

The City of Graffiti

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To the untrained eye, graffiti is the defacement of public property, the end product of street-yahoos making their names known to anybody who walks by. It is unfocused and sprawling, totally unlike the framed works hung in the gallery two streets across the business district, and it ungraciously demands its audience to acknowledge some unknown figure with a taste for omnipresence. Graffiti, however, is a largely misunderstood art form, if indeed the people will even accept it as one. What's important is that toys, writers, taggers, and painters (all argot in the graffiti world) are completely uninvolved with people who'd claim themselves to be recognized as legitimate artists. The argument is that graffiti is an elitist and closeted genre that grows in complexity the finer the examination of the artist is and that is uniquely bolstered in its subculture status by the resilience of its members to withstand influence from the outside world. Graffiti art, drawing strength from its history, its artists, and its struggle against conformity, has become a self-contained and self-serving city within a city.

Birth

Graffiti art was created during turbulent times in the South Bronx during the 1960s, a period of time when the youth of America was beginning to develop its identity crises and civil issues were becoming more and more in the public eye. Reacting out of a need for creativity and expression, inner-city areas turned to a cheap, efficient, and moreover entirely unexplored medium: aerosol paint, which had only been invented around one decade before. As an art form intimately connected with the people, graffiti in the 1960s

and 1970s changed and became topical, always on top of the newspaper headlines. In Joe Austin's interview with LEE 163D (the name is the artist's street moniker, following the name and street number combination started by notorious "first writer" TAKI 183 in the late sixties), LEE 163D expressed the cultural tension surrounding the birth of graffiti:

Shit was deep. You had Viet Nam and all types of protests, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, racism and hatred at a peak and brothers and other...inequalities and trying to put a stop to it. Burn, baby, burn. [...] The odds were against you. You can't be unaffected by all that. [A]t some point it's gonna help mold your mentality and its not gonna be singing "my country 'Tis of Thee." (43)

It was during this fecund era when taggers became prevalent. Taggers are the graffiti writers who are mostly preoccupied with spreading their specific signature along as wide a range as possible, establishing their identity and reputation through quantity and city-wide fame. Taggers marked the beginning of a personal awakening within the individual during this time, characterized by the selfish egocentrism shown in spreading a personal name for the sake of art. These were the beginnings of a people suddenly interested in a local autonomy free of "something...rotten in America" (Austin 43). Expression was key during that era, with an emphasis on the avant-garde just beginning to rear its motley head. The historical development behind graffiti is "sociologically interesting because the original writers [the spray-painters] did not emerge from other art worlds"—that is to say, graffiti, and the use of spray-paint as a medium, was the first of its kind, drawing from no other source for novelty (Lachman 242). This began is the first instance of self-resilience within this art form.

During the 1970s and 1980s, graffiti became intertwined with the arising new music scene. DJs and musicians started experimenting with new sounds that broke free of conventional instruments. Inner-city folk were attracted to this style of music they could call their own and invented dance moves to go along with it. It is not clear what was riding what's coat-tails, but graffiti became symbiotically stronger with what would then become the Hip-Hop era. When hip-hop gained national acclaim and stayed on the charts, received criticism from notable critics, and bred other styles of music and dance, graffiti was no longer a fad but a cultural phenomenon that was here to stay. It received the legitimacy it was sorely in need of, and in return gave to the hip-hop community a grassroots flair, since many of the DJs and musicians moonlighted as graffiti artists. Its form as an appreciated art in the public eye created a pretentious air for purity in style, what would later be labeled "old school" and now is touted as the golden era of graffiti (Rahn 20). Suddenly, there was a set of rules to adhere to that became as serious as law that bound all the individual artists into one community. The obsession for order "is one example of how traditional hip-hop culture is a community defined by codes of behavior.... The paradox of the hip-hop community is this desire for conformity of language...and rules of ethics when graffiti is known for its resistance against systems of authority" (Rahn 23). "Old school," therefore, represented a doctrine within a culture antithetical of organization. The paradox is dissolved, however, when it is understood that around this time graffiti artists had come together as a whole to unite as separate from the common stranger: everyone else.

Without influence from any schools of art, writers taught themselves their own brand of art that would be self-perpetuating across many generations and would become

the keystone to hold a subculture together. As naïve as these artists were, writers “developed social mechanisms both for allocating fame and for the recruitment and training of new writers” that would “incorporate diverse elements of mass culture,” a phenomenon fully realized by the time of the present-day graffiti (Lachman 242).

