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Defacement art

On the sad spectacle of graffiti in the museum.

Of all spurious forms of contemporary art, perhaps the most ostentatiously disagreeable is so-called "graffiti art." What it represents is the elevation of a public nuisance into a protected and adulated form of creative endeavor. Because it has its origin in an activity that involves a contempt for private property, its rebirth as art—a specially venerated species of property—involves all manner of contradictions, not to say hypocritical evasions, on the part of those who practice and those who hawk and display the stuff. In the Spring issue of *City Journal*, Heather Mac Donald, taking off from an exhibition of such "street art" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, provides a long and patient demolition of this form of urban squalor masquerading as art.

What's particularly irritating about graffiti art is the way it enshrines something that is both hideous to look at *and offensive to contemplate. Épater la bourgeois: shocking the middle class has been a cherished goal of the avant garde since the birth of the movement in the nineteenth century. The fact that the middle class long ago enlisted themselves as co-collaborators in this project of rote titillation transformed the avant garde into a reactionary force in everything but posture and rhetoric. The amazing thing has been the longevity of this new incarnation of Salon art: year after year, decade after decade, "artists" and their eager if jaded public rehearse the tired old pantomime: the party of the first part recycles some bit of Dada while the party of the second pretends to be shocked or at least interested. How can they keep it up? The energizing lubrication, we suspect, is not surprise, novelty, or shock; it certainly isn't aesthetic interest. Perhaps it is the large supply of cash that seems still, even now, to circulate around these performances—cash and that other enlivening if illiquid currency, celebrity. The thing that makes graffiti or (a perhaps more accurate term) defacement art so viscerally unappealing is the element of effrontery it involves. You cannot see the stencil-like scrawls without thinking of the perfectly innocent public structure that was marred by some spray-paint-wielding hooligan.*

Ms. Mac Donald provides an expert anatomy of this species of psychopathology. She guys the wretched (if lavishly compensated) dealers who traffic in this form of defacement and dissects "the hypocrisy of the graffiti vandals themselves, who wage war on property rights until presented with the opportunity to sell their work or license it to a corporation. At that point, they

grab all the profits they can stuff into their bank accounts." That little dialectic—rail against capitalism, "greed," and corporate interests while assiduously lining your bank account with the lucre such disquisitions elicit—is by now a hoary old standby in the metabolism of left-liberal dissimulation.

But, as Ms. Mac Donald shows, what makes defacement art specially toxic is its practical afterlife. Most repulsive art stays in the art gallery. It may blemish the taste and sensibility of those who savor it, but otherwise its real-world effect is minimal. Not so with defacement art. "Lost in this antibourgeois posturing," Ms. Mac Donald writes, "is the likely result of the museum's graffiti glorification: a renewed commitment to graffiti by Los Angeles's ghetto youth, who will learn that the city's power class views graffiti not as a crime but as art worthy of curation. The victims will be the law-abiding residents of the city's most graffiti-afflicted neighborhoods and, for those who care, the vandals themselves."

The title of Heather Mac Donald's essay—"Radical Graffiti Chic"—alludes to Tom Wolfe's classic 1970 account of a fundraising party for the Black Panthers at Leonard Bernstein's Park Avenue penthouse. "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's" was both hilarious and disturbing: hilarious for the spectacle of fatuous posturing on the part of the beautiful people in the Bernsteins' circle kowtowing to the Panther thugs, disturbing because of the element of sinister malevolence that suffused the proceedings. Ms. Mac Donald captures something similar in her account of defacement art. Like every other museum, LA MOCA sedulously removes graffiti from its exterior walls. No wonder. Cities long ago recognized that graffiti was a symbol of decay. "A neighborhood that has succumbed to graffiti," Ms. Mac Donald observes, "telegraphs to the world that social and parental control there has broken down. Potential customers shun graffiti-ridden commercial strips if they can; so do most merchants, fearing shoplifting and robberies. Law-abiding residents avoid graffiti-blighted public parks, driven away by the spirit-killing ugliness of graffiti as much as by its criminality."

But just move inside the museum and, presto, graffiti is celebrated as vibrant artistic expression that "challenges" (as the late Keith Haring, a practitioner of the genre, put it) "subversive forces in the military, government, business—entities we need to keep fighting against." Right. In "Crime in the Museums," a separate review of the exhibition of defacement art, Heather Mac Donald made an interesting experiment. Here we had an exhibition glorifying a certain form of criminal activity. How would museum officials react were one of its patrons to engage in that activity within the exhibition? Ms. Mac Donald took out a marker and prepared to scribble on one of the works. "You can't do that," intervened a guard. How about the wall? "You can't write on the wall." It's not that MOCA is against graffiti. It is even selling cans of spray paint in its gift shop. You can't take it into the museum, of course, but, explained an official, "What you do with it outside is your own business." Nice, eh? Meanwhile, Ms. Mac Donald notes, "tagging," i.e., defacing other people's property with graffiti, has increased around the gallery. Perhaps it's time for local property owners to institute a cease-and-desist lawsuit.