

ABSTRACT

GRAFFITI AS VANDALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTENTIONS, INFLUENCE, AND GROWTH OF GRAFFITI

Through media exposure, pop culture and inclusion into the art world, graffiti has grown to become a broadly labeled activity that incorporates an abundance of public forms of expression. I will clarify how the transgressive nature of illegal graffiti distinguishes it from graffiti-influenced art that is being made for display in the gallery and museum environment. My work will also explore some of the lesser-known influences on graffiti culture such as punk and hardcore music and skateboard culture and the importance of freight train graffiti as an overlapping subset of graffiti culture. Graffiti's use as an effective tool to refute corporate advertising helps to reinforce its unique ability to create expression in the public realm. Recent museum and gallery exhibitions of graffiti-influenced art expose how graffiti has changed from its original destructive roots and gained an enormously broad label including street art and other forms of public art under the umbrella of the graffiti title. The main goal of my work is to distinguish illegal graffiti that is not made with artistic intentions, from the other practices it has influenced, whether artistic or otherwise. With this distinction made, I hope to reinforce graffiti's cultural value as an important and unique form of public expression.

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GRAFFITI AS VANDALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
INTENTIONS, INFLUENCE, AND GROWTH
OF GRAFFITI

by
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In late 2002 a group of middle and upper class white kids from the San Francisco Bay Area were arrested for graffiti and charged with felony vandalism as well as an extensive list of accompanying charges, the worst accusing them of gang activity. These kids were a part of the graffiti crew¹ Kill Until Killed (KUK). The name was not meant literally; it is a euphemism for “paint until painted over.” An Assistant District Attorney (ADA) handling the case attempted to use a statute that connected any group of three or more people committing a crime from a list of twenty-five charges (most of which were violent crimes) as participating in gang activity.² The charge the ADA used to make this gang connection was vandalism. Felony vandalism was placed on this list of gang affiliation charges to include gang graffiti used to claim territory, which KUK’s graffiti absolutely was not. KUK’s goal was simple; they wanted to cause destruction with their graffiti. Their intention was not to make art: it was to tag on public and private property. So does this mean what they produced was not art? Does the intention have anything to do with whether or not graffiti is art? And at the most basic level, is illegally produced graffiti art at all? My thesis examines these questions by exploring the intentions of graffiti and how similar subversive subcultures have influenced and pushed graffiti. I also discuss how graffiti has evolved and explore how the art world has begun to accept some aspects of graffiti as fine art.

¹ A graffiti crew is a group of graffiti writers that share common goals or interests. Sometimes confused with gangs, these groups are usually formed to share ideas and creativity within a group of writers.

² *People v. Superior Court (Johnson)* 120 Cal.App.4th 950, 958 (2004).

As for the KUK writers that were made examples of, some served jail time, all paid fines and today there is a whole new generation of writers tagging and destroying public and private property in exactly the same way. If there was any success in the goal of deterring graffiti with this scare of serious charges, it was short lived. Graffiti is now an inevitable part of our society.

My thesis describes graffiti's intentions as other than artistic and explores its cultural value as one of the most pure forms of self-expression. I discuss some of the unexplored history behind contemporary graffiti and will make a distinction between graffiti-related art being shown recently in museums and galleries and true, illegal, destructive graffiti. While contemporary culture has begun to accept certain aspects of graffiti, much of this acknowledgment is not representative of the transgressive part of the practice. Graffiti has evolved to include street art, kitsch designs, and legal art that has been influenced by graffiti as well other forms of public art that are in many cases commissioned and made legally under graffiti's broad label. This inclusion of so many things that may or may not be related to graffiti has made the term fairly ambiguous. I intend to clarify the graffiti label and also discuss some of the important aspects of this evolution.

In the past few years there have been an increasing number of theses and dissertations completed about graffiti and street art. The research completed for these papers has formed a good base for further research and is imperative to academic understanding of what is undoubtedly one the largest and fastest growing cultural phenomena of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. One of the main goals of my research is to further this understanding and expose some of the less understood aspects of this culture. Most of the recent academic research speaks extensively on subway and New York City graffiti. Much of this research credits hip-hop culture and specific socio-economic variables as the main

influence on graffiti. While this cultural foundation is important, my research expands on this base, exploring parts of graffiti that have not been addressed previously. It details influences such as punk rock and hardcore music, skateboarding, and other non hip-hop related draws that have not been properly credited and question some the inaccuracies that have become common misconceptions about graffiti.

There is an entire vocabulary associated with this subculture that I define as terms are used. In spite of graffiti's transgressive nature, ironically there are some basic rules to which people making graffiti adhere. The three basic types of graffiti are a tag, a throw-up, and a piece. A tag is the most basic signature. It is usually made with a marker or spray paint. A throw-up is usually spray painted with two colors in large bubble type letters with an outline. A piece, short for masterpiece, is the most detailed and of the three takes the most time to complete. It is important to understand the hierarchy of which types of graffiti can be written over by other types. A throw-up goes over a tag and a piece goes over a throw-up.³ This system is usually directly related to the writers' experience, as writers just starting out may only have the ability to tag or possibly make a throw up. It usually takes a substantial amount of time to get to the point of completing larger pieces, and by this point the writer will likely have become part of a local graffiti community if he or she has participated long enough to successfully make a large, multi-colored piece.

I intentionally avoid using the term "graffiti artist." Ex-graffiti writer and contemporary artist Steven Powers explains, "I loathe the term 'graffiti artist.' I think graffiti is its own thing, I think art is its own thing, the combination of the

³ Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, *Spraycan Art*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 54.

two has always been awkward.”⁴ Avoiding this term is not meant to insinuate that the writer is not creating something with artistic value. It is only meant to make clear that graffiti in its truest form is intended to be destruction and vandalism. Even though in some cases the graffiti writer may be creating something extremely artistic, the label of “artist” does not accurately describe someone making graffiti.

This thesis is organized into three chapters. The first chapter explores some of the important but lesser-known influences on graffiti, such as punk and hardcore music cultures, as well as skateboard culture, and how these subversive activities influenced and overlapped with graffiti. It examines some of the books, magazines, and videos that were published about graffiti, starting with outside documentarians from New York who began photographing graffiti in the 1970s. Graffiti writers in the 1980s began to publish their own magazines made mostly for other writers, and by the 1990s, the internet would allow anyone with an interest to view, share, and discuss graffiti with people all over the world. It also focuses on the role freight trains played in graffiti’s North American expansion and how this medium became one of the first ways graffiti writers could view regional and even national work travelling through their city.

The second chapter describes the transgressive base from which graffiti derives. It explains the intentions behind illegal graffiti and begins to make a distinction between this illegal root of the form and the current more popularized aspects of graffiti. As a part of graffiti’s evolution, it has become a reaction to corporate advertising and will be discussed as a tool many graffiti writers use to compete with advertisers for public space. Finally, this chapter discusses some of

⁴ Vice.com, “Steve ‘ESPO’ Powers Interview,” accessed April 12, 2012, <http://www.vice.com/art-talk/steve-powers>.

the ethics that are an unwritten aspect of illegal graffiti and will explore the contradiction such rules create within this anarchic culture.

Chapter 3 continues the discussion of graffiti-as-art versus graffiti-as-vandalism. It analyzes the art market's demand for the commodified form of graffiti herein referred to as graffiti-influenced art. This section also singles out some of the influential people behind the promotion of graffiti-influenced art and discusses how their original place within the graffiti subculture has shaped their work's maturation. Finally, the conclusion explores some of the reactions from the contemporary art world and ties together how all of these variables affect the future of graffiti, graffiti-related art and the relationship between the two.

American graffiti's birth has been traced back to a Philadelphia teenager who tagged the nickname "Cornbread" in hopes of gaining recognition.⁵ His plan worked and soon there were tags all over town by kids who wanted to be noticed the same way Cornbread had.⁶ This late 1960s phenomenon made its way to New York by the early 1970s and eventually found its way onto the subway trains. The practice of graffiti grew and evolved rapidly over the next fifteen years.⁷ It slowly began to spread throughout North America and into Europe, but by the late 1980s New York subway graffiti had come to an end.⁸ This event would contribute greatly to the advent of freight train graffiti and an increase of wall painting in major cities. This thesis begins chronologically at the point in the mid-1980s when American youth were becoming aware of graffiti through a multitude of

⁵ Roger Gastman and Caleb Nelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York, New York, Harper Design: 2010), 48.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cole T. Only, *Steel Wheels 1986 – 1997* (New York City: Steel Wheels Press, 2010), 29.

influences, some having no connection to hip-hop or even New York graffiti at all. Graffiti historian Cole T. Only explains how, “on May 12th 1989 the last graffiti covered train ran on the Independent (IND) 8th Ave. local C line.”⁹ The Mass Transit Authority (MTA) had finally found an effective system to eradicate subway graffiti in New York City.¹⁰ Graffiti would never completely die in New York, but during this time, graffiti began to show up in every major U.S. city and by the 1990s had become an international phenomenon. In many places walls and any other surface that would afford visibility, became a viable canvas. By the early 1990s, graffiti artists found that freight trains’ ability to send their work more than 3,000 miles away was one of the best ways to gain notoriety.¹¹ In a practice for which the main goal is visibility, this was the new subway car on a national scale. To this day there is nothing comparable to painting a train in California and having that work travel to New York, Florida and even to Canada and Mexico.

My research gives a more comprehensive understanding of graffiti and some of the subcultures that surround it by exploring parts of the work that have not been detailed and by citing work by authors who have studied and participated in graffiti for many years. I rely on some of the most cited work on the subject from Craig Castleman, Jeff Ferrell, Henry Chalfant, and Martha Cooper while also utilizing contemporary opinions from Carlo McCormick, Cedar Lewisohn, Matt Revelli, Pedro Alonzo, Roger Gastman, Aaron Rose and Jeffery Deitch. I also include perspectives from many of the most renowned and influential figures from graffiti and contemporary art, such as Barry McGee, Shepard Fairey, Steven

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roger Gasman, Darin Rowland, and Ian Sattler, *Freight Train Graffiti* (New York City: Abrams, 2005), 110.

¹¹ Ibid.

Powers, Geso, Slej, Power, Pre, SBOne and many others. These added perspectives will complement the existing art sociology, art psychology, and art historical research relating to graffiti and street art. While past academic research will be crucial in articulating how graffiti fits into different sections of society and the art world, the inside opinions and vantage points included here will make a significant contribution toward fully understanding the path that graffiti is presently on and help to distinguish between graffiti made with destructive intentions and graffiti made as art.

CHAPTER 2: ALTERNATIVE INFLUENCES AND CULTURAL SOURCES

The intention of this chapter is to expose some of the influences on graffiti that are less commonly known. There are hundreds of subsets within graffiti culture that in many cases have gone completely undocumented. These are just a few of the crucial influences that contributed to and helped to spread graffiti throughout North America and the rest of the world. While not limited to the West Coast, punk rock and skateboard cultures were especially strong movements in California, so it only made sense for these subcultures to have a large influence on West Coast graffiti.

By the early 1980s punk music had become a thriving subculture in London and New York and had made its way to the West Coast where subgenres like hardcore and skate punk were forming underground. In an anarchic form of rebellion, many punk rock kids would tag band names and political statements much the same way graffiti writers were disseminating their own tags.¹ Many graffiti writers have identified influence from this subversive music culture that had many of the same rebellious beliefs.

Skateboarding is another subculture that gained popularity in the 1980s. Skateboarders went out into the streets of their cities and towns to find places to skate, and as their skills progressed they found new challenges that only public and private property could offer. Abandoned pools, parking lots, stair handrails and many other forms of public architecture became the most desirable places to ride a skateboard, and seldom were these skaters asking for permission to ride these spots. Although skateboarding was originally popularized largely in

¹ Graffradio.com, "Power Interview," accessed January 30, 2012, <http://grafradio.com/?p=296>.

suburbia, as graffiti made its way out of the city, the two subcultures crossed paths and the merger was an easy one with the subversive nature of both of these activities.

Documentation in the form of books and video was scarce but played a crucial role in the spread of graffiti. Photographers and documentarians outside of the culture made most of these publications, but as they immersed themselves in the subculture, many graffiti writers saw the value of these outsiders' documentation. Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper showed a truly genuine interest in graffiti culture and were embraced by many New York writers by the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today they are considered experts on this subculture even though their participation has always been as outside observers. By the mid-1980s, some writers began publishing their own magazines, which were mostly photo compilations with interviews with prominent writers. These two forms of print were crucial to graffiti's international spread.

The next vehicle of graffiti sharing came in the form of the internet. This new medium gave graffiti writers, and anyone that was interested, immediate access to work from almost anywhere on the globe. Not only did people quickly realize how important viewing others' work was to graffiti's progression, they also found how effective the internet was at promoting oneself. This increased exposure that has literally changed graffiti in many ways and this chapter will delve into some of these changes.

Lastly, this chapter also discusses the freight train graffiti culture and how it has become an extremely important part of graffiti, especially in North America. New York subway graffiti was eradicated by the late 1980s and when this happened, graffiti writers evolved and found new ways to adapt to not only the cityscape but also to suburban and even rural America. Freight trains were the

next logical step away from subway cars. Their ability to make graffiti visible was much the same as their subway predecessors, but their ability to travel thousands of miles across the continent was enough to ensure this form of graffiti years of longevity. All of these groups and influences have played an enormous part in forming graffiti's place in contemporary society and my goal is to expose some the details of each and highlight their role in graffiti's growth.

The Punk Connection

Subway train graffiti in New York City was eventually squashed as the result of a successful campaign to keep this form of transit graffiti free. But this first twenty-year stretch was only the beginning. The original graffiti culture that had been spawned in Philadelphia and New York was now internationally known. By 1990, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and nearly every major U.S. city had a thriving graffiti culture. What seems to be misunderstood about this later surge in graffiti's spread is the enormous amount of growth that was happening outside of the hip-hop influence. Punk rock music and other forms of counter culture were some of the largest influences on a new generation of graffiti writers. Many still acknowledge hip-hop's early influence, but in middle-class suburban America, graffiti was not just a result of hip-hop. Supported by the general non-conformity of many youth subcultures, graffiti was becoming a popular form of anarchic expression.

