

**From Graffiti to the Street Art Movement: Negotiating Art Worlds, Urban Spaces,
and Visual Culture, c. 1970 - 2008**

Anna Waclawek

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

November 2008

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ISBN: 978-0-494-63383-0
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ISBN: 978-0-494-63383-0

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ABSTRACT

From Graffiti to the Street Art Movement: Negotiating Art Worlds, Urban Spaces, and Visual Culture, c. 1970 - 2008

Anna Waclawek, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 2009

This thesis provides an analysis of the New York Style letter-based, signature graffiti subcultures as well as the contemporary international street art, or post-graffiti movement. The primary intention is to explore the function and meaning of graffiti traditions as they exist in the context of cities, art worlds, and urban visual culture. During the 1970s, the letter-based signature graffiti style exploded as a movement on New York City subway trains. By the mid-1980s graffiti subcultures were developing in numerous urban centres throughout the world. In my assessment of traditional graffiti writing from the 1970s to the 1990s, I focus on key issues that sustain this cultural form, including motivation, identity, criminality, gallery exhibitions, subcultures, and style. By reviewing the graffiti's genealogy, its formal composition, and its evolution into a complex art form practiced in cities around the world, I emphasize its function, namely as a tool for identity negotiation and visual subversion. By accessing graffiti's problematic history both as a sub and a pop culture, unpacking its difficult relationship with galleries and legality, and countering its incessant association with hip-hop, I insist upon graffiti's role as a long-standing and culturally relevant pictorial tradition.

While signature-based graffiti subcultures continue to thrive today, the second part of my thesis, shifts focus onto international street art practices. I evaluate urban painting's role as a public art, scrutinize the work of some artists as both performative

and at times site-specific, and address the contemporary debates regarding post-graffiti exhibitions and the movement's livelihood on the Internet. Through this analysis, I describe post-graffiti practices as thoroughly connected to graffiti writing, yet ideologically and visually separate. Because of the prevalent use of figuration, legibility, and frequent socio-political relevance of street art, these art practices are constituents of the urban landscape that artfully communicate with both the citizens and the material structure of a city. The overwhelming pervasiveness of these coexisting art genres confirms that urban painting is a quintessential art movement of the twenty-first century. My project explores how signature graffiti and street art contribute to the experience of the urban environment and to the history of art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To my supervisor, Dr. Johanne Sloan, I extend my deepest gratitude for your extraordinary intellectual curiosity, generous direction, and tireless encouragement. This dissertation is a direct result of our numerous and lengthy discussions – I thank you sincerely for your wisdom, original ideas, and intuitive inquiry. Dr. Cynthia Hammond, thank you for your exceptional support and sophisticated scholarship. Dr. Annie Gérin, thank you for your intellectual generosity and profound insights. Dr. Beverley Best and Dr. Kevin Dowler, your rich observations and suggestions have greatly impacted this project. To Dr. Catherine MacKenzie, thank you for your outstanding encouragement, moral support, and for being incredibly giving of your time. Finally, many thanks to the faculty and staff of the Department of Art History at Concordia University, especially Dr. Loren Lerner, Prof. Sandra Paikowsky, JoAnne Anselmi, Brenda Dionne, and Denis Longchamps.

This thesis would not have been possible without the financial support from Concordia University's Department of Art History, The Concordia Graduate Fellowship, and The Fonds Québécois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture. Moreover, I would like to extend heartfelt thanks to my friends and colleagues, especially Anja Bock, K. Gandhar Chakravarty, Danielle Evans, Sharon Murray, Nuria Carton de Grammont, and Rachel Lauzon, whose support – editorial, intellectual, or otherwise – has resulted in the timely conclusion of this dissertation. Lastly, thanks to all graffiti writers and street artists, especially those whose works and words figure in this project. For your time and input, ROADSWORTH, VEXTA, SWOON, and PEZ, I reserve a special place of gratitude.

DEDICATION

To my wonderful family: Piotr Waclawek, Grazyna Waclawek, Justyna Waclawek-Lawlor, and K. Gandhar Chakravarty.

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PREFACE

I observed a remarkable phenomenon at Concordia University's library, one that is reproduced in other university or public libraries. The graffiti books that are part of the library's catalogue are often classified as "missing" or long "overdue," and when they can be found usually suffer from absent pages or personal remarks in the margins; they are also shelved on an entirely different floor from all the other art and art history books. This combination of theft and placement reveals both graffiti's status as a captivating object of inquiry, and as an art form that is quite literally marginalized in the history of art. In the course of my doctoral research, I have dialogued with graffiti "writers,"¹ street artists, curators, gallery assistants, academics, students, and other professionals directly involved in some aspect of graffiti production, exhibition, or research. While informative, these exchanges fostered almost predictable discussions about the validity of graffiti studies.

Most surprising to me, however, have been the reactions from friends, acquaintances, and complete strangers regarding the topic of my research. No matter what the social context or city, people want to talk about illegal street art. Although the dialogue may not always be in favour of graffiti, it is consistently engaged. After four years of researching the graffiti and post-graffiti movements, I am still astounded by the fact that the obvious question, "What are you studying?" followed by my answer, "Graffiti," is met with such enthusiasm, typically leading to long conversations that broach countless graffiti-related issues. People want to converse about these art movements because they are physically accessible in our quotidian experiences of a city, yet are simultaneously mysterious,

¹ Writers are members of the graffiti subculture. Most people who practice graffiti writing refer to themselves as writers given that it describes what they do – write on walls.

exciting, and provocative. Whether graffiti is abhorred or adored, it consistently generates passionate debates, which, for the purposes of this thesis at least, proves that graffiti plays a prominent role in the cultural landscape and consciousness of a city. What that function might be, and whether graffiti should be supported or penalized, remains open for discussion; however, one thing is certain: when it comes to contemporary international art movements, the writing is on the wall.

In his closing keynote address at the graduate student conference, “Charged Circuits,” Scott Burnham, Creative Director of the 2009 Montreal Biennale, argued: “the street is a huge cultural laboratory.”² Burnham, who in 2003 established and directed “Ill Communication,” one of the largest street art biennales, expressed the value of surveying the ongoing materialization of art and culture at street level as a foreshadowing of the coming trends in major cultural institutions. A few months after Burnham’s lecture, the Tate Modern held the first major museum exhibition of street art in London.³ This occurrence signals that graffiti and its successor post-graffiti a.k.a. street art, are being recognized by mainstream art institutions as movements worthy of art world attention.⁴ A major study of these movements grounded in visual art and culture analysis, however, has yet to be published. My thesis is primarily a step towards rectifying this deficiency. To accomplish this task, I examine these movements as epoch-making art forms and constituents in urban visual culture.

² “Charged Circuits: Questioning International Exhibition Practices” was held at Concordia University March 14 & 15, 2008.

³ The exhibition, simply entitled “Street Art,” ran from May 23 until August 25, 2008, and brought together the work of six street artists: Blu, JR, Failed Sixeart, Os Gêmeos, and Nunca.

⁴ The distinction between graffiti and post-graffiti is explained in the section that follows, “Signature Graffiti Writing and Urban Painting.”

Instead of making superficial claims regarding graffiti's status as both art and crime, I assess the history of traditional graffiti writing in New York City (NYC) as well as today's international street art movement to discuss the functions and meanings of the graffiti and post-graffiti movements. In the course of my research, I worked with both outsider and insider sources. Part I, the historical section of my thesis that explores the graffiti movement from the 1970s until the 1990s, is grounded on outside sources. As this first part is primarily a literature review, I work predominantly from interviews and testimonials found in published materials. Part II, which focuses on the contemporary post-graffiti movement, centres on interviews conducted with most of my chosen artists as well as on outside source material that establishes my theoretical framework and interprets general trends in urban art culture.

In the course of my undergraduate education I majored both in Art History and Sociology. During my bachelor's degree, my interest in graffiti flourished as an overt example of how, in the most basic terms, art and the social structures intersect and indeed cannot exist without one another. The cultures of graffiti, whether grounded in traditional signature writing or in a variety of urban painting styles, are essentially interconnections between the production, diffusion, and reception of art, the self, and the social structures of a city. As such, and because these cultures are composed of a multitude of characters, they are also teeming with contradictions. Throughout this thesis I attend to a number of the challenges that make graffiti both a stimulating and a problematic object of study. For example, I investigate graffiti's dual status as an art form and a crime; the disagreement amongst scholars à propos graffiti's standing as one of the key elements of hip-hop culture; the dichotomy in the graffiti world between its subversive nature and its

relationship with pop culture and advertising; the ambiguity regarding graffiti writers' identities as equally advertised and anonymous; the discord within graffiti writing cultures concerning the production of legal work; and the incongruity with which graffiti writers aspire to defy mainstream structures but mimic them in the creation of their own systems of hierarchy. By focusing on these issues, as well as questions of fame, style, motivation, space, site, and performance, I establish a critical basis for continued graffiti and post-graffiti research in the fields of art and culture.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: FROM GRAFFITI TO POST-GRAFFITI

1.1 Signature Graffiti Writing and Urban Painting

This thesis analyzes the evolution of the New York Style letter-based, signature graffiti subcultures to the contemporary international street art movement, exploring the impact that illegal, ephemeral art has in the contexts of the cityscape, art worlds, and visual culture. By problematizing the history of a worldwide art movement that for the last forty years has flourished on the sidelines of art history, this study critically contributes both to graffiti research and the developing field of visual culture studies. Joe Austin concludes his analysis of New York subway graffiti by claiming: “writing manifests the greatest art of the late twentieth century. But that argument will have to wait for another book.”¹ The primary intention of this research is to initiate a dialogue about graffiti cultures by underlining the works’ functions and meanings for the artists, the viewers, the culture of a city, and the discipline of art history. The diverse forms of ephemeral urban art that have arisen since the mid-1990s – as a result of the pioneering work of signature graffiti writers – have, to date, evaded substantial study in an academic context. Moreover, the New York Style of graffiti writing that arose in the early 1970s, became synonymous with hip-hop culture by the 1980s, and flourished globally by the

¹ Joe Austin, Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 271.

1990s, has been analyzed mainly by anthropologists,² cultural historians,³ and sociologists,⁴ but remains largely ignored by art historians. My project helps remedy this omission by exploring how signature graffiti and street art contribute to the experience of the urban environment and to the history of art. Moreover, the purpose of my research rests in the identification and analysis of this transitional moment in the history of graffiti. This is an ideal time to reflect on the historical development of graffiti and to reassess the significance and impact of graffiti writing, precisely because there is a new kind of street art appearing within urban spaces. While I cannot predict the future course of the post-graffiti movement, my scholarship recognizes and analyzes this process of change in the urban environment.

The New York Style of writing first developed in Philadelphia during the 1960s and then exploded as a movement on NYC subway trains during the 1970s.⁵ This letter-based style of graffiti writing centres on the writer's signature and its basic formal elements include spray-painted "tags,"⁶ (fig. 1) "throw-ups,"⁷ (fig. 2) and "pieces"⁸ (fig.3). Each component, no matter how ornate, depicts the writer's pseudonym, which is sometimes adorned with images. The rendition of the stylized name is momentous as it is inextricably linked both to a writer's identity and status within the graffiti subculture. A

² See: Susan Phillips, Wallbanging: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

³ See: Ivor Miller, Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002.

⁴ See: Nancy Macdonald, The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

⁵ A number of authors, including Roger Gastman, Darin Rowland, and Ian Sattler note that Philadelphia graffiti pioneers include CORNBREAD and COOL EARL. Freight Train Graffiti. New York: Abrams, 2006, 48.

⁶ Tags refer to graffiti writers' graffiti names or signatures. Conversely, tagging (hitting or getting up) means writing one's subcultural name.

⁷ Throw-ups are larger versions of tags – most typically executed with two colours, one for the outline and one to fill-in the space inside the outline.

⁸ Pieces are large colourful paintings or murals that sometimes integrate imagery with the signature.

graffiti name consequently allows the writer to be recognized throughout a city while, on the one hand, maintaining anonymity, but on the other, gaining notoriety within the subculture. The graffiti movement is propelled by a number of subcultures that have organized themselves around the dissemination of this art form. Graffiti subcultures present graffiti writers with a supportive, albeit competitive, social network complete with rules, hierarchies, tools for identity negotiation, friendship, and the impetus to prove oneself on the graffiti scene. Stylistic and formal innovation – restructuring the traditional appearance of letters and, in a way, rewriting the alphabet – is a primary goal of any serious writer.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the New York Style developed exponentially as it spread internationally as a result of travel, graffiti-laden trains, underground magazines, movies, exhibitions, popular and hip-hop culture, and the Internet. As those who research it have discovered, “the international graffiti movement is ungraspable, hard to define, underground, multivocal and purposefully miss-understandable: these ambiguities constitute its primary aesthetic.”⁹ Post-graffiti art, commonly referred to as “neo-graffiti,” “urban painting,” or simply “street art,”¹⁰ exists as a new term in the graffiti literature to identify a renaissance of illegal, ephemeral, public art production. Unlike the easily recognizable letter-based graffiti style, the post-graffiti art movement boasts greater diversity and includes art produced as an evolution of, rebellion against, or an addition to the established signature graffiti tradition. A number of street artists began by writing graffiti and, with time, changed their practice to generate a different brand of urban

⁹ Florence Merle, The International Graffiti Movement: Mixed Metaphors and Aesthetic Disruption. Ph.D. Dissertation. New Jersey: Princeton University, 1998, 13.

¹⁰ Some authors, including Nicholas Ganz note: “a lot of artists prefer to label their work as ‘aerosol art,’ ‘post-graffiti,’ ‘neo-graffiti,’ and ‘street art’ in order to differentiate themselves.” Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, 10.

expression for ideas that moved beyond the representation of their names. Others either not satisfied with or explicitly positioned against the ethical, hierarchical, and pictorial codes of traditional graffiti resolved to produce a form of public art that stylistically distinguishes itself from signature writing. Still others, who neither started out by writing graffiti nor decided to unequivocally rebel against it, began creating street art simply through experimentation with different media and contexts of diffusion. The essence of the post-graffiti movement, thus, and indeed the reason for its appellation, derives from the culture of graffiti writing. The addition of the prefix “post,” however, suggests that while this movement distances itself from the established visual vocabulary and principles of New York Style graffiti, post-graffiti also implies a chronological progression. While the post-graffiti label invokes a historical reference, it concurrently indicates formal, material, and visual development.

The post-graffiti movement is characterized by wide-ranging stylistic, technical, and material innovations, which place less emphasis on lettering with spray-paint and more weight on fashioning varied interventions into the cultural landscape of a city. As opposed to signature graffiti, produced predominantly by male pre-teens and teenagers, post-graffiti art is typically disseminated by older males but also a great number of female artists.¹¹ Although post-graffiti artists have fostered strong communities that are founded on their artistic passion and contempt towards laws and institutional conformity, they do not constitute a veritable subculture – street artists tend to work autonomously and eschew subscribing to a group that defines itself as oppositional to mainstream cultures. Apart from a more inclusive and less organized membership, the street art

¹¹ I account for the reasons for increased female participation in Chapter Four.

movement that exists alongside the signature graffiti movement differs most observably in visual terms. In the post-graffiti era, the reliance on letters, which principally characterizes traditional graffiti, has transformed into an exploration of figuration, abstraction, and symbols. Most notably, street artists chiefly exploit more formal art techniques such as stencilling, printmaking, and painting to create largely figurative works, which range from realistic portraits to cartoonish characters. Whereas signature graffiti writers figuratively “bomb”¹² cities with their tag names representing their presence, subcultural status, and sometimes crew affiliation, post-graffiti artists are more eclectic in their method of delivering messages through their work. Although the spray-can continues to be a key tool in the dissemination of illegal street art, other media, such as oil and acrylic paint, oil-based chalk, charcoal, stickers, posters, stencils, and even mosaic tiling, are now widely employed. Unlike the subcultures that have arisen around the propagation of New York Style graffiti, post-graffiti artists use a host of techniques, media, and messages. This study tracks and analyzes the expansion of the established graffiti movement through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, to the development of urban art today.

The scholarly research on graffiti conducted by authors from a variety of disciplines together constitutes a critical base for further studies. Craig Castleman’s 1984 examination of the New York graffiti scene¹³ charts the major aspects of writing graffiti including descriptions of style, technique, and materials, as well as the politics of illegality, gangs, the art world, and transit authorities. This seminal book was followed by

¹² To bomb or bombing refers to completely covering a surface with illegal graffiti or writing prolifically.

¹³ Craig Castleman, Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982.

colourful texts such as Steven Hager's Hip Hop (1984),¹⁴ Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's Subway Art (1984),¹⁵ and Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff's Spraycan Art (1987).¹⁶ These works illustrate and describe, rather than critically analyze, graffiti and hip-hop culture. As New York Style graffiti developed in cities and countries around the world, an increasing number of scholarly publications began to surface, each focusing on a specific aspect of graffiti writing culture. Jeff Ferrell's Crimes of Style (1996)¹⁷ focuses on the graffiti scene in Denver, Colorado. The author argues that scene was constructed as a "crime of style" both by the writers themselves and by what the author calls "the aesthetics of authority,"¹⁸ which are propagated by "moral entrepreneurs"¹⁹ such as city officials. Susan Phillips's Wallbangin' (1999)²⁰ centres on the analysis of Chicano and African-American gang graffiti in Los Angeles, which she considers as a cultural form through which these groups redefine their social and political positions in society. In Taking the Train (2001),²¹ Joe Austin concentrates on how graffiti was constructed as an urban crisis by NYC officials and media to divert the citizens' attention from other possible causes for the city's socio-economic problems. In her study, The Graffiti

¹⁴ Steven Hager, Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

¹⁵ Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, Subway Art. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.

¹⁶ Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, Spraycan Art. London: Thames and Hudson, 1987.

¹⁷ Jeff Ferrell, Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality. Boston, Ma.: Northeastern University Press, 1996.

¹⁸ Ibid, 178. Ferrell defines the aesthetics of authority as follows: "As local campaigners react to graffiti and characterize it for the public, they read meanings into it which reveal more about their economic and political interests, and the aesthetic orientations which accompany them, than about the nature of graffiti itself."

¹⁹ Ibid, 115. Ferrell explains that moral entrepreneurs are: "those in the upper levels of the social structure [...] who in the process of constructing an anti-graffiti campaign, have at the same time constructed graffiti writing as crime."

²⁰ Susan Phillips, Wallbangin'.

²¹ Joe Austin, Taking the Train.