The Modern Era: The Refinement of Graffiti Language

April Agura, a contemporary graffiti artist operating out of Red Bank, New Jersey captures the attitude of hip-hop graffiti and its common banter in an interview spanning a series of emails with this author. When asked on what difference a counter-culture (in this case, the accepted normal culture within a city) has on graffiti, the eighteen year-old nursing student answers:

It probably wouldn't be as much fun. (insert laugh) It will never be legal that's for sure. But it seems like graffiti is a shout out to the world. Tag names are really pen names. WE are artists and writers. WE are stating our territory and existence. (Agura 1)

Self-expression is key, and wherever there are places where voices are unheard graffiti becomes apparent. It becomes a language untouchable by societal norms from an outside perspective.

This language is tied closely with the very nature of graffiti – its tendency towards the deviant. Graffiti “highlights the prowess of a deviant or criminal subculture such as the hip-hop graffiti underground in fluidly constructing and reconstructing the cultural spaces and media through which it operates, and the audiences for whom it performs” (Ferrel 7). Artists are able to define their audience by adjusting where to place a piece,

thereby controlling the level of exposure. Controlling its media is a way both to control how to bring it to the people and to allow localism to stay very much alive. Artists are then more compelled to share local politics and issues with those graffiti artists who would otherwise be totally unaware, as Ferrel found in his two-year study of graffiti's exposure across borders. Information can include such various topics as point of origin ("THE RAMBLER PORT ALLEN LA") or even social issues of a grander design ("KS. GOV. BILL GROVES IS A CHILD MOLESTER") that would never travel as successfully through word of mouth (Ferrel 7).

This play between artist and audience is a constant check on the graffiti culture, grounding its nature and leaving it unspoiled by the interference of the common city dweller, whom the graffiti writer treats entirely as separate audience. Wildstyle is a form of graffiti calligraphy that is as distinct from regular graffiti as Traditional Chinese characters are from Simplified ones, and the motives behind the preference of one or the other is equally similar. Wildstyle "incorporates several different innovations from prior styles," another example of graffiti learning from itself, in the form of "twisted fractured, or crumbled letters as well as interpenetrating arrows, bars, and extensions" that are in many ways entirely illegible to the untrained eye (Austin 112). To a fellow graffiti artist, however, this form may be admired as an adventure into abstract thought and for the skill required to execute a convoluted style of graffiti. By clearly moving away from legibility, which would be a characteristic prized outside of the graffiti subculture, the city within graffiti asserts its independence and its preoccupation with appeasing only itself. DONDI, in an interview with Robert Reisner, notes that wildstyle is "usually only attempted by an accomplished, confident writer," or a "king" among fellow graffiti writers whose

reputation has been validated by numerous other pieces (15). In the interview, DONDI claims that “when I write for other writers, I use wildstyle, and when I write for the public I use straight letters,” which would be legible and written therefore for entirely different reasons (qtd. in Reisner 15).

The language within graffiti allows the subculture itself to be looked at from an anthropological standpoint both intricately tied to and independent of the larger design. As originally intended, graffiti art is used to show a personal opinion across a wide spectrum of audiences fully knowing that those on the other side may be unwilling to care for it; however, those who do care for it will interpret the meaning as a direct plea to understand the issue at hand. The issue has a selective importance, as only certain topics ever break through and appear on “moving canvases” such as the sides of vehicles and train cars. The incentive is the graffiti community itself as an audience and the effort to communicate. This is apparent again in this author’s interview with April Agura, who had previously worked on trucks in her area:

Fung: When you tag, who’s your target audience?

Agura: Noone really. this is all for me. I get the excitement from just being known. I had the [stencil of] Bruce Lee one a main street once and i loved how everyone commented or looked. it was always of approval though.

Tagging in this way works within a closed circuit and works to achieve a purer form of graffiti bound within the hip-hop style and unconcerned with outside influences. Garnering the attention of city dwellers as well as authority figures is a fringe benefit, but not important in any way to the integrity of the work at hand. Graffiti came about most

importantly as an expression of the artists, who needed the freedom of the spray can to make the world aware of their presence.

Finding Identity

Contrasting with the freedom of movement within graffiti subcultures is the inner struggle within the art, which reveals that the graffiti movement is large enough and sentient enough to even despise itself. The original artists who were at the forefront of the graffiti scene during its conception were pompous for a reason, because they felt they had reached the epitome of ruling over their communities as “kings” (Lachmann 242). Even today, “several of the gallery muralists advocate a ban on subway graffiti arguing that ‘we were the first and the best. The writing now is just scribble-scrabble. Our pieces were art’” (Lachmann 248). The ability to peer backwards through a cultural lens suggests that throughout the passage of time graffiti has always had a basis of standards, of who was better than whom.