Many publications about graffiti make clear the strong connection to hip-hop culture.² But this was in no way an exclusive relationship and, particularly during the spread of graffiti in the 1980s, there were many people that were

² Anna Waclawek, *From Graffiti to the Street Art Movement: Negotiating Art Worlds, Urban Spaces, and Visual Cultures c. 1970 – 2008*. (PhD. Diss. Concordia University 2008), 38.

introduced to graffiti in ways completely unrelated to hip-hop. San Francisco graffiti writer and contemporary artist Barry McGee explains the importance of punk rock shows on his early exposure to graffiti:

It was probably through music and stuff. It was a lot of punk rock shows and stuff like that. There was always graffiti in these places and I was just like, “who is this guy? I keep on seeing this guy.” There was this one guy, Cuba, he wrote “Cuba” and it was at all the same hardcore shows in the bathroom, on the door, and on the street. And then I was like “what, who’s doing this?” It was different than my idea of what graffiti was, before that.³

Punk and hardcore music were crucial influences on graffiti by the 1980s. Los Angeles graffiti writer Power speaks about getting his start in graffiti, writing punk rock band names all over Los Angeles, long before he understood the ethos of graffiti.⁴ “We would just put up punk bands and we all had nick names, mine was ‘moocher’ back then... and once all that New York stuff came over, it was fun to sort of learn it and stand back and say weird, we were kinda practicing that without knowing it.”⁵ Power says he remembers learning some of the more traditional graffiti rules from Martha Cooper’s and Henry Chalfant’s book, *Subway Art*, but punk rock and hardcore music was rooted in dissent that aligned perfectly with the counterculture spirit of graffiti⁶ (see Fig. 1). Power described how as he began to meet more traditional graffiti writers in Los Angeles he transitioned from punk rock tagging to graffiti easily because the common desire to get up and vandalize was so similar.⁷ He describes how they were both “that in

³ Art21.org, “Barry McGee: Graffiti,” accessed February 3, 2012, <http://www.art21.org/texts/barry-mcgee/interview-barry-mcgee-graffiti>.

⁴ “Power Interview”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

your face kind of thing, that total exposure and underground and shock value and graffiti just totally fit that.”⁸



Figure 1. Outlaws crew, Portland, Oregon 2008. Photo by the author.

There is an important ingrained sense of anti-authoritarianism that is common to punk and hardcore music that perfectly overlaps with the sensibility of graffiti. During the early 1980s when the Southern California band *Black Flag* was asked why they didn't try to control violence at their shows, band member "Dukowski responded with a succinct summation of the punk principle of anarchy. 'Do we have a right to act as leaders, to tell people how to act?' Dukowski replied.

⁸ Ibid.

‘The easy solution isn’t a solution, it’s the fucking problem. It’s too easy to have someone tell you what to do. It is harder to make your own decision.’”⁹ This is a mentality that is shared by the graffiti community to this day. While there are elder writers that have gained respect in probably every city, there is no established hierarchy that empowers these elders to enforce certain activities. There are ethics in place, but at the end of the day this is a subculture with anarchic roots that relate directly to the do it yourself (DIY) ethos that are such a prominent part of punk culture and they promote vandalism as an important form of free expression.

Barry McGee gives another example of how punk rock and hardcore in the 1980s shaped his own and others’ ability to express themselves:

There were some strong influences for sure, some very strong influences. I started in ‘84, and that’s in the Reagan era. There was a lot of protesting, and there was a lot of interesting music going on at that same time. So, a lot of those things had big influences on me—as far as punk rock and hardcore music and just people doing things on their own—all these things that were going on.¹⁰

Punk rockers and graffitiists were treated very similarly by authority figures as well. “Between 1980 and 1981, at least a dozen *Black Flag* concerts ended in violent clashes between the police and the kids.”¹¹ These were kids being harassed for participating in activities that in many cases were not even illegal. They were outside of the norms of that time and were treated as outcasts for their participation in these groups. Michael Azerrad documents some of these

⁹ Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Senses from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (New York: Little, Brown and Company 2001), 35.

¹⁰ Art21.org, “Barry McGee,” accessed April 21, 2012, <http://www.art21.org/texts/barry-mcgee/interview-barry-mcgee-public-and-private-space>.

¹¹ Azerrad, 20.

subculture overlaps directly while discussing this clash between *Black Flag* fans and the police, “Not helping matters was the fact that the *Black Flag* logo was spray-painted on countless highway overpasses in and around Los Angeles.”¹² Thus these punk fans used graffiti as a way to not only show their loyalty to the band, but to force the public to experience their anarchy.

Slej, from Salt Lake City, recalls that his introduction to graffiti likewise had no connection to hip-hop: “Before I got started writing Slej I ran around writing, just, political shit all over everything.”¹³ Slej explains how he met Skid, from San Francisco, who asked why he wasn’t writing graffiti, to which Slej replied, “Well, I am kind of writing all this stuff [political sayings] for a reason.”¹⁴ Slej goes on to explain Skid’s response to this: “you know you come up with a name, people know who you are. That one name means all that shit,”¹⁵ meaning that his graffiti alias will represent all of the political discourse that people know him for. It may not necessarily be true that writing the one alias could possibly have the same political impact outside of the graffiti subculture, but it does give a clear example of the power that the illegal tag can have as a statement of defiance. In many ways Skid is correct that the tag itself holds a very defiant and anti-authoritarian value all by itself. It is the quickest and easiest way for someone to let the public know they do not agree with their system of authority. The tag is inherently defiant no matter how it is spelled.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Graffradio.com, “Slej Interview,” accessed February 14, 2012, <http://grafradio.com/?p=70>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Punk and hardcore music subcultures are just a couple of the rebellious youth communities that crossed paths with graffiti. They were articulations of a dissatisfied youth that needed a venue to express their discontentment with society and political issues. In ways very similar to graffiti, these kids just needed to voice unsatisfied views on everything from their economic opportunities to their general displeasure with their home or social life. Another subculture that shared many of these same views with punk and graffiti alike was skateboarding. Middle class youth involved in punk and hardcore were utilizing skateboarding as a physical outlet for many of these same transgressions.

Skateboard Culture

One of the ties between skateboarding and graffiti is their illegality. Within the last ten years, skate parks have been built in cities all over the United States. Before this, kids were constantly looking for places to skate. Police would kick them out of public places, and private businesses would post signage that banned skateboarding specifically. While discussing sanctioned graffiti venues, Stefano Bloch makes an important comparison between skateboarding and graffiti: “As with graffiti, skating began as an unsanctioned street act for which utilitarian infrastructure acted as the hardware of the craft. And like graffiti, once it was seen as destructive, unsightly, or out of control, it was relocated to a specific space and reintroduced as safe, creative, and most importantly, controllable.”¹⁶ With both of these activities, there is a sanctioned version that still holds value, but it is their anarchic origin that gives these activities an irreplaceable quality. Carlo McCormick explains, “From the pioneering graffiti writers to skateboarders, we’re

¹⁶ Stefano Bloch blog, accessed April, 12, 2012, <http://stefanobloch.wordpress.com/this-is-not-a-free-wall/>

paying homage to the criminal mindset of artists everywhere who don't play by the rules and constantly trespass social boundaries regardless of the ramifications."¹⁷ This attitude also relates directly to the spirit of punk and hardcore music cultures as well. These subcultures shared mistreatment and disapproval from society generally: "...unpopularity led to a golden age of neglect that fostered an intense camaraderie. Skateboarders responded to being shunned, abused, and chased by confronting adversity, building and finding their own terrain while making up a whole scene of music, art and less easily categorized pursuits. No one dictated what skating was or wasn't, so it was entirely up to the people doing it to fashion their own self-sufficient world."¹⁸ Because all of these subcultures share this transgressive nature, they influenced each other in many ways completely independent of the hip-hop influence that graffiti is so commonly assumed to depend upon.

In response to a question of the similarities between graffiti and skateboarding, Craig R. Stecyk III asserts:

To a skateboarder, the world is a functional evolving dance floor. Skateboarding is an activity that requires the rider to constantly conceive and reinterpret information while traversing the urban environment. Adaptation and improvisation are at the core of the skate experience. I think the reason so many artists have come out of skateboarding is because of all of that cognitive expression. You're interacting at all times – from reading the cracks in the street, computing the terrain's slope, drawing your arc through space, dodging cars, down to knowing when the guards won't be at a particular spot. Skateboarding is performance art.¹⁹

¹⁷ Carlo McCormick, "The Beaten Path" from *Beautiful Losers* (New York, New York: Iconoclast Editions 2004), 79.

¹⁸ Jocko Weyland, "Pineapple and All Those Guys" from *Beautiful Losers*, (New York, New York: Iconoclast Editions 2004), 119.

¹⁹ Craig R. Stecyk III, "Skate and Destroy," in *Art in the Streets*, ed. Nikki Columbus, (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications 2011), 188.

These same attributes directly overlap with the innovations required of graffiti writers. Stecyk describes obstacles that are physical to skateboarding but appear in many different forms of repressed activities. And it is the same persistence that has allowed similar subcultures such as graffiti and hardcore to not only survive but to continually evolve.

Whether seen as a sport or an extension of dance or performance, skateboarding's original intentions align congruently with the transgressive sentiments of graffiti. The more it was repressed, the more skateboarders sought out places to learn new tricks and grow in their skills, exactly the same way graffiti writers have to constantly find new places to paint. This oppression only created a push back from skateboarders that were criminalized for their desire to participate in an activity that was forced to look for haven in the same places graffiti writers had too, which was usually anywhere they could. While punk, skateboarding and graffiti were all repressed and criminalized in many of the same ways, graffiti did see some important acceptances from the art world and many other outsiders interested in the artistic aspects of graffiti. By the early 1980s some important documentation and criticism surfaced in the form of books, movies, art show reviews, and magazines.

Media Exposure

Although graffiti was still in many ways underground, by the 1980s the media that had been published about early New York graffiti was helping to expose this act of rebellion to the masses. Journalist Norman Mailer wrote *The Faith of Graffiti* recognizing the exuberant energy behind what he described as a vibrant new art form as early as 1974. He prolifically wrote about New York

graffiti as the beginning of the next great art movement.²⁰ While many have agreed with Mailer over the years, due to the illegality and the destructive intentions behind graffiti, it may never gain the status that Mailer hoped for.

Almost ten years after the publication of Mailer's book, Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver released the 1983 documentary, *Style Wars*, on New York graffiti culture. This venture aired on the *Public Broadcast System* (PBS) and was one of the first inside documentations of this thriving subculture that was made available to the public.²¹ In the late 1980s Chalfant describes the mixed reactions to this film: "The audience at any showing of *Style Wars* attended by Tony or me [Henry Chalfant] always raises the same questions: in one, angry citizens berate us for encouraging vandalism everywhere, and in the other, the purists ask if we regret being part of a process that has destroyed urban folk culture."²² Due to its illegal nature, graffiti provokes a visceral reaction from most people, whether it is positive or negative.

The book *Subway Art* followed in 1984, and *Spraycan Art* in 1987. Both of these books offered large photos of graffiti, as well as the writers' judgments, insights, and expectations. Los Angeles graffiti writer Revok describes how "*Subway Art* and *Spraycan Art* were like a bible to me. That brought it in a form that was tangible, that you could like, look at and study and learn from."²³ These early books and films were all documentation of the hip-hop based roots of graffiti

²⁰ Norman Mailer, *The Faith in Graffiti* (New York City: HarperCollins, 1974), 4.

²¹ "Style Wars," Directed by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, (New York City: Public Broadcasting Service 1983).

²² Jeff Chang, *Cant Stop Wont Stop*, (New York: Picador, 2005), 162.

²³ "Outside In: The Story of Art in the Streets," Comment from Jason "Revok" Williams at 10:42, accessed March 6, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/36179600>.

from New York, but soon punk, hardcore, skateboarding and other forms of counterculture began to play a role in graffiti writing as well.

Another early outlet of information about graffiti came in magazine form by the mid-1980s. Most of these magazines, especially in the beginning, were self-published by the writers themselves. *IGTimes* and *Ghetto Art*, which later became *Can Control*, were two of the early magazines that initially consisted of just black and white photos of graffiti.²⁴ In 1983 David Schmidlapp made the *Subway Times* which “took its name and from a newsletter produced by New York’s MTA.”²⁵ The next year Schmidlapp published *IGTimes (IGT)*, also known as *The International Get Hip Times (T.I.G.H.T.)*.²⁶ His focus was graffiti as a form of expression as something independent of the dominant gallery-based art scene, highlighting its subversive nature. In an interview he describes it as “An indigenous art form, from the cities’ youth, running in the cultural capital of the world.”²⁷ While *IGT* mostly displayed New York City-based work, in a feature with Caine II in 1984 some of the work he had done on freights in California was highlighted. “It happened to show freights, though not actually putting them forward as some sort of movement on the West Coast in those years.”²⁸ Not long after this a magazine would emerge out of the West Coast that understood how

²⁴ “Interview with Power”

²⁵ Roger Gastman and Caleb Nelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York, New York, Harper Design: 2010), 261.

²⁶ David Schmidlapp, “IGTimes History” accessed March 25, 2012, <http://lapphoto.com/igtimes/>.

²⁷ Joe Austin, *Connected, Cultural Studies for the End of the Century*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

²⁸ Roger Gasman, Darin Rowland, and Ian Sattler, *Freight Train Graffiti*, (New York City: Abrams, 2005), 83.

important these freight trains would become to graffiti's spread in the second half of the decade.

Los Angeles graffiti writers Power and Charlie published the first issue of *Ghetto Art* in 1987, and by 1989 the name was changed to *Can Control*. This West Coast magazine was published until 1998²⁹ and focused heavily on freight trains. This was an important piece to the spread of freight train graffiti throughout the United States, which in turn spread graffiti to many places it may not have ended up without this exposure via trains. In many ways, this concentration contributed to freight graffiti developing into its own subculture within the larger graffiti culture. There are no subways in Los Angeles the way there were in New York, so it made sense for these West Coast writers to gravitate towards freights. *Can Control* was the first full color graffiti publication and was designed to be more of a real magazine layout, as opposed to a punk rock zine that was purposefully made to look less professional. Power explains: "We always spent some money, we always went through a printer so the first one was glossy... *Ghetto Art* 6 September/October 89' that was the first one in color."³⁰ *IGT* and *Can Control*, early on were some of the only ways graffiti could be shared and studied. In many ways this zine tradition overlapped with the DIY sentiments of punk rock culture, a movement that had been making counterculture, underground publications since the late 1970s.³¹ Power acknowledges that although he never made any punk zines, he was definitely influenced by them when he started working on *Ghetto Art*, but wanted to do something unique at the same time.³²

²⁹ "Power Interview"

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Being made by writers, these magazines offered information that was exclusive to this subculture that informed and educated many young writers that were just getting started.

