

Community art collective condemns Occupy Oakland-related vandalism



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The Community Rejuvenation Project (CRP), a nonprofit best known for large mural projects throughout Oakland, released a declaration on Tuesday decrying property destruction during last Wednesday's general strike.

Director Desi W.O.M.E—a chosen name that stands for Weapons Of Mass Expression, pronounced like "womb"—stops short of condemning illegal street art in general, but called the attacks on property "misguided destructive action by graffiti vandals" in a phone interview.

"Our artwork originates from the aerosol tradition," W.O.M.E. said. Given that lineage, he respects some lawless street art with poignant political messaging. "You can't love the fruit and hate the root," he said.

CRP is an example of "the fruit." The organization has spearheaded community efforts to transform bare walls into colorful murals relevant to the specific neighborhood where

they are painted. They employ youth to pick up trash around their project sites and at one point cleaned an entire 150-block area. They are preparing a photographic anthology of their work.

W.O.M.E. said illegal street art—the root—has played an important role in social movements around the globe. These range from anti-Apartheid activism of the '80s to two years ago in Oakland when “we are all Oscar Grant” began to appear on blank surfaces all over town following the fatal shooting of Grant by BART officers.

“As a youth movement, aerosol writing is about developing your identity,” W.O.M.E. said. “That allows you to do the external work.”

W.O.M.E. said that actions taken by violent protesters last week, such as breaking windows and defacing property just to be destructive, “derails the message, rather than compliments it.”

Normally, W.O.M.E. doesn't approve of the term graffiti. “We're the practitioners of that art form,” he said. “So we're very sensitive around terminology.” Traditionally, among its practitioners, spray paint art is referred to simply as “writing.”

But what W.O.M.E. witnessed last Wednesday, he said, was graffiti. “Less developed, more selfish aerosol writers are taking away from the perception and the understanding that aerosol writers can provide powerful social commentary,” he said. They were not steeped in the culture of the community. Worst of all, perpetrators hid behind an otherwise peaceful crowd.

This violates, he said, what he calls “the rules of the game.”

“You can write whatever you want if you're willing to pay the cost for it,” W.O.M.E. said. In recent years, the cost of getting caught is a minimum of \$400 in damages or a felony charge for anything over that amount. Aerosol writers take that risk knowingly because they love their craft, he said.

“When you cause people to get tear gassed and arrested, it's costing the movement money,” he said. “And that's costing people money because they have to get lawyers, get bail, go through the system.”

So he wonders who Occupy's vandals really are. Perhaps they are agent provocateurs of the police, he said. Perhaps they are privileged kids who don't have to worry about consequences. “What you're seeing is richer kids who have access,” he said—access to transportation, increasingly expensive spray paint, and legal aid.

These “graffiti hipsters,” as CRP’s official statement refers to them, represent “a demographic shift toward more affluent white people tagging in inner-city communities historically populated by people of color.”

W.O.M.E. said that trend reflects broader problems of representation within Occupy Oakland, signified even by the group’s name. “This place is already occupied—this is indigenous land,” he said. “We prefer ‘decolonize’ or ‘liberate.’”

“‘Occupy’ is what the U.S. is doing in Iraq and Afghanistan,” he said. “Palestine is occupied.”

Source: <http://oaklandnorth.net/2011/11/09/community-art-collective-condemns-occupy-oakland-related-vandalism/>