Subculture (2002),²² Nancy Macdonald analyzes the process by which graffiti writers in New York and London build, protect, and define their masculine identities through their participation in a subculture. Ivor Miller's Aerosol Kingdom (2002)²³ interprets the creation of hip-hop culture by focusing on the Afro-Caribbean and African-American traditions that young New Yorkers appropriated. Finally, Janice Rahn's Painting Without Permission (2002)²⁴ considers the work of Montreal graffiti writers as rooted in community, collaboration, and dialogue that provides youth with an alternative way of learning. The research undertaken by these anthropologists, sociologists, art educators, historians, and cultural theorists has in recent years been supplemented by an ever-growing number of non-academic publications authored by designers, photographers, and graffiti writers, such as Nicholas Ganz's Graffiti World (2004)²⁵ and Graffiti Women (2006),²⁶ Tristan Manco's Street Logos (2004)²⁷ and Graffiti Brasil (2005),²⁸ and Louis Bou's Street Art (2005).²⁹

While some of the above-mentioned authors have, to a degree, documented graffiti's early forays into gallery spaces, none have thoroughly analyzed the critical implications of this transposition, nor fully explored graffiti as an art form. In my research, I have come across two doctoral dissertations that address graffiti as a visual art

²² Nancy Macdonald, The Graffiti Subculture.

²³ Ivor Miller, Aerosol Kingdom.

²⁴ Janice Rahn, Painting Without Permission: Hip hop Graffiti Subculture. Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 2002.

²⁵ Nicholas Ganz, Graffiti World.

²⁶ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents. New York: Abrams, 2006.

²⁷ Tristan Manco, Street Logos. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2004.

²⁸ Tristan Manco, Lost Art and Caleb Neelon, Graffiti Brasil. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2005.

²⁹ Louis Bou, Street Art: The Spray Files. New York: Collins Design and Monsa Publications, 2005.

form. Both Jack Stewart's³⁰ and Louise Gauthier's³¹ theses partly examine graffiti's pictorial tradition; the foci of their studies, however, both exclude an analysis of the contemporary post-graffiti movement and neglect the relevance of graffiti as a legitimate form of public art. The fact that post-graffiti art has been largely overlooked by academics considerably affects my research goals. Although a select number of scholarly texts and a variety of coffee-table books composed almost entirely of photographs have been published on the subjects of graffiti and street art, there exists no sustained analysis that encapsulates these movements' contribution to the cityscape and to art history.

Current editions of art history survey texts, such as Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective,³² continue to omit graffiti and street art from their contemporary review of the history of art. While additions to Gardner's are systematically incorporated – most recently to include the work of contemporary performance, video, digital, and women artists – in the 2006 edition, there is no mention of graffiti in the chapter entitled “The Art of the Later Twentieth Century.”³³ Despite the fact that public and site-specific works are discussed and brief critical sub-sections such as “Challenging Cultural Icons,”³⁴ “The Authority of Signs,”³⁵ and “The Conscience of the Art World”³⁶ constitute part of the postmodernist section, the exclusion of graffiti

³⁰ Jack Stewart, Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New York City, 1970-1978. Ph.D. Dissertation. New York: New York University, 1989.

³¹ Louise Gauthier, Writing on the Run: The History and Transformation of Street Graffiti in Montreal in the 1990s. Ph.D. Dissertation. New York: New School for Social Research, 1998.

³² Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective. Twelfth Edition. Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.

³³ See Chapter 23 of Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 853.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 859.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 862.

means that students are denied an opportunity to learn about an art movement that has subsisted in major cities around the world for almost forty years.

The scope of existing graffiti scholarship is limited, especially if one is interested in understanding a visual and cultural reading of New York Style graffiti, street art's significance in a city other than as a tool for rebellious expression, or how the contextualization of graffiti in different spheres affects its meaning. Graffiti researchers have suggested that "graffiti exists as a public art outside the control of public officials, an alternative style outside the circle of corporate style and consumption,"³⁷ and even that graffiti "writers force change on an environment, but without recourse or permission,"³⁸ yet these claims have not been sufficiently analyzed in terms of their significance to art and visual culture. Assertions that graffiti proposes a type of expression that disrupts the urban grid of visual organization, and to some extent, imposes change on urban environments are imperative to my study. In the first part of my research, I revisit the most comprehensive studies on the culture of graffiti writing, synthesize the main points of discussion, and introduce a reading grounded in art history, art sociology, and subculture studies. I thus contribute a crucial perspective to the study of a movement that has in the literature been barely accepted as an art form, but has yet to be fully scrutinized as such.

Public art and visual culture theorists have at times mentioned graffiti's relationship vis-à-vis the art world as a "compelling instance" in which the "domestication of public art undermines its political energy by enhancing its aesthetic

³⁷ Ferrell, 197.

³⁸ Phillips, 23.

surface,”³⁹ but have failed to truly examine graffiti in relation to sanctioned public art or other examples of performance, ephemeral, or site-specific works. In the second part of my thesis, which focuses on the post-graffiti movement, I connect street art to ideas developed by academics concerned with public space and ephemeral art works in order to situate it within the existing discourses on cities and art in public spaces.

1.2 An Interdisciplinary Methodology

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first, entitled “The Graffiti Movement,” critically reviews anthropological and sociological graffiti scholarship and traces the movement’s history from the 1970s to the 1990s. Chapters Two, “The Foundation of the New York Style,” and Three, “The Evolution of Graffiti Art,” which together make up Part I, address key issues that have already been raised in graffiti literature, including motivation, identity, criminality, gallery exhibitions, subcultures, and style. Framed by theoretical perspectives on public space, public art, and visual culture, the second part of this thesis, “The Post-Graffiti Movement,” analyzes street art via case studies. Chapter Four, “Street Art and the City,” concentrates on fundamental questions that contribute to both an art historical reading of urban art and its impact on a city, the art world, and visual culture studies.

Art educator Janice Rahn,⁴⁰ anthropologist Susan Phillips,⁴¹ sociologist Nancy Macdonald,⁴² and cultural theorist Ivor Miller⁴³ have all focused on questions of identity

³⁹ Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently*. Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006, 88.

⁴⁰ Janice Rahn, *Painting Without Permission*.

⁴¹ Susan Phillips, *Wallbanging*.

and motivation in relation to the work of signature graffiti writers. In her personal interviews, Rahn questioned graffiti writers on their motivations to produce graffiti and concludes that because “hip-hop graffiti provides a noninstitutional structure for adolescents to learn from each other through a communication network”⁴⁴ the primary incentive to participate is linked to issues of identity and the desire to play a role in the visual structure of a city. Susan Phillips, in her research, found that writing graffiti is often an alternative to gang membership because it offers participants the possibility to form their own kind of non-violent gang or “crew.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, Phillips argues “graffiti is often adopted by those without power, to negotiate relationships with both the society from which they are disempowered and others within their own groups.”⁴⁶ Nancy Macdonald’s research adds an under-studied dimension to the scholarship by claiming that the foremost motivation for graffiti writing is to negotiate masculine identities within subcultural networks. Finally, Ivor Miller’s evaluation of the aerosol art movement as a culture of resistance identifies the aspiration of graffiti writers to “affirm their own identities and question the values of the society they were born into”⁴⁷ thus pursuing their art as a continuation of their inherited traditions. To these readings of empowerment, belonging, and masculinity, I introduce a perspective that aligns graffiti with Pop Art as a creative response to popular culture, advertising, and branding in the cityscape. By paralleling graffiti writing with Pop Art, I reveal how both movements followed similar trajectories in terms of their appropriation of popular media and advertising, their

⁴² Nancy Macdonald, The Graffiti Subculture.

⁴³ Ivor Miller, Aerosol Kingdom.

⁴⁴ Rahn, 139.

⁴⁵ Crews are groups of affiliated graffiti writers who often write together.

⁴⁶ Phillips, 20.

⁴⁷ Miller, 87.

relationship to commercial art and the commodity market, and their initial standing in the world of high art. This analysis extends the ideas of authors Joe Austin and Ivor Miller who have to a limited degree theorized graffiti writers' use of popular culture icons as well as the significance of signage in the public sphere. In his research on the paintings Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein produced in the early 1960s, Michael Lobel argues that paradoxically, because of their familiarity, these works are in fact under-theorized. Lobel thus sets out to analyze the "relation between the work of art and its reproductions, between the artists and the machine, between the terms of originality and repetition."⁴⁸ In many ways, my signature graffiti research echoes these objectives, in that I too am interested in the under-analyzed aspects of an art form that thrives in most major cities and functions simultaneously on the ideals of originality and repetition.

Sociologist Jeff Ferrell,⁴⁹ historian Joe Austin,⁵⁰ and communications scholar Craig Castleman⁵¹ approach the matter of crime as well as graffiti's standing in the art world from diverse viewpoints. While Castleman takes a non-partisan position on these issues by simply presenting opposing views, both Ferrell and Austin firmly argue that authority figures turned the movement into a scapegoat to justify urban conflict and decay. By rereading the history of NYC subway graffiti, Austin alleges that graffiti became the central metaphor for the city's social decline and rising crime rate. Austin not only reasons that both city authorities and the media together constructed graffiti as a symbol of civic disorder, but he also contends that the art world's brief fascination with graffiti, "ripped [graffiti] out of its own history as it was being reframed as 'art' during

⁴⁸ Michael Lobel, Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 2002, 1-2.

⁴⁹ Jeff Ferrell, Crimes of Style.

⁵⁰ Joe Austin, Taking the Train.

⁵¹ Craig Castleman, Getting Up.

the boom.”⁵² Jeff Ferrell, with his study of Denver Colorado’s scene, focuses on graffiti’s criminalization by city officials who consider it a nuisance that threatens the governmental power structure, the ideology of private property, and the aesthetics of public space. Moreover, Ferrell considers graffiti’s place in the art world as a form of suppression, since graffiti loses its essence and graffiti writers are deprived their anarchistic identity inside the confines of a gallery space. To address both the varying constructs of graffiti as a crime by officials and an art form by commercial gallery owners, I employ the sociology of art, especially the concepts of mediation, as developed by Nathalie Heinich⁵³ and collective production, as explained by Howard S. Becker.⁵⁴

My reading of traditional graffiti as a subculture is framed by research on deviance, masculinity, and style.⁵⁵ The idea that graffiti writers constitute a subculture is most clearly defined by Nancy Macdonald and Ivor Miller. Both authors claim that a writer’s motivation to produce graffiti is intrinsically connected to a longing for participation in a community that functions on the margins of mainstream cultures. Their ideas are supplemented by scholarship specifically centred on the primacy of style in subcultures. In the graffiti world, writers, whose primary audience is composed of other writers, chiefly write for an incestuous audience – it is within the culture itself that their work is evaluated and respect is gained.⁵⁶ At their core, subcultures differ from mainstream cultures because of members’ desire to distinguish themselves as constituents

⁵² Austin, 196. The author is referring to the 1980s art boom.

⁵³ Nathalie Heinich, *La sociologie de l’art*. Paris: Editions La Découverte, Repère n. 328, 2001.

⁵⁴ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982.

⁵⁵ Deviance: Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press, 1963; Masculinity: Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*; Style: Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979.

⁵⁶ As Jeff Ferrell observes, writers in Denver “draw on common stylistic resources and in turn evolve new, collective notions of style as they do graffiti with and for one another.” 53.

of an exclusive group.⁵⁷ Classification is hence determined based on the solidarity and bond members enjoy within the subculture. Graffiti therefore constitutes a subculture because it represents a community that has positioned itself in opposition to the dominant culture while remaining intrinsically connected to it.

In Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Dick Hebdige argues that style is a fluctuating tool of resistance against hegemony. In order to remain marginal and subversive, subcultures must continually reinvent themselves in opposition to the dominant order. This process of reinvention relies on strategies of appropriation and assemblage to create new styles. Guided by Hebdige's influential study, I question the magnitude of style in the constitution of a subculture, explaining that graffiti is an ideal manifestation of this dynamic given that style is the axis of the culture's organization. The hierarchies of the graffiti world reside within the details of a stylistically rendered signature. As Jeff Ferrell argues, graffiti is a crime of style because it is grounded both in illegality and in the writers' shared pictorial resources. As such, graffiti's elements of style are repositories of both individual creativity and collective production. From here, I analyze graffiti's status as both the articulation of a subculture and as an extension of popular culture. This inquiry leads me to assess the value of illegality for graffiti writers, graffiti's connection with hip-hop culture, and its proliferation on the Internet. Framed by the work of subcultural theorists and hip-hop historians, I argue that graffiti subcultures worldwide have an integral role in the negotiation of the individual graffiti writer's identity.

⁵⁷ Nancy Macdonald writes that a subculture "constructs, perceives and portrays itself as standing apart from others as an isolated" and defined group.152.

In addition to the analysis of key questions related to motivation, identity, criminality, formal exhibitions, subculture, and style, the first part of my thesis also establishes a number of more specific objectives. I discuss how and why graffiti and hip-hop came to be associated with one another. I identify the characteristics that enable both graffiti and hip-hop to create and sustain a sense of community and self-identity for young people and deconstruct the critical and often misrepresented relationship between graffiti writers and the artists Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. I also problematize the participation of women in graffiti worlds and account for the role of films, freight trains, and the Internet in the international diffusion of the New York Style.

In Part II of my thesis where I analyze the post-graffiti movement through case studies, theoretical perspectives on public space (Lefebvre, de Certeau, Hetherington),⁵⁸ public art (Deutsche, Kwon),⁵⁹ and visual culture (Mitchell, Mirzoeff)⁶⁰ contextualize my research. Framed by this methodological structure, I question how street art might fit into or challenge the public art paradigm; how the movement functions in the city as a performative gesture; what types of spaces it occupies in the urban environment; what sorts of challenges the work poses for the notion of site-specificity as well as authorship; how legal dissemination of the work in relation to commercial and gallery contexts or the Internet both complicate and facilitate the movement; and, finally, what role street art plays in a city's visual language, especially for art historians. Throughout Chapter Four,

⁵⁸ Public Space: Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991; Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life. Stephen Rendall, trans. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988; Kevin Hetherington, Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998.

⁵⁹ Public Art: Rosalyn Deutsche, Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996; Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

⁶⁰ Visual Culture: W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture." Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies. Eds. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey. Williamstown; Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, New Haven: Distributed by Yale University Press, 2002. 231-250; Nicholas Mirzoeff, Introduction to Visual Culture. London and New York: Routledge. 1999.

“Street Art and the City,” I address each of these questions through the work of a different street artist.

Additionally, Part II of my thesis introduces the artistry and variety of illegal street art within an art historical discourse and emphasizes the particular characteristics of the post-graffiti movement that make it relevant to our experience of public space. In order to underline the socio-political and cultural relevance of their work as a part of the creation of a visual and public culture, my analysis of street art emphasizes the art practices of some of today’s most active artists who work illegally within the cityscape. I employ the concept of a “public culture”⁶¹ to deconstruct the ways in which street art as a public art negotiates its place in the cityscape by reinventing and contributing to city spaces. By tracing the evolution of graffiti and the worldwide prevalence of street art, I underline the profundity of these art forms in our collective construction of a city as a space where identities are negotiated.

Today’s street art, as compared to traditional graffiti, is not only much more visible in the landscape of a city, but also much less visually cryptic. The greatest distinction between graffiti and post-graffiti is the substitution of the letter with the logo or the figurative image. In fact, the simple lines and emblematic figurative work of Keith Haring that alienated him from the world of graffiti writing is exactly the type of imagery today’s street artists praise. By using visual techniques and materials other than spray-paint, urban artists replicate and subvert the signs and symbols of urban environments. Adding their names to the public sphere, as in traditional graffiti, can be understood as an alternative to the corporate brand names that overrun the cityscape. Contemporary neo-

⁶¹ The concept of public culture, has been used by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, artists, and other scholars to map the capital, human, and media flows that draw cities, peoples, and states into transnational relationships and political economies.

graffiti artists, however, often intervene in an overtly political way, furthering the idea of public expression. Because their work is typically rendered in more accessible locations and is not aimed primarily at other street artists, urban painting is an interventionist tactic that reaches a larger segment of the population. By replacing the stylized written word with the graphically designed image, urban artists today have expanded the communicative potential of their visual language, thereby increasing their “accidental”⁶² audience. The modes of street art tend to be distinct enough to allow for an easy identification of its authors, and since the tightly knit structure of the graffiti subculture does not apply to urban artists, these modes are best investigated by pinpointing individual artists.

I begin my analysis of street art by questioning its place within the public art paradigm. Much like public art that functions as a place-making tool and as a visual element of the urban landscape in its engagement with and transformation of the cityscape, street art is also a part of the process of a city. Street art responds to the environment of a city inasmuch as it partakes in the creation of a city’s visual culture. Still, illegality, motivation, materiality, and spatiality are the foremost aspects that differentiate street art as a category outside of public art. Both paradigms can function as subversions and communicate with the urban environment, yet they do so in materially and spatially dissimilar ways. Contemporary public art projects like street art practices are often complex, critical, temporary explorations of the social and cultural structures of a city. However, in paralleling these discourses, I raise questions regarding the

⁶² Kym Pruesse, editor of *Accidental Audience: Urban Interventions by Artists* explains that urban “intervention work is site specific [...] and generally involves an element of unpredictability. Surprise or accidental encounter is part of what constitutes the experience of the work.” *Accidental Audience*. Ed. Kym Pruesse. Toronto, ON: offsite collective, 1999, 2.

motivation to create art illegally in a city, the kind of impact this act might have on the artist's identity, and how the audience becomes implicated in the performance of the works.

In the context of a city, post-graffiti artwork can be understood as an ephemeral, performative gesture. The character of much street art materially amplifies its responsive quality. As the work ages, fades, tears, dissolves, and ultimately disappears, the process itself reflects the cycle of life and thus generates a relationship between the audience and the work, as well as the work and its context. According to art historian Martha Buskirk, an art object is not only constructed through its site of dissemination, but also through the viewer who experiences the work "as a series of unfolding encounters."⁶³ If art making and art viewing employ both artists and the public as actors, then it follows that the experience of street art, either through production or reception, functions as an embodied gesture that constitutes a type of interactive performance. Working in the city is both an anonymous expression of artistic freedom and a participatory type of performance, which facilitates the negotiation of self as well as the personalization and re-articulation of the visual cityscape. By shaping urban social spaces with their work, street artists create a vehicle for identity building. The art works of many street artists address the daily operations of the urban landscape in physical ways because in the end, it is art that decays, that is "valueless"⁶⁴ and belongs to everyone and to no one.

Next, I focus on the types of spaces street art occupies. Henri Lefebvre⁶⁵ argues that space is socially constructed. Furthermore, Lefebvre interprets "the production of

⁶³ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003, 22.