With the continued popularity of graffiti, there are still a large number of books and other print publications that continue to be produced. But assimilation of the internet into media culture in the 1990s quickly changed the way information about graffiti was published and shared in the same way it did for so many other social groups.

Today, the internet is changing the way graffiti's underground ethos and rules are learned. Prior to the internet, access to this information was exclusive to personal relationships among people within the subculture. There was a master/apprentice relationship between new writers and experienced writers.³³ Today kids are bombarded with images of graffiti in pop culture, music videos, and through many forms of advertising. If a person is interested in how graffiti is done, they can type the word "graffiti" into any internet search engine and instantaneously see hundreds of images, videos and supplies readily available to them.

In 1994 Susan Farrell started one of the first graffiti websites, *www.graffiti.org*. This site relied on writers and enthusiasts from cities around the world to send in their photos so that people living anywhere in the world can see what someone is doing in Atlanta, Chicago, or even Paris or Prague. The popularity of sites such as *woostercollective.com* and *12ozprophet.com* means that almost as soon as new work has gone up on the street, its available to a worldwide audience. "You can paint a wall in Australia," says Neate, "and in a matter of

³³ Thecitrusreport.com, "Ges0" modified August 25, 2011, accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.thecitrusreport.com/2011/features/geso/>.

hours it's on all the forums and blogs - if you're Banksy, it gets on the news. What street art does more than any previous movement is to use the media as a medium."³⁴ Photos published on the internet give anyone with an interest in this subculture access to work being made all over the world.

The internet's ability to reach so many viewers in such a short amount of time made it possible to completely change graffiti culture in ways many people see as both positive and negative. California writer Geso sums up his take on the internet in an interview: "The internet is cool, you do a piece and some fag [sic] wastes his gas driving all over the state to take a photo of something I painted and then post it online. It's cool for me because I don't get photos usually..."³⁵ This partially positive comment is followed by his negative feedback. "It's not cool when some toy³⁶ that has never done shit in his life gets on there and tries to be a flicker bug, twitter banging fucker"³⁷ Geso is referring to an inexperienced writer promoting himself without putting work in to gain a reputation strictly through time and hard work. Most writers that began painting previous to the internet seem to be most critical of this self-promotion. The internet allows people to post a large amount of work they may have done in a short amount of time. The problem older graffiti writers have with this kind of fame is that these inexperienced writers have not paid their dues and spent the time they should have earning status to gain recognition. Freight train specialist Ichabod claims to just ignore this internet buildup: "self-promo is easy to spot and the lines don't lie. Go

³⁴ Alice Fisher, "How the Tate Got Streetwise," accessed August 24, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/may/11/art.exhibition>.

³⁵ Graffradio.com, "Geso Interview" accessed July 13, 2011 <http://grafradio.com/?p=435>

³⁶ An inexperienced and unrespected graffiti writer.

³⁷ Graffradio.com, "Geso Interview."

bench, you'll see who is up. Anyone who believes the net is an accurate picture of the real world is a fool.”³⁸ In other words, even though he looks at the internet, he doesn't form his opinions of other writers from what he sees online. But he does have an uncommonly trained perspective acquired through benching (a term with origins dating back to New York subway days when writers would meet at a subway stop and watch cars pass and photograph them from a station bench.) An important drawback to the internet that Ichabod points out is “the homogenization of styles and the death of regional style...”³⁹ This assertion claims that easy exposure to different regional styles on the internet has caused the unique elements of certain cities' or regions' graffiti styles to be copied and spread in ways that did not happen previous to the internet.

The impact of the internet on graffiti culture is undeniable. There is access to images that are important for the preservation of such an ephemeral activity. And while many believe the internet has given access to people that may not have earned a place in the subculture, the availability the internet provides has led to progression and inclusion of graffiti-related art in art institutions. Whether this is viewed as a positive or not, there is no way to deny the enormous impact of the internet on graffiti culture. Long before graffiti's ability to be seen internationally with the stroke of a keyboard and the click of a mouse, freight trains were the only network that could take graffiti from one side of the North American continent to the other. Freight trains have never gained the attention that graffiti in metropolis areas have, but this less commonly noticed part of the subculture has played an

³⁸ Graffradio.com, “Ichabod Interview,” accessed April 1, 2012 <http://graffradio.com/?p=201>.

³⁹ Ibid.

important role in the spread and the continuation of the New York subway tradition that was so crucial to the beginnings of graffiti.

Freight Train Graffiti

Writers in New York were forced to find new surfaces to paint when the MTA eradicated subway graffiti.⁴⁰ Eventually people realized that freight trains allowed their work to travel the same way subways had, but on a much larger scale. New Yorkers P-Nut II and Tracy168 produced the first documented freight train graffiti in 1974.⁴¹ Tracy168 remembers stealing paint from a Red Devil factory: “There happened to be freight trains back in that area, so we said, ‘let’s try these cans out right here.’ That’s how the P-Nut II/Tracy 168 thing came about.”⁴² This was clearly just a random occurrence. P-Nut II and Tracy 168 were not necessarily interested in their work traveling on these trains. By the late 1980s some writers were just starting to realize the potential for freights to take work across the continent, but it was not until the early to mid-1990s before freight train graffiti really took off.⁴³ This medium is one of the largest factors in the spread of graffiti throughout North America. Rio and Kerse are an example of freight writers who have work on trains throughout the country (see Fig. 2). In the city graffiti writers found many other places to put their work, but freight trains were the next logical step away from subway trains.

When writers first started painting freights, many admit they were not fully able to grasp the potential for these trains to travel the country.

⁴⁰ Gastman, *Freight Train Graffiti*, 110.

⁴¹ Ibid, 82.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Power Interview”



Figure 2. Rio and Kerse, Photo by the author.

Author, Cole T. Only describes how infectious it was for writers to learn about their work traveling thousands of miles across North America.⁴⁴ Before the internet this was one of the only ways people could see work by writers from many different parts of the country. Writers in New York could see freights from California, Florida, and British Columbia and understood that their trains could travel just as far in the opposite direction.

With time, freight writers were able to see the potential of this medium. One of the more interesting means of exploiting the visibility of freights was through train tracking 1-800 numbers that allowed writers to track the movement of the cars they painted by the identifying numbers on the train.⁴⁵ The freight

⁴⁴ Cole T. Only, *Steel Wheels 1986 – 1997* (New York City: Steel Wheels Press, 2010), 80.

⁴⁵ Graffradio.com, “Reser Interview,” accessed March 3, 2012, <http://grafradio.com/?p=393>.

transit companies had the 1-800 numbers so their shippers could see the location of their freight at any given time. Once writers learned about this tracking ability, they used it to see where and how far their work was traveling.⁴⁶ Some writers took the time to extensively research the routes and where certain types of cars traveled in order to insure maximized visibility. Philadelphia writer Pre talks about how he would call some of the local freight companies to get information,

When Conrail was running stuff here [in Philadelphia] I used to call them up and tell them I went to Lake High School or college and I was doing reports on transit and shipping and stuff like that and they would mail me these packages of maps with all the yards in it. Once I realized I could do it with Conrail I was calling like almost every freight company, so I had like Southern Pacific maps and Norfolk Southern maps and in my basement I had them all hanging up and on the Conrail one I had all of the yards that I went to circled... It was like my war room.⁴⁷

With the foresight to understand how trains move and where they get laid up and for how long, Pre was able to not only maximize the amount of trains he could hit safely but also know how far these trains would travel. With one of the most important draws of graffiti being fame and having your work seen by as many people as possible, freight train graffiti was and still is an unrivaled outlet.

Long before digital cameras and graffiti websites, writers and freight train enthusiasts were benching and documenting freight trains, as well as walls, the same way many had with the New York subways. Writers and sometimes civilians⁴⁸ took photos of graffiti and some would trade packages of these photos

⁴⁶ Graffradio.com, "Pre Interview," accessed March 13, 2012, <http://grafradio.com/?p=445>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ While civilian benching is very common now, "John the Greek" is one of the early civilians that traded freight photos. He is mentioned in interviews by Power from Los Angeles and SBOne from Atlanta.

with others in different parts of the country.⁴⁹ This early form of networking and sharing work would eventually explode on the internet. But interestingly there were some who traded these hard copy photos for years.⁵⁰ There are still writers who prefer to take photos with and look at 35mm film. As with any form of technology, there will always be people who prefer what is familiar.

The next chapter will discuss a more broad set of rules that apply to graffiti more generally, but it is important to note some of the ethos that applies specifically to freight train graffiti. Generally speaking, the idea of rules in relation to graffiti seems like a strange concept to some, but there are definitely actions that are not accepted by many writers, especially on and around freights. This topic has been debated by many writers. Some believe that there are no rules, but most writers that have sustained longevity follow certain rules to protect themselves in this scrutinized, illegal practice. Graffiti is clearly an act of defiance, so to many it seems hypocritical to apply rules to a practice that is in opposition to most systems of governance. Nevertheless, within many groups of freight train writers, there is a strict set of rules that are followed and enforced from within the subculture to ensure their continued ability to write.

Above all veteran writers expect younger writers to know graffiti history and not paint over work by graffiti writers that have earned respect.⁵¹ With the number of people painting trains today there is a limited amount of space on trains, so in many cases writers will have to paint over other peoples' work. It is when younger writers don't know or care that they are painting over work that is

⁴⁹ "Pre Interview"

⁵⁰ Graffradio.com, "SB One interview," accessed March 11, 2012, <http://grafradio.com/?p=161>.

⁵¹ "Slej Interview"

historic that there becomes a problem. Another rule that relates to the lack of space on trains is the way in which a writer paints over others. If a writer painted a throw-up or a piece that did not come out well or maybe wasn't finished, the next writer to come in and paint over it should completely cover the previous work.⁵² If they do not completely cover the previous work it will be showing everyone exactly who they are painting over. This is a huge disrespect to the writer being covered. Completely covering the previous work is the appropriate way to go about taking space on a train, according to these unwritten rules.⁵³

One of the most important rules specific to freight train graffiti is care and respect of the freight train yards.⁵⁴ Veteran writers will usually have multiple yards in which they paint. This is usually so they are not painting too much in the same place. If workers notice new paint by the same name, they might notify authorities. Cleanliness is also important for this same reason. In order to keep yards clean and safe, writers will not leave their empty cans behind. Roger Gastman explains how older writers have picked up cans and trash left by other writers just to try and preserve a safe lay-up or yard.⁵⁵ But cleaning another writer's mess does not come without a price. The writer doing the cleaning up may punish the writer leaving a mess for having to do these extra chores, either physically or by stealing their paint or by painting over their work.⁵⁶

⁵² "Reser interview"

⁵³ Geso, personal communication

⁵⁴ A freight train yard or lay-up is a place where freight trains are parked to be loaded, unloaded or rerouted.

⁵⁵ Gastman, *Freight Train Graffiti*, 268.

⁵⁶ "Reser Interview"

Many older writers have families and jobs that they do not want to risk losing because of someone else's actions.⁵⁷ These rules are in place to protect these writers from being caught. In an interview with Reser, he emphatically describes how frustrated he gets with writers that stray from these unwritten rules: "...you need to have some sort of understanding what is actually going on and how long people have been doing it and why we get so mad at you for leaving your fucking can or painting ten cars in a row, you know what I mean, there is a reason that we get so angry about it."⁵⁸ This mentality ties in very well with one of the most interesting aspects of graffiti. These writers practice graffiti with no reward other than personal accomplishment and recognition from other writers. They put themselves at risk of jail time, fines and criminal records. Many of these freight train writers have developed an art of avoiding potential risks and are very passionate about protecting what safe places they have to paint. These rules are made and enforced by writers that have and want to maintain their longevity in this practice. More than any other reason, these rules are there so that they can continue to paint trains safely.

But aren't all of these rules a contradiction? Graffiti is supposed to be anarchic, transgressive, and destructive. While this is true, writers in cities as well as in train yards have spent many years finding a balance that allows them to continue writing under the radar. Depending on the perspective, this can create many arguments. While the younger writer may be naive and overt, their passion to destroy seems much more ambitious. The older writers that are protecting their train yards and walls may be doing so to ensure longevity, but is their anarchic

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

sprit being compromised? Younger writers can argue that if you have a job and/or a family to protect, then you have assimilated into the society graffiti is meant to reject. How can an anarchic graffiti practice be possible if the writers' everyday life is acculturated to the society it rejects? But maybe the rebuttal lies in the elder writers' ability to maintain a transgressive practice with true longevity that takes intelligent planning, execution and intuition. In either case the goal is to create work that is transgressive and unauthorized. Whether the destruction is blatant or covert, the end goal is the same.

Considering that graffiti has not only survived, but spread and grown globally after more than forty years, there is a fairly limited understanding of the subculture. This is due to its underground nature that relates to the fact it is illegal and aside from recent spurts of acceptance, it is heavily repressed. This lack of knowledge about the subculture in many cases leads to assumptions of gang activity and that the practice is purveyed by low income, minority youth that are in most instances involved with hip-hop music. Including and exceeding the examples provided in this chapter, graffiti has spread to every socioeconomic stratum and has encroached on nearly every aspect of youth and popular culture. There are many more influences on graffiti than people realize. This chapter focused on those that overlapped with graffiti's transgressive root that the following chapter will detail further. As the subculture continues to grow and the internet brings images and information about the practice and its history, these influences subsequently multiply at an amazing rate.

CHAPTER 3: GRAFFITI AS TRANSGRESSION

The root and foundation of graffiti is based on it being an act of vandalism. It started in many different forms of marking. Gang graffiti has been recorded in Philadelphia as early as the nineteenth century.¹ French photographer Brassai published photos of graffiti in France from the 1930s that he saw as a type of outsider art that “could open the door to new artistic expression.”² The “Kilroy Was Here” moniker was left by soldiers all over Europe during World War II. In the 1960s Cornbread was seeking fame and attention on the Philadelphia bus routes with the beginnings of what became contemporary graffiti.³ The 1970s followed with New York’s explosion of graffiti that quickly found its way onto the subways. Graffiti grew to enormous heights in New York before eventually waning in the late 1980s. But this was only the beginning and today, graffiti is found, practiced and understood around the world.

This chapter explains the transgressive nature of true illegal graffiti and makes the distinction between this and legal work made for galleries or museums that is in many cases labeled “graffiti art.” It will also discuss graffiti as a response to corporate advertising and how graffiti is such an effective voice in response to advertisements and overbearing visual stimuli placed in the public realm by corporate America. The next section discusses how important the simple tag or signature is to the existing hierarchy within graffiti and how this simple act speaks louder and more defiantly than any large, bold work ever could. It looks at the

¹ Roger Gastman and Caleb Nelson, *The History of American Graffiti*, (New York, New York, Harper Design: 2010), 42.

