

## Street Graffiti: Is it Art or Vandalism?

The Twittersphere nearly exploded last month when the iconic “i love you so much” wall on South Congress was vandalized on Jan. 13. Luckily, the inspirational message was back to its former glory the next day. While it may seem silly for people to be so passionate about some red letters quickly sprayed on the side of a green building, Austinites cherish their street art. However, Austinites also cherish their clean and beautiful city and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars painting over graffiti and tags each year.

Musician Amy Cook, the artist who painted “i love you so much”, had no idea her scrawl on the side of Jo’s Coffee would become such an important piece of Austin culture. “My girlfriend at the time was having a bad day,” said Cook. “I knew she was downtown and when she drove back home she would drive past and see it.”

The first time the “i love you so much” wall was vandalized, the saying had to be completely painted over. Cook had said that she didn’t want to repaint the sentence saying, “that was just the life of street art.” A Facebook petition, however, caused her to realize how much it meant to people and to the city, so she repainted it.

“I knew it would resonate with people; make them feel good,” said Cook. “I certainly didn’t envision people having their wedding pictures taken there or the life that it’s taken on. It’s simple, it’s honest, it’s just a feeling expressed simply.”

Ideas and feelings have been expressed through graffiti since ancient times. Egyptians etched hieroglyphics into stone to tell stories and document events. According to PBS, American graffiti really exploded in the 1970s and could be seen on city walls and subways. Unlike today’s opinions of graffiti being an insolent, public exhibition, it

brought its artists great commercial success and was accepted into the contemporary pop culture.

So, what is the difference between street art and graffiti? Is there a difference? Many argue that it's in the eye of the beholder. "Who decides what is aesthetically valuable to society is not normally just one person," said George F. Flaherty, a University of Texas associate professor specializing in Latin American and Latino art. "It's a whole community of holders of that aesthetic object who say 'Oh, this is worthy of a pedestal.'"

Some say the value isn't even in the art itself; the value is in the experience. "It's about the adventure," said Dr. Weird, a local street artist. "It's about getting in there and doing it. It's about thinking about it two weeks before, a week before, a half an hour before. It's about for some reason having that paint in a bag right next to you. It's about having nothing else to do."

The City of Austin defines graffiti much more rigidly than Weird. According to the official City of Austin website, "Graffiti is markings, such as initials, slogans or drawings, that are written, spray painted or etched in any manner on property such as a sidewalk or wall of a building without consent of the owner."

Depending on the level of damage graffiti can either be a misdemeanor or a felony crime. City Ordinance requires that property owners remove graffiti within 30 days and gives property owners free removal assistance using allocated funds. The City of Austin's 2013 fiscal budget is \$3.1 billion and \$509,476 will be set aside for graffiti abatement, according to Carol Barasch, who is the manager of communications for the City of Austin. This ends up only accounting for 0.0002% of the total budget.

However, some property owners, like the owners of Jo's Coffee, sometimes grow to love the graffiti and decided to keep it even though it was painted without permission.

One local organization working with The City of Austin is The Little Helping Hands organization, which will enter their 4<sup>th</sup> year in June. They want to give kids the chance to work with their families to better the community. The organization has been partnering with the City of Austin for three years and receives 40-60 reports each month. "They help us find sites that are safe for kids and families and that need to be cleaned up," said Marissa Vogel, founder and executive director for Little Helping Hands. "We spend about an hour cleaning it up and beautifying Austin." The volunteers, currently, hold two activities each month.

While artists, law enforcement, citizens and volunteer organizations may be at odds over what is considered art and what is considered vandalism, Weir summed it up stating, "I like it, but...you know what I mean, there's a lot of people out there with a lot of different opinions."