⁶⁴ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

⁶⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

things in space” as becoming “the production of space,”⁶⁶ where the modernist city is organized in a manner to facilitate the flow of commodities. This idea is central to an art movement that plays on the commercialization of space to produce meaning. Were it not for the privatization of public space, street art – produced on the outskirts of prime advertising locations – would not so readily impart satirical or reactionary ideas. Since space is continually in a state of production, it embodies endless opportunities for modification and resistance. As post-graffiti practices demonstrate, no matter how controlled spaces are, they are also subordinate to lived experiences and are thus open for subversion. Even within the capitalist economy of space, there are gaps or marginal spaces, which while often neglected, are necessary for the conceptualization of the city as a complex arena. In her research on the Montreal graffiti scene’s transformation from overwhelmingly politically oriented graffiti in the 1970s to the New York signature style in the 1990s, sociologist Louise Gauthier argues that “in general, graffiti writers appropriate objects and places in and around the city that have been neglected, forgotten or rejected. Singling out these sites, they turn them into temporary areas of visual and cultural production.”⁶⁷ Gauthier identifies these sites as “non-spaces”⁶⁸ or abandoned, desolate sites in the urban sphere. Taking up Gauthier’s argument, I examine street art’s liminal role in the cityscape. Non-, marginal, or liminal spaces are not necessarily marginal by way of geography, but rather by way of use. The concept of liminality is related both to physical space and to identity, or social space. As a physical or conceptual

⁶⁶ Henri Lefebvre, “Space: Social Product and Use Value.” Critical Sociology: European Perspectives, Ed. J.W. Freiberg. New York: Irvington Publishers. 1979, 285.

⁶⁷ Gauthier, 256.

⁶⁸ This term has also been developed by social scientist Marc Augé, who uses the concept of “non-places” in his analysis of supermodernity as “spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces.” Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. John Howe, trans. London, New York: Verso, 1995, 94.

realm, the marginal affords the subversion of space, an idea especially relevant for street artists. While some artists choose spaces that lie on the periphery of a city, many work in the city core – amidst otherwise mainstream uses of space. As Kevin Hetherington reminds us, margins “are not only things pushed to the edge, they can also be in-between spaces, spaces of traffic, right at the centre of things.”⁶⁹ Rosalyn Deutsche’s⁷⁰ contention that public spaces are increasingly falling into private ownership – which makes a city the product of capitalist social practice – as well as her inquiry into the term public are invaluable questions in terms of street art. Deutsche’s conviction that space “serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination,”⁷¹ is integral to my argument: by working in liminal spaces, street artists contest capitalist environments.

The question of site-specificity is a challenging one for street art. In her research, Miwon Kwon⁷² argues for the necessity of understanding site-specific works as interactions between identity or community and place. The author’s examination of how site-specific art critically interacts with contemporary urban life and the built spaces of a city is paramount in my analysis of street art’s *raison d’être* in the public sphere. Following Kwon, I argue that by personalizing the forgotten spaces of the city, street artists critically examine the experience of contemporary urban life. Based on Kwon’s analysis of three public art paradigms: art in public places, art as public spaces, and art in

⁶⁹ Hetherington, 107.

⁷⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 26.

⁷² Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

the public interest,⁷³ I identify neo-graffiti as a site-conscious art form that seeks to be integrated as part of urban art, architecture, and landscape, while disrupting the balance of art that is designed as public space. Street art challenges traditional ways of approaching site-specific art since the work of one artist can be found in numerous cities throughout the world, and the same artwork can be reproduced in seemingly random locations. Street art, however, is site-specific in that the artists seek particular places in the context of a city that best respond to or benefit from their practices; nonetheless, the work itself is sometimes not site-specific as it is not a permanent piece with a fixed address. The seriality and multi-sitedness of many street art practices allow the pieces to take on new meanings with each execution, rendering the work entirely different. In addition to the challenges street art poses for the notion of site-specificity, the movement is further complicated by its diffusion in galleries and on the Internet. Removing street art from the street is paradoxical in that it erases the work's transience. As I explain in Chapter Four, some artists take advantage of both commercial space and cyberspace to spatially and materially distinguish their indoor from their outdoor practices.

As public art has become more abstract, more demanding of the viewer, more political and critical of both the categories "public" and "art," it has fostered dialogue and criticism about art museums, audiences, and the construction of art works. Although graffiti has generally been excluded from public art discourse, its popularity worldwide tends to incite exciting discussions about cities and the processes of urban change. By considering an art form in which authorship is key but rarely disclosed and the significance of its site-specificity is contingent on its illegality, this thesis both disrupts

⁷³ Miwon Kwon, "Public Art and Urban Identities." European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP) Multilingual Webjournal ISSN 1811-1699. Available from: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0102/kwon/en>

the idea of the traditional art historical object of inquiry and brings attention to how our visual landscape provides valuable insights into our public cultures. The way urban artists use and experience public spaces affects their relationships with cities and mobilizes their conceptions of social agency. As a type of public performance, graffiti and post-graffiti production initiates connections with networks of like-minded people and solidifies relationships with cities.⁷⁴

The interdisciplinary research approach I employ throughout my dissertation is integral to my fundamental goal of analyzing the socio-cultural and political impact graffiti has on a city, art worlds, and visual culture. It is necessary that I draw from a variety of theoretical standpoints in order to question an ephemeral art form that generally exists outside of the history of art but is intrinsically connected to it, even by way of defiance, and subsists somewhere in between a subcultural practice, a public art, a gallery commodity, and a crime. My chosen disciplinary perspectives – art history and sociology – together shape the backbone of my research. Under the art historical umbrella, I focus specifically on the work of scholars whose research investigates public art, cities, ephemerality, site-specific art, and questions of visual culture. In terms of sociology, I concentrate on ethnographical graffiti research, subcultural studies, and art sociology's notions of mediation and art worlds. By considering these movements in stylistic and interventionist terms – linking the work to its place of dissemination and the circumstances of its experience – I argue that as an ephemeral art form, which temporarily disrupts urban places, graffiti and post-graffiti play a critical role in the visual construction of urbanity. As movements that operate within the city's infrastructure, but

⁷⁴ As Susan Phillips remarks, graffiti “enables cultural groups to give themselves solidity and definition.”
20.

outside of its jurisdiction, and within the world of art, but outside of its canon, graffiti and post-graffiti are invaluable objects of inquiry that have not yet benefited from sustained art historical analysis.

1.3 Graffiti Writers and Street Artists

When analyzing the development of graffiti in NYC throughout the 1970s and 1980s, I discuss the work of several, now infamous, graffiti writers to illustrate the evolution of New York Style graffiti. Most prominently, I concentrate on the work of LEE (fig. 4), LADY PINK (fig. 5), BLADE (fig. 6), DAZE (fig. 7), CRASH (fig. 8), NOC 167 (fig. 9), and TRACY 168 (fig. 10). Given that the subway and wall graffiti of these writers has, for the most part, long disappeared, I access their work primarily through publications, the Internet, films, and exhibition catalogues. Each of these writers contributed to the New York graffiti pictorial tradition either through stylistic innovation, mastery of skill, or by acting as a spokesperson for the movement. They all participated in gallery exhibitions of graffiti and some have sustained graffiti careers to this day. Most notably, LEE and PINK continue to be role models in the graffiti movement as they maintain a production of legal work and have established their entire careers around their graffiti-derived fame. In my visual analysis of signature graffiti as it developed in NYC, I illustrate my discussion with a number of illegal and canvassed graffiti pieces produced by these writers in order to exemplify a variety of technical and stylistic innovations.

The post-graffiti section of my dissertation is focused on a detailed and critical examination of the pictorial and material innovations of nine contemporary street artists:

SWOON, OS GÊMEOS, VEXTA, BANKSY, ROADSWORTH, INVADER, MISS VAN, PEZ, and JACE. I chose these artists specifically because they have designed some of the most groundbreaking contemporary urban art in international terms, and have received an abundance of attention in graffiti circles, through publications and Internet sites, and, in more mainstream circles, through gallery exhibitions. They all work prolifically on their craft, have disseminated their work in a variety of contexts, and have international followings. Furthermore, my choices were motivated by accessibility in terms of resources, the artists' willingness to discuss their work, and Internet popularity. Although their practices are varied and centred in disparate cities – New York, São Paulo, Melbourne, London, Montreal, Paris, Toulouse, Barcelona, and Saint-Pierre, Reunion Island – their work can be addressed according to three main pictorial or material trends in post-graffiti art: stencils, characters, and logos. The literature on stencilling as a genre is more developed than that on logos or characters. Still, I find these categories useful as ways to visually contextualize the most popular avenues street artists have chosen to express their interventions.

The stencil artists whose work I discuss throughout Part II include, the British artist BANKSY; ROADSWORTH, who is based in Canada; and the Australian artist VEXTA. Each artist's exploration of the stencil as a medium differs from the other in terms of sites of diffusion, message, and style. BANKSY is revered within the street art community, and more recently within mainstream art circles, as one of the most notoriously witty and palatable contemporary guerrilla artists. Originally from Bristol, BANKSY's fame has escalated well past his native England, to a level many graffiti writers only dream about. Countless newspaper reports, editorial columns, and Internet

sites⁷⁵ are devoted to BANKSY's numerous interventions, which typically target urban spaces, art museums, zoos, and geographical or national landmarks. As Tristan Manco explains, "the amount of stencils he paints, their increasingly large size, their photographic-looking qualities, and his antiauthoritarian sense of humor have made him the darling of the street art scene and of rebellious kids everywhere."⁷⁶ The artist's practice is categorized by anti-establishment, anti-war, and pro-freedom messages most typically illustrated with figures of rats, policemen, children, monkeys, and soldiers. His style is contingent upon simplicity: whether he renders a singular figure or a narrative scene, the absurdity, clever juxtapositions, or meaningfulness of his imagery are immediately apparent. Satirical juxtapositions motivate much of his practice, whether representing the Mona Lisa holding a rocket launcher (fig. 11), or a young girl lovingly hugging a bomb, the artist revels in the absurdity of contrasting the innocent – children and animals for example – with destructive emblems of war. Working in a very different spatial and visual aesthetic, in 2001, Montreal's ROADSWORTH initiated a series of stencilled images on the city's roads. The integration of his works with official city infrastructure is a unique method of instituting a dialogue between citizens and the structure of the city. ROADSWORTH's first stencil was an ironic visual protest against the lack of bike paths in Montreal (fig.12). Spray-painted cyclist symbols on roads without designated bike paths were the first in a series of works through which the artist prompted the public to question their role in public space. By painting on the city's roads, the artist not only appropriates a non-traditional surface for art diffusion, but he also intervenes into a highly structured, functional, and systematized formal vocabulary.

⁷⁵ A number of articles can be found under "cuttings" at www.banksy.co.uk.

⁷⁶ Josh MacPhee, *Stencil Pirates: A Global Study of the Street Stencil*. Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2004, 106.

ROADSWORTH's practice is so insidious that "many people who see his art in public think it has been done by the city."⁷⁷ Across the globe, in Melbourne Australia, VEXTA's first street stencil depicted a baby human skeleton with the caption "this is what a war victim looks like." While the artist refutes the claim that her work is politically motivated, many of her images reflect the socio-political climate, as demonstrated by her piece "Welcome to Australia" (fig. 13), where underneath the inviting caption, she rendered a large number of armed police officers ready for combat, exposing Australia's strict Immigration Laws. The overwhelming aim of VEXTA's work, according to the artist herself – to forge a connection with her viewers – relies on her belief that painting on the street is where art can be most influential. VEXTA's work illuminates the "coldness of our urban environment" and expresses opinions and ideas "not expressed in mainstream media," making people more apt to connect with the work on an emotional level.⁷⁸ The artist has gained much acclaim on the Melbourne street scene where among the multitude of post-graffiti practices her works excel in their richness.

Stencils, much like traditional graffiti, require few resources for production: a relatively firm surface, a utility knife, and spray-paint. Stencil artists most often utilize cardboard, acetate, metal, wood, or plastic laminates to create a durable surface for their designs. Once cut, the stencil can be used repeatedly and thus functions like a tag. Producing stencil art has become increasingly popular over the last twenty years, mainly because the medium facilitates a premeditated quality to the work and rapid

⁷⁷ Christian Hundertmark, The Art of Rebellion 2: World of Urban Art Activism. Mainaschaff: Publikats Verlag, 2006, 72.

⁷⁸ Jake Smallman and Carl Nyman, Stencil Graffiti Capital: Melbourne. New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2005, 143.

dissemination. The differences between stencil graffiti and New York Style graffiti are immediately apparent. The greatest difference is of course visual – stencil graffiti is pictorially dissimilar to free-hand writing and is not founded on the distortion of letters. Unlike traditional graffiti, stencilled graffiti designs, although often diffused at night, tend, as an end product, to depict exactly what the artist intended.⁷⁹ Moreover, it is typically less time consuming to spray in a stencil, making it safer to apply. Traditional graffiti writers have “sometimes dabbled in the technique, but it was usually frowned upon and considered cheating,” thus stencilling evolved into its own breed of graffiti, one “indifferent to the egocentric nature and territorial disputes of traditional graffiti.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the system of prestige and competition prevalent in the writing world is atypical in the stencilling culture, and stencils have a tendency to be more legible and are thus able to communicate to a greater number of outsiders than traditional graffiti. The lack of territorial and egocentric competition makes the stencilling community more open to visual experimentation since one is not judged in terms of the subculture’s governed standards of quantity and quality.⁸¹ Stencilled works, even when made by ex-writers who operate under the philosophy of “getting up,”⁸² tend to represent more blatantly political messages. Although stencil production and diffusion is just as time consuming as signature graffiti writing, it can arguably be a less creative enterprise in the sense that the images used by stencil artists are not necessarily of their own creation. While some

⁷⁹ This is not always the case with graffiti put up freehand under the cover of the night.

⁸⁰ Smallman and Nyman, 8.

⁸¹ Nicholas Ganz explains: “Graffiti and street art are separated not only by techniques but also by sociological elements. The former is largely governed by the desire to spread one’s tag and achieve fame, and the old rules of ‘getting up’ still apply; it’s about quality (your work must be better than everyone else’s) *and* quantity (you have to piece like made and catch as many tags as possible). Street art tends to have fewer rules and embraces a much broader range of styles and techniques.” Graffiti Women, 10-11.

⁸² Getting up refers to the act of writing illegal graffiti. The term often implies writing graffiti as much as possible in as many locations as possible in order to get noticed.

contemporary artists have evolved their practices to a remarkable level whereby they use more than one stencil in the creation of a single work, enabling them to craft a more layered piece with overlapping colours, shapes, and finishing touches, others rely heavily on simple, pre-existing images found in magazines or on the Internet.

Typically, a stencilled work is characterized by an easily recognizable image or a legible word or phrase and does not necessarily advertise the name of its creator. In fact, while many stencil artists, such as BANKSY, disseminate their tags as part of their works, whether as text or as symbol, others, like ROADSWORTH, are keen to make purely anonymous work recognized only for its repetition of style, and others still, such as VEXTA, vary their subject matter and style so that they cannot be typified by technique or theme.

Josh MacPhee, author of Stencil Pirates, succinctly reviews the history and origins of stencilling internationally and demonstrates that the medium has typically functioned as a political resistance tool.⁸³ The author argues that in the past thirty years four major types of stencilling have persisted: “(1) utilitarian (industrial/decorative), (2) anonymous, often cryptic, message or image, (3) political, and (4) the traditional graffiti usage of ego markings.”⁸⁴ As expected, each of these types overlap, as proven by the work of contemporary street artists who often make, for example, anonymous, political renderings, which function as tags. Instead of categorizing stencils into types, Tristan Manco, author of Street Logos, organizes stencils in terms of styles, which include signs,

⁸³ The author notes that stencils were used for campaigns against Somoza dictatorship in 1970s Nicaragua; for anti-apartheid campaigns in South Africa; and for anti-militarist slogans on British walls. MacPhee, 11-16.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 21.

iconographics, logos, urban characters, and free-forms.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the authors of Stencil Graffiti Capital: Melbourne have compiled a number of thematic categories most popular with stencil artists: politics, skulls, faces, robots, music, symbols, cartoons, Kung Fu, politicians, animals, war, sexy ladies, guns, horror, and text.⁸⁶ Stencil artist CIVILIAN argues that making street art is founded on “the simple idea of reclaiming space. Taking a dead, empty space, and revitalizing it,”⁸⁷ and artist MEEK contends, “it’s healthy to have visual ephemera that’s not fueled solely by consumerism.”⁸⁸ Indeed, the majority of street artists that make this sort of work, react to their environment – an unsolicited, organic sort of reaction, which makes it that much more genuine. While stencilling is visually far removed from the secret language of traditional graffiti and allows the medium and the message to communicate a great variety of ideas, fundamentally, and especially to outsiders, stencil art plays the same role in the urban sphere, disrupting the status quo by creating a gallery of free art. No matter how they are characterized, the stencilled art forms I discuss are image-based, unsolicited interventions in the cityscape that have evolved as a continuation of the graffiti movement.

The category of logos is illustrated with the art of Reunion Island’s JACE, Spanish artist PEZ, and France’s INVADER. Tristan Manco defines a tag as “a small advertisement for an artist – a logo for the ego.”⁸⁹ Indeed, a logo for street artists is very much akin to a traditional writer’s tag. In examining post-graffiti art, I understand logos as evolutions of signatures from letters to characters or abstract designs that function as

⁸⁵ Tristan Manco, Street Logos. 11-111.

⁸⁶ Smallman and Nyman, 22-158.

⁸⁷ CIVILIAN quoted in Stencil Graffiti Capital. 15.

⁸⁸ MEEK quoted in Stencil Graffiti Capital. 35.

⁸⁹ Tristan Manco, Street Logos. 43.

icons, which either convey an idea, represent an artist, or both. In the world of corporate advertising, logos are symbols that represent a brand to the consumer or advocate a vision. Illegal street logos are materially diverse in that they can be spray-painted, postered, stickered, stenciled, or drawn and are visually flexible since an artist's logo, although recognizably theirs, can vary with each execution. While to an extent graffiti logos "advertise" the artist, ultimately the goal is not to sell a product, but rather to forge a space in the cityscape that questions the function of public space.

JACE, who began writing traditional graffiti in 1984, eventually differentiated his work from that of other writers and devised a character – a logo – to substitute his signature. At the risk of alienating himself from the graffiti community, the artist developed his signature "gouzou" character in 1992. Particularly appealing in JACE's work is his technical experimentation, which includes working in screen-prints, stickers, stamps, and wallpaper, as well as his sites of diffusion. Explaining that street art represents a "street in good health,"⁹⁰ the artist introduces his logo into advertising billboards and into the natural environment, making witty social critiques or simply enlivening a space (fig. 14). PEZ, meaning fish in Spanish, also began by tagging during the 1990s in his native Barcelona, and with time, formulated a logo to replace his signature. PEZ's smiling blue fish (fig. 15), which can now be found on city walls worldwide as well as on canvases, T-shirts, stickers and bath curtains,⁹¹ is emblematic of the crossover from a preoccupation with letters to a standardized symbol. His work is a clear example of the evolution from graffiti to post-graffiti. Finally, every one of INVADER's logo creations, although different, are unmistakably his, since neither

⁹⁰ Bou, 186.

