

the ethics of graffiti

by eamon byrne

“It looks rather balanced, as though it had been cropped like a photo,” said the expert, leaning forward and peering intently at the object through a magnifying glass. The colours were somewhat garish. The scrawl at the left rather than the signature marked it as a work of graffiti. At close range it appeared the formality had been despoiled purposefully, given that the scrawl and the signature were themselves symmetrical, in much the way the main design was. They seemed variations of each other. But they were different. They had been drawn by different hands. So these two things — despoliation, replicability — may have been properties of graffiti. If you were to see the same on the next wall in the next subway tunnel you wouldn’t be surprised. And it *was* a wall. The cracks in the surface were the giveaway. They gave the image a Renaissance look, that of an ancient mural. “Remember,” said the expert, “we’re looking at an image of a photo of an image on a wall. Its colour also gives it its ‘primitive art’ look, as opposed to an art-gallery, modern abstract-art one. “*Look,*” he emphasised, using a word which readily came to mind when he discussed a prospective purchase with a client and didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that the object of the look was a graffiti object, for in many cases a client wouldn’t want to look at such an object at all. But sometimes one would have to. Sometimes it was compelling.

“But is it art?” asked the client, for this was an important question to be asked by a purchaser. That question was too enigmatic to be answered easily by the expert. “An object is art if the artist says so,” he replied off-handedly, as though he wasn’t overly concerned with impressing the client. In fact for the renowned expert on graffiti it was a statement of principle very germane to his business, which was the business of selling kitsch and graffiti at his graffiti and kitsch art gallery located on a prime corner of the city’s main art precinct. Inside the window he had a prime example of a miniature piece of Koons displayed in a bullet-proof glass case clamped to a steel plate on the floor, sensibly so, for it came with a figure containing multiple zeros to be given only on application to clients deemed by the expert to be sufficiently interested, which meant sufficiently well-heeled; and throughout the one-room gallery were other notable examples of the art of kitsch set cheek by jowl with the latest pieces of filth fetched in from the alley. It was these latter which sold in enough numbers to pay for the facade (such being an appropriate term for an expensive shopfront in the fashionable district), with the supply replenished nightly through a back door which opened on to the darkness occupied by overflowing trash cans and through which the city’s rats and dope fiends roamed. In this imitation of a Zola locale a brutal sex murder had once occurred, a distant memory yet still it kept away most but the collectors of the trash and the suppliers of his trade, the young artists who had “made it” thanks to their good sense of remaining art guerillas. This particular alley one on a bong had declared a “passage of rite”, as it suited his guerilla-aesthetic which dictated that he enter arcades of commerce through their back doors