² Brassai, *Brassai Graffiti*, (New York: Rizzoli Int. 2002), 36.

³ Gastman and Nelson, *History of American Graffiti*, 48.

significance of the act of writing itself, which is especially important due to the ephemeral nature of graffiti. The chapter also explores some the rules and structures that are a part of the subculture that are not always followed due to the anti-authoritarian nature of graffiti, but are undeniably present and in some ways an ironic part of the culture.

As graffiti spread, its destructive roots have remained intact. “For many graffiti writers, graffiti is a secret language, an empowering form of self-expression, an urban calligraphy of the oppressed, a screaming political expression of outrage and protest against an unjust and alienating political economic order.”⁴ This chapter highlights these intentions and that these writers are not concerned with risking their freedom or worse to disseminate this ephemeral work. Hardcore graffiti strives to cause as much damage as possible and make an impact that is purely rebellious. In many ways it is made for other graffiti writers to admire and recognize (see Fig. 3). Its spirit stands in direct opposition to the Western art establishment that has begun to embrace it. In an interview with the late Bay Area graffiti writer Sham who was a founder of the KUK crew, he described his opinions on art vs. graffiti: “I’m an artist, too. I’m a good artist, but that’s not what I see graffiti for. Graffiti is a fucking game. It’s all about getting your name up. It ain’t about who can draw the prettiest picture. It’s about who can fuck shit up the most.”⁵ This is an extreme perspective, but it is crucial to understand that this raw motivation is what makes graffiti so unique and separates it from contemporary art.

⁴ Michael Walsh, *Graffiti*, (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1996), 5.

⁵ Frank Casiano, “Getting Up With Sham: The Bombing of Shit Fuck City,” modified August 13, 2003, accessed February 14, 2012, http://www.hiphopslam.com/news/2003/hhs_news_service_016.html.



Figure 3. KUK and FTL crew member throw-ups, Berkeley, California 2003. Photo by the author.

Graffiti's popularity has resulted in huge recognition of parts of the subculture, including street art and art made both indoors and outdoors that is influenced by illegal graffiti. Street art is a variation of graffiti that has grown tremendously in the last ten to fifteen years. Many street artists began writing graffiti, and some create what is considered street art alongside their graffiti practice. Generally speaking, contemporary street artists have been able to navigate in and out of the gallery environment more successfully than graffiti writers. While in the public realm, street artists appropriate space in the same fashion as their graffiti predecessors. The difference is that street art is commonly meant to interact with the public on a personal level, in spite of its sometimes critical or satirical messages. Unlike graffiti that intends to create a more direct message of defiance to society, street art tends to engage the viewer and provokes them to

contemplate the street artist's critique. "Rather than fixating on dialog with specific citizens, however, street artists primarily focus on creating different kinds of visual ruptures in a cityscape that might speak to a variety of audiences."⁶ The street artist's intent may still have a defiant undertone, but the fact that some street art does not have these intentions separates it from graffiti, and while this acceptance is exciting, it is important to distinguish between some of these more recently acknowledged genres and illegal, transgressive graffiti.

Anna Waclawek explains how "writing graffiti, even if inwardly is about a sense of identity and community, is outwardly about defiance."⁷ New York based graffiti writer Katsu is one of the strongest proponents of graffiti as vandalism. He insists on distinguishing his audience as strictly the graffiti community. "Graffiti writers should love graffiti, people in the public should hate it."⁸ His statements mirror many of Sham's opinions about making graffiti specifically for other graffiti artists.⁹ While some graffiti is legible, most is cryptic and made for an audience that is not a part of the general public. This separation creates an interesting dichotomy, because not only is the graffiti writer taking the space from the public, but they are also in a sense excluding them from what they leave behind. Using tags and marks that are not completely legible to the untrained eye makes the work more exclusive to the subculture and extends the defiant nature of the work.

⁶ Anna Waclawek, *From Graffiti to the Street Art Movement: Negotiating Art Worlds, Urban Spaces, and Visual Cultures c. 1970 – 2008*. (PhD. Diss. Concordia University 2008), 223.

⁷ Waclawek, 131.

⁸ "Katsu Interview," accessed February, 6 2012, http://www.12ozprophet.com/index.php/news/video-katsu-crack_and_shine.

⁹ Casiano, "Getting Up With Sham."

In an interview with the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), Barry McGee talks about being more concerned about the opinion of the graffiti crowd than anyone else: “whenever I do stuff indoors, I feel like I have to do like 100 percent more stuff outdoors to keep my street creditability. It’s probably the audience I am most worried about... I am always wary of how I set, you know with the twelve or thirteen year old kid, what do they think of what I’ve done. How I fit in their scheme of things.”¹⁰ This is one of the largest distinctions beyond graffiti’s anarchic intentions. Contemporary art is made to be sold and objectified while graffiti is made simply as an act of defiance. There is something very pure about not only the intention, but the act of creating this expression with no expectation of monetary reward.

With the art world’s new infatuation with graffiti-inspired art, there are people that see this as an opportunity to cash in. True graffiti is completely separate from this graffiti-inspired art irrespective of the experience of the writer. McGee again makes this distinction:

This is commerce. I’m not trying to bring the street into the gallery. There is real graffiti and there is trend graffiti. There are those who are doing the real thing and those who are selling out. There is a lot to be said for the trappings of a price tag. The maintenance of purity comes from treating this as a hobby, not as a profession. Graffiti is a passion and a lifestyle; it doesn’t come with a price tag.¹¹

Graffiti is unique because its motivation is not monetary gain unlike so many other things in Western society are. Writers risk their freedom and future ability to earn just to get work on the streets. Some people do not see the value in this motivation

¹⁰ Art21.org, “Interview with Barry McGee and Margaret Killgallen,” accessed February 26, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/watch-now/segment-barry-mcgee-margaret-killgallen-in-place>.

¹¹ Dragolab.com, “Barry McGee Interview at the Alessandra Bonomo Gallery,” accessed March 28, 2012, <http://www.dragolab.com/en/news/posts/barry-mcgee-at-the-alessandra-bonomo-gallery>.

due to the illegality of graffiti, but I assert that from a historic perspective this motivation will be revered as a pure form of expression.

No matter what their purpose, writers are taking public space without permission and claiming it as their own. “Artists who perpetuate their art on an unsuspecting and unwilling audience, irritate most pervasively by virtue of their presumption, a Duchampian conceit beyond the mere declaration, ‘This is art because I say it is’ – no, they further assert that the sphere of others is a canvas of their own in a morally pernicious form of appropriation.”¹² It is this separation from art that gives graffiti such a unique place in society. Since the early 1970s graffiti has evolved in many ways, but no matter how accepted it becomes its root act of vandalism remains its most important defining feature.

In an interview with New York graffiti legend Cost, he explains the roots of his intentions:

Our attitude was more like “Fuck you and fuck the system.” We were angry, rebellious guys. There was a definite punk attitude to what we were doing. It was a “Fuck the whole system. Fuck the government. Fuck socialization.” We just revolted against the whole system. Fuck politics and all the politicians. Rudy Giuliani. Stuff like that. We were anti. The best way to describe what we did was like “We’re anti. We’re not artists, we’re anti-artists”...I didn’t go to the yard at 13 and say, “You know what? I’m gonna go write on these trains because I want to make money.” You know what I mean? ... I went to the yard because I was rebelling, and my family situation was not a good one. Looking back, my family was splitting up, like my parents. The whole family was a mess and I was at that age where you get rebellious and I went into graffiti.¹³

¹² Carlo McCormick, Marc Schiller and Sarah Schiller, *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, (Hohenzollernring: Taschen, 2010), 50.

¹³ Caroline Caldwell, “Vandalog interviewed COST – Part two,” accessed September 9, 2012, <http://blog.vandalog.com/2012/09/vandalog-interviewed-cost-part-two/>.

This example shows the pure, almost innocent perspective which many kids begin from. This defiant attitude is the defining distinction between art and graffiti.

The amount of contemporary art being made that is influenced directly by graffiti is a clear reflection of graffiti's success as an important form of expression. It is made by writers, ex-writers and by people not involved with the subculture at all. It is the distinction between these two realms of graffiti as vandalism and graffiti as art that I hope has been made clear. The line drawn between what is art and what is graffiti is not static and is dependent on personal perspectives and opinions. No matter how liberally graffiti is accepted, there is a portion that remains unwanted. It is the illegal, destructive parts of the act that are difficult for many to digest which hold the most credence. The most anarchic, unappealing graffiti holds a cultural value that needs to be recognized. It is pure self-expression. While it may take from private property owners and the public space it inhabits, this is a small price for the result of this extremely valuable form of expression.

A Reaction to Corporate Marketing

With the distinction between art and graffiti established, it is important to explore some of the motivations writers have beyond the initial causeless vandalism. One of the most important catalysts for contemporary graffiti writers is competition with corporate advertising. Public marketing has expanded exponentially in urban areas and graffiti and street art compete directly for this space. I argue that the anarchic nature of graffiti ensures the ability to express oneself in a society that is growing more and more saturated by corporate advertising. The public space that corporations have appropriated leaves many people with a desire to have a voice in this public forum, and in many places

graffiti is the one of the only voices that can be heard. It is a voice that can be removed, painted over, and pressure washed, but cannot be completely ignored. It is disseminated with the understanding of its ephemeral nature, with writers ready and willing to replace and repaint their work repetitively.

Carlo McCormick articulates graffiti's transgressive response to corporate advertising perfectly: "...if we are honest enough to admit that these deeds are not simply creative acts but destructive ones as well, then we might just understand how the exponential rise and global spread of graffiti, post-graffiti, and street art is addressing an endemic shift in our relationship as individuals to the body politic, and most importantly, the social architecture of economy and politics that has been built around us."¹⁴ Graffiti has the unique ability to create these instabilities and to allow writers to express themselves by lashing back at a world of corporate advertising that has repressed their ability to utilize public space. While graffiti has evolved into what is labeled as an art movement, it is the illegal, outdoor work that has the greatest social impact in response to the marketing campaigns of big business.

These corporations are seen as an extension of the larger governmental system that many writers are in opposition to, and graffiti is an effective means of expression against this corrupt political environment. Their message may not even be speaking directly to the establishment, but the opposition is apparent:

Whether or not it says so in so many words, the fuck you message is implicit in the use of graffiti as communication. The medium itself implies alienation, discontentment, marginality, repression, resentment, rebellion: no matter what it says, graffiti always implies a "fuck you." Though addressing the larger society in this contemptuous manner may be a secondary or even

¹⁴ McCormick and Schiller, 131.

tertiary element of the graffiti writer's agenda, this element always lurks in the background of every graffito on every wall.¹⁵

People are just looking for a voice with which graffiti can empower them. "This type of rebellion and resentment, shared between the graffiti artists and their work, is exactly the type of message that society tries to suffocate."¹⁶ Waclawek asserts that "while the genealogy of graffiti writing may be linked to several originating influences, it is more significantly connected to the pervasiveness of consumer culture."¹⁷ This is clearly the case with many contemporary writers.

Kaws, who began writing graffiti in New Jersey and New York, is an excellent example of work made in the public forum that is an effective response to corporate advertising.¹⁸ He embarked on what is now looked at as one of the most well-known street art campaigns in the mid-1990s in New York. "In San Francisco he spent some time with Barry McGee and obtained a key from him that opened the glass doors of the bus shelters. He began stealing the ads from inside the shelters, taking them back to his studio and painting his trademark skull and crossbones figures wrapped around and over the faces of the models in the ads."¹⁹ Even though the work was a variant of traditional graffiti, the defiant message was intact and was in direct response to the overwhelming and excessive corporate messages spread throughout the city.

¹⁵ Susan Phillips, *Wallbangin'* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1999), 23.

¹⁶ Bradley J. Bartolomeo, "Cement or Canvas: Aerosol Art & The Changing Face of Graffiti in the 21st Century," accessed September 7, 2012, <http://graffiti.org/faq/graffiti-is-part-of-us.html>.

¹⁷ Waclawek, 152

¹⁸ Chris Lee, "Tag, this artist is definitely it," accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-et-kaws21-2009feb21,0,1190088.story>.

¹⁹ Aaron Rose, "Least Likely to Succeed" in *Beautiful Losers*, ed. Aaron Rose and Christian Strike, (New York, New York: Iconoclast Editions 2004), 46.

Bradley Bartolomeo asserts the intention behind graffiti very well. “I would like to suggest that graffiti, though seen as vandalism and an illegal use of public space, is rather a type of resistance that opposes the elitist control of imagery and message.”²⁰ At graffiti’s root there is a clear sense of raw vandalism, but as it evolves, it becomes a reaction to many different kinds of society’s repressions.

What I and many others would propose as the most significant feature of graffiti; graffiti inherently maintains a position that opposes the authoritative, dominant, and hierarchically structured capitalist society in which we live. Graffiti shows up when, where, and how it wants; the graffiti artist, in fact, breaks down the “walls” between the people and their environment. This is exactly what is anthropologically significant; graffiti, in its nature, is a reflection on the relationship between people and their environment. A testimony to an aspect of culture, the spontaneity with which graffiti is created gives us insight as to the people that do it; though the graffitist’s behavior is sporadic, his/her message remains the same. Graffiti artists contest the elitist control of the fate of our society’s living environment.²¹

It is graffiti’s ability to lash back that makes it so important to our society. It is not a commodified art that carries a monetary value. Graffiti’s cultural value is its unique voice, and that voice is muffled in the confining art world where monetary value is the most important aspect.

Margaret Kilgallen explains how corporations excessively utilize public space but somehow this is not questioned: “The public looks at graffiti and sees garbage and sees ugliness, and I always wonder why they don’t look at the billboards, especially around San Francisco there are millions of them everywhere, isn’t that garbage? That’s like mind garbage.”²² Graffiti writers are motivated by

²⁰ Bartolomeo, “Cement or Canvas”

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Barry McGee and Margret Killgallen Interview”

this corporate use of public space that is continuously forced upon them. “The unauthorized visual alteration of spaces in a city is a type of rebellion against the capitalist construction of space. An illegal mode of expression, which suggests on the margins of a city’s structure, signals an invasion of ‘public’ space.”²³ This endless struggle over public space is a battle that will unfortunately be won by the group with the most resources, but the persistence of graffiti writers will continue to give others a voice that cannot be ignored.

