

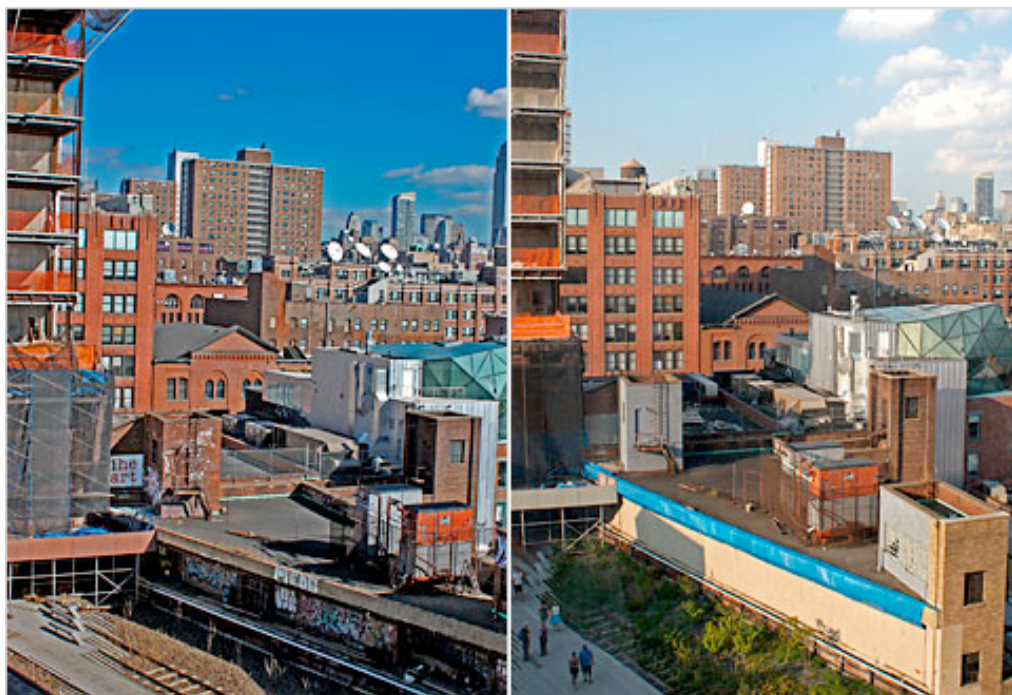
City Room



October 20, 2009, 7:30 am

Removal of Graffiti Along High Line Vexes Some

By [Sarah Maslin Nir](#)



Seth Carnes Graffiti, left, has been cleaned up in many cases since the completion of the High Line, right. Seth Carnes, an artist, has been documenting the process, and he is critical of it.

Up on the [High Line](#), the city's newest park, set on a formerly abandoned elevated railroad line, the site's gritty history gets a passing reference: Slats underfoot conjure the railroad ties that once sat quietly rotting under wild weeds up here.

But a more obvious sign of the edifice's derelict past — the graffiti once splashed across the building walls that hem in the track — has been almost completely erased. And what is left of that urban art, or urban blight, depending on whom one asks, is likely to be scrubbed away, a move that has divided some New Yorkers over

the place grime has in the city's landscape.

The city identified about 20 buildings along the entire High Line as candidates for graffiti removal and reached out to their owners back in October 2008, according to Evelyn Erskine, a spokeswoman for the mayor's office. Under legislation passed in September intended to speed up cleanup, the city's [Graffiti Free NYC](#) program, which identifies and removes graffiti, contacts people whose buildings have been defaced. If the owners do not object, the city will remove the paint free of charge, unless the building owners ask to do it themselves or tell the city they would like the scrawl to stay. When graffiti is on private property, as it is on the buildings abutting the High Line, the city cannot force a cleanup, Ms. Erskine says.

So far, 18 of the buildings have permitted the city to scrub them clean — nine of which have already had the work completed. The remaining buildings are mostly along the unfinished second half of the track, where park construction is still under way. The move has been lamented in the graffiti blogosphere and chronicled in places like [iheart.org](#), the Web site of Seth Carnes, an artist whose 2008 white, red and black painting of the words "i heart" on a patch of brick wall above the line near 13th Street was covered over with what he writes is "a battleship gray layer of paint" this past spring.

"Certainly when I saw the drab gray paint over it, it was a tragic moment," though not entirely unexpected, Mr. Carnes said. "Part of the act of the street art-form is what goes onto a wall is covered or changes. But I think a solid gray coat of paint over what used to be a nice textured brick wall with some good graffiti over it is not an improvement."

[Friends of the High Line](#), the organization behind the park's creation and operation, declined to comment on the topic.