⁹¹ Ibid, 94.

painted nor pasted, they are cemented. INVADER's mosaic interventions make him one of the most imaginative and internationally active contemporary street artists. The artist has been invading spaces since 1996 with his special brand of pixilated tile characters, inspired mostly by first-generation arcade games, which he cements into walls across cities worldwide (fig. 16). His interactive website, www.space-invaders.com, is programmed to operate much like a video game in that the "player" is alerted of a new invasion (a new site of dissemination), and must then locate the "invader" (the tiled artwork) in the tradition of "Where's Waldo," so as to move onto the next level. Cataloguing his work through "invasion guides" and "invasion maps," available for purchase on his website, the artist retraces the history of a particular invasion thereby offering a set of potential tourist attractions. In other words, he documents his movements throughout a city through a careful indexing of his work. Conceptualizing his artistic interventions as a game in which every city in the world is a possible target for "attack," the artist has a unique way of initiating a dialogue with city spaces and leaving his mark in the most unexpected places.

Finally, with the works of New York artist SWOON, French artist MISS VAN, and the Brazilian duo OS GÊMEOS, I explore another popular street art category that portrays characters. Characters, however, are not new in the world of graffiti. Writers have been incorporating comic book characters into their pieces since the age of subway graffiti in NYC. Typically, characters were either self-created designs used to reflect phrases put up by writers, or appropriated renditions of popular cartoon characters like the Pink Panther or Donald Duck. Today's characters differ to a great extent from those executed by traditional writers, in that they are most often imagined creations, sometimes

used to stand in for the signature itself. I separate characters from logos – although a logo could most definitely be a character – for several reasons. First, formally, crisp lines or outlines as well as limited colours and symbols typify logos. Second, spatially, logos are often smaller. Third, logos are typically left unsigned. As opposed to logos, characters are often visually complex, life-sized renditions of creatures or personas often accompanied by legible signatures.

With her street portraits, SWOON invites viewers to read her work as an event rather than an object. The artist's diverse, complex portraits rendered in a variety of media including thin recycled newsprint are intended to reflect the experiences of a city onto the fabric of the city itself (fig.17). SWOON's style has garnered her critical acclaim as exemplified most recently through her participation in an exhibition at the MoMA.⁹² Working in a dramatically different style, MISS VAN began producing her *poupées* (dolls) in 1993 in her hometown of Toulouse (fig. 18). The artist's whimsical characters, often described as feisty, sexy, and glamorous, have since become her trademark and garnered her international recognition. Painting in a traditional graffiti style since 1986, twin brothers, OS GÊMEOS, meaning "the twins" in Portuguese, later became pioneers of the Brazilian street art scene. Working with latex and spray-paint in a distorted comic-book style, the pair has greatly influenced, challenged, and redefined the face of street art with artwork that:

ranges in tenor from lyrical and touching portraits of their beloved family to the gut-wrenching images of São Paulo's homeless, crippled and forgotten. Their sardonic political images of looters, terrorists, criminals and politicians collide an absolute despair for the inhumane world with the immediate, empowering agency and humanity of painting in the street.⁹³

⁹² Three of SWOON's pieces were exhibited at the MoMA as part of the exhibition *Since 2000: Printmaking Now*, which ran from May 3 through September 18, 2006.

⁹³ Tristan Manco, Lost Art and Caleb Neelon, *Graffiti Brasil*. 64.

Their characteristically yellow personages are painted on city walls, canvases, and made into sculptures, and have been exhibited outside of their home country in gallery shows throughout Europe, the United States, and Latin America (fig. 19).

Through my chosen examples of graffiti and post-graffiti, I reveal both how these movements contribute to a production of space, and to borrow Annie Gérin's words, how "meaning is formed, how it varies in specific contexts and in intercourse with actual publics."⁹⁴ My corpus exemplifies some of the most innovative traditional and contemporary graffiti practices, and also supplies the reader with a sample of the visual history of the New York graffiti movement and of today's street art movement in various cities throughout the world. My intentions are thus to formalize a discourse related to these art forms within the fields of both art history and visual culture.

⁹⁴ Annie Gérin, Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives. Eds. Annie Gérin and James S. McLean, forthcoming 2009, 5.

PART I

THE GRAFFITI MOVEMENT

CHAPTER 2: THE FOUNDATION OF THE NEW YORK STYLE

In his book Crimes of Style, Jeff Ferrell argues that graffiti “marks and illuminates contemporary urban culture, decorating the daily life of the city with varieties of color, meaning, and style.”⁹⁵ While not overtly radical, these words concisely describe the power and significance of graffiti writing. In order to analyze how graffiti “illuminates contemporary urban culture” and what exactly its “meaning and style” are, I must delve into its genealogy as well as its formal and socio-political principles. This chapter focuses on these questions by addressing the development of what is most widely recognized as the “graffiti,” “aerosol art,” or “writing” culture in NYC during the 1970s and early 1980s. The motivation lies beyond rewriting a history that has already been presented by authors such as Mailer (1974); Castleman (1982); Chalfant (1984 & 1987); Ferrell (1996); Walsh (1996); Austin (2001); Macdonald (2002); Rahn (2002); and Miller (2002)⁹⁶ who have all conducted ethnographic or survey research. Instead, Part I consolidates the work of these authors and fills some of the research lacunae. Thus, this chapter and the next, which considers the evolution of signature graffiti writing from the mid-1980s to the 1990s, describes, applies, and questions key ideas developed by these graffiti chroniclers. This process is both structurally and methodologically necessary: structurally, a literature review that concisely assesses the most significant aspects of writing’s history is essential both as a critical starting point for further analysis and as a

⁹⁵ Ferrell, 3.

⁹⁶ Norman Mailer, “The Faith of Graffiti.” Esquire 81.5 (1974): 77-88; Craig Castleman, Getting Up; Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, Subway Art & Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, Spraycan Art; Jeff Ferrell, Crimes of Style; Michael Walsh, Graffiti. Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1996; Joe Austin, Taking the Train; Nancy Macdonald, The Graffiti Subculture; Janice Rahn, Painting Without Permission; Ivor Miller, Aerosol Kingdom.

method of uncovering a history alien to most art historians. Methodologically, chapters Two and Three address questions that motivate the reasons for approaching graffiti from perspectives rooted in art history and the sociology of art. Beginning with the existing scholarship, which explores the socio-cultural foundation of graffiti writing, these methodologies assist my analysis of the stylistic and societal impact of early graffiti in the cityscape and in the commercial art world.

The first section of this chapter, “The Place, Practice, and Promise of Hip-Hop,” addresses the development of the youth-generated hip-hop culture of the 1970s. It begins by briefly describing the conditions in the South Bronx that led to the materialization of hip-hop culture in order to engage the often glossed-over, misrepresented, or misunderstood connection between graffiti and hip-hop. Further to this, I contextualize, explore, and deconstruct graffiti as one of the elements aside from disc jockeying, emceeing, and break-dancing, of the budding, localized hip-hop culture. Furthermore, hip-hop culture is addressed as a source of empowerment and a tool for identity negotiation for urban youth. The focus is primarily on the scholarship of Tricia Rose (1994),⁹⁷ Cheryl Keyes (2002),⁹⁸ Imani Perry (2004),⁹⁹ and Shawn Ginwright (2004)¹⁰⁰ who have analyzed the socio-political dimensions and community-based evolution of hip-hop culture.

Next, the section entitled “Kings Get Up with Style,” scrutinizes the formal, material, and technical aspects, as well as the genealogy of New York Style graffiti and

⁹⁷ Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press: Published by University Press of New England, 1994.

⁹⁸ Cheryl Keyes, Rap Music and Street Consciousness. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

⁹⁹ Imani Perry, Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Shawn A. Ginwright, Black in School: Afrocentric Reform, Urban Youth, and the Promise of Hip-Hop Culture. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

explores the significance of choosing a graffiti name, the politics of style, and signature graffiti's relationship to gang graffiti. Reflecting primarily on the culture's progression during the 1970s and early 1980s, this section focuses largely on some of the texts just mentioned – Craig Castleman's (1982) seminal book on the structure of graffiti, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's (1984) survey of subway graffiti, and Jeff Ferrell's (1996) ethnographical study of graffiti writers in Denver – to address some of the more typical aspects of graffiti writing. Recognizing that not all graffiti writing cultures or those who have dubbed themselves graffiti writers follow the same stylistic or social path, I must therefore attend to some generalizations that have circulated within the graffiti world. In this vein, some of the unwritten ethical codes of graffiti production are also analyzed in order to assess the value of style and fame for writers wholly absorbed in graffiti diffusion. This section not only provides the reader with the basic vocabulary necessary for a discussion of signature graffiti, it also borrows the terminology of formal visual analysis already familiar to art historians to deconstruct the elements of art and design that make up the New York Style.

Finally, "From Subway Graffiti to Spraycan Art," examines graffiti's transposition from New York subway trains to city walls that resulted from major anti-graffiti campaigns. Of primary significance are Chalfant and Prigoff's (1987) exploration of early wall graffiti and Austin's (2001) influential research on graffiti cultures in NYC. This section outlines the visual development of graffiti on the subway system and questions the momentum that eventually forced the movement off of trains and forever criminalized the act of graffiti writing. I also scrutinize the germination of graffiti as art once the work began to be defended as such by gallery dealers. Together, the passages

that compose this chapter introduce the reader to what was commonly known as the hip-hop graffiti style and to the politics of graffiti writing during the 1970s and 1980s.

2.1: The Place, Practice, and Promise of Hip-Hop

A number of authors have traced the history and socio-cultural impact of hip-hop culture from its inner-city roots to its worldwide dispersal. Shawn Ginwright (2004) describes hip-hop as “an emerging worldview;”¹⁰¹ Alex Perullo and John Fenn (2003) label it “a musical and cultural force;”¹⁰² Gwendolyn Pough (2004) notes that hip-hop is not only a youth movement and a culture, but also “a way of life;”¹⁰³ Raquel Cepeda (2004) argues that hip-hop “became the ultimate expression of black youth resistance to poverty and oppression;”¹⁰⁴ William Eric Perkins (1996) explains that hip-hop grew “out of a long history of interaction between black and Latin urban culture;”¹⁰⁵ Robert Farris Thompson (1996) contends that hip-hop was invented by youth to “regain the voice that had been denied them through media indifference or manipulation;”¹⁰⁶ and Imani Perry (2004) claims that it is “an art form culturally rich and economically impoverished.”¹⁰⁷ Most of these characterizations can just as aptly describe the early graffiti writing culture;

¹⁰¹ Ginwright, 32.

¹⁰² Alex Perullo and John Fenn, “Language Ideologies, Choices, and Practices in Eastern African Hip Hop” in *Global Pop, Local Language*. Eds. Harris M. Berger and Michael Thomas Carroll. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003, 19.

¹⁰³ Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004, 3.

¹⁰⁴ *And It Don't Stop: The Best American Hip-Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years*. Ed. Raquel Cepeda. New York: Faber and Faber, 2004, xvii.

¹⁰⁵ *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 50.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Farris Thompson, “Hip Hop 101.” *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 213.

¹⁰⁷ Perry, 2.

however, hip-hop culture and writing culture are not one and the same. Although systematically grouped together, used to define one another, and commercially packaged as one entity, hip-hop and graffiti writing have different histories, traditions, and memberships. Most authors who address hip-hop culture agree that it materialized mainly in New York's South Bronx sometime in the early 1970s as a Black youth movement characterized by graffiti writing, disc jockeying, emceeing, and break-dancing. The inclusion of graffiti writing as one of the defining elements of hip-hop necessitates critical attention. To understand graffiti's relationship with hip-hop and its development from a situated practice to a worldwide culture, I analyze hip-hop's trajectory from a localized to a globalized phenomenon.

The aim of this section is threefold: first, to discuss the socio-political environment of the ghettoized South Bronx community in 1970s NYC; second, to introduce and examine the interrelation of the elements that have typified this cultural phenomenon and to question graffiti's status as one of them; and third, to explore how hip-hop culture is an identity-building platform and source of empowerment for marginalized youth.

The South Bronx

“For five years the B-boys, rappers, DJs, and graffiti writers of New York continued to expand and develop their unique artistic vision in almost complete isolation from the rest of the world.”

-Steven Hager¹⁰⁸

The “complete isolation” Steven Hager describes refers to the ghettoized development of hip-hop culture in New York’s South Bronx during the early- to mid-1970s. Examining the contemporary commodification of hip-hop culture, Nancy Guevara remarks that it often “simply appears as a faddish display of male exuberance in inner-city ghettos, a sudden inexplicable burst of color and energy.”¹⁰⁹ Such an uninflected image of hip-hop ignores the socio-economic, political, and cultural context of the culture’s development. This subsection thus explains how and why a subculture arose in this geographically negligible part of NYC.

The Bronx, which for generations was home to middle-class Jewish, Irish, German, Italian, African-American, and Latin-American families, was known as a quiet and orderly neighbourhood until the beginning of its demise in 1959.¹¹⁰ The “breakdown” of the Bronx was caused by two major changes: the politically motivated intentions of urban renewal that manifested through the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and the shift in the class make-up of the borough. Parks Commissioner Robert Moses proposed the expressway that cut through the very core of the Bronx. Its construction involved the relocation of many economically fragile Black and Hispanic peoples from

¹⁰⁸ Steven Hager, “Afrika Bambaataa’s Hip-Hop.” And It Don’t Stop: The Best American Hip-Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years. Ed. Raquel Cepeda. New York: Faber and Faber, 2004, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Nancy Guevara, “Women Writin’ Rappin’ Breakin’.” Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 49.

¹¹⁰ Steven Hager, Hip Hop. 1-2.

different areas in NYC into the South Bronx.¹¹¹ As Tricia Rose describes, the Cross-Bronx Expressway demolished “hundreds of residential and commercial buildings [...] and some 60,000 Bronx homes,”¹¹² which left large numbers of lower-income families without housing. The poorer Bronx populations, primarily made up of people from African-American and Latino descent, were left to deal with a housing crisis and a severe economic depression. The demise of the Bronx prompted landlords and business owners to liquidate their properties or move their businesses elsewhere. Inevitably, the South Bronx quickly became an overpopulated and unstable neighbourhood. The apartment buildings had mostly been bought by professional slumlords that charged inflated rents and neglected the upkeep and repairs. Moreover, some slumlords, in the effort to evade taxes, burned down their properties in order to collect the insurance money. In fact, “between 1970 and 1975, there were 68,456 fires in the Bronx – more than thirty-three each night.”¹¹³ Because NYC’s financial budget was already overextended at the time, very few services or governmental support were offered to the people already living in poverty.

The destruction of the neighbourhood motivated those who could afford it to relocate elsewhere. Consequently, as more working-class African-Americans and Latin-Americans moved into the South Bronx, Caucasians began to move away. This exodus resulted in an employment crisis, as many of the borough’s new residents were not adequately skilled to fill the vacant positions. The lack of employment eventually created “the need for a quick and available income to provide financial support in the face of a

¹¹¹ Rose, 30.

¹¹² Ibid, 31.

¹¹³ Keyes, 46.

paucity of resources.”¹¹⁴ By 1965, this employment shortage was filled by the illegal drug trade, which in turn escalated crime and gang violence.

By the 1970s, residents of the South Bronx were socially and economically underprivileged, neglected, and disenfranchised. The construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway devastated Black and Latino South Bronx residents who “were left with few city resources, fragmented leadership, and limited political power,”¹¹⁵ and this mistreatment drastically contributed to the economic and social climate of the era. Post-industrial conditions such as a diminishing job market as well as limited social services and affordable housing had a direct impact on urban, working-class residents: “the poorest neighborhoods and the least powerful groups were the least protected and had the smallest safety nets.”¹¹⁶ The inhabitants of the South Bronx, especially young people, felt the consequences of post-industrial decline as businesses left urban areas and job possibilities became increasingly limited. Moreover, “between 1978 and 1986, the people in the bottom 20 percent of the income scale experienced an absolute decline in income, whereas the top 20 percent experienced most of the economic growth.”¹¹⁷ Since the bottom twenty percent of the income scale was primarily composed of Blacks and Latinos, the economic divide intensified the already existing tensions between race and class in NYC. Furthermore, the economic depression was compounded by the ethnic isolation felt by Blacks and Latinos who were marginalized through low-income housing projects. Finally, African-Americans and Latinos in urban, working-class communities were culturally isolated from the mainstream American paradigm by virtue of

¹¹⁴ Maria Arshalouis Yaponidjan, Using the Four Elements of Hip-Hop as a Form of Self-expression in Urban Adolescents. Psy.D. Dissertation, United States: Connecticut University of Hartford, 2005, 17.

¹¹⁵ Rose, 33.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 27.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 28.

ghettoization and racism. The incessant racism minority groups felt as a result of “corporate corruption, immoral religious leadership, and gross neglect of the plight of the poor” resulted in a loss of faith amongst urban youth in the American system.¹¹⁸ In the midst of this bleakness, hip-hop emerged.

The conditions that led to the alienation of Black-Americans and Latinos actually helped cultivate a strong and defiant sense of identity for these disenfranchised urban youth. As Black and Latin-American neighbourhoods, such as the South Bronx, “became the primary symbol of America’s woes” in the mass media, “the youngest generation of South Bronx exiles were building creative and aggressive outlets for expression and identification.”¹¹⁹ For South Bronx youth living in dismal circumstances during the 1970s, it became essential to protect and control the only thing they felt they could claim – their territory. The organization of large groups of youths into gangs burgeoned into the nefarious NYC gang culture characterized by incessant violence. Because the Bronx was recognized as “a stronghold for gang activity,”¹²⁰ it was highly monitored by police, which ultimately resulted in a crackdown in the mid-1970s. Simultaneously, the street gangs that reigned over the Bronx largely disbanded after concerned community members called a peace meeting. By 1973, Afrika Bambaataa, founder of the Zulu Nation and commonly acknowledged as the Godfather of Hip-Hop, promoted “youth solidarity by rechanneling violent competition into artistic contests.”¹²¹ Many, like Bambaataa, proclaimed that the only way for inner-city youth to survive was to construct a cultural ideal that would sustain and maintain empowered notions of community, history, and

¹¹⁸ Ginwright, 31.

¹¹⁹ Rose, 33.

¹²⁰ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 7.

