynamic process; this varies amongst languages, language families, and cultural language functions.

<sup>2</sup> It is very necessary to note, though, that culture cannot entirely determine these responses. While the factors of culture are crucial to creating these frameworks of meaning construction, there are a multitude of factors that all simultaneously play into the process of meaning-making and meaning determinations. The relationship between a sign and its arrived at meaning is socially constructed and learned.

<sup>3</sup> The old adage “A picture is worth a thousand words” feels uncannily appropriate here.

### Examples of Graffiti's Functionality as Information Conveyance

**Jean-Michel Basquiat.** In following the institutional understanding of art, those who study art create it—think Salvador Dalí, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, and Andy Warhol.<sup>4</sup> But figures like Jean-Michel Basquiat entered and traversed the difficult terrain of the fine art world through the merit of and powerful commentary provided by his work. With his early work passing for graffiti on the streets of New York, Basquiat transcended the confines of the traditional gallery space and blurred the lines of “high art” and street art with his innovative and transitional works that characterized not only the liminal spaces between artistic landscapes, but the rapidly evolving social world of his time.

Since so many elements of life cannot be expressed in a “traditional” manner, i.e., through speech or text, this *language of art* was a way for Basquiat to both ask and answer some of life's most significant questions. When words fail us, art in its many forms often comes to our aid, and provides us an outlet through which we can properly express ourselves, our intentions, our stories.

Beginning his artistic career spray-painting the walls and buildings of downtown New York City with words, Basquiat's first artistic language was a written one. Initially operating “under the tag...of SAMO, he transformed his own observations [of the world and people around him] into pithy text messages inscribed on the edifices of [his] urban environment” (“The Defining Years”, 2019). This quickly became his *modus operandi*, and Basquiat came to produce a series of text-image drawings and inscriptions across the city in the early 1980s, each containing at least a single word, short phrase, or simple image referring to a person, event, or recent observation of his.

As one of the first graffiti artists to successfully break into and maintain a presence in the mainstream art world, Basquiat began producing his influential works with the intent to convey a spiritual experience. His 1981 series—including the pieces *Untitled (Head)* (1981), *Per Capita* (1981), *Notary* (1983), and others—exhibit an irrefutable power to transcend the individual and address broader issues and universal themes he considered of import to widespread, receptive audiences.

Striving to embody the cultural and aesthetic richness of his environment, Basquiat produced works characterized by “distinctive and sophisticated iconography of symbols that includ[ed] skulls, bones, scrawled words, crowns, stick figures and abstract pictorial marks” (“Jean-Michel Basquiat”, 2019). Understanding the weight of the work that he was producing, Basquiat's work began to take on new meaning for the city of New York, slowly making its way into the “art world” at a time when hip hop, street art culture, and neo-expressionism coalesced.

Though Basquiat intentionally resisted the label of “graffiti artist” during his life, and stylistically, his works share little resemblance with the traditional spray-painted images of graffiti artists who made their initial reputations as subway painters in the 1970s, his work has come to characterize this style in history, form, and content, and has become a strong representation of this movement. Despite his lack of formal art training, Basquiat successfully navigated his transition from city walls to gallery walls, and in the process helped to morph the working vocabulary of contemporary art.

**Banksy.** The notoriously anonymous graffiti artist, known by nom de guerre Banksy, remains one of the most well-known contemporary figures in the modern graffiti movement. In a time of rampant utilization of

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<sup>4</sup> If a formal art education and an institutional showing of work are the standards by which we define *art* and *artist*, then are we to discount the works of other such renowned figures as Frida Kahlo, Keith Haring, Jasper Johns, or JR?



artworks as vehicle for activism and social commentary, Banksy's work is slowly being incorporated into the mainstream artistic canon.

Utilizing stenciling as his main medium, Banksy's works explore the dark underbelly of contemporary Western society, as embodied across the globe. The public visibility of his works conveys a sense of urgency in the transmission of his intended messages, as they are often context- and politically-driven. Previously referring to graffiti as a form of "underclass revenge", Banksy's attempts to make a statement become significant timely contributions to both the physical and media landscapes, taking the form of "the voice of the people". Additionally, his strategic placement of altered versions of famous and classical works within museum and art institutions themselves provides blatant commentary on the conception of the "art world", posing questions on the nature of art and the power of the institution.

Banksy's first formal exhibition took place in a tiny Silver Lake venue in 2002, aptly titled *Existentialism (Banksy)*. His continued showcasing within small exhibitions created a phenomenon that Max Foster coined "the Banksy effect": a measured increase in interest in the work of graffiti artists as mainstream and highly valued pieces for purchase and display (DeTurk, 2015). And despite the fact that his works are technically illegal, this landscape transformed illegal marking into precious, valuable objects.

Though some would consider his work vandalism, many would look at his pieces as critical commentary on the current state, and even as an active humanitarian approach. Both his street art and "contributions" to museums and other institutions act as outrageous comments on not only the art itself and its context, but also on the relationship of art and the public eye. In particular, his self-destructing piece, *Girl With a Balloon* (2006) that made headlines in October 2018, made a statement about how art and what it represents or conveys cannot remain static in our current landscape. His actions force people to think and engage in dialogues about power, representation, history, and art in the hopes of starting larger, global conversations.

### Conclusion

When your language routinely obliges you to specify certain types of information, it forces you to be attentive to certain details in the world and to certain aspects of experience of which speakers of other languages may not be aware. For a painter, there are no two reds, because each is influenced by both its and the artist's context; art remains capable of redrawing the lines that establish our basic sense of what is and what matters. While configuration remains important to the construction and encoding of meaning, we need to look at graffiti within a more semiotic framework, while still understanding that aesthetics contribute to our development of that framework. And in understanding visual images within this semiotic structure, we must go one step further and acknowledge that the signs that constitute our everyday world are formed into a language, and together enact representation in our understanding of produced or constructed meaning. Meaning must be "assigned...and normalised by convention and use"; signs do not have permanent or essential meanings, and nor should the medium to which they are assigned be singular or fixed (Sorrells, 2016, p. 55).

Graffiti art as "writing", or "representing", rather, constitutes a creative method of communicating with other artists and greater audiences, and one with deep roots in history and cultural and political movements. This type of communication carries high value, because it is imbued with the ability to link people of all ages, colours, and communities, regardless of cultural, racial, or lingual differences, in a way that nothing other than art can. This expansion in approach to both the understanding and construction of representation embodies the notion that "habits of *mind* [can] go beyond language itself, affecting your experiences, perceptions,

associations, feelings, memories and orientation in the world” (Deutscher, 2010).

Phenomenologists have argued that intention is the maker of art, while others have claimed that *art* is defined by how it is experienced by its audiences, rather than its creators. Art as a sociological category in this sense of determining what is and is not art is a way to understand the fluid nature of artistic expression, and thus our need as audience and documentarians to evolve with the changing nature of media and communication. This is a learned ability, which is deeply affected by our cultures and by one another. Art is not only that which appears in the gallery as determined by the curator; but something that exists across walls, minds, nations, and generations to embody that which often cannot be expressly “put into words”: “authentic interpretation must show what does not stand there in the words and yet is said nevertheless” (Deutscher, 2010). Graffiti occupies a space in which we can learn to wield the tools of governance discourse, finding and using our voices, and expressing both our needs and the needs of our world. As long as the meanings we as humans have to convey pertain to objects in space and time or facets of our everyday lives, a graphic display may be fully adequate, perhaps even superior to, a verbal description of our world.

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