Still not yet "buffed," as graffiti proponents term the cleaning procedure, are tags and designs alongside the unfinished stretch of the park. Some are by celebrities of the underground, like the elusive artist "Revs," and "Sacer," the label used by the indie artist [Dash Snow](#), who died of a drug overdose last summer. [Revs](#), who keeps his true identity secret, spent the '90s plastering the city with "rollers," giant block type versions of his nickname executed with house paint and roller brushes on long handles.

"Not everybody feels that it is art," says Dorothea Basile, the director and founder of [ARTime](#), an arts education organization, who has taught classes and leads walking tours on the High Line about contemporary and other art. For some people, the answer to whether it should stay hinges on whether the markings are art or an eyesore. "The idea of preserving something that people don't feel that it's art is very challenging," Ms. Basile says.

Both Ms. Basile and Mr. Carnes point out that many of the Chelsea galleries beneath the High Line's shadow, like Phillips de Pury & Company, often exhibit and sell the work of graffiti artists, sometimes for hefty sums.

"A lot of people simply don't like graffiti — to them, it's just litter, basically," says Peter Sutherland, a photographer whose book of portraits of stars of the graffiti galaxy, "Autograf," features a forward written by Revs. But "there's people that consider graffiti like a lot of the great music that's known to come out of New York; the best kind of bits of culture we've produced here in the past 25 years."

To Mr. Sutherland, the art value of the rollers, "fill-ins" or "throw-ups," as the variety of tags are called, is somewhat beside the point. "It's like a visual cue as to the history of the High Line when it was closed down," he says. "Other than, like, weeds overgrowing, those are the only kind of little tidbits that tell you what was going on there, till whenever it stopped functioning."

“It speaks to the history of what this site was,” Ms. Basile says. “Part of what I think is so great about the High Line is I feel like there has been a real thoughtfulness in terms of acknowledging its artificialness, and at the same time wanting to take in its past history.”

Nonetheless, the clock is still ticking for the graffiti on the nine remaining facades. “Very similar to the debate about whether or not it’s art, is whether or not it should be preserved,” Mr. Sutherland says. “It’s part of what makes graffiti interesting, the controversial side of it.”

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1. 1. October 20, 2009 9:21 am [Link](#)

If Mr. Carnes likes graffiti so much, perhaps he can offer up his own private property as a canvas.

— *Steve Jobs Akbar*

2. 2. October 20, 2009 9:34 am [Link](#)

Railroad ties do not rust

— *Jim Sampson*

3. 3. October 20, 2009 9:39 am [Link](#)

The Highline, though beautiful (as a garden designer I am drawn to the wonderful plantings) , is a very sanitized version of the elevated railway that existed and died. The graffiti - which I often find beautiful - is an authentic connection to the city that produced the Highline. It should stay.

<http://www.66squarefeet.blogspot.com>

— *Marie Viljoen*

4. 4. October 20, 2009 9:40 am [Link](#)

While some graffiti is truly beautiful and other graffiti can evoke some emotional response, most is simply ugly, adolescent, egocentric expression. Let's move on to something else.

— *Too Much Hand Wringing*

5. 5. October 20, 2009 9:42 am [Link](#)

Has anyone who feels graffiti is art asked the "artist" to "decorate" their apartment? I don't think so. Graffiti is trash. period.

— *Andres Roura*

6. 6. October 20, 2009 9:43 am [Link](#)

Always glad to see vandalism repaired.

— *trudy*

7. 7. October 20, 2009 9:46 am [Link](#)

Surely you're aware that "graffiti" is plural and takes plural verbs and pronouns.

— *Nick Jones*

8. 8. October 20, 2009 9:46 am [Link](#)

I am all for an artist expressing themselves. If what they produce is a work of art and not some mindless scribble then I say leave it where it is. If it's an eyesore the get rid. Sometimes it can enhance the area or just bring it down.

— *Adrian in England*

9. 9. October 20, 2009 9:51 am [Link](#)

Graffiti, yea not that appealing. But pales to insignificance when compared to demolishing 19th Century buildings in Manhattan and throwing up a tower that purports to comply with retail space requirement. Renting to Financial Companies that cover over street windows to make office space, filling out a streetscape of banks and chain pharmacies is more dismal than some graffiti here and there.

— *jarry*

10. 10. October 20, 2009 9:52 am [Link](#)

Graffiti is not ART, and it never was. There's no historical meaning to it, except that some uneducated loser wasted paint and time to deface an already attractive wall or whatever.