¹²¹ Keyes, 47.

self. As Steven Hager describes: “for over five years the Bronx had lived in constant terror of streetgangs. Then, in the summer of 1976, they unexpectedly failed to appear. Something better had come along to replace the gangs.”¹²² The birth of “hip-hop”¹²³ manifested itself not only as a type of cultural expression but also as a means to “redefine, reassert, and constantly reestablish what it means to be urban and black.”¹²⁴ The youth of the hip-hop generation, some of whom were children of those involved in the Black Power movement, needed a new worldview. They looked for inspiration and guidance in each other, in popular culture, and in their cultural heritage. Living in “an age where corporate mergers, particularly in media and entertainment, have redefined public space,”¹²⁵ urban youth turned to the collage of mass-mediated mainstream culture and their own histories to establish a space for themselves. The hip-hop movement thus began as an urban youth culture, which evolved in response to the inner-city poverty, drug, gang, and housing crises and the resulting community devastation that plagued the South Bronx during the 1960s.

Considering the economic and social conditions as well as the ethnic make-up of the South Bronx in the 1970s, the question of why hip-hop materialized there is answered by Tricia Rose’s claim that the critical frame for the development of hip-hop was “the tension between the cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity.”¹²⁶ Hence, the hip-hop culture that originated

¹²² Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 11.

¹²³ According to Bambaataa, the term hip-hop was first used by him to describe this movement, and comes from a phrase by Lovebug Starski “describing the movement of a person dancing to a beat in his rap: ‘hip hop, you don’t stop, you just hippy, hippy, a hop.’” As quoted in Miller, 164.

¹²⁴ Rose, 31.

¹²⁵ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002, 9.

¹²⁶ Rose, 21.

in the South Bronx and subsequently spread worldwide was born out of a need for identity negotiation in resistance to a mainstream culture that tended to exclude its impoverished minority populations. As explained in subsequent sections, this cultural identity was articulated both through appropriation and innovation. Propelled by Afrodiasporic and Latino traditions, the hip-hop movement thrived on the margins of mainstream socio-political and cultural reality to represent a generation of youth with limited accessibility and unbound creativity. The culture of hip-hop that emerged in the South Bronx “as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions has been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment”¹²⁷ exhibits styles contiguous with other African-American and Latino expressions. As hip-hop spread, first beyond NYC, and then beyond the country, it gathered incredible momentum, expanding its original agenda. Still, the fundamental elements of hip-hop culture continue to thrive and the essence of the movement, although often co-opted and exploited by the mainstream, lives on.

Disc Jockeying, Emceeing, Break-dancing, Graffiti Writing

“Early MCs (or “rappers”) and DJs, graffiti artists, and break dancers forged a scene entirely dependent on face-to-face social contact and interaction.”

-Greg Dimitriadis¹²⁸

Before venturing into a discussion of hip-hop’s formal elements, I must first address the disagreement that has recently arisen in hip-hop scholarship concerning the ethnic background of the initial hip-hoppers. On the one hand, some authors (Guevara,

¹²⁷ Ibid, 34.

¹²⁸ Greg Dimitriadis, Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice. New York: P. Lang, 2005, 1.

1996; Pough, 2004) argue that all “three forms of hip hop – rap music, subway graffiti, and breakdance – had grown out of a long history of interaction between black and Latin urban cultures.”¹²⁹ On the other hand, Imani Perry (2004), amongst others, claims: “hip hop is an iteration of black language, black music, black style, and black youth culture.”¹³⁰ Perhaps the disagreement stems not from the question of the founding ethnic lineage of hip-hop culture so much as how theorists have framed it. Those who, like Perry, refer to hip-hop culture as a Black culture do not disregard its hybridity or the fact that many non-Blacks participated in its creation. As Cheryl Keyes explains, hip-hop “was not conceived as an ethnically homogenous expression,” and in the early days “graffiti artists were ethnically diverse overall, Puerto Rican hip-hoppers dominated in breakdancing, while African Americans and African Caribbeans mainly performed as DJs and MCs,” meaning that it was the “cultural intersection of African diasporic blending that ultimately provided the basis for a hip-hop aesthetic.”¹³¹ Referring to hip-hop culture solely as a Black culture suggests that its central characteristics derived from, and were identified with, a predominantly African-American population. This characterization not only fails to account for the Latino contribution to hip-hop, but it also fails to effectively describe the ethnically diverse culture of graffiti writing. The research that argues that hip-hop’s integration into “the fabric of American culture was as a black American cultural product, through an overwhelmingly black American audience” is compelling, but not if it means to include graffiti writing under the hip-hop umbrella. Although this issue is revisited at various occasions throughout this chapter, it

¹²⁹ Guevara, 50.

¹³⁰ Perry, 2.

¹³¹ Keyes, 49.

should be mentioned straightaway that because of its early break from the boundaries of the ghettos, the culture of graffiti writing was from the beginning an activity that assembled a diverse sample of New York's youth. Indeed, when New York Transit Police Department's graffiti squad officer Kevin Hickey was asked in 1981: "What sorts of kids write graffiti?" he answered: "The type of kids that live in New York City. They range from the ultra-rich to the ultra-poor."¹³² Understood differently, early graffiti writers came from a variety of social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and neighbourhoods.¹³³

The four commonly acknowledged fundamental elements of hip-hop culture evolved on street corners in the form of recreational, creative, and good-natured "battles." Battles in hip-hop denote lyrical (between MCs), musical (between DJs), physical (between break dancers), or artistic (between graffiti writers) competitions. Because hip-hop culture did not require the purchase of expensive instruments, art supplies, or sound systems, as prerequisites for participation, it was accessible to urban youth: a can of spray-paint, a ghetto blaster, turntables, and a cardboard box – used as a makeshift dance floor – were the building blocks of hip-hop. Beyond these material factors, the actual skills the youth developed generated an idea of hip-hop culture as fun and innovative. What follows is an overview of hip-hop's defining elements as they emerged in the 1970s.

Disc jockeys, DJs, or turntablists were the inventors of hip-hop music. Initially, DJs were block party¹³⁴ staples; their level of skill was evaluated based on the loudness

¹³² As quoted in Castleman, 67.

¹³³ In his many interviews with graffiti writers Ivor Miller notes that most writers, like LADY PINK, have stipulated: "the world believes that most writers are either from the inner city, from the ghettos, black and Puerto Rican," but that in fact "writers include people from all ages, all creeds, genders and sizes." 17.

¹³⁴ Block parties were popular during the 1970s as, typically illegal, neighbourhood celebrations whereby the community would congregate to simply have a good time or celebrate a specific occasion.

and quality of their sound system. With time, DJs advanced their practice from simply playing a record to a highly specialized and complex art using two turntables and a mixer. DJs discovered ways to control and manipulate speed, treble, bass, rhymes, beats, and pitches to create new songs. They mixed, spliced, and scratched records in a way that remade the turntable into a veritable musical instrument. Early hip-hop DJs created musical hybrids by fusing the break beat, or the purely instrumental part of a song, with elements from another song. They also pulled a record counter-clockwise to create a scratching sound or looped records in order to cut back and forth between the same passages.

Recognizing the benefits of using lyrical accompaniment to their music, DJs started working in collaboration with emcees, MCs, master of ceremonies, or microphone controllers. Traditionally, an MC deployed rhymes or raps – improvised or pre-written – to promote the DJ and energize the audience by encouraging dance and verbal response. Thus, DJs and MCs, musicians and lyricists, worked together to create the ultimate marker of hip-hop culture: rap music. As revealed by the plethora of contemporary academic scholarship dedicated to hip-hop, rap music is often seen as synonymous with the whole of hip-hop culture. While some authors (Perkins, 1996; Pough, 2004; Keyes 2002) explain that rap is but one element of hip-hop, mainstream popular culture has appropriated the music of hip-hop as a stand-in for the culture of hip-hop itself. In the 1970s, however, rap was understood as but one component of an underground lifestyle.

Rap music was instrumental in early hip-hop culture because it equipped urban youth with an outlet to voice their concerns, political ideas, and everyday realities in a jovial and participatory environment. In the early days, creating rap music required

neither singing ability nor musical genius. This statement, does not suggest, however, that rap music involved no creativity or skill; the music was simply a more accessible style compared to others of the era. Rap music gave the hip-hop movement a voice, a beat, and a reason to congregate. During this period, rap concerts would take place just about anywhere in the neighbourhood, indoors or out. In fact, street or block parties, open to everyone, would frequently be organized to celebrate the community in an inclusive manner. Rap music provided a platform for exchange and participation. Moreover, the more it progressed as a style, the more it musically and lyrically empowered urban youth by providing them with a platform to communicate their experiences.

Rap music was so tightly linked to urban experience that it was eventually regarded as “a subculture of American music, of American culture, and of black America.”¹³⁵ The term subculture is used here to designate the generation of Black and Latino youth who grew up in the post-civil rights era and created the hip-hop movement. Obviously, hip-hop culture does not describe all African and Latino-Americans experiences or that of all urban youth. Thus, while the notion of a subculture can be used to express the reality of African-American and Hispanic peoples in the United States, it is employed here to represent an even smaller community within the Black and Latino populations. Rap music was influential in the formation of urban youth identity by making the subculture visible. This visibility was both symbolic and literal. Symbolically, rap stood for the sense of empowerment it gave to young people who needed to identify with each other and society at large. Literally, rap provided what Pough identifies as a spectacle, which young people needed as the first step to being heard. As Pough argues:

¹³⁵ Perry, 194.

“for a historically marginalized and invisible group, *the spectacle* is what allows them a point of entry into a public space that has proved to be violent and exclusionary.”¹³⁶

Interestingly, the spectacle is also what allows the gestures and styles of a culture to be commodified and absorbed by the mainstream. Therefore, rap music was, and continues to be, the defining element of hip-hop culture.

With music, came the inevitability of dancing. Break-dancing originated as a style of physical expression propelled by hip-hop music. Break-dancers, or B-boys and B-girls, characteristically dress in athletic clothing and sneakers and take turns flaunting their moves – the dancers contort their bodies into elaborate martial arts and gymnastic-inspired poses and spins to the beat of hip-hop music. Spurred by hip-hop beats blasting from portable stereos, youths relied on their dance moves to battle on flattened cardboard boxes laid out on street corners. The terms “break-boy,” “break-girl,” and “break-dancer” derive from the thirty-second percussion “break” section DJs mix into a song to signal a dancing “break-down.” As Katrina Hazzard-Donald describes, “hip hop dance can be characterized in three stages; waack, breakdancing, and rap dance” and “is clearly masculine in style.”¹³⁷ In time, women also began to break-dance, but as with rap music, this element of hip-hop was male dominated.¹³⁸ Breaking has been described as influenced by capoeira,¹³⁹ typically performed by Brazilian dance troupes, and by the success of Kung-Fu movies.

¹³⁶ Pough, 29.

¹³⁷ Katrina Hazzard-Donald, “Dance in Hip Hop Culture.” Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 225.

¹³⁸ I discuss women’s participation in graffiti writing in chapter three.

¹³⁹ “The capoeira fighting art, which closely visually resembles dancing, emphasizes the use of elaborate windmills and sweeping kicks as standard attacks. This martial art was reportedly used frequently by African slaves revolting against their masters in Brazil.” Yaponidjan, 31.

If rap music became the most celebrated and commercially profitable element of hip-hop culture, then break-dancing fell at the opposite end of the spectrum. Break-dancing was, and today continues to be, an influential part of hip-hop culture; however, it is simply more profitable to sell music than to sell dance. Nonetheless, break-dancing stood as the signifier of style in hip-hop's early days. While today hip-hop fashion is a profitable industry characterized by flashy suits, opulent gold or silver jewels, baseball caps and visors, as well as oversized t-shirts and pants with huge logos, in the early days, hip-hop clothing was simpler. The style was typified by running shoes with large laces, tracksuits, bomber jackets, and sleeveless undershirts. While rap music provided urban youth with a voice, break-dancing signalled identifiable manners in which to move and dress. In short, more than a dance style, break-dancing was key in the development of an attitude associated with hip-hop culture. Break-dancing was critical, since "speakers, turntables, mixers and the inevitable array of breakdancers nurtured rap's public roots and its reclamation of public space."¹⁴⁰ It too was instrumental in the creation of a public spectacle as a way of gaining space in the urban sphere.

That a youth movement would be fuelled by modes of expression accessible and often driven or made popular by music, dance, and fashion seems relatively straightforward, but what was graffiti's role in this? Why is writing so often coupled with the culture of hip-hop? Graffiti was adopted as one of the elements of hip-hop because: a) genealogically, it has been linked with territorial gang graffiti, and gangs, in turn, are associated with the South Bronx and the birthplace of hip-hop; b) stylistically, graffiti visually renders the energy and impulsiveness of hip-hop and likewise hip-hop

¹⁴⁰ William Eric Perkins, "The Rap Attack: An Introduction." Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 10.

appropriates pop culture imagery; c) historically, both cultures blossomed at the same time in NYC; d) ethnically, as I argued earlier, it has been incorrectly stipulated that adherents of both cultures are primarily Black and Hispanic – even though the writing culture was always ethnically diverse;¹⁴¹ e) practically, each cultural form can be interpreted as a tool for identity negotiation and self-assertion; and f) commercially, graffiti fits perfectly into the marketing of hip-hop culture, which “became an umbrella term used in the press and commercial media for New York City urban youth culture.”¹⁴² In reality, the link between hip-hop culture and the culture of graffiti writing is largely symbolic. In hip-hop’s early days however, “writing became a global youth art movement in part through its broadcast connections to hip-hop [...] By the early 1980s, hip-hop congealed as a mass-marketed commodity, and in publicizing that commodity, the links between rap, break dancing, and writing were solidified.”¹⁴³ Therefore, although graffiti writing was a subculture, its framing as an element of hip-hop facilitated its entry into the mainstream.

While the elements of hip-hop all originated in a localized setting, those participating in the culture of writing were at best tangentially involved with the hip-hop scene. Although both cultures evolved in the same city and period, they are otherwise distinct. As graffiti writer VULCAN explains, “this [graffiti] culture stood alone before hip-hop was established. Writing had its own life, its own hierarchy, and its own stars [...] Writing may be an element of hip-hop, but hip-hop is not necessarily an element of

¹⁴¹ As Michael Walsh notes: “A popular myth created by the media is that most graffiti writers come from poor urban areas. This is not true. An estimated half of the graffiti writers in the U.S. come from white middle and upper middle-class families.” 11.

¹⁴² Miller, 162.

¹⁴³ Austin, 204.

writing.”¹⁴⁴ Graffiti writer CRASH argues further, “the music, the art, and the dance didn’t go hand in hand, but they emerged at the same time. We wore sneakers because we had to run from the police in the lay-ups, and we wore hoods because it was cold out.”¹⁴⁵ Of course some graffiti writers were involved in both hip-hop and writing, but, generally speaking, the idea of “hip-hop graffiti,” while a commonly used phrase, is founded on a fabricated reality. The commonalities between these cultures, especially in terms of their “approach to rhythm, color, style, multiple naming [...] and the creation of a culture of resistance to official narratives,”¹⁴⁶ have been defended in the literature; however, the simplistic link between graffiti and hip-hop is often taken for granted, thus negating the distinctive nature of each.

The key components of hip-hop all depend on a synthesis of already established cultural forms. While hip-hop culture emerged as a form of “resistance to poverty and oppression,” and in due course became “a way of life” for some urban youth, each element is fundamentally rooted in cultural appropriation. Consequently, each element of hip-hop is grounded in a re-shaping, re-formulation, or re-invention of pre-existing practices.

Rap music stems from a fusion of “African and African American oral and musical traditions, specifically African griots and storytellers [...] slave songs and spirituals, jazz and R&B.”¹⁴⁷ Hip-hop dance, namely break-dancing, descends from African-American, African, West Indian, and Latino styles of movement. In fact, a careful investigation of break-dancing reveals its “precedents in early African-rooted

¹⁴⁴ As quoted in Miller, 165.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 164.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Pough, 6.

forms like the jitterbug and rumba” and in martial arts dance forms.¹⁴⁸ Finally, signature graffiti writing is often associated with the street graffiti that, since the 1950s, was used by Black and Latino gangs to proclaim their territory. While rap music and hip-hop dance are rooted in African-American and Latino cultures, graffiti’s genealogy is more elusive. As graffiti culture evolved, especially via subway trains, it “developed into a more elaborate communications network with its own codes of behavior and aesthetics.”¹⁴⁹ For this reason, I analyze graffiti’s genealogy more closely in order to explain the process of how it became included as one of hip-hop’s central elements, even though no clearly identifiable African-American or Latino traditions can be readily ascertained.

As urban youth embraced and rearticulated pre-existing traditions through the four constituents of hip-hop, they created a culture of innovation that responded to their worldview. The limited materials available to marginalized, urban youth coupled with the wealth of Caribbean, Hispanic, and African customs and cultural conventions formed the foundation of hip-hop culture. Urban youth “worked with the scraps they were given and developed a rich and vibrant culture and youth movement.”¹⁵⁰ The “scraps” in this case do not refer to cultural but rather financial resources. With minimal funds and maximal energy and creativity, urban youth still managed to assert their voices. In the 1970s, hip-hop began as a response to an unjust and exclusionary socio-political system and with time developed into a system of its own. This system – this culture – however, unfolded autonomously and yet paralleled mainstream culture. Nonetheless, at its core, hip-hop culture was about resisting oppression, gaining a voice, and reclaiming public space.

¹⁴⁸ Guevara, 50-1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 50.

¹⁵⁰ Pough, 7.

Instead of using “postmodernist strategies, which emphasize the dismantling and breaking up of traditions,” the youth of the hip-hop generation used “African-derived, predominantly working-class forms to synthesize existing fragments together into a seamless whole.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, hip-hop’s tactic of fusing a variety of cultural elements functioned as a strategy for resistance.

The Promise of Hip-Hop

“While progressive hip-hop culture functions as the voice of resistance for America’s black youth, it also provides a blueprint for the possibilities of social change.”

-Shawn A. Ginwright¹⁵²

Hip-hop’s socio-political roots, its mandate of autonomy, and the aspiration of its participants to produce new modes of expression out of already established ones, created a meaningful, engaging, and innovative culture. In order to counter the trend of classifying graffiti as an element of hip-hop, the characteristics that empower writers and provide them with personal and collective tools for identity negotiation are specifically addressed in the following chapter. This section examines hip-hop culture – graffiti excluded – as an identity-building force for Black and Latino youth.

The impact of a youth-initiated movement on a young person’s sense of self and community is tremendous when considering the development of cultural identity. In the simplest terms, a cultural identity is based on an association or kinship with a group of people with whom s/he shares “language, territorial location, class position in the social

¹⁵¹ Miller, 34.