There is an ongoing competition between graffitists and advertisers with seemingly unlimited budget. “It has to do with money you know and who has access to space. And when I feel like the access to space is cut off for like the general public, I feel like that makes me want to do work on the street that much more.”²⁴ This motivation to compete with advertising has become a universal one for graffiti writers and street artists alike. McCormick points out how, “it was one thing when kids ran amok in abandoned buildings and decaying cities for their own amusement, but it is quite another matter when surfaces being attacked are advertisements – and these days those are just about everywhere, which is precisely the point.”²⁵ It is an endless battle that is inevitable. The more advertisers monopolize public space, the more graffiti writers will come up with responses to speak out against what many of these inhuman capitalist companies represent.

²³ Waclawek, 254.

²⁴ “Barry McGee and Margret Killgallon Interview”

²⁵ McCormick and Schiller, 132.

Public Art as a Rebellion

Long before graffiti writers and street artists were utilizing their work as a public voice in response to advertising, there were artists that found ways to use public art to rebuke and speak out against the elitist attitudes of museums and galleries. While these artists were paid to make art as distinguished from graffiti, the purpose of their work relates to the sentiment behind graffiti in interesting ways. Joyce Kozloff moved her work outside to purposefully get out of the gallery. Barbara Kruger, who incidentally has a following in the graffiti and street art subcultures, made art in response to commercialism and consumerism. In the 1970s Joyce Kozloff and Barbara Kruger found ways to employ public work as a successful means of speaking to a new fresh audience. These two women expressed their opinions in two very different ways, Kruger with a more direct visual critique of social, cultural and women's issues, Kozloff with a more subtle approach to her critical stance towards the art establishment. Kozloff was working with patterns and decoration in the 1970s and was heavily influenced by Moroccan and Islamic art. Her work was not always well received at a time when the art world was transitioning out of minimalism. After showing with the pattern & decoration movement throughout the 1970s in museum and gallery settings, Kozloff began to focus on creating public murals. She started her first in public work in 1979 and completed fourteen public commissions through 1997.²⁶ Kozloff explains that she feels herself and other women artists have a responsibility to extend art into the real world.²⁷ This is an effective way to challenge the authority of the art world. By simply moving her work into the

²⁶ Carlene Meeker, "Joyce Kozloff," accessed August 22, 2012, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kozloff-joyce>.

²⁷ Ibid.

public realm, she was able to escape the restrictions and expectations of a gallery or a museum. While her public art continued to utilize non-western patterns and “low art” materials like ceramic and fabrics, she was able to remove her work from the commercial art world and make an impact through the theories and ideals that were important to her.

Contemporary artist Barbara Kruger began making work in the 1970s and 1980s that was critical of consumer culture as well as the art establishment. Her work utilizes text and some of the successful advertising practices employed by big business to convey her messages that challenge the very consumerism that these businesses are marketing. Like Kozloff, she also appropriates public space for much of her work to connect with viewers outside of the art establishment. One of Kruger’s most successful pieces is a simple red box with white text that reads “I shop therefore I am.” Her use of pronouns and what she describes as “direct address” allow her to further her connection to the viewer.²⁸ The language is simple and says no more than is needed. She turns the cliché against its own imperative to make the connection.²⁹ This method is authoritative and booming. Kruger’s ability to connect with the viewer has been emulated by contemporary street artists and ironically by many clothing and retail companies to convey their own messages.

This use specifically of “I” and “You” in Kruger’s work personally incorporates the spectator and as Craig Owens articulates, “[the pronoun] gives the viewers personal application of the pronouncement a body, weight or gravity.”³⁰

²⁸ Hal Foster, “Seriously Playful,” in *Barbara Kruger*, ed. Alexander Alberro, (New York: Rizzoli Int., 2010), 18.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Craig Owens, *The Medusa Effect, or The Specular Ruse*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 198.

But this is a permanent concept and the perspective of the viewer is unchanging. Alexander Alberro describes how “In each case the subject is constitutive in that the interpretation or particular decoding is not inherent in the artwork – artists or art critics will interpret it differently again; but at the same time the subject is constituted by the artwork, in that, according to the interpretation, she is to a lesser or greater extent transformed by it.”³¹ The genius in Kruger’s message is how it communicates to an array of viewers on many different levels. Owens describes how “[it] oscillates perpetually between the personal and the impersonal,”³² leaving the connection available to a viewer with or without a personal association with the message. This unique ability to connect with her viewers both in the gallery and in the public realm has made a lasting impact on the following generation of street artists and graffiti writers alike.

Art has been used as a way to respond to social inequities for centuries, from Parisian Impressionists challenging the Academy in the nineteenth century to Dadaists and Surrealists speaking out against political restraints in the early twentieth century. What makes graffiti so unique is its ability to critique corporations and political policies in the public realm illegally. This connection to art’s history is undeniable, but it is graffiti’s vandal nature that separates it from these artistic predecessors. It is able to act as a form of expression that has never had a comparable role in society. As corporations and businesses continue to expand their public marketing campaigns, graffitists will continue to utilize this unrivaled form of expression.

³¹ Alexander Alberro, “Picturing Relations: Images, Text, and Social Engagement” in *Barbara Kruger* ed. Alexander Alberro, (New York: Rizzoli Int., 2010), 200.

³² Owens, *The Medusa Effect*, 192.

The All Important Tag

The hierarchy of types of graffiti was previously described as a throw-up goes over a tag, and a piece goes over a throw-up. This leaves the simple tag as the least respected type of graffiti in this system. But while the tag is vulnerable to being written over by larger more elaborate work, its ability to be placed quickly in highly visible locations (see Fig. 4) makes this type of graffiti extremely important. The tag's ability to be disseminated quickly allows it to be the most effective means of causing large amounts of damage in a short amount of time.



Figure 4. Tags on a Portland, Oregon bridge 2008. Photo by the author.

Nancy McDonald describes two different perspectives on a tag: “What may look like evidence of scrawling chaos in its final form on the wall actually belies a

deep-rooted sense of order and discipline.”³³ The writer’s main goal is to be noticed. This is done through systematic, repeated acts of vandalism. Graffiti writers would never be recognized if they did not put their tags in high profile, highly visible places. While the graffitists may be concerned with the aesthetic result of their work, the main goal is to express themselves through a medium that can gain the most visibility possible.

Tags are scribbled and scribed on everything from phone booths to train bridges to freeway overpasses. Slej describes the importance of a tag over some of the more elaborate types of graffiti:

In graffiti you have guys who just do walls and you got guys who just do trains and to me that just doesn’t cut it. But for me I get off just as much on just doing ally way silver pen bombing, hitting stand pipes, hitting shit that people may not even see for years, hitting shit that there’s a chance the only person that might see it is a bum taking a piss in an alleyway, [who] might look over and think, “what the fuck is that?” But that to me that’s just as important as going to a wall setting down and doing a full production and spending a full day doing it. To me that doesn’t mean any more than catching a pen tag on a parking meter.³⁴

The art world and people that have begun to see value in graffiti tend focus on large, colorful, detailed work and disregard this part of the practice that is more basic and crude.

Some writers believe that once a certain level of respect is gained that the writer’s status can never be taken away. When graffitists begin to focus on large-scale commissions or making legal work that becomes successful due to their notoriety, they may do less and less work in the streets. But going back to the New York roots, Castleman explains, “In order to maintain a reputation in the

³³ Nancy McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2002) 75.

³⁴ “Slej Interview”

graffiti world, a writer must manage to get up continually.”³⁵ Some of the most dedicated writers argue that unless you continue to put in work on the streets, including tags and throw-ups in illegal places, you are not worthy of recognition.³⁶ Not only is the development of this basic function important, but without continuing the practice of getting illegal tags up on the streets, a writer’s credibility will eventually be lost.³⁷ No matter how a graffiti writer’s career progresses, without continuing to maintain new illegal tags their reputation within the graffiti community will eventually diminish.

Class Struggle

Another aspect of graffiti is its ability to engage as an active participant in class struggle. While today graffiti is made by people from every socioeconomic background, the defiance of the upper echelons that control advertising and government remains intact. For writers that have any sort of longevity in the subculture, graffiti becomes an anti-authoritarian lifestyle that extends past painting and writing. Writers do not only risk their freedom in the act of making the work. Most start by stealing the paint they use to tag with.

In a conversation with Jesse Small he describes how this is all a part of the class struggle that graffiti writers intend to engage in “Anyone who buys paint to do graffiti with is a toy³⁸ in my book. We stole every can, because we had no money. If you can afford to buy paint, you don’t understand the class struggle.”³⁹

³⁵ Craig Castleman, *Getting Up*, (New York: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1982), 21.

³⁶ Geso, pers. comm.

³⁷ Graffradio.com, “Tribute to Oil,” accessed March 24, 2012, <http://grafradio.com/?p=485>.

³⁸ An inexperienced and unrespected writer.

³⁹ Jesse Small, e-mail message to the author, July 13, 2009.

This just adds to the already daunting amount of risk that goes into writing and painting enough to make a name for oneself. The graffiti subculture becomes a lifestyle for its members. Dedicated graffiti writers tend to avoid assimilation into the society to which their work is a reaction. This includes not only stealing paint, but most other things that they might need including clothes, food, beer, sellable items, etc.⁴⁰ Presently one of the largest New York graffiti crews called IRAK blatantly expresses their desire to steal with “I” simply being the pronoun and “RAK” being slang for stealing,⁴¹ directly expressing their group interest in stealing. This is just an extension of this act of getting over. To purchase these items would be a form of acculturation into the system. Not every one of these criminal acts is required of every writer, but many do their best to avoid assimilation if possible. In many ways this lifestyle reflects the same form of defiant expression that the graffiti itself does.

Without this form of communication, some people would inevitably find ways to express discontentment with their environment that could go beyond the mildly criminal and become violent. Los Angeles writer Power talks about how graffiti kept many kids out of trouble. “There is a huge part of it, especially in L.A. were its really positive because a lot of the kids without this kind of graffiti would have gotten into gangster shit.”⁴² Even with its defiant nature, graffiti had a hugely positive effect on many people. There are aspects of community that kept many kids out of gangs that would have eventually led them into violence and drugs. Although graffiti remains a criminal act, in almost every case it is

⁴⁰ Geso, pers. comm.

⁴¹ “Imfamy,” Directed by Doug Pray, (Los Angeles: Image Entertainment, 2005).

⁴² “Power Interview”

reversible and while its intent is clearly subversive, it is a hugely important form of non-violent resistance and expression.

Graffiti As Performance

Whether painting a train in a desolate Midwestern lay up or painting a wall along the I-5 freeway in Los Angeles with headlights flashing past, graffiti is about more than just the result, it is also about the experience. Slej talks about how he and others have used many different disguises to conceal their identities while out painting and tagging, from construction workers attire to the dirtiest, tattered outfits they could create to appear homeless.⁴³ Steve “ESPO” Powers employed a successful technique in Philadelphia and NYC. Aaron Rose explains that “ESPO stands for ‘Exterior Surface Painting Outreach,’ and Powers executed all of his work on the street under the guise of neighborhood beautification.”⁴⁴ He would show up in a white jumpsuit to paint storefront roll down doors, many times in broad daylight on Sundays when the business was closed.⁴⁵ The thought and preparation that went into these paintings is amazing. But it is clear that the performance that was required to pull this off was just as important as seeing the finished product.

Psychoanalyst and art historian Ellen Handler Spitz describes the importance of this performance as a rebuttal to the common art practice:

No longer equated with any good sanctioned by society, art consists not of products made, cherished, and preserved, but of the acts of marking and making. Performances, not objects, are cathected. Ambivalent and destructive wishes underlie these thoughts, fitting wire fences to enter

⁴³ “Slej Interview”

⁴⁴ Rose, “Least Likely to Succeed” 45.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

forbidden spaces, execute paintings at night, abandon them at the whine of sirens.⁴⁶

While writers may not be concerned with how the act of writing is perceived, they are certainly aware of how it makes them feel. Many writers have described their addiction to the adrenaline rush that cannot be replaced by anything other than graffiti. “The adrenaline rush of graffiti writing — the moment of illicit pleasure that emerges from the intersection of creativity and illegality — signifies a resistance to authority, a resistance experienced as much in the pit of the stomach as in the head”⁴⁷ Writers continue hoping to keep finding this feeling. NYC subway writer Bama describes his own experience:

It was fun... that’s the beauty of the writing. You know, you sit here in the train yard at two o’clock in the morning with four other people and you’re spraying and you look down the track and you see all these brothers working on the one goal – to make the train beautiful. There’s so much peace in that. You got that creative feeling, that vibe that comes out of all of that work happening. Everyone’s looking out for the man and for the workmen and the tenseness, man, it’s just a weird feeling.⁴⁸

California writer WHY 1984 describes how “graffiti takes me to parts of the city that I wouldn’t go to otherwise. It takes me to abandoned buildings and lots and just deserted places that people don’t frequent. Experiencing these places are half of why I continue to write. I enjoy experiencing these places for the same reasons I write, they are shunned by society the same way that my graffiti is.”⁴⁹ The experience of the act becomes in many ways as important as the graffiti that is left.

⁴⁶ Ellen Handler Spitz, “An Insubstantial Pageant Faded” in *Image and Insight*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1991), 51.

⁴⁷ Jeff Ferrell, *Crimes of Style*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1993), 172.

⁴⁸ Castleman, *Getting Up*, 51.

⁴⁹ “WHY1984, pers. comm.

In Steven Powers's book *The Art of Getting Over*, he tells the story of a West Side Highway piece: "I'm in the home stretch with no hassles, when I hear a police radio squawk. I nearly fall off the ladder, but keep composed when the cop on the beat asks, 'What do you get paid for this?' I said '\$17.50 an hour, plus over time.' He nodded and walked on."⁵⁰ It is these kinds of experiences that make graffiti so addictive and separate it from every other kind painting.

Graffiti Ethics

While this chapter has focused on graffiti's transgressive nature, the practice has a fairly structured set of ethics that even the most destructive writers follow. These rules may vary depending on a number of variables that include socioeconomic background, geography, and as explained in the previous chapter, the type of graffiti the writer engages in, i.e., freight trains, walls, mass transit, etc. There are many basic rules that have survived since graffiti's early days in New York. Martha Cooper's *Subway Art* and other New York graffiti documentations helped kids from all over the country understand some of these unwritten expectations.