— *JRG*

11. 11. October 20, 2009 9:57 am [Link](#)

Good riddance. Paint over the graffiti. If the majority of the graffiti is like what is shown in the above photo, they have little or no artistic value. Cleaning this up is no worse than sweeping up broken glass on the sidewalk. If these were murals, I would understand perhaps wanting to preserve them. But somebody (or a bunch of somebodies) scrawling their tags on any surface they can reach? Lame. Take pride in the neighborhood by keeping it reasonably tidy, and the neighborhood will take pride in itself.

— *Erin*

12. 12. October 20, 2009 10:02 am [Link](#)

“Street art?” Nuts. Where's the composition, where's the balance? The best are cartoons, the typical “street art” is indistinguishable from what gets posted by a five year old on mommies refrigerator. Oh, but I see—it makes money, so it must be good.

Let them ask the owner of the property for permission to deface his building. Otherwise, all these talentless Leonardos should find themselves in a work gang cleaning up their scribbles.

— *bostonEddie*

13. 13. October 20, 2009 10:08 am [Link](#)

Graffiti is not art, and never will be. In fact it's a crime. These so-called artists should be arrested and sent to jail.

— *Antoine*

14. 14. October 20, 2009 10:09 am [Link](#)

Given the deep belief at The Times that graffiti is art — you have been running these stories for decades now — I suggest that you invite the artists behind the work to beautify your new building as they see fit. The reporter should do likewise with her home. Think of how authentically urban it will all look. You'd be doing the city a service in fighting the Disney-fication of Times Square.

— *Andrew Smith*

15. 15. October 20, 2009 10:19 am [Link](#)

Erin,

You must have super-sight ability to see the graffiti in this picture. Please, lend me your gift the next

time I count the ants on my kitchen ceiling.

— *Dan*

16. 16. October 20, 2009 10:22 am [Link](#)

This article provides further evidence that graffiti artists might be among the most self-important and self-absorbed people on the planet.

— *Stephen Ostrander*

17. 17. October 20, 2009 10:22 am [Link](#)

Graffiti is and always has been an eyesore. Calling it ‘art’ is a joke.

— *D Garson*

18. 18. October 20, 2009 10:33 am [Link](#)

I agree that I don’t see much of value in the posted photos, and would support its removal. But I am in agreement with Mr. Carnes in that the flat paint is definitely NOT an improvement over the textured, lovely brickwork.

Why not sandblast instead, and get back to the natural brick colours?

— *sangerinde*

19. 19. October 20, 2009 10:34 am [Link](#)

i enjoy street art, but those who complain about removal, come on, it is CHELSEA. go find a more interesting, soulful neighborhood

— *deborah*

20. 20. October 20, 2009 10:35 am [Link](#)

Cities are cool because they are dynamic. They are dynamic because things change. Tearing down and building new, painting over, these are changes. This is the true beauty of cities: that what is there one day is replaced another by the conscious decision of people (as opposed to nature, which results in beauty of a different sort).

By the way, if you want to see what true urban art by graffiti artists can be, I recommend <http://www.muralarts.org>

— *keith*

21. 21. October 20, 2009 10:39 am [Link](#)

Perhaps the battleship-grey walls should be decorated with a “tag” from a fine artist instead - a hundred-foot-long copy of Matisse’s signature, or Whistler’s butterfly monogram, would be truly beautiful.

— *Mike*

22. 22. October 20, 2009 10:39 am [Link](#)

Not polite to deface someone’s property, especially without permission.

— *Carlos Pedido*

23. 23. October 20, 2009 10:40 am [Link](#)

If an “artist” wants to express himself, he should purchase some canvas and express to his heart’s content. However, expressing oneself on a building owned by someone else is a crime.

— *Ann*

24. 24. October 20, 2009 10:41 am [Link](#)

The high line was a sanctuary for graffiti writers during the time of its neglect. And rightfully. It was neglected for decades and the only people who considered and utilized it’s position were graffiti writers (and occasionally drug users). Now that the space is being used for a legitimized purpose, the experience must change. A new age can be ushered in for the high line.

Like all other aspects of life, the graffiti on the high line, went from poor to great quality. There were exceptional pieces up there from Sace (yes, he can piece), seen, Cope2, Ces, Werds, Marty and other notables I would have to dig for. Dismissing all graffiti as trash is unfair. I’m sure if someone came across a beautiful piece with vibrant colors and curvaceous, flowing letters that person wouldn’t dislike the art aspect based solely on the legality of it.

— *Jeff*

25. 25. October 20, 2009 10:41 am [Link](#)

I am no fan of graffiti. However, I see the difference between the scribbling of a tag from the intensity of mural. Tags are cheap and ugly. Murals take an idea to create. Maybe if the vandals (because that’s what they are) took time to create something visually appealing rather than visually assaulting, people might view their creations with a more accepting eye.

— *Keith S.*

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