¹⁵² Ginwright, 132.

fabric, common history and so on.”¹⁵³ A sense of identity derives not only from one’s sense of self, but is also largely dependant on our sense of others. As Homi Bhabha argues, we require a perceived tangible difference, an Other, from which we can distinguish ourselves, in order to have reassurance in who we are and of our position in the world.¹⁵⁴ He contends that by creating a stereotype of the Other, we are able to hide the lack of stability of our own identities. Hence, we need an embodied Other to assert the magnitude of our existence. Cultural traditions are resources that connect us to a community and this community can only be conceptualized in relation to its difference from another community. Given that history is an ongoing process, identity is also in a constant state of production. The nature of cultural identity is therefore problematic since it is essentially in flux.

According to Stuart Hall, there are two distinct ways one can conceptualize the meaning of cultural identity. The first mode defines identity in terms of a collectively shared self which reflects the “common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning.”¹⁵⁵ This definition argues that a true cultural self necessarily derives from a group’s common history. The second approach to cultural identity is one that acknowledges history’s constant changeability. This position recognizes that while history has unified people in terms of shared experience, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the

¹⁵³ Ticio Escobar, “Identity and Myth Today.” The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory. Eds. Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, and Ziauddin Sardar. London and New York: Continuum, 2002, 146.

¹⁵⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism.” The Location of Culture. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1994. 64-88.

¹⁵⁵ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 22.

narratives of the past.”¹⁵⁶ Therefore, what we have become surpasses what we were historically. In terms of hip-hop, cultural identity is measured in relation to a sense of inclusion within a historically, socially, politically and economically distinct group. As Ginwright explains, “hip-hop culture is central to conceptualizing black youth identity because it is an essential pathway to understanding their struggles, realities, and possibilities.”¹⁵⁷ In other words, identity is perforce connected to one’s background.

The promise of hip-hop to motivate urban youth in a creative, empowering, and engaging manner was, to an extent, fulfilled. As an alternative approach to negotiating the dominant culture, hip-hop reclaimed a communal voice for urban youth. The culture of hip-hop “has produced many positive identities for urban youth faced with gang warfare, drugs, and inadequate schools.”¹⁵⁸ Rap music, for example, especially at the start, promoted open discourse.¹⁵⁹ Break-dancing still encourages a non-violent form of battle that allows youth to develop their dance skills in a healthy arena of competition. During the 1970s, these elements worked together to empower inner-city youth and create hope for their futures, making hip-hop culture “a sort of integrated cultural process which both tapped into and transcended environment.”¹⁶⁰ As the children of those who aspired for change through the Civil Rights Movement, the originators of hip-hop who were well acquainted with neglect and frustration imagined this culture as essential in the creation of a space for the expression of their experiences. Indeed, with time, hip-hop

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹⁵⁷ Ginwright, 34.

¹⁵⁸ Miller, 72.

¹⁵⁹ Even though today’s hip-hop music is often “perceived as profane, sexual, misogynous, degrading, socially deviant, and politically incorrect it has great social influence and appeal among adolescents. Therefore, it has the ability to directly and indirectly serve as a cultural and educational tool, as well as a form of self-expression, for urban adolescents.” Yapondijan, 15.

¹⁶⁰ Ferrell, 6.

culture “became an umbrella term used in the press and commercial media for New York City urban youth culture.”¹⁶¹ As media attention was lavished on the hip-hop scene and its dance and musical styles were taken up by the mainstream, graffiti, in turn, was deprived of its own history as it too was regarded underneath the hip-hop umbrella.

2.2: Kings Get Up with Style

Writing graffiti in the urban environment is motivated by a multitude of desires: to express oneself by disregarding the laws governing sanctioned locations for personal expression; to leave a mark on the urban terrain; and to feel a part of something or someplace. Although recognizing that “writing culture has never been static or singular and never, in the end, truly definable,”¹⁶² this section references ethnographic data about the graffiti culture during the 1970s and 1980s that traces certain patterns and traditions. While not every graffiti writer has followed the same path, deploying existing academic research that has used graffiti writers’ own words to describe the culture as meaningfully as possible, facilitates the delineation of certain truths. The most pertinent of these truths is contingent on a common ambition “to be the best [graffiti writer], the most famous, the most respected,” and ultimately to instil in oneself “a strong self-concept.”¹⁶³ Previous research about graffiti writing indicates that it emerged as a youth culture that served as an alternative to gang membership, a system that responded to the creative and social needs of urban youth, and an avenue for building identity.

¹⁶¹ Miller, 162.

¹⁶² Austin, 61.

¹⁶³ Macdonald, 92.

Making a name for oneself by writing graffiti is motivated by the search for peer recognition, status, and fame. Recognizing that by writing their names on city walls, young people could create a street identity for themselves and get respect for it by their peers, graffiti writers became enthralled with their new pastime. As writers began to mimic one another's work and graffiti writing saturated the cityscape, it quickly became organized, formalized, and skill-demanding. Eventually it was clear, as Craig Castleman writes, that "style, form and methodology, major concerns of most writers, are secondary in significance to the prime directive in graffiti: 'getting up.'"¹⁶⁴ In order to become famous within the graffiti writing culture a writer first has to get up, or write their tag to the point of saturation. This criterion is essential if a graffiti writer aspires to gain and maintain a reputation within the culture. Once recognized through the stylized writing of their nickname, graffiti writers must frequently earn status by writing prolifically and by displaying skill. This path to fame suggests that ultimately graffiti writers abide by stylistic and ideological rules that mimic those of mainstream culture. This similarity is especially revealing in their quest for fame.

In the section that follows, I explore the structure of New York Style graffiti and the formal and technical aspects of writing, as they existed during the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, gang graffiti, the politics of style, and the significance of the name in the evolution of signature graffiti is investigated. Next, a formal visual analysis of writing exposes a space for graffiti in art historical discourse. Finally, the politics of graffiti from within the subculture are underlined in order to discuss the notion of fame. The foremost

¹⁶⁴ Castleman, 19.

objective of this section is to explain the genealogical, stylistic, material, and ideological aspects of the graffiti writing subculture.

While this art movement may be the “only art form ever developed by youth,”¹⁶⁵ it is also the only art form that focuses primarily on the signature as an art object. Traditional graffiti writing subcultures continue to operate in a number of cities throughout the world based on their own codes of conduct and predominantly outside of institutional frameworks. The art historical perspective enhances the sociological and anthropological studies that have already contextualized much of graffiti research. The implications and consequences of framing graffiti within art history service both graffiti research and the discipline of art history. Graffiti writing deserves a sustained level of inquiry within a discipline that evaluates context, socio-political and cultural history, as well as the work itself as relevant towards a critical understanding of graffiti’s functions and implications within the cultural landscape of a city.

Formal, Material, and Technical Aspects

“Owing to graffiti’s illegality, writers learned to paint quickly. The reason that writers use spray cans for anything beyond a small tag, is that the spray can, easily concealable and portable, can cover a large area quickly, yet with control.”

-Steve Grody¹⁶⁶

The basic formal elements of New York Style graffiti that depict the writer’s signature are known as tags, throw-ups, and pieces. The rendition of each of these forms asserts the writer’s graffiti identity, one that is paradoxically, largely centred on

¹⁶⁵ James Prigoff “Forward” in Steve Grody, Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art. New York: Abrams, 2006, 7.

¹⁶⁶ Grody, 43.

anonymity. Writers frequently refer to and recognize each other solely by their nicknames, often not knowing each other's given names. This constitutes a unique dynamic between authorship and anonymity. On the one hand, writers' graffiti names allow them to move through a city anonymously. On the other hand, what graffiti writers actually do – write their nicknames in the cityscape – is an act of authorship. The formal, material, and technical aspects that together have typified the New York Style of graffiti writing are discussed below.

The tag: the earliest, simplest, and most elemental form of graffiti writing is a quickly executed, monochromatic rendering of the writer's graffiti name. Tagging is the expected point of departure for a graffiti career as it represents "his/her 'roots,' the credentials that make him/her a writer."¹⁶⁷ A graffiti tag tends to be a pseudonym that the writer devises or acquires. Early tags were frequently a combination of the writer's real name and their street address. In this way, others knew not only whether the writer was male or female, but also which neighbourhood they resided in. When TAKI 183, JULIO 204, EVA 62, ELSIE 137 and other early taggers were bombing NYC, they were neither preoccupied with style, nor technique. Although tags have nowadays become complex and abstract, in the 1970s they were clearly written and could be read by anyone. By the 1980s, tags looked more like logos, each "about as individual as the writer's handwriting."¹⁶⁸ Along with stylistic developments, writers also gradually moved away from the traditional "name – street number" approach to choosing names that would be visually gripping when pieced and that would not aid the police in tracking them. Thus as tagging evolved, taggers progressively became more concerned with formalism versus

¹⁶⁷ Macdonald, 75.

¹⁶⁸ Castleman, 26.

the representation of one's moniker and neighbourhood affiliation. Sometimes names appeared as nonsensical words whose letters worked well together or words appropriated from popular culture. Choosing a name could also be a strategy to convey an attitude or describe how writers wanted to represent themselves within the subculture. As writer PHASE 2 contends: "your signature is your identity. Being an individual is very important."¹⁶⁹ Indeed, a personally stylized tag is the first step to affirming a writer's identity within the graffiti subculture.¹⁷⁰

Furthermore, writers would ordinarily write more than one tag name, "switching between them when they tire of one, when they develop a style that is suited only to one of them, or when they write one so often that it has become 'hot' (the police are looking for the holder of the name)."¹⁷¹ Switching between tag names – name-switching – or decreasing the number of letters in one's tag – letter-dropping – is both a method of self-protection and a tool for stylistic innovation. Switching names gives writers a fresh combination of letters to explore and contort, while dropping letters from their names offers writers the luxury of time to make their name more visually compelling.

Tagging is usually executed excessively at a frenetic pace as a way of publicizing oneself. To this end, taggers maximize their legacy through overexposure. Tagging is a kind of personal ad, which is not only an assertion of being, but also a method of popularizing a name within the culture of writing. As graffiti writers KENO and SON I explain, taggers "have to write their names at least a thousand times before they can

¹⁶⁹ As quoted in Miller, 50.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 82.

¹⁷¹ Castleman, 75.

expect to be noticed by other writers.”¹⁷² Many graffiti writers regard the tag as an entry-level enterprise, which establishes the writer on the scene. As writer WICKED GARY asserts, “the more you write your name, the more you begin to think about and the more you begin to be about who you are. Once you start doing that, you start to assert your individualism and when you do that, you have an identity.”¹⁷³ Because it is not an intensely challenging form of graffiti, “tagging carries the least status.”¹⁷⁴ Still, some people remain taggers for their entire graffiti careers while others, after sufficient exposure, graduate to the creation of more complex, colourful, and skill-demanding pieces.

As author Nancy Macdonald suggests, through the diffusion of their graffiti name writers access a secondary self.¹⁷⁵ The writer’s real name becomes reserved for all of the tasks and responsibilities associated with the writer’s non-graffiti life, while graffiti colleagues and the citizens of a city identify the writer by their tag. Thus, the self accommodates two self-contained personas: one real life and the other subcultural. The subcultural-self permits the writer to partake in a subculture that is expressed in the midst of mainstream culture. As writer STYLO describes, even if those not part of the graffiti subculture do not attach the same meaning to the graffiti they encounter, for writers “if you paint somewhere and you go back there, you feel like you belong...there’s a bit of you there.”¹⁷⁶ This sense of belonging is key in a subculture where the participants are at once celebrated and incognito.

¹⁷² Ibid, 21.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 76.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 29.

¹⁷⁵ Macdonald, 195.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 194.

With the advent of more taggers from the mid-1970s onwards, writers realized that in order to get noticed they had to develop their tags both in colour and in size. Originally describing pieces that “were badly colored, sloppy, and poorly conceived,”¹⁷⁷ throw-ups eventually came to define a new development in the graffiti form. Essentially larger versions of tags consisting of outlined letters that are grouped together and sometimes filled in with a different colour, throw-ups are rendered or “thrown up” on a wall in a brisk manner. When executing a throw-up, writers tend to use the crack fill¹⁷⁸ application of spray-paint which involves the quick spraying of a thin layer of paint to create a meandering pattern that echoes the letters’ shapes. The letters are typically outlined in a different colour and some drop shadows may also be added. If time permits, an additional outline in a third colour can be included to make the throw-up stand out.

Throw-ups “like the tag, are relatively simple and demand little evidence of artistic ability.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, like tags, throw-ups are essentially about numbers, since “the question of style is never raised with throw-ups.”¹⁸⁰ They represent another manifestation of the writer’s name that appropriates more space, thus making the writer increasingly visible within the subculture. Ambitious writers sometimes:

use a wider, yet still limited, spectrum of chromatic combinations [for their throw-ups]; including patterns, modulations and highlights; construct more complex outlines; build simple three-dimensional effects; and sometimes spray paint zones around their work as a way to make their name stand out.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Castleman, 61.

¹⁷⁸ The fill always refers to the interior space of a piece. It is the base colour, which is later outlined.

¹⁷⁹ Macdonald, 77.

¹⁸⁰ Castleman, 31.

¹⁸¹ Gauthier, 160.

“Bubble-letters”¹⁸² characterized the early throw-ups that began to appear around 1972. Because throw-ups are larger than tags and are more time consuming, one throw-up has the same street value as a number of tags.

Typically, only those who are recognized as prolific writers with artistic talent meet the greater challenge of producing pieces. Short for masterpieces, these large, colourful, elaborate, and stylistically challenging works require an even greater amount of time to create and typically earn a writer the most respect. As opposed to tags and throw-ups, these works are assessed on the basis of quality and technical expertise. Pieces are like murals; whether on a wall or the outside of a subway car, they sometimes convey a message and combine words with characters (fig. 20). Before attempting a piece, writers spend copious hours planning. The organization required for the execution of a large, illegal mural has writers preparing “sketches beforehand, carefully outlining the piece, drawing the characters, and noting the color scheme.”¹⁸³ The type of surfaces chosen for pieces is imperative since a wall’s condition affects the quality of the work.

Usually writers begin a piece by priming the wall with light coloured house paint. Prepping the wall in this way not only makes sense economically, but it is also vital aesthetically. Economically, a coat of house paint impedes the absorption of expensive spray-paint by old walls. Aesthetically, a coat of paint provides writers with a monochromatic backdrop, it outlines the piece, and it “allows the writers to spray paint sharper, cleaner lines.”¹⁸⁴ Pieces are typically composed of a number of colours and appear in a variety of styles. In the production of legal pieces, writers have a propensity

¹⁸² Typically used for throw-ups, bubble letters are intertwined and rounded to appear like balloons or bubbles. Sometimes this style is referred to as the “softie” style.

¹⁸³ Cooper and Chalfant, 32.

¹⁸⁴ Ferrell, 78.

to employ the solid fill method of paint application, which consists of an evenly distributed colour patch. If they desire a foggy effect, the writers utilize the smoke fill, which makes the letters appear cloudy or vaporous. To create a piece, writers have to be skilled at painting details and at blending the paint to produce shadowy or faded borders. A well-executed piece often prompts other writers to leave short messages along with their tags around it. Likewise, an admired style is habitually “praised through plagiarism,”¹⁸⁵ a practice scorned by most writers who revere originality.

Eventually, writers improving on each other’s innovations, created technically challenging and stylistically innovative pieces that both grew in size and led to the beginnings of “style wars.”¹⁸⁶ A writer’s individual style became a route to fame and aside from quantity provided writers a new category through which they could “outdo each other in terms of color and design.”¹⁸⁷ Pieces today remain extremely complex works of art.

Some writers, especially in the 1970s, invented names for their personal styles, some of which are still employed today. The most commonly known styles are: the bubble letter style named by PHASE 2; the “3-D letter”¹⁸⁸ style designed by PISTOL I “wildstyle,” its origins debated,¹⁸⁹ and the “computer rock” or “mechanical”¹⁹⁰ style.

¹⁸⁵ Miller, 114.

¹⁸⁶ Style wars are graffiti battles whereby writers aim to outdo each other through innovative techniques. The purpose is to determine who is the most creative and whose style is superior.

¹⁸⁷ Castleman, 56-7.

¹⁸⁸ The 3-D style, as the name suggests, uses three-dimensionality to add effect to basic or wildstyle letters.

¹⁸⁹ As Ivor Miller notes, “Wild Style was a writer’s crew in the 1970s led by TRACY 168. The term has since been adopted widely by writers to denote complicated lettering forms developed by many innovators throughout the course of the aerosol movement.” 197.

¹⁹⁰ The computer rock style is a wildstyle that looks “digital” – as though the letters were printed by a computer.

“Blockbuster”¹⁹¹ letters, also quite common, are typically not accompanied by images, and are easy to read, squarish, huge, two or three-dimensional letters.

Wildstyle came to designate energetic pieces with interlocked, highly stylized letters. Although virtually unreadable, especially to non-writers, wildstyle pieces usually have a phrase in quotation marks towards the bottom, which legibly repeats the pseudo-letters above. Wildstyle letters are characterized by their ruptured, interwoven, or twisted appearance, and are enhanced by arrows, lines that give the style a sense of movement, as well as an assortment of items that highlight parts of the design. The illusion that the stylized letters are in motion is part of the energy expressed through graffiti. Commenting on wildstyle lettering, writer LEE expresses: “it’s not words, it’s not a name anymore. It’s more of a living thing that you have created, because every letter has a character to itself.”¹⁹² This style is usually reserved for skilled writers who can fashion their names to appear as though they have been “put into a typographic blender that has crushed, sliced, stretched, and reshaped the letters, and then sprayed them onto the side of a moving train.”¹⁹³ Wildstyle reconstructs the alphabet in countless ways and provides writers with a sort of secret language. As author Ivor Miller contends, with wildstyle: “the ability to tear apart and rebuild the structure of a Roman letter is paramount.”¹⁹⁴ In the development of letterforms that are illegible, sometimes even to writers other than the artist, the graffiti culture has successfully constructed a visual language that while performed in the cityscape, is reserved for and fuels the subculture. Essentially, in the early years, it was through a sort of stylistic competition that writers “tested the limits of

¹⁹¹ Blockbuster letters often tilt and are typically rendered in two colours. These letters do well to cover a large number of smaller pieces.

¹⁹² As quoted in Miller, 39.

¹⁹³ Austin, 112.

¹⁹⁴ Miller, 16.

their aesthetic prowess until the letters they used became abstracted”¹⁹⁵ and until a specialized visual language arose.

In addition to stylistic effects, some legal or commissioned works are also categorized as theme, memorial, and dedication pieces. All three are prone to be collaborative efforts because of their scale and because their subject matters typically affect multiple writers. Theme pieces differ from regular pieces since they are generally set within an imagined or real, yet distant, location, or celebrate an event. As the name suggests, memorial pieces pay tribute to a deceased friend or family member and are characterized by a representation of that person’s name juxtaposed with religious symbolism such as angels, clouds, or crosses. Finally, dedication pieces are ordinarily addressed to friends and other writers as marks of respect. A collection of “shout-outs”¹⁹⁶ often appear in juxtaposition to a piece, which more than simply giving respect to individual writers or crews, also reveals the names of those who belong, and consequently those who do not, to a given social group of writers.