Powers talks about the overlap with punk culture and how the motivations are very similar, but that graffiti does have an overriding set of rules remained intact throughout its years of travel and change. "Graffiti is funny because you're so individual and you're so out there alone pioneering stuff but at the same time you are absolutely following a set standard that was created... ..the core basis of why we all do it, and the things that we believe, it seems that none of that has changed and that's different than other things, you know with music things change constantly, [with] different kinds of art things change but [with] graffiti once those

⁵⁰ Steven Powers, "The Art of Getting Over," (New York: St. Martins Press 1999), 41.

rules hit everyone followed it...”⁵¹ Generally these rules have remained unchanged after more than forty years. Depending on writers’ moral beliefs, there are some things writers do stay away from. Slej describes the things he will not write on:

...I might seem ironic, or even perhaps hypocritical, I am pretty antireligious but I will not hit religious institutions. I try to stay away from schools for the most part, regardless of what I think of the public school system. It’s personal property to me [that’s off limits] you know you don’t hit someone’s house or fucking car or something. As far as something that is just going to put someone that is just trying to make a living out, that’s fucked up. As far as like the school or charitably organizations, religious organizations, whatever, the money they spend to clean off your shit could go towards, you know, putting clothes on some homeless guy’s back or buying new text books, or you know buying a new computer for a class. So to me that’s off limits. I mostly try and focus on Government property or big business, if it’s outside of government, places that can absorb it...⁵²

This goes to show that in many cases his political beliefs outweigh the defiant nature of the practice.

Even within the subculture there are some that do not agree with or adhere to rules or codes. Sham explains his own personal set of rules: “For anybody out there who doesn’t know the rules about graffiti, let me tell you: There are none. Some people will say, ‘Well you can’t go over this and that...’ Listen, if it’s there, go over it. The more people I take out the better.”⁵³ Writers’ perspectives and practice vary greatly when it comes to ethics. It is hard to place rules on an activity that is based on anarchic roots but in more than forty years, graffiti has changed to fit different peoples’ lives and beliefs.

⁵¹ “Power interview”

⁵² “Slej Interview”

⁵³ Casiano, “Getting Up With Sham”

What is import to understand from this analysis is that graffiti exists as a subversive act of resistance. The following chapter looks into the art world's attempt to embrace graffiti and street art and how this is so difficult due to graffiti's subversive nature. Some people's issue with graffiti being made to be displayed indoors is the transformation of this defiant act into a tangible, sellable object. Once it is taken out of the public realm, where it exists as an ephemeral thought that cannot be bought or sold or owned, it becomes a completely different thing. There is a range of beliefs regarding graffiti's ability to make its way into a gallery environment, but at the end of the day it is the rejection of society's norms that gives graffiti the voice to be such a powerful form of expression.

CHAPTER 4: GRAFFITI AS SANCTIONED ART

While the transgressive nature of graffiti cannot be denied, neither can the fact that we are all getting older by the minute, including graffiti writers. As these writers and people in the subcultures related to graffiti grow up and their work matures, their paradigms begin to shift. At the same time, these individuals' backgrounds undoubtedly inform what they find to be valuable and beautiful. All of this begs the question: what happens when graffiti writers get older and start to increasingly create more legal work that inevitably clashes with those in the art establishment who are not accepting of graffiti-influenced work? This chapter examines the place of graffiti and street art in the contemporary art world and the effect recent gallery and museum exhibitions of graffiti-related work have had on its status. Further, it explores the background of the modern decision makers guiding graffiti-influenced art into the galleries and museums. Finally, this chapter would not be complete without an introduction distinguishing the difference between graffiti, street art, and graffiti-influenced art.

As discussed in great detail in the preceding chapter, graffiti is transgressive in nature. While some graffiti is aesthetically beautiful or technically artful, that is certainly not the purpose behind it being created. When the illegality of the act is removed, graffiti loses a necessary element that defines it as graffiti. While graffiti-esque work can be reproduced in a legal setting or a gallery or museum, it is simply not the same thing as graffiti that is produced illegally. All of the motivations behind the work are changed, its context is changed and that loss cannot be reconciled with the definition of graffiti. This is not to say that graffiti-inspired art in the gallery is not valuable, it is just different.

There are various hurdles that arise when attempting to bring an inherently transgressive practice into the structured gallery environment. This dichotomy is discussed in greater detail in the next section, as this conflict is most apparent when graffiti and street art are taken out of the streets and placed into the gallery or museum as graffiti-inspired art. It is in examining the inherent problems faced by the museums and galleries displaying this work that the distinction between “graffiti-inspired” art and the real thing crystallize.

Street Art

Another variation on graffiti that is important to graffiti’s evolution into the gallery setting is street art. While graffiti and street art are made illegally, the two share less common ground than one might think. Street art can incorporate text and letter forms, but is generally more dependent on figurative imagery (see Fig. 5). Many street artists use spray paint to apply some or all of their work, but it is not their exclusive medium. Stencils are often used to apply spray paint with specific designs and preprinted images are wheat pasted to various surfaces as well. London street artist D*Face explains:

If you’re carrying a can of spray paint and you’re painting a wall, then you’re not going to have any leniency at all with the police. Whereas, I’ve been stopped many a time from putting posters up, but they’ve been like, “Don’t do any more of this, throw away what you’ve got, go home,” and you’re like, “Yeah sure,” and you carry on. Generally, with posters and stickers and things like that, they’re more lenient.¹

This is not meant to imply that street artists are not subjected to many of the same treatments as graffiti writers but in many cases, depending on the choice of media, street art is seen as more of a nuisance than as vandalism. This is in part because

¹ D*Face quoted in *Street Art*, by Cedar Lewisohn, (New York: Abrams 2008), 127.



Figure 5. Unknown street artist, Los Angeles, California 2011. Photo by the author.

of its close visual relation to advertising. Graffiti is an independent statement of counter-culture, while street art whether it is defiant or playful invites attention and interaction from the general public.

One example of street art that exemplifies this purposeful interaction with the public at large is the work of French street artist JR (see Fig. 6). As a photographer JR works intimately with people in the community he is working in. He takes portraits of local citizens and blows these photos up and pastes them up in the community and allows them to be part of the interactive environment for the people that live and work there. One example of this interaction was a project he did in Israel and Palestine where he pasted portraits of Israeli and Palestinian people side by side on both sides of the dividing wall. When residents on both sides of the wall were asked if they could tell who was Israeli or Palestinian almost all of them could not tell the difference.² While traveling in India he had to come up with even more discreet ways to disseminate his work because the penalty there was so heavy.³ During the Spring Hindi festival Holi, residents throw powdered colors into the air and on one another.⁴ So to disseminate his work discreetly, JR printed his portraits in white adhesive on white paper. The newly installed works appeared to be blank white sheets, but once the festivals began, the powdered colors adhered to the portraits making them appear in a multi-colored brilliance. Here the artist is being playful while engaging the public in a more important discourse.

² JR, "JR's TED Prize wish: Use art to turn the world inside out," accessed September 30, 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/jr_s_ted_prize_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.



Figure 6. JR, Downtown Los Angeles 2011. Photo by the author.

Another, more defiant example of this type of work is Bristol, England based street artist Banksy. This artist usually uses stencils to spray paint his politically critical images, but has made sculptures, installed his own paintings in major museums, and even made counterfeit money as a prank that never came to fruition. Some of Banksy's most important works are from 2005 when he made a handful of illegal pieces on Israel's West Bank barrier. The work was critical of the wall, with some of the pieces depicting children dreaming of an imaginary

paradise on the other side of the wall. Another showed a child kneeling at the base of the wall finishing a painting of an imaginary ladder leading to the top of the wall above him. These playful images subtly critiqued the injustice of the wall and received international attention. Since 2005 Banksy has become the most famous street artists in the world. His work has sold for as much as \$1.8 million dollars in a 2008 contemporary art auction,⁵ and in 2011 he was nominated for an Academy Award for his 2010 documentary “Exit Through the Gift Shop.”⁶ If these street artists’ works had been made legally, instead of done in a covert guerrilla style, it would lose its merit. At the same time that their work is made to strengthen culture; if it was done with permission it would not have the same effectiveness.

With the growth and assimilation of graffiti influence into pop and consumer culture, and the acceptance of graffiti-inspired work as an art form, the distinction between graffiti, street art and graffiti-inspired art is of paramount importance. Whatever category a certain work falls under, there is no doubt that graffiti has inspired street art and the graffiti-influenced work that is now being exhibited in galleries and museums.

Bringing the Outside In

In recent years the art world has taken a great interest in graffiti and street art, but this new appreciation was not the art world’s first foray into this realm. As graffiti continued to grow into the late 1970s, many New Yorkers felt that it added

⁵ Lowpro, “Viewpoints: Top 25 Most Expensive Banksy Works Ever,” accessed September 22, 2012, <http://arrestedmotion.com/2011/09/banksy-top-25-most-expensive-works-ever/>.

⁶ Los Angeles Times, “Banksy Scores Oscar Nomination for ‘Exit Through the Gift Shop,’” accessed September 22, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/01/banksy-scores-oscar-nomination-for-exit-through-the-gift-shop.html>.

color and vibrancy to the drab urban landscape of the city. Many graffiti writers began receive invitations to show in Lower East Side galleries with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring who were in the early stages of their careers. For a short time graffiti writers were met with open arms from dealers and collectors that saw an opportunity, but the hype did not last long. MTA President David Gunn began an anti-graffiti campaign that effectively eradicated graffiti from the NYC subways.⁷ As a result the art world's interest in this novelty art form waned as well.

In contrast to this early surge of attraction to graffiti, today's wave of interest has grown much larger and stronger than during the 1980s New York scene. For example, graffiti has found its way into pop and mainstream culture through music videos and corporate marketing in every medium imaginable. Volkswagen, Coca-Cola, HBO and numerous other large companies have hired graffiti writers to create advertising with graffiti influence for the purpose of connecting with youth culture.⁸ Also, the graffiti-influenced art trade is no longer limited to a few galleries in the Lower East Side. Graffiti inspired art is now marketed in various ways including being sold at contemporary art auctions. In fact, some of the most sought after items at recent contemporary art auctions were made by active and inactive graffiti writers and street artists alike. This kind of broad exposure and popularity in the art world would seem to support the position that graffiti is no longer a passing fad, nor is it a nouveau art form as it has a long history that reaches back into the 1980s New York art scene.

⁷ Cole T. Only, *Steel Wheels 1986 – 1997* (New York City: Steel Wheels Press, 2010), 29.

⁸ RRock Enterprises, "Client List," accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.rrockenterprises.com/clients/>.

Key Promoters

One indicator of graffiti's resurging popularity is its recent exposure in galleries and museums. As indicated above, in its infancy, graffiti-inspired work had exposure in the 1980s New York City art scene. As graffiti has grown, its exposure in various galleries and museums is indicative of the power that graffiti-inspired work and street art now hold as a genre. One key to graffiti-inspired art taking its place in contemporary art could be a changing of the guard. As those who grew up in the subcultures related to graffiti transition to gallery leadership positions and more established careers, their proclivities play a major role in what is accepted as art. For example, some of the key organizers of many of these graffiti-related exhibitions are from within the subculture, at least by generational relation. Even someone who did not grow up in the subculture like Jeffery Deitch who is the present director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) has roots in promoting artists who began in the streets before making their way indoors. As such, the background of the people now pushing graffiti-inspired art to the foreground of the art world is of obvious importance and informs the possible impetus behind this thrust. There are many people that have played an important role in bridging the gap between the streets and the gallery. While all of these people are deserving of mention, I have focused on a few individuals I feel are personally relevant and exemplify the transition from growing up in the graffiti culture and now contributing to the art world.

Long before graffiti and street art were receiving attention in the mainstream, Aaron Rose was bringing some of the most important graffiti and street artists into his gallery. From very early on he understood the importance of what was happening in the streets. Rose opened Alleged Gallery in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1992, showing work by young artists involved with

punk and hardcore music, skateboarding, graffiti and other underground subcultures.⁹ One of the most unique things about this gallery was that Rose was a peer of most of the artists installing and displaying their work. Rose describes wanting a place to show the art that he and his friends were making at the time, never imagining it would turn into a ten year venture.¹⁰ Rose describes the space being referred to as, “that skateboard gallery” and he explains how “openings were never wine and cheese events. Forty-ounce bottles of beer in brown paper bags were more *de rigueur* in our scene.”¹¹ It was a place for the underground to share their creations with the world.

This endeavor led to a traveling exhibition Rose organized titled “Beautiful Losers.” The show opened in March 2004 at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio and from there traveled to California, Florida, and Maryland. From 2006 to 2008 the exhibition saw Italy, France, Japan and finally Mexico.¹² This was an enormous breakthrough not only for many of the artists involved with the project but for this genre of outsider art as a whole. This was one of the first instances in which artists that had come from influences rooted in counter culture movements where for the first time graffiti, punk and skateboarding were given a stage in a contemporary art museum.

Aaron Rose and Christian Strike published an extensive catalog of the work, artists, and essays included in the exhibition titled *Beautiful Losers*. This book is one of the first large compilations of art historical writing that relates to

⁹ Allegedpress.com, “About,” accessed August 19, 2012, <http://www.allegedpress.com/about.html>.

¹⁰ Aaron Rose, “Least Likely to Succeed” in *Beautiful Losers*, ed. Aaron Rose and Christian Strike, (New York, New York: Iconoclast Editions 2004), 36.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Rose, *Beautiful Losers*, 271.

graffiti and some of the other subversive cultures that influenced the practice. Rose and co-director Joshua Leonard also produced a documentary film of the same name, *Beautiful Losers*. This documentary interviewed and spotlighted many of the artists involved with the exhibition. During the long life of this show, Rose has played an amazing role as a proponent of outsider art. His success comes partly from his personal connection to his network of friends that formed the participating cast of this enormously influential venture.

Roger Gastman has also been an influential figure in bringing graffiti into the mainstream spotlight. Gastman wrote graffiti himself in Maryland as a teenager.¹³ Before his twentieth birthday he owned a graffiti supply business and had started the graffiti magazine *While You Were Sleeping*.¹⁴ He went on to co-publish *Swindle* magazine with street artist Shepard Fairey, multiple other book about graffiti, and eventually establish a boutique media business that serves as a liaison between graffiti culture and corporations seeking graffiti-influenced marketing.

On the West Coast and in other parts of the country, galleries dedicated to graffiti and street art began to spring up by the turn of the century. In 1999 Matt Revelli founded Upper Playground with an accompanying gallery, Fifty24SF. Upper Playground is a clothing retailer that commissions designs from artists as a way to make art accessible to youth and people that may not have the means to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on paintings or sculptures. Some of the designers represented by Upper Playground are strictly graffiti writers. Other than

¹³ RRock Enterprises, "About," accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.rrockenterprises.com/rogergastman/>.

