

# the wall

by eamon byrne

Looking at an image of a graffiti on a wall on our computer screen we ask ourselves: what is the image's main graffiti-like property? We might answer: its location. But that is a contextual and political interpretation. There's nothing in that answer which addresses the aesthetics of the image which, we have to admit, is *not on a wall*, but on our computer screen and, moreover, set in some rectangular field, which is itself set within a whitish screen surrounded probably by another border, the browser's, and the whole within another border, the monitor's bezel. So the main property of the *image* is its rectangularity. That's what nearly all western painting has in common — a two-dimensionality which is all the more two-dimensional the more three-dimensional illusionism struggles against it.

So where is the wall, the graffitiness of the wall? It's inferred. To see it, to see the *graffiti*, one would have to be in front of the wall itself.

Take this further: the important thing may not be the graffiti at all, it may be just the wall. The wall was once, before the early renaissance had run its course, the primary carrier of visual art. And here is the rub. Art is, most importantly (a cynic might argue), a marker of wealth. Art has currency. Indeed, art *is* currency. Now, in the early renaissance, who "owned" the art? Easy: those who owned the walls. So "great artists" painted murals on walls owned by wealthy patrons (eg the Medici — later the Popes).

Then art moved onto easels (another hard word to spell). Why? Because supply follows demand. Because the pool of wealthy patrons had expanded (we were moving inexorably towards our present economy, even in 1480). You no longer needed to have a palace with great walls to employ a great artist. Besides, the great

artists had by now wised up. Easels, canvas, oil — these were the tools which enabled the great artists — even the not-so-great artists — to ply their trade. Art was *becoming* a trade. The days for walls were numbered.

Now flash forward to the present day. What can we say about the modern wall? For one, it's not a tradable commodity. Can you imagine Sotheby's auctioning walls? "Now we have here this wonderful cracked wall — what do I hear: 100,000! On my left: 200,000! Ladies and gentlemen, come now, surely, this wall has *provenance*. Popes have thrown up at the foot of this wall! The dogs of kings have pissed at the base of this wall! 300,000? Do I hear 300,000? I'll take fifties!"

You can safely bet that walls from the Sistine Chapel will never appear in a Sotheby's catalogue.

Which leaves walls as the last bastion of the underground — because it's the least fashionable. It's the least fashionable because it's the least commodifiable.

Continuing to imagine the image of the image on the wall, what inside or within the image signifies it as graffiti? Its overall design? I don't think so. Because it's cropped or regularised in its rectangle, it looks more like a standard, if crude, abstract image. But there is one obvious graffiti signifier. It's the tag on the left side. And because this tag has been applied in a different paint or ink to that of the main image (which is also apparently signed — you can infer this by the colour of *its* ink), it appears that someone else has added this tag. So that, then, becomes its graffitiness. The image has been appropriated/defaced by someone else. The message of the scrawl at the left is political. It says many things. One is this: *you do not own this space*. Another is this: *I do not respect your image as "art"*. Another is this: *I was here*. And that last message is what connects it to every high-end image you find in any art book or gallery. It may

be less sophisticated but it's still the same message: a scream against mortality.