Markers and spray-paint were the materials most widely used in early graffiti production. Spray-paint is a fitting medium for the dissemination of graffiti because not only is it portable, affordable, and available in a wide variety of colours, it also reflects writing’s urgency. Since writers work under pressure, typically constrained by time, they found an otherwise commercial paint medium that they both appropriated and transformed. The spray-paint can, currently an archetypal symbol of graffiti, is modified by writers to serve as both paint and brush. Nozzles or “caps”¹⁹⁷ are imperative to graffiti

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 119.

¹⁹⁶ Shout outs are typically lists of names which function to acknowledge or thank someone.

¹⁹⁷ Caps or tips are fitted onto spray-cans and determine the width of the spray.

production because they, like paintbrushes, allow for varying thickness of line. Initially removed from other aerosol products such as household cleaners and hairsprays and affixed to paint cans, caps specifically designed for graffiti writers are now widely available. “Fat” and “skinny” caps are staples for any dedicated writer. As the name indicates, fat caps, sometimes called softballs, emit a thick, soft, or fat spray and are habitually employed to fill in throw-ups or parts of pieces. Skinny caps on the other hand produce thin or skinny lines and are relegated to the precise work of detailing. As writers work with the spray-paint medium and experiment with caps, they become skilled at calculating the appropriate distance to put between themselves and the wall in order to create the perfect drip-less line. When writers master the speed of paint application and are able to execute crisp lines, they have successfully achieved “can control.” Since spray-paint is a difficult medium with which to work, most writers begin by practicing and perfecting their names on paper. Krylon brand spray-paint is most popular amongst graffiti writers because it has the widest variety of vibrant colours and it dries very quickly. In the early days, some writers preferred Red Devil and Rustoleum brand paints for their quality. Sometimes writers utilize cheaper paint to do fill-in work in large pieces; generally, however, Krylon brand is as indispensable a tool as spray nozzles.

“Racking up,” “boosting,” or shoplifting spray-paint was a tradition amongst writers in NYC. Although stealing materials is not necessarily practiced by writers in other urban centres, in New York, especially during graffiti’s early days, racking up was the most common method of acquiring paint.¹⁹⁸ Shoplifting spray-paint is habitually a team effort, and frequently “those who are best at it will often take more paint than they

¹⁹⁸ Jeff Ferrell argues: “despite the legends of “racking” (stealing) paint among graffiti artists in New York City and elsewhere, most Denver graffiti artists purchase the spray paint which they use.” 66.

can use, selling the excess to other writers who are less skilled at stealing or more timid about it.”¹⁹⁹ Today, specialty graffiti stores like Sub V in Montreal,²⁰⁰ stock a much wider variety of spray-paint than hardware stores. Writers shop at such stores for the availability of specialized and diverse graffiti products that are not otherwise widely obtainable.

Apart from spray-paint, writers also use wide-tip or fat-tip markers. Markers are silent and easily concealable, dry faster, are easier to control and quicker to use, emit fewer fumes, and, as such enable writers to be more discrete when disseminating tags. Like spray-paint cans, markers are often tailored to meet a desired effect. Markers that are cut diagonally, as opposed to those with a rounded tip, are especially popular because calligraphically they allow writers to produce a sharper tag. The ability to control a marker effectively in order to accomplish an aesthetically pleasing tag is referred to as “handskills.”

In addition to spray-paint and markers, another staple material for writers is the sketchbook. Called “piecebooks” or “blackbooks” these hardcover, leather-bound sketchbooks are used to sketch pieces that will be transferred onto subway trains or city walls. Piecebooks are also an invaluable way to record works that eventually disappear from public view. Moreover, they function as a writer’s portfolio and as a collective tool of creativity. Writers not only sign and draw in each other’s piecebooks, but they also collaborate on pieces together inside of one book. More than just a record of writers’ work and evidence of their skills, piecebooks “serve an important function in confirming the writer’s identity, in distinguishing him from others who might claim to ‘do

¹⁹⁹ Castleman, 47.

²⁰⁰ Sub V is located at 5666 Sherbrooke Street West in N.D.G., Montreal, Quebec.

graffiti.”²⁰¹ Blackbooks are thus essential, not only because they reveal a writer’s commitment to their art, but also because they function as educational reference tools.

The materials, techniques, and forms described here have, since the 1970s, dramatically evolved. They are so historically entrenched in the culture of writing, however, that even if no longer applied or considerably enhanced, they remain acknowledged as fundamental to the foundation of the subculture. Considered together, the material, formal, and technical aspects of writing are rebellious. Illegality aside, the elements used to construct graffiti’s visual vocabulary function as a form of resistance. The creation of a graffiti identity, primarily through the dissemination of a tag, is not only a form of camouflage; it also identifies the writer’s “inclusion in a culture with a defiant stance toward the surrounding society.”²⁰² The reconstruction of the alphabet, the use of spray-paint instead of paint brushes, and the proliferation of names that are meaningful only to those who participate in their diffusion, all point to the fact that the culture of writing rebels, like some contemporary art, against traditional or established art forms and modes of communication.

Graffiti’s Genealogy

“Graffiti writers are urban shamans, and the streets are our modern day caves!”

-CRAYONE²⁰³

In studies that have been conducted specifically on New York Style graffiti, authors trace a similar lineage. They first argue that there are “natural, symbolic, and

²⁰¹ Ferrell, 69.

²⁰² Miller, 57.

²⁰³ As quoted in Walsh, 1.

ritual forces at work in modern graffiti art”²⁰⁴ traceable to 30,000 years ago with cave art. Second, they affirm that the practice of tagging started “when a Washington Heights teenager named Demetrius first started writing his nickname, Taki, and his street number, 183, on walls, stoops, public monuments, and especially in subway stations all over Manhattan.”²⁰⁵ Both of these claims regarding graffiti’s ancestry actually obfuscate the reasons urban youth choose this form of expression. The principle goal for this subsection is, therefore, to unravel graffiti’s visual tradition in order to trace its genealogy.

The practice of writing on walls, of course, has a long and varied history. Writing any form of graffiti, whether it be a political, personal, or religious responds to a variety of social needs. Expression through words, symbols, or figures on city walls can be a reaction against oppression, an anonymous way to feel heard, an act of personal or group empowerment, a mode of protestation, or a secret language. In one way or another, the graffiti writing phenomenon that took NYC by storm from the 1970s onwards, encompasses all of these needs. Michael Walsh contends that writing graffiti fulfils another, politically motivated desire: “the emergent meaning of graffiti takes on its historical identity [...] as an act of creative (and destructive) ritual transgression against a repressive political-economic order.”²⁰⁶ Walsh notes that writing graffiti is a ritually and symbolically empowering statement against the institutionalization of urban culture. He reasons that the destructive act of writing graffiti, in the sense that it “destroys” the homogeneity of public space and ownership, gives power to marginalized individuals. With graffiti, writers destroy the idea of private property in the public sphere – an idea

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 1.

²⁰⁵ Castleman, 53.

²⁰⁶ Walsh, 1.

constructed and maintained by a capitalist value system. Walsh's views on the meaning of and motivation for graffiti writing are engaging and indeed similar to my own about the post-graffiti movement.²⁰⁷ However, since most graffiti writers, especially in the 1970s, were between the ages of twelve and fifteen, it is unlikely that they meditated on the power of their "transgressive ritual act."²⁰⁸ As a theoretical assessment, Walsh's argument is sound and certainly applies, especially today as many graffiti and post-graffiti artists are older and have benefited from retrospection or reflected on their motivations. Perhaps in the context of graffiti's early days however, given that some writers have expressed that they are attracted to graffiti because of a promised sense of belonging, a more fitting argument would be that many writers felt socially empowered through writing because it helped them define a cultural place for themselves within the community they created.

The graffiti writing that is most commonly linked with NYC actually developed in Philadelphia in the late 1960s.²⁰⁹ During this time, graffiti was largely associated with gangs whose members wrote graffiti in order to demarcate their territory, thus keeping their enemies at a distance. Hip-hop's agenda of public space reclamation and identity-assertion had the same ideals.²¹⁰ The connection between graffiti and gangs is unsurprising, especially since, as explained earlier, "writing emerged in an era when

²⁰⁷ As discussed in Chapter Four, "Street Art and the City."

²⁰⁸ Walsh, 3.

²⁰⁹ As Jack Stewart explains: "around 1965 graffiti began to appear in the ethnic and racially distinct neighborhoods of Philadelphia that were used in a way that had not generally been used before, and this led to a far greater difference in appearance a few years later in NYC." 179.

²¹⁰ Sacha Jenkins, "The Writing on the Wall: Graffiti Culture Crumbles into the Violence It Once Escaped." And It Don't Stop: The Best American Hip-hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years. Ed. Raquel Cepeda. New York: Faber and Faber, 2004, 290.

segregated gangs dominated social interactions among youths throughout the city.”²¹¹

The reliance on the name in gang wars was key, particularly since in its graffitied form, a gang’s name broke out of its traditionally small scale to become as intimidating as the warning it aimed to represent. Eventually some non-gang members started writing their names on city walls with the intention of garnering “fame and recognition throughout the neighborhood, whether it was from other writers, gangs, or girls.”²¹² These adolescents were not concerned with protecting their territory, but rather with acquiring or feeling part of new territory by marking it with their names. In NYC, graffiti had a similar history. Gang members and non-gang affiliated youth, like TAKI 183 and his imitators, wrote their names or nicknames on city walls to signify their presence. Almost instantly, graffiti writing, “with its own codes of behavior, secret gathering places, slang, and esthetic standards,”²¹³ became a lifestyle for hundreds of teenagers. Most early writers agree that in many ways graffiti was an alternative to gang membership and because of its movement onto subway trains, the practice of graffiti writing helped dissolve the prevalence of street gangs, making them irrelevant by 1973 or 74.²¹⁴ Eventually, the popular press started to take notice of writing, and articles, such as *The New York Times* 1971 feature “TAKI 183 Spawns Pen Pals” began to appear.²¹⁵ Until this article was published, graffiti as a movement in New York was virtually unknown to people outside of the hip-hop community. Most locals who took notice of graffiti assumed that it was gang-related. After the feature was published, many adolescents understood that TAKI’s

²¹¹ Miller, 112.

²¹² Gastman, Rowland, and Sattler, 49.

²¹³ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 13.

²¹⁴ Stewart, 208.

²¹⁵ The article appeared on July 21, 1971 and briefly explained how this writer took advantage of his job as a courier to write his name all over NYC.

“wide-reaching celebrity meant that [as a writer] you would be recognized in your neighborhood as somebody – as an independent somebody, who had no obligation to no stinking gang.”²¹⁶ Thus, adding to the earlier assertion that hip-hop functions as an identity-building mechanism, writing graffiti also empowers and constructs identities for writers, with the critical distinction that it is against the law. By illegally marking their names in the spaces of a city, graffiti writers challenge the idea of designated places for expression. Writing graffiti, even if inwardly about a sense of identity and community, is outwardly about defiance.

In both popular and academic studies of traditional graffiti, one word continually surfaces – style. As evidenced by the discussion of graffiti’s formal elements, such as tags, throw-ups, and pieces, both authors and graffiti writers speak of style as a defining characteristic of graffiti production.²¹⁷ Writers consider style to be paramount because the hierarchies of the graffiti world – whether a writer is respected or not – are evidenced by the details of one’s personally stylized tag. A distinguishing visual style is “the single determining factor in how a writer is judged among his peers. Various writers may be known for other attributes such as can control or color palette, but without an inspired creative letter style, a writer will never be considered in the top tier.”²¹⁸ For graffiti writers, style equals skill and is inseparable from the name. It can lead either to fame or to obscurity within the community. How a name is written, how letters are represented and reshaped, the colours employed, and the flow of the design are all judged when appraising a writer’s style. Craig Castleman explains: “by demonstrating a good sense of

²¹⁶ Jenkins, 290.

²¹⁷ Style is an incredibly significant construct in the writing community, as reflected by the titles of two of the best known graffiti films (*Wild Style* and *Style Wars*), and one academic study (Jeff Ferrell’s *Crimes of Style*).

²¹⁸ Grody, 116.

design and a facility with the use of spray paint, a writer can win the esteem of other writers and even that of some members of the public.”²¹⁹ Hence, the question of style is just as critical as the act of getting up because matters of style essentially organize the subculture.

As increasing numbers of young people came to be recognized and gain notoriety for tagging throughout their city, graffiti became a competitive activity. As Ferrell notes, “new emphasis began to be placed on style, on ‘making your name sing’ among all those other names.”²²⁰ As a subculture, graffiti took shape when writers started decorating their names with popular culture icons and redesigning their tags with colours. As writers became noticed and respected within the graffiti scene, they would spend hours sketching designs and studying the work of others. A proficient style, especially if exhibited on a subway train, was highly respected as “true grace under pressure, and those who consistently get up with style are admired for both their skill and their bravery.”²²¹ Signature graffiti writing evolved as writers advanced their visual vocabulary largely through studying each other’s work.

A writer’s status and subcultural identity are rooted in the adherence to and development of the stylistic principles of graffiti writing. Moreover, style is also what defines the conflict between writers and authorities, since the graffiti style clashes and disrupts the otherwise controlled aesthetics of the cityscape. Fame, respect, and status are the driving forces as well as the real and immediate rewards of writing. As writers earn these, their self-concepts begin to change. The challenge that the graffiti subculture poses

²¹⁹ Castleman, 20.

²²⁰ Ferrell, 7.

²²¹ Castleman, 24.

– to get up, become recognized, and achieve fame – is enticing to young people who want to take part in a city’s visual culture. The common visual language shared by the members of this subculture, which is articulated through style, allows writers to embrace and invert letters to create an alternative culture of signs. Subcultural status and identity hinge not only on the amount of subcultural participation, but also on the formal quality of that participation.

The question of style is crucial to an understanding of hip-hop culture in general and particularly graffiti writing. Dick Hebdige’s 1979 text Subculture: The Meaning of Style continues to be an influential analysis of style as a form of subversion. Hebdige’s work focuses on marginal groups typically organized around age and class - punks, Rastafarians, “Teddy-boys,” mods, rockers, skinheads, and other British youth subcultures - whose style the author explains is a statement of “refusal,” or subversion, resistance, and opposition to the dominant order. Hebdige insists that more than simply resisting hegemony, subcultures hybridize styles by appropriating, displacing and assembling objects, images, and material culture available to them in the effort to construct identities that will confer on them “relative autonomy” within a social order. Hebdige analyzes styles of clothing, music, and speech and shows how, in general, these provide imaginary identifications for the groups who adopt them. Style, like culture, is forever in motion, as it is the point at which exchanges of cultural meaning take place. In his study, Hebdige demonstrates that members of subcultures challenge hegemony by drawing on the particular experiences and customs of their communities, creating “a ‘solution’ to a specific set of circumstances,”²²² thereby demonstrating that alternative

²²² Dick Hebdige, Subculture. 81.

realities can be constructed from the dominant order. According to Hebdige, subcultures must continually reinvent themselves to remain in opposition to the governing system.

This process of reinvention relies on strategies of appropriation and assemblage to create a new form of style. Indeed, as argued earlier, the culture of hip-hop has done just that. Hip-hop – a culture that has distanced itself from mainstream culture in order to represent a marginalized group of people – has created a hybrid style out of elements from popular culture – fashion, images, music, language, and attitudes. Hip-hop, using Hebdige’s ideas, can thus be described as a filtered or mediated response of a sizeable portion of New York’s Black and Latino communities to New York’s population at large. The graffiti subculture has also created a hybrid style out of popular culture forms, but the component parts of graffiti are distinctive, and the result is not the same as hip-hop. As explained earlier, graffiti’s cultural codes and membership differs from hip-hop’s. Graffiti references the practice of branding that overruns a city, as well as gang graffiti to create a mediated response to the authoritativeness of a city. In graffiti writing, the hegemony of style as a prefabricated commodity is replaced with styles constructed from a variety of cultural resources. As graffiti writers subvert the tools of mainstream visual culture to negotiate their own space within the cityscape, it becomes evident that style both defines graffiti in mainstream culture and in a parallel way it is a primary vehicle for the negotiation of status within the graffiti subculture. Hebdige has demonstrated that nuances of style and meaning lie at the very heart of individual and collective crime and deviance. As the author stipulates, the alternative styles devised by a subculture are also meant to pose a sort of threat to outsiders while empowering insiders.²²³ While style has

²²³ Dick Hebdige, “Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display.” *The Subcultures Reader*. Eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. London: Routledge. 1997, 402.

been analyzed as a valuable research topic in subcultural studies, it has not been thoroughly explored when looking at graffiti from the perspective of art history.

Graffiti writing not only creates a type of secret language that sustains the subculture, it also pivots on elements of art and design, which vivify this language. Writers employ a number of effects, symbols, and syntactical elements to enliven their signatures. In terms of effects, they commonly use chiaroscuro, the pull effect, highlighting, and overlapping. Chiaroscuro or fading, is a common visual technique in painting that creates areas of light and shadow by blending colours together. Pulling refers to a distortion of the pictorial space by stretching or exaggerating letters to create a sense of movement. Highlighting and overlapping the letters of a piece are effects used both to make the piece sparkle and to add to the cohesive interconnectedness of the lettering style. Writers also blend letterforms, outline their letters, and emphasize them by adding 3-D effects. Often letters overlap in a transparent manner and include bits of shine, sparkles, or cracks as accentuation. As for symbols, writers customarily paint stars, crowns, haloes, and arrows. The arrow is widely used in wildstyle to visually shape, provide direction, and move through the name. Stars, crowns, and haloes all imply celebrity, divinity, authority, knowledge, and power. While stars are most often decorative, crowns may indicate that writers are considered or consider themselves kings or queens. Still, as Louise Gauthier argues: “most writers do not associate any particular symbolic meaning to the names and images they use in their work.”²²⁴ In terms of syntactical elements, writers are fond of exclamation and quotation marks as well as underlining. Exclamation marks provide the name with a sense of volume or intensity;

²²⁴ Gauthier, 171.

quotation marks frame and emphasize the name; and underlining the name visually supports it, once again highlighting it.