The freedom of speech granted by such a method of communication can and is exploited by those who intend hateful messages. Within the graffiti artist communities lies a tension that eventually breeds outbursts of artistic creation intended to harm. Whether or not these outbursts are classified as art is irrelevant to the actual direction the anger is aimed. Amardo Rodriguez uncovered a microcosm of this theme in his research on bathroom stall graffiti. His research essentially claims that those subcultures who all wish to express their innermost thoughts become marginalized in their thinking and find this format a quick and easy way to express bigotry. This goes beyond the concept of turf warfare or the informal partitioning of acceptable spraying-grounds determined by

graffiti crews. While those partitions create a non-violent environment to express one's own need for possession of property, groups *within the graffiti subculture* are often targeted out for public humiliation in heavily trafficked areas:

Fung: Is there any preference for a public or a private audience? Have you ever created a piece specifically geared towards someone?

Agura: Haha no. Maybe i should target an ex-boyfriend though. I saw one downtown with this guy named Broken. He was really hurt by his ex-girlfriend and was complaining and tagging everywhere about it. THEN finally she tagged back to tell him to shut up. haha. what a waste of good space.

Graffiti entails a form of organizational life wherein the groups all vie for top position through discussion and communication. This characteristic of structure is not meant to give it a sense of organized crime, however, but a sort of self-contained civil war. Creativity will breed strife more powerfully than anger will breed creativity, apparent in the freewheeling nature of the artist.

For the graffiti community, this structure focuses the direction of emotion inward and away from the larger city as a whole. Specifically, this may happen when gangs butt heads over territories and graffiti artists are employed to create elaborate gang "tags" to show claimed land. The existence of this inner struggle proves that graffiti art is not quite as simple as independent people acting impulsively on random acts of destruction. In his essay on the artistic inspiration behind the graffiti mystique, Gilberte Brassai exclaims that "carving one's name, one's love, or a date on the wall of a building is a type of vandalism that cannot be explained by destructive impulses alone. I see in it

rather the survival instinct of all those who cannot erect pyramids or cathedrals to perpetuate their name” (18). The elaborate tags and murals painted by graffiti artists are the lasting monuments, however fleeting they are, that proudly proclaim graffiti’s capacity to stand as its own social structure and the plights that only it alone encounters. It is a clumping agent that, in times of gang warfare and neighborhood calamity, brings people together for a common cause.

Community within graffiti art is an important element in recognizing it as an art form. In the realm of social institutions, graffiti can take the place of absent role models and does so in many cases. Along with the inherent individualism spray painting a public building gives the graffiti tagger, being part of spray-painting gangs or “crews” creates a sense of being part of a larger whole (Christen 60). In places where family is rife with dysfunction and where the school system is so poor that it no longer remains a place where children can go to get an education, graffiti crews bind children together in systems of teams not unlike those in the military. This argument is supported in the branching of stencil-work within graffiti. A stencil, by design, is easier to work with than with a free-hand can of spray paint. As a team, a crew can work with precision swiftness to leave its mark and destroy the evidence in a range of seconds. This pertains to graffiti’s self-containment because of the ingenuity. The techniques graffiti crews employ are almost military in their procedure, but in receiving no formal training, teenagers develop these procedures themselves without any outside education.

Surviving as a Culture

Richard S. Christen argues that graffiti is in fact an urban educator and that the ingenuity needed to perform a successful tagging job or mural while avoiding civil authorities trains the graffiti artist in higher modes of learning (70). Here is the education system that any city requires. The control of the can and stencil teaches spatial reasoning with a literal, pragmatic hands-on approach, tending to employ measurement using “what is available such as the can itself or their outstretched arms. It is remarkable how writers can intuitively transfer, with accurate dimensions, a small sketch to fit a large wall” (Austin 14). To work together to construct a barn-sized balanced mural within minutes’ time benefits the ability to work together as one to achieve a single goal. And while it may seem that these are skills no longer needed by today’s workforce, the numbers in Christen’s research show that long-experienced graffiti artists develop the aptitudes required for higher-education learning. Graffiti art is not the art form of the uneducated. Because there *is* education, there *is* form and function and purpose, not just delinquency. In an interview with SEAZ, Rahn notes that she has “rarely seen a student in school so animated about learning” as she has seen mentored under SEAZ, who “asked him questions and watched carefully all day with a keen interest” (75). The connection drawn here is that while graffiti is not a substitute for education, the city of graffiti provides for its own, spreading the culture through its youth so that it may keep itself alive. This is interesting to note, because in all societies education must be used to indoctrinate the youth into acceptable societal standards in order to keep the civilization going. The mimicking in the visual learning experience will be passed down from mentor to “toy” (an unlearned student) until the toy is mature enough to begin receiving apprentices, continuing the cycle.