¹⁴ Seffie Nelson, "Tag He's It," accessed August 24, 2012, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/11/tag-hes-it/>.

buying a t-shirt with their design, the only way to interact with work done by these writers is to encounter it on the street. Matt Revelli's success at this business has developed into very influential relationships and positions such as his post as the Senior Editor for the art publication *Juxtapoz Magazine*, founded by artist Robert Williams, publisher Fausto Vitello, Craig Stecyk, and Greg Escalante.¹⁵ This publication began with the goal of spotlighting alternative art genres such as hot rod, comic book, graffiti, pop surrealism and street art. Since its inception it has grown through its keen sense of contemporary art outside of the typical art establishment. "It boasts the highest circulation of any U.S. art magazine, beating out more established counterparts like *Art News*, *Art in America*, and *ArtForum* for that distinction."¹⁶ Between Upper Playground and his role as editor at *Juxtapoz*, Revelli has played a crucial role in solidifying not only graffiti-related art, but many other types of outsider arts' place in the contemporary art world.

New York dealer and gallery owner Jeffery Deitch forged relationships with a number of artists either connected to or directly involved with graffiti in the 1980s.¹⁷ He reported on the famed "Times Square Show" that exposed many New York critics and dealers to graffiti-related art for *Art in America* in 1980.¹⁸ In the 1980s and early 1990s he dealt and advised on modern and contemporary art and forged relationships that would lead him to open Deitch Projects in Soho in 1996. This gallery exhibited contemporary artists from various backgrounds until 2010. In the 15 years it was in operation, the gallery claims to have held 250 projects and

¹⁵ Greg Beato, "Art for the Masses," accessed August 19, 2012, <http://reason.com/archives/2009/05/26/art-for-the-masses>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jeffery Deitch, *Art in the Streets*, (New York: Skira Rizzoli Inc.), 314.

¹⁸ Ibid.

public events.¹⁹ Deitch left this venture to take the director position at the Los Angeles MoCA in 2010. His tenure at this new public institution has been eventful to say the least. Nowhere is the changing of the guard more apparent than with Deitch and his directorship of the MoCA. Since Deitch took this position in late 2010, five board members have resigned, as well as the chief curator who was forced into resignation.²⁰ This has been in direct response to Deitch's leadership and his focus on parts of emerging contemporary art that are not easily accepted.

These individuals have forged ahead unabashedly into a world that wanted nothing to do with what they represented. While it is important to point out that graffiti-inspired work is far from the transgressive, illegal graffiti described previously, it is apparent that graffiti-influenced art that originally evolved from a criminal base is no longer a passing fad. As an example of this progression one only has to look at the success of recent exhibitions, despite negative reactions from certain art critics.

Museum Exhibits

In 2008, the Tate Modern in London hosted one of the first museum shows dedicated to street art. The show included Blu from Bologna, Italy; the artist collective Faile from New York, USA; JR from Paris, France; Nunca and Os Gemeos, both from São Paulo, Brazil and Sixeart from Barcelona, Spain.²¹ The exhibition was curated by Cedar Lewisohn and was generally well received. Although all of these artists were in some way influenced by graffiti, none of the

¹⁹ Deitch.com, "Projects," accessed August 15, 2012, <http://deitch.com/gallery/about.html>.

²⁰ Mike Boehm, "MOCA Board Exits Pile Up," accessed August 21, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/13/entertainment/la-et-cm-moca-board-20120713>.

²¹ Tate.org, "Tate Modern Exhibitions," accessed August 24, 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/street-art>.

work in the exhibition directly resembled traditional graffiti. The street art variant this show displayed has been better received than graffiti, especially by the art establishment.

Lewisohn published an important text in conjunction with this exhibition titled *Street Art*, in which he makes an important distinction between work in the street and what is brought into the museum:

Since museums are often funded by the government, we have to consider them as voices of the state. More than ever before, they can be seen as part of the political apparatus – as tools of regeneration, educational vehicles and arbitrators of taste. Art in the street is the exact opposite of this, and offers a far more direct viewing experience, but is no less valid.²²

He also points out the variable that ultimately separates graffiti from all contemporary art practice. “The museum viewing experience is geared toward a fetishism of the object in order to gain some deeper understanding.”²³ It is graffiti’s ephemeral qualities that separate it from traditional art practices and make it so difficult to successfully display in a museum setting. In response to an anonymous New York graffiti writers manifesto, Ellen Handler Spitz explains that he objects to, “its removal from the original context of the street and station yard and its cooptation by the media, he rages especially against the attention it has provoked in cultural circles – particularly in the established art world which, he implies, radically misunderstands it – having appropriated its aesthetics without its politics.”²⁴ This is an important distinction. Lewisohn seems to be one of the few

²² Lewisohn, *Street Art*, 127.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ellen Handler Spitz, “An Insubstantial Pageant Faded” in *Image and Insight*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1991), 39.

involved with graffiti and street art's recognition at the museum level who articulates a good understanding of both sides.

In 2010 the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego had an exhibition titled *Viva La Revolution: A Dialogue With the Urban Landscape*. While the show displayed work inside of the museum, guest curator Pedro Alonzo secured outdoor venues so that the artists could also display their work in the public atmosphere as it was intended. This is about as close as graffiti-inspired art and graffiti get to touching, but again the convergence of the two never actually happened. For this reason, the outdoor work was distinguished from graffiti by the public and was therefore received positively. Alonzo does reinforce some of the same issues graffiti deals with in the public realm when discussing street art. "Street art – particularly art that looks like graffiti – is often harshly prosecuted, even though it frequently shares space with ads in the urban setting."²⁵ He describes the same problematic environment that I discussed in the previous chapter and reiterates how "formal access to public space is limited to those wielding economic or political power. For the rest of society, series of barriers, economic and bureaucratic, have been erected to ensure limited access, creating situations where political views and social agendas of those in power are reflected in the official use of public space."²⁶ While this show displayed work by a group of artists that does not completely represent the graffiti community, their history and influence from the subculture are apparent because the exhibition successfully addressed the issue of public space that the illegal graffiti community faces. While this show

²⁵ Pedro Alonzo, "Children of the Revolution" from *Viva La Revolution: A Dialogue With the Urban Landscape*, ed. Sherri Schottlaender, (Berkeley, California: 2010 Ginko Press), 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

was successful overall, it was partially overshadowed by anticipation of MoCA's graffiti and street art retrospective that was being prepared for the following year.

Art in the Streets

In March of 2011, under the direction of Jeffery Deitch, the MoCA in Los Angeles held the first retrospective exhibition on graffiti and street art, titled "Art in the Streets" (see Fig. 7). This exhibition provided a detailed history of more than forty years of graffiti and street art. Deitch brought on Aaron Rose and Roger Gastman to co-curate the exhibition. Having assistance with the curatorial decisions from within the subculture gave the show some increased authenticity. Even with insider knowledge of the subject, certain events during the show made it clear how difficult it is to bring graffiti into the museum or gallery. Due to the illegal nature inherent to graffiti it is impossible to display it in this setting and retain the energy it has on the streets. Leading up to the opening of "Art in the Streets," people complained that graffiti in the surrounding neighborhood was increasing and that the exhibition was to blame. MoCA's director Jeffrey Deitch directed the blame at the "young" and "anarchic," and was quoted sending a message to kids doing graffiti in the surrounding neighborhoods: "If you harness your talent you can be in a museum someday, make a contribution and a living from it."²⁷ This statement from a long-time art dealer and curator appears to reflect his appreciation for graffiti only in the form of a commodity. It is an interesting statement because the individuals exhibiting in the show would not have been there had it not been for their illegal graffiti backgrounds. Deitch has a long record of showing and promoting graffiti writers and artists that came from

²⁷ Anna Almendrala, "MOCA's 'Art In The Streets' Exhibit Invites Unwanted Graffiti," accessed April 13, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/17/mocas-art-in-the-streets-_n_850197.html#s265235.

graffiti and street art in his Soho galleries, so this response to the complaints about graffiti around the museum was surprising. This was just one of many responses or statements made by Deitch and MoCA that undermined the anarchic nature behind illegal graffiti which is the very root of the art they were promoting in this show.



Figure 7. Saber and Risk, “Art in the Streets” 2011. Photo by the author.

The next decision by the museum that exposed the difference between graffiti-inspired art and graffiti was an incident with the removal of a mural by Italian street artist Blu. MoCA commissioned Blu to paint a mural for the show. Four months prior the opening in December 2010, Blu spent six days working on

the piece.²⁸ His mural had an anti-war theme and depicted wooden coffins covered with dollar bills. Deitch, who had been out of town during the bulk of the work, returned to Los Angeles and decided the mural was too controversial and that the artist could finish the piece but it would be painted over before the opening of the exhibition.²⁹ Interestingly, this mural was representational of the political rhetoric that Blu typically presented in his illegal work. One of the reasons MoCA cited for the decision to paint over the mural was because the wall faces a veterans' hospital and the Go For Broke monument that commemorates Japanese-American soldiers who fought in the Pacific during World War II.³⁰ However, the Veterans Hospital and the Go For Broke Foundation had apparently not made any formal complaints about the mural to the museum.³¹ On the one hand, MoCA had every right to paint over the mural. It had after all commissioned the work, so it was the MoCA's "curatorial decision" to make.³² At the same time, this kind of censorship is diametrically opposed to the principles of graffiti and street art where the graffiti writers' message is unfiltered. Los Angeles street artist Shepard Fairey was one of the few artists exhibiting in the MoCA show to speak out in defense of Deitch's decision:

A museum is a different context with different concerns. It would be tragic for the breakthrough of a street art/graffiti show at a respected institution like

²⁸ Hrag Varington, "More Answers in MOCA Mural Censorship," accessed August 15, 2012, <http://hyperallergic.com/15072/more-answers-moca-mural/>.

²⁹ Artinfo.com, "Whitewash at MoCA: Jeffrey Deitch Censors Blu's Political Street Art Mural," accessed January 21, 2011, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/36568/whitewash-at-moca-jeffrey-deitch-censors-blus-political-street-art-mural/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Blu, "Let's Just Use the Right Words," accessed July 20, 2012, <http://blublu.org/sito/blog/?p=1040>.

MoCA to be sabotaged by public outcry over perceived antagonism or insensitivity in Blu's mural... Street art or graffiti purists are welcome to pursue their art on the streets as they always have without censorship. I think that though MoCA wants to honor the cultural impact of the graffiti/street art movement, it only exists in its purist form in the streets from which it arose.³³

Fairey clearly articulates the problem of bringing this type of work into the museum. The obvious issue lies in the fact that curatorial discretion disempowers the most important aspect of graffiti and street art, which is its ability to allow these writers to express themselves freely. Here the message of MoCA is clear, graffiti-inspired art is an accepted genre. Real, illegal, grimy, made for the streets graffiti is not.

Another incident just a week prior to the opening was New York graffiti writer Katsu's uninvited addition to the show.³⁴ Katsu used a fire extinguisher filled with black paint to write his name about thirty feet high on a wall visible from the nearest main street that also faces the entrance to the museum. Katsu was not a participant in the MoCA show and the graffiti he placed on the building was illegal and uncommissioned. With the museum's established proficiency in painting over commissioned work, it was no surprise the Katsu tag was painted over by the next morning. Twin brothers, Os Gemeos, a Brazilian pair participating in the MoCA show, who painted graffiti for many years were supposed to do an installation in the very place that Katsu's tag was buffed (painted over). As a result of Os Gemeos graffiti background and adherence to the graffiti code of ethics, the pair refused to paint their scheduled mural on the wall

³³ Nicolas Lampert, Shepard Fairey quoted in "The Problem With Taking 'Art in the Streets' Into the Museum," accessed August 15, 2012, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/36721/the-problem-with-taking-art-in-the-streets-into-the-museum/?page=2>.

³⁴ Martha Cooper, "How Katsu, Blade, Rime and Os Gemeos Rocked MOCA," accessed March 4, 2012, http://www.12ozprophet.com/index.php/martha_cooper/entry/how_katsu_blade_and_os_gemeos_rocked_moca.

Katsu had hit.³⁵ The twins were following an old graffiti rule that you do not write over another graffiti writer's work (or in this case, over where a writer had put their work) if you have respect for them. While it is obvious that the museum would not leave the tag in place when they had plans for the wall in question, the incident still shows that the museum had no interest in graffiti as it exists in its illegal form. It was only interested in its commissioned work that would bring in paying visitors and new membership dues.

One of the most important aspects of the exhibition involved the reactions and press the show generated. Some journalists were clearly upset that the museum could even imply that graffiti has any value. *New York Post* writer Rich Lowry reacted almost belligerently, titling his article "Glorifying A Blight."³⁶ He scolds and berates the museum for "glorifying petty criminality and an urban blight practically synonymous with disorder and mayhem."³⁷ The tone of his article is irrationally angry and he is clearly upset that the museum would give any credence to graffiti. To some degree he is correct, for popularizing graffiti-inspired art the museum gives credit to the heritage of graffiti itself, thereby unintentionally encouraging yet to be discovered graffiti writers and street artists. It would be interesting to know how Deitch and MoCA expect to close the door behind this exhibit. In other words, where is the line drawn between those who made enough illegal work for years to be deemed worthy of the show, and the illegal work that is now being made?

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rich Lowry, "Glorifying A Blight," Accessed May 9, 2011, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/glorifying_blight_JFeudR6Lx1Kf6wlPvYnBO.

³⁷ Ibid.

Lowry cites Heather Mac Donald who had recently written a review of the show and a lengthy critique of MoCA's philosophies for choosing to curate this show. Mac Donald claims that "graffiti culture celebrates routine acts of theft and intersects with street gangs. It involves a lifestyle (late-night forays to break the law) and brings consequences (criminal records) that are destructive to young lives."³⁸ It is impossible to argue that there are not people who end up with criminal records from graffiti, but in the previous chapter Los Angeles graffiti writer Power explained how graffiti actually helped keep kids out of gangs and prison. Many people do not realize there is a large distinction between gang graffiti and the anarchic graffiti that is discussed here. Mac Donald, Lowry and many other critiques of the MoCA show make generalizations about graffiti and relate it directly to gangs and violence. There are exceptions in some regions that do have overlap between gang and non-gang graffiti, but generally speaking, gang graffiti is intended to mark specific territory and "the classic New York graffiti writers were all about crossing boundaries."³⁹ Graffiti that stemmed from New York is anarchic and is altogether different than graffiti made for gang purposes.

The individuals organizing a show of this scale have to appreciate graffiti on some level, no matter where their intentions lie. But this regard for graffiti will possibly never be shared by conservative minds such as Mac Donald and Lowry and many others. As Ben Davis points out, "The endless graffiti-as-art versus graffiti-as-vandalism debate is just a displaced version of the fundamental question raised by the tumultuous pluralism of contemporary aesthetics: 'what is art?'"⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ben Davis, "Under "Art in the Streets," the Beach!: The Real History Behind MOCA's Contentious Blockbuster," accessed August 15, 2012, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/37614/under-art-in-the-streets-the-beach-the-real-history-behind-mocas-contentious-blockbuster/?page=2>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

As long as graffiti is illegal, there will be people who will not accept its presence and conversely, if graffiti ever became legal it would lose its ability to effectively express its intended rebellion. This illegal root of graffiti served as an easy target to discredit the show.

What surprised many people in the Los Angeles art community was how successful the show turned out to be. “Art In the Streets” broke attendance records, welcoming 201,352 visitors from April 17, 2011 to August 8, 2011.⁴¹ Again critics found a way to discount even these statistics. “The museum said its previous top-attended exhibitions were the 2002 Andy Warhol retrospective with 195,000 visitors, and the 2007 Takashi Murakami show with 149,323 visitors. But the comparison between shows can be misleading since ‘Art in the Streets’ ran for more weeks than the Warhol show — about 16 weeks versus 12 weeks, respectively.”⁴² While this is not a completely unfair claim, “Art in the Streets” did also bring in 32,278 visitors in its final week, which set a museum record, so it nearly impossible to speculate what “Art in the Streets” twelve week attendance would have really been.⁴³ These numbers are a clear indication of the viewing public’s enormous acceptance of and even infatuation with graffiti and street art culture. As this acceptance grows, the disparity between the works being made in the streets and work made for these museum and gallery shows continues to increase. The acceptance of graffiti-influenced work into the art world seems to make illegal, anarchic graffiti even more despised.

⁴¹ The Huffington Post, “MOCA Los Angeles Sets Record Attendance for 'Art In The Streets',” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/10/moca-los-angeles-has-reco_n_923988.html.

⁴² QW, “‘Art in the Streets’ saw attendance of 201,352 visitors,” accessed August 19, 2012, <http://www.theartdossier.com/news/art-in-the-streets-saw-attendance-of-201352-visitors/>.

⁴³ The Huffington Post, “MOCA Los Angeles Sets Record Attendance.”

Graffiti in the Mainstream

As further evidence of the growing popularity of graffiti-influenced art, recent art auction sales are interesting. Some of the artists included in “Art in the Streets” have sold work in major art auction houses.⁴⁴ Since 2008, Bonham’s Auctions has held an annual “Urban Art Auction” selling work by many street artists and graffiti writers that are both active and retired from making illegal work. There is clearly an enormous audience for this work but as its popularity grows larger, the majority of the collectors miss the passion behind it that derives from the illegal cousin of this work.

It was inevitable that the influence of graffiti would eventually lead to an effective and significant art practice. The growing interest and acceptance of graffiti-influenced art is well deserved, but it creates an even greater degree of misunderstanding than may have existed before. Now that there is a haven for this type of work, people do not understand why all graffiti writers do not aspire to find their way into the gallery. The lack of understanding of graffiti culture allows for an even greater resentment of illegal graffiti. And conversely animosity has grown between graffiti writers who strictly make illegal work and those who transition into the gallery space.

One interesting place where the convergence between graffiti and consumerism becomes confusing is in the new paint industry graffiti culture has created. During the 1990s, Montana Colors began manufacturing spray paint to market specifically to graffiti writers. They listened to graffiti writers and developed a product that uniquely met the requests of these writers in terms of the consistency of the paint and pressure of the spray. There are now dozens of

⁴⁴ Christies.com, “Auction Search Results,” accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/searchresults.aspx?entry=shepard+fairey&searchtype=p&searchFrom=header&searchSubmit=Search>.

companies that produce paint geared towards graffiti, but the reason Montana is noted here is the fact that they also opened art galleries, initially in Barcelona, Spain, but now in Madrid, Brussels, Sevilla, Montpellier, Valencia, Buenos Aires, Nottingham, Montreal, Amsterdam, São Paulo, Lisboa, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, and Curitiba.⁴⁵ Their galleries display work by established and emerging artists that have come from a graffiti influence. Their long history in this subculture allows them to show work by artists that are extremely vital to the movement.

Shepard Fairey is a prime example of someone who has been labeled a sellout by parts of the graffiti community mostly due to his mainstream success and being thrust into the limelight. In the late 1980s Shepard Fairey started, as an experiment, a sticker campaign that has grown into one of the most successful contemporary art careers to date. In his original manifesto he explains that the experiment of his campaign is dependent on peoples' perceptions of his stickers:

The OBEY sticker campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. Heidegger describes Phenomenology as “the process of letting things manifest themselves.” Phenomenology attempts to enable people to see clearly something that is right before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they are muted by abstract observation.

The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail. The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because OBEY has no

⁴⁵ Montanacolors.com, “Montana Shop & Gallery,” accessed August 24, 2012, <http://www.montanacolors.com/montanaShop.php>.

actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities.⁴⁶

Matt Revelli describes the success of this venture as a boulder that has increasingly gained momentum in the manner that was outlined in Fairey's manifesto.⁴⁷ So the question that cannot be answered by those who accuse Fairey of his selling out is, if he has achieved the goal that his manifesto put forth, then what about this success makes him a sell-out?

This hostile mentality remains in many parts of the graffiti subculture due to the fact that acknowledgment from the greater art world in turn leads to assimilation into the mainstream. Given graffiti's core refusal of mainstream culture, this is in many ways an understandable mentality. As many of these successful graffiti writers mature into contemporary art careers and slowly grow away from the rebelliousness embodied in their original work, an already enormously broad genre will continue to grow. The examples of graffiti-related exhibitions provided in this chapter show not only how utterly impossible it is to successfully bring a transgressive practice such as graffiti into the sterile gallery or museum environment, but also how graffiti's acceptance by pop culture is continually transforming the subculture. As graffiti continues to grow and expand and become included with street art and other related activities, its evolution is inevitable. No matter what comes of this popularity and acceptance, the rebellious root and anarchic origins of graffiti practice will remain important.

⁴⁶ Shepard Fairey, "Manifesto," accessed September 20, 2012, <http://www.obeygiant.com/about>.

⁴⁷ Matt Revelli, "Shepard Fairey," modified May 4, 2010, accessed September 20, 2012, <http://www.thecitrusreport.com/2010/features/shepard-fairey-a-perspective/>.

CHAPTER 5: WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR GRAFFITI

The goal of this thesis has been to illuminate some of the alternative and lesser-known influences on graffiti and, to explore the relationship between graffiti and more mainstream counterparts of graffiti culture. By shining light on parts of the history of graffiti writing and some of the subcultures within the larger label of graffiti and to create a discussion about the evolution of this practice that is now more than forty years old. During this time of growth and maturation, graffiti has become broad reaching and has merged with and been influenced by not only the subversive subcultures noted but also by many others over the years. This study of these less noticed aspects of graffiti's influence will be vital to a better academic understanding of the graffiti subculture.

It has been essential to articulate the importance of the transgressive impulse behind graffiti. As the root and foundation of this practice, graffiti writing's rebellious claim to public space has become overlooked and pushed aside as graffiti finds its way into the art establishment. The anarchic aspect of graffiti that will never fully be accepted is the sole quality that gives graffiti its uniqueness. As a pure form of rebellion, graffiti's only purpose is to make a statement in a society whose public speech is controlled and stifled. Graffiti writers disregard consequences that come with this illegal form of expression that can leave them with financial burdens, criminal records and even time in prison. The motivation to utilize this practice given all of these risks is one that is unrivalled by any other form of expression, be it art or otherwise.

As graffiti-related artwork becomes commodified within the art establishment, it has also created controversy between those accepting of the work and those that are not. Jeffery Deitch's MoCA programing, which is inclusive of

graffiti-related work, continues to evoke negative reactions. Media attention and scrutiny over Deitch's museum leadership is presently at a climax. There has been a culminating divide in the MoCA's board of trustees. Early in 2012 three board members, Kathi Cypres, Jane Nathanson and Steven F. Roth resigned from the board. Of these three, only Jane Nathanson has spoken publicly explaining her reasons for leaving, citing her disagreement with Jeffery Deitch's fundraising efforts. She said that "the reason for her resignation in March was not Deitch's exhibitions, but his inexperience as a fundraiser, and the concentration of power in too few people — especially [Eli] Broad."¹ It almost seems as if Broad's support of Deitch is part of a larger agenda that is yet to be seen.

In June 2012, Chief Curator Paul Schimmel was voted into resignation by some of the board of trustees.² This event was soon followed by the resignation of all of the MoCA's artist board members. Los Angeles artist John Baldessari was the first to announce his exit in response to Schimmel's resignation. He stated to the press, "Mr. Schimmel's departure was a tipping point, in which 'MoCA was going to become something else, whether I liked it or not.'" In an honest confession, he added: "It also makes me think that I'm a dinosaur, and Jeffrey Deitch and his ideas may be the future. But I don't like it."³ This statement is more direct than those made by most of Deitch's opponents, but it is yet to be seen if Deitch's ideas will be the future or lead to the museum's demise.

¹ Mike Boehm, "MOCA Board Exits Pile Up," accessed August 21, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/13/entertainment/la-et-cm-moca-board-20120713>.

² Mike Boehm and Jori Finkel, "Firing of MOCA curator is latest of many departures," accessed June 28, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-schimmel-firing-latest-departure20120628,0,9897.story>.

³ Randy Kennedy, "Museum's New Identity Causes More Fallout," accessed July 17, 2012, <http://travel.nytimes.com/2012/07/14/arts/design/museum-of-contemporary-art-los-angeles-is-divided.html>.

Soon after Baldessari's resignation, MoCA board members Barbara Kruger, Catherine Opie, and Ed Ruscha also resigned within a week of each other. Kruger and Opie made no mention of Schimmel's resignation but in an email to the *Los Angeles Times* just after the curator's resignation, Ruscha stated, "I quivered when I heard the news. It was an involuntary reflex... Paul was a flashlight in the dark and now we can get ready for less sunshine."⁴ The *Los Angeles Times* helped to paint a dividing line between Deitch and Schimmel that may or may not have been completely accurate. "Schimmel's ouster has been widely perceived as consolidating the MoCA board's support for a style of exhibition that is Deitch's signature — a populist approach that examines the intersection of visual art with wider pop-cultural phenomena such as celebrity, fashion and music, and has the potential to draw larger crowds than most narrowly focused contemporary art exhibitions."⁵ This populist approach has proven to be excellent programming for attendance and revenue, but has clearly been a reason for the divide in the MoCA's board. Many feel that Schimmel's more academic based programming was the right direction for the museum, but the board members present when these decisions were made supported Deitch.

In the midst of the MoCA's board crisis, *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith also formed a critical opinion of Deitch soon after the *Los Angeles Times* published their own: "His [Jeffery Deitch's] 2011 'Art in the Streets' exhibition, although better received by critics and very well-attended, didn't help establish a serious tone. And it included several artists whom Mr. Deitch had represented as

⁴ Mike Boehm and Jori Finkel, "MOCA: Ed Ruscha joins other artists in resigning from board," accessed July 17, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-moca-20120717,0,6439847.story>.

⁵ Ibid.

an art dealer — at-best a sloppy-looking overlap between his former role as a dealer and his current one as a custodian of a public institution.”⁶ One could argue that Deitch was using his position to propel some of the already successful artists represented by him previously, to gain personally from their growth as a result of this show.

Frustrated board members Lenore S. Greenberg, Betye Burton, Audrey Irmas, and Frederick M. Nicholas did pinpoint dissatisfaction with Deitch’s curatorial decisions in a public letter: “The celebrity-driven program that MoCA director Jeffrey Deitch promotes is not the answer. Committed donors contribute to museums that pursue the highest quality programs under prudent financial management. MoCA needs to get back to its core mission and to the kinds of programs that made it the exemplary contemporary art museum...”⁷ Whether because of his lack of fund raising, his close ties with Eli Broad or his curatorial decisions, Deitch has rubbed many of the museum’s past supporters the wrong way.

In her analysis of New York subway graffiti, Ellen Handler Spitz makes a connection to a 1967 manifesto by Claes Oldenburg:

Residual objects created in the course of making the performance... The performance is the main thing....

I am for an art... that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.

I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.

⁶ Roberta Smith, “A Los Angeles Museum on Life-Support,” accessed July 23, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/arts/design/hurdles-grow-at-the-museum-of-contemporary-art-los-angeles.html>.

⁷ Lenore S. Greenberg, et al., “Letters: A different MOCA,” accessed August 20, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/letters/la-le-0712-thursday-moca-20120711,0,1281959.story>.

I am for an artist who vanishes...

I am for the art of scratchings in the asphalt, daubing at the walls.

I am for an art that is put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten, like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt like a piece of shit.

At the completion of my work I'm afraid I have nothing to say at all. That is I have either thrown it away or used it up.

(Oldenburg 1967, passim)⁸

Oldenburg saw a need for change in art that nearly describes what graffiti intended specifically. While this paper distinguishes between graffiti as vandalism and graffiti as art, the key connection is Oldenburg's need for an art that does not know it is art at all: "His description of (parental) authority (i.e., the museum) and the wish for a chance to grow up without parents (i.e., without an artistic tradition)."⁹ Oldenburg felt exactly the same way about the art establishment that the New York subway graffiti writers did about their surroundings. This push for something new and fresh was the most important thing in the world to these graffiti writers.

With nearly every new art movement and philosophy there is a resistance. Impressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, Minimalism, Feminism all brought new ideas visually and philosophically and each movement found resistance from an art establishment that resistant to change. It will be interesting to see what history decides to label as a graffiti art movement in the future. My prediction is that this broad culture that is labeled as graffiti will be remembered only for tamer derivatives of graffiti, but that the root rebellion

⁸ Claes Oldenburg quoted in Ellen Handler Spitz, "An Insubstantial Pageant Faded" in *Image and Insight*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1991), 48

⁹ Handler Spitz, "An Insubstantial Pageant Faded," 48

and anarchic nature that inspired such an unrivaled form of expression will be lost to the more publicly accessible aspects of this broad thing that is now called graffiti. The fact that graffiti has continued to thrive and change to fit each new generation it encounters, shows that there is no stopping its progression. From the illegal form it exists in on the streets to the art practice it influences, graffiti is and will continue to be an undeniable part of contemporary culture.

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