The skepticism involved with graffiti as an urban educator lies hand in hand with the belief that graffiti is really not as glorious as the critics make it out to be. Seemingly enough from a purely visual standpoint, graffiti appears to be just a gaggle of squiggles with little form or direction. It is amusing to poke fun at graffiti art, if only to bolster the self-image that one's own preference in art is involved more with the traditional, more classical pieces. The magic surrounding graffiti is mostly a product of the media supporting the underdog: in this case, the poorly underrepresented city class who are the voices lost in the hubbub. This standpoint is closed-minded in its acceptance of art and underestimates the inspiration needed to make a message appear positively incendiary when sprayed on a drab slab of industrial concrete. The motive that drives a conventional artist is fully present in the graffiti artist, but while the skeptic may be right that graffiti may be of less worth in the scheme of things, it is only in monetary value. Most graffiti wasn't created for monetary value of any sort, and in that sense "a lot of graffiti writers don't consider themselves artists because art is something that is accepted and something you can make money off of" (Rahn 71).

Surviving as Art

It was only in the evolving post-graffiti movements that commissions started to happen, and that marked the beginning of the end of the city of graffiti. Graffiti art is made with the knowledge that it may not be here tomorrow. Since it is done for peers, its message may be as simple of a message as a resounding "hello." Its existence is as poetically significant as the value of a fruitful day and many times lasts for just that long. At one point in New York City's subway system, according to the article "Million Pound

Waste of Space,” subway cars were scrubbed clean nearly every day (2). When asked on his motivation to spray any public space, graffiti artist GENE replies, “the art object itself is not as sacred as the actual action and the actual movement over time...[W]hen you put up a graf piece, most artists are aware of the temporal element of the piece itself” (qtd. in Rahn 31). This stance emphasizes the interconnectedness between graffiti artists and their resilience towards outside authority to the extent of absolute apathy. The memory itself and the reputation graffiti upholds are what remain significant to the graffiti artist.

With this history in mind, criticism spilled over from music and dance directly onto the art and style of the graffiti artists. With this new legitimacy, artists started becoming notable and more frequent in the public eye. Names such as Keith Haring, TAKI 183, and Michael Fay started popping up in newspapers and New York City turnstiles, subway cars, and cab-compartment windows alike. Proof of the existence of an art form comes when criticism that it has died appears. With the advent of these names came the doubts of whether or not graffiti was ever an art form to begin with. It seemed that at that time, everybody, including the artists themselves, began to lose focus on the blatant self-expression graffiti had originally stood for. Instead of being prized for its creativity or the unique perspective in which its message was conveyed, graffiti art was being admired for simply *breaking away* from conventional art forms, not for what were the actual merits in freewheeling expression (Powers 140). Contrary to the opinion that it was a constantly evolving art form drawing power from city strife, graffiti was seen by popular critics to be a dying form that was only successful in its novelty and nothing else.

This hypothesis was further supported by the lack of vigilance graffiti artists had in fighting against the Establishment that they had been so vehemently protesting against back in the 1960s and 1970s. The mayoral government of New York began a push to abolish street graffiti using constant teams of white-washers and new building materials that paints would not adhere to. To those who had embraced it with open arms years past, graffiti was becoming less art and more a nuisance to the public eye (Powers 141). Even though the American public had always recognized graffiti as a crime, the macrocosm of the larger city evolved around it in such a way as to incorporate it back into the larger culture. Once it lost its status as an independent city, graffiti may have lost its luster and slunk back into the shadows. When that happened, art dealers “skirted the aesthetic merits of graffiti art in their sales pitches and instead concentrated the artists’ background of poverty and crime...with their current ability to paint just like real, trained artists” (Lachmann 246). Graffiti failed in providing a reliable art form, and it fell into the hole of “style of no style” (Kunstler 73). The downfall of graffiti relates to the graffiti subculture in the way that once outside influences began to dictate what was “good” in graffiti, the fragile hegemony collapsed.

Conclusion

To view graffiti as an independent culture within the confines of limited but shared social and geographic contexts is as acceptable as observing any other culture within an anthropology text. Within the graffiti movement was an organization of individual peers brought together by the same need for expression and self-declaration, and from there an intricate system of laws and checks came into play as well as a unique

standard for morality and education. Following its birth, the graffiti movement never stalled in raising its head and making its presence known, using a unique style that seems both confounding and mystifying. Evidence of its self-resilience can be found in its inner-struggle for acceptance and legitimacy, which ultimately taxes its ability to survive in its original reactionary form. The evidence of its struggles further solidifies graffiti's status as a self-aware city within a city, fully capable of preserving itself through time as long as it is left unaltered by alien elements or the violating eye of popular culture.

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