In addition to these elements, writers are also interested in formal qualities such as line, texture, composition, mass, and colour. Modelling the letters allows the piece to figuratively move. Both a piece's dimension as well as its stylistic illusions contribute to the quality of the work. The formal differences between tagging and piecing determine the divergent criteria when analyzing a writer's style as a bomber or piecer. When judging both tags and pieces, writers criticize each other's styles by focusing on "originality of design, a smooth integration or flow of letters, brightness of color, smoothness of paint application [...] sharpness and accuracy of outlines, and the effective use of details."²²⁵ When analyzing the quality of a piece, writers pay particular attention to the use of highlights, shadows, fading, and three-dimensionality. They also deconstruct the trimmings such as characters, arrows, stars, and other graphic designs. However, the most significant aspect of a piece's quality is the use of letters. As one writer explains: "letters should stand on their own with no help of colours or elaborate techniques [...] colours and designs are secondary, focus in on the primary concept in graffiti and master your letter forms."²²⁶ The letters create the general design of the whole piece and should ideally represent energy. Whether merged, divided, or a combination of both, the letterforms essentially carry the piece. As Steve Grody notes: "letterforms are the springboard for formal and creative exploration."²²⁷ Stylistically successful letters are neat with drip-less outlines, sharp lines, and aesthetically pleasing connections. While

²²⁵ Castleman, 25.

²²⁶ As quoted in Macdonald, 82.

²²⁷ Grody, 70.

drips are typically seen as signs of inexperience, they are sometimes purposefully incorporated into a piece. Contemporary writers often employ both the “controlled drip” and the “painted drip” to imply chaos or sloppiness or to assert witty comments on their stylistic ability. If a writer’s technique is deemed poor, their work is criticized for having “bad style;” or, as noted earlier, if a writer’s style is truly unique it is reproduced and named in their honour. Apart from good control to produce high-quality lines or outlines, writers also pay particular attention to how the outline is filled in with paint. There are a number of fill forms used today but in early graffiti production the most common were free-form lines. Often the fill accentuates the letterforms; however, at times it is used to challenge the letters, as though the designs and colours inside the letters’ outlines stood in visual opposition to the letters themselves. Through a process of layering and expressionism, the signature becomes hidden. This sort of experimentation with letterforms continues today with the production of incredibly complex pieces that challenge both the medium and the method.

While the signature often exists unto itself, it is at times decorated with other representational elements. As mentioned earlier the use of cartoonish characters is rather prevalent in graffiti production. Characters are either spin-offs from existing mainstream cartoons or “caricatures of homeboys, street life, crew members, or the artists themselves.”²²⁸ Often when characters or graffiti apparatuses such as spray-cans or markers are added, they substitute the letters themselves. While writers draw from a number of influences, personal or commercial, they try to expand their techniques and

²²⁸ Ibid, 90.

designs with each execution – thus, re-establishing the characters as personalized, novel images.

Some exemplary pieces (fig. 21), situated in Montreal on the corner of Ste-Catherine Street and Bleury, were executed as part of the “Meeting of Styles” international festival that took place on September 1st and 2nd, 2007.²²⁹ A visual analysis of these pieces signals a number of similarities in terms of production, although different styles are employed. Both pieces are painted on a background of green, blue, grey, and brown. The writers would have then sprayed a loose sketch of their letters and filled them in with the main colour – in this case, green on top and a yellowish orange on the bottom. Both works employ the arrow form on a number of occasions, suggesting movement and expansion. In each case, the writers have outlined and bordered their pieces in two different colours to make the letters pop out. They have also created a three-dimensional illusion for their letters, especially visible in the upper piece. Although minimal, the author of the upper piece has included a tiny star, whose yellow colour is echoed in the “S” of the piece, thus creating a visual flow and balance. While the lower piece is more fluid in its elegantly stretched lines and letters, much like the upper piece, it incorporates subtle bits and cuts throughout the design. The addition of bits and cuts suggests that fragments of the letters are falling off; this device also works to visually emphasize the structure of letters in the overall design. Both writers aptly integrate their letters and create transparent overlaps between them, whereby one letter seamlessly blends into the next, creating uniformity. Both writers have also made minimal use of a colour, which does not otherwise figure in their pieces, to suggest that all the letters are threaded

²²⁹ www.mosmtl.com This website includes photos and information about all Meeting of Styles international festivals.

together – red in the upper piece and aqua blue in the lower. The author of the lower piece has added a subtle shine to the edges of some letters, which makes the letterforms sparkle. Furthermore, one small drip has been painted onto the first “S,” as an ironic commentary on the quality of the writer’s work. Taken together, as Steve Grody explains, these effects and devices are used to convey “spontaneity and energy, almost as though the piece burst into existence on its own.”²³⁰ Although these pieces do not incorporate characters or many extraneous designs, through colour, technique, style, and all manner of visual devices, these pieces illustrate a high level of skill typical of seasoned writers, manifested only through the signature.

Earlier, I introduced the idea of a stylistic link between graffiti writing and hip-hop culture. This connection is especially vital to authors who underline that both cultures “developed in an urban environment that bombards children with icons of consumerism,” and that adherents to both “countered passive consumerism and made their presence known.”²³¹ In this light, it has been argued that graffiti is a visual testament to the liveliness and spontaneity of hip-hop. The distinctive cutting, rhythmic beats, and sampling of rap music, as well as the jerky theatrics of break-dancing, are echoed in graffiti writing. As Miller argues: “by creating a visual art form through the interaction of motion, word, and rhythm, writers have transformed the dance, voice, and drum rhythms”²³² of hip-hop culture. Miller also analyzes wildstyle as a form of aesthetic appropriation comparable to rap music, in the sense that it reworks the Roman alphabet. Hip-hop lyrics are often created by exploring the possibilities of language. Miller has thus

²³⁰ Grody, 65.

²³¹ Miller, 6.

²³² Ibid, 39.

drawn a parallel between “rhythmic vocal freestyling and aerosol rhythmic lettering, between the architecture of style in both spoken language and in written signatures.”²³³ Miller’s argument is only convincing if one aspires to articulate how graffiti might be connected to hip-hop.

The graffiti writing associated with hip-hop has also been linked to rap and breakdancing through what Arthur Jafa calls “flow, layering, and ruptures in line.”²³⁴ All the elements of hip-hop adhere to these concepts and through these contradictions (flow versus ruptures in line) hip-hop can be described as a complex, multi-levelled, or layered movement. As explained earlier, rap music is created through a process of lyrical and musical rupture and flow as the DJ and MC dissect existing songs, overlap beats, and scratch records to create new songs held together by a lyrical flow. Likewise, breakdancers lock their bodies into positions that interrupt the flow of their movements, but simultaneously create fluid overlapping motions. Similarly, graffiti writers use winding letters that flow into one another but are broken up by sharp outlines and covered by a multitude of colours and stylizing effects. Together, the effects of flow, layering, and ruptures in line “at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena.”²³⁵ In other words, these stylistic concepts can be imagined symbolically, as Tricia Rose explains, as a method of appropriation and resistance.²³⁶ Still, as argued earlier, while relations can be drawn, especially in theory, they do not explain the fact that hip-hop and graffiti are in fact two distinct cultures.

²³³ Ibid, 41.

²³⁴ As quoted in Rose, 38.

²³⁵ Ibid, 39.

²³⁶ Ibid, 61.

The above analysis effectively signals a critical aspect of graffiti writing – its appropriation of pop culture. The New York Style was most obviously inspired by television as well as the advertisements, posters, billboards, and brand names that bombard the lives of city-dwellers. In short, writers “devoured images from the myriad popular culture forms around them” and reshaped them “to produce their own culture.”²³⁷ There are numerous examples of early graffiti’s use of popular animated icons such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Santa Claus, and Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup cans. Writers would “build their own iconography by selecting images from comics, TV, and advertising, and reassembling them in new contexts.”²³⁸ In a way, this borrowing can be interpreted as yet another link with hip-hop since rap music and graffiti both rely on the strategy of sampling popular culture by appropriating sound or imagery. The inclusion of characters reveals both the playfulness of graffiti writing and that visual culture motifs influenced young writers. Although writers relied on images from popular culture, the overall design and use of characters by writers was innovative and original. Often pieces that included characters “were like self-portraits of the writers”²³⁹ and, much like the signature, reflected the identity of the author in some way. The lettering styles and popular culture products frequently borrowed by writers from comic books, films, television, video games, and album covers meant that “writers turned first to the forms of visual culture that they enjoyed in their immediate surroundings and used these as meaningful raw materials rather than, say, the tradition of ‘fine art’ painting that is also

²³⁷ Miller, 35.

²³⁸ Cooper and Chalfant, 80.

²³⁹ Miller, 41.

easily accessible in New York City.”²⁴⁰ This practice of appropriation points to the fact that young people were frequently interested in reproducing images and imagery of products that targeted them as consumers – the dominant visual icons within their sphere of commercial youth culture. Since most writers were between the ages of twelve and fifteen when they started their careers, they were “especially conscious of and open to cultural motifs from the world around them.”²⁴¹ Borrowing and synthesizing images and ideas from popular culture also meant that some writers entered into a dialogue with society at large, trying to communicate through recognizable imagery.

Graffiti’s connection with popular culture through icon appropriation and through the creation of alternative forms of signage in the public sphere suggests integral parallels between the “graffiti world” and the “mass-mediated world.” In NYC, “written language has become an everyday, expected part of the urban landscape.”²⁴² New York is filled with names that promote someone or something. Names, logos, and signage of all kinds are naturalized within the cityscape and drive the capitalistic consumer culture. Signage in the public arena that enters our consciousness is in dialogue with itself and with us, the consumers. Brand names are always competing for notoriety. Store names, brand names, corporate names, celebrity names – all have become ubiquitous. In fact, as Austin argues: “long before the new writing appeared in the urban landscape and entered the fray of competing names, New York City was already the undisputed capital of the spectacularized name written in shared (commercial) public space.”²⁴³ For graffiti writers, mixing their names into the fray was a logical extension of the dominant

²⁴⁰ Austin, 174.

²⁴¹ Miller, 27.

²⁴² Austin, 39.

²⁴³ Ibid, 39.

commercial ideology: if your name is recognized in the urban realm, then you are somebody. Illegally adding your name to the public arena, of course, connotes that you are disrupting the system, rebelling against social norms, and making your presence felt albeit subversively. Still, advertising and the development of graffiti writing share many common traits. Writers would often turn to ads for ideas and inspiration. The interest writers had in ads was not “because they believed in what it represented, but to learn from its visual sophistication.”²⁴⁴ Both advertising campaigns and graffiti writers are in the business of advertising, promoting, and celebrating a name.²⁴⁵

Ultimately, while the genealogy of graffiti writing may be linked to several originating influences, it is more significantly connected to the pervasiveness of consumer culture. Adding tags illegally into the official framework of a city communicates a number of ideas. First, it implies a desire to belong to a city’s visual framework, which is theoretically inclusive but exclusive in practical terms. Second, it disrupts the corporate logic of naming, by introducing unsanctioned, unknown names. To this effect, it uses the language already in place as a basis for subversion. Third, it exposes a city’s underbelly. The names that circulate in the cityscape represent companies who employ thousands of unnamed people. In contrast, the unauthorized names represent real people, making their names known in real time. Fourth, it reclaims space for a more diverse public.

The culture of graffiti writing emerged from youth experiences within the urban crucible. Like some contemporary artists, graffiti writers were influenced by the circumstances of their lives, the domination of mass-media, the lessons of history, and

²⁴⁴ Miller, 37.

²⁴⁵ This idea is further developed in chapter three when discussing Pop Art.

artful exchanges with each other. New York Style graffiti is perhaps best understood as an urban aesthetic that allowed those typically removed from and silenced by the mainstream to assert their presence. The term “urban aesthetic” references both graffiti’s link to other types of signage in the urban environment and its association with the evolution of hip-hop culture. As Austin elucidates, graffiti writing is “a long-standing aesthetic tradition that has always been intimately connected with the major social trends and cultural innovations of its time.”²⁴⁶ Today, graffiti practices continue to progress and incorporate a multitude of socio-cultural and political sources of inspiration – examples of such pieces are analyzed in Chapter Four as I discuss the work of contemporary street artists.

Kings and Toys

“Since most writers share a desire for widespread renown, fame is considered the ultimate in graffiti-writing achievement.”

-Craig Castleman²⁴⁷

As the number of graffiti writers increased during the 1980s and writing penetrated all five boroughs of NYC, graffiti writing became highly competitive. Young people aiming to outdo one another in terms of quantity and quality “realized that the pride they felt in seeing their name up in the neighborhood could expand a hundredfold if it travelled beyond the narrow confines of the block.”²⁴⁸ Enter the subway trains. As graffiti infiltrated the inside and outside of subway trains, urban youth organized themselves into crews, each sharing a stylistic ideology and a loyalty to one another. As

²⁴⁶ Austin, 38-39.

²⁴⁷ Castleman, 78.

²⁴⁸ Cooper and Chalfant, 14.

writers gained recognition within the culture via their tags, level of skill, and creativity, they also developed hierarchies and tacit rules. The writing culture is surprisingly structured, in fact, “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.”²⁴⁹ This subsection scrutinizes the organization of the writing subculture and the pivotal role of competition in getting up.

Writing crews or groups, as they were initially called, typically consist of writers with equivalent levels of skill. Crews are loosely organized and function “as a kind of social hybrid, combining the informal organization of a peer group, the shared-goal orientation of a sports team, and the collective identity and protective functions of a gang.”²⁵⁰ Often a writer is associated with multiple crews, making these groups open to all classes, ethnicities, and ages. The impetus of working together as crews is to share ideas and innovations, aid each other in the field by scouting for police and other authorities, and make writing a fun, communal event. Deliberating on a crew name, most often tagged as initials, is as vital as choosing an individual tag, and the reputation of a crew is linked with the notoriety of its members. Although writers generally do not collaborate on the works themselves, at times efforts are combined, both in terms of materials and skills, to create large pieces. When working in crews, writers either each paint their names, one next to the other, or they write their crew’s name and add personalized embellishments. Ivor Miller found that most writers who were active during the 1970s “passionately recall the individual creativity that was encouraged within the

²⁴⁹ Macdonald, 75.

²⁵⁰ Austin, 64.

group context.”²⁵¹ After 1973, “crews became an institutionalized part of writing culture,”²⁵² mostly because of the risks involved when writing on subway trains. Piecing together in train yards gives writers “a sense of shared danger, group effort, and camaraderie,” since, as explained by graffiti writer BAMA, “you get close to each other when you’re doing this and you’ve got to trust the next man ‘cause if you’re not looking, you hope he is.”²⁵³ Crews are important in the negotiation and cultivation of a writer’s identity, since they allow the individual to connect with a social network of like-minded people. Crews can thus be considered types of learning institutions essential to maintaining cooperation and communal education amongst writers.

Earlier, I mentioned that hip-hop graffiti is typically thought to have descended from the practice of territorial graffiti by gangs; in fact, the above discussion of crews may seem similar to an explanation of gangs. While both gang members and graffiti writers associated with crews are typically youths seeking recognition from their colleagues while using pseudonyms and partaking in illegal activities, graffiti writers express themselves through art and not violence. A graffiti writer who had been a gang member, explains: “instead of taking arms we just took paint. There’s some violence in the art: you can see it in the reds and oranges [...] if there hadn’t been graffiti, there would have been a lot more violence.”²⁵⁴ Thus, unlike gangs, writing crews battle “aesthetically by burning their rivals with innovative styles and [they have] voluntary membership.”²⁵⁵ In the early 1970s, some writers, especially those from Brooklyn where

²⁵¹ Miller, 28.

²⁵² Austin, 119.

²⁵³ As quoted in Castleman, 51.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 107.

²⁵⁵ Miller, 113.

gangs were rampant, thought it wise to deal with gangs by forming gangs of their own. While “ostensibly formed only for the sake of writing and self-preservation, these writing gangs were similar to fighting gangs in that they sometimes purposefully engaged in rumbles with other gangs [and] limited membership to writers from their home turf.”²⁵⁶ Eventually writing gangs disbanded because they were continually in conflict with fighting gangs who wanted to battle for territory and did not understand that graffiti writers wanted to be free agents. At this point, the informal graffiti crews described above, which were organized primarily for the interest of companionship, began to form.

Whether affiliated with a crew or not, a writer’s main goal is to be respected and famous within the writing community. Writers typically write their tags everywhere they go making the “urban landscape an unbounded billboard, a mass-mediated prestige economy.”²⁵⁷ Since their practice is anonymous, they use their tag to move beyond the confines of their neighbourhoods, which in the 1970s was achieved namely via the subway system. Typically writers gain recognition thanks to artistic talent, copious tags and throw-ups, skilful pieces, or the sites of dissemination. In the 1970s, the more writers’ names travelled throughout the boroughs on trains, the better known they became. Likewise, today, the more writers get-up, the greater their reputation. Moreover, the more outrageous, dangerous, or inaccessible writers’ locations, the more respect they acquire. These paths to success within the writing subculture are neither spontaneous, nor arbitrary. Acquiring status is a slow process whereby writers have to convince their peers that their work is both original and noteworthy. Bypassing these strategies, writers can also become legendary if immortalized by the media. Newspaper stories with

²⁵⁶ Castleman, 96.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 47.

photographs and television shows and films shot in New York have been instrumental in earning a writer status. However, although this sort of instant fame is prized, “it is not as significant as the fame that can be won through diligence and hard work.”²⁵⁸ As opposed to mainstream culture where star status can materialize almost instantaneously, shortcuts, in the graffiti world, neither guarantee nor sustain fame.

The term “king”²⁵⁹ came to be used by writers in the 1980s to signify a master of style and technique. Although, writers usually had to achieve the title of king – king of a particular style or king of a specific subway line, for example – sometimes writers claim the title for themselves “either verbally, or visually by putting the symbol of a crown on top of their name or by writing king next to it.”²⁶⁰ Such a self-declaration, however, has to be supported by proving oneself in the field. In opposition to king, the term “toy”²⁶¹ designates considerably less skilled writers who do not garner as much recognition for their work. Originally, the word was used by writers to describe anything inferior. For example, smaller marker pens were referred to as toy markers or subway trains that ran shorter routes were known as toy trains.²⁶² With time, the word referred solely to less experienced or less skilled writers.

In the 1970s, younger or less-experienced writers often apprenticed to more knowledgeable, veteran writers, helping with their projects while learning the trade. In this way, the writing community passed down its traditions and “taught its own

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 81.

²⁵⁹ Kings are generally very accomplished at their craft and recognized as prolific writers.

²⁶⁰ Macdonald, 78.

²⁶¹ Toys are typically thought of as artistically incompetent.

²⁶² Castleman, 76.

artists.”²⁶³ Toys were educated by their mentors on which markers and spray-paint brands were optimal, which effects derived from which nozzles, and how to control paint without dripping. When in the 1980s the competition for space intensified with the drastic increase in the number of writers, toys became less tolerated and were frequently ridiculed by established writers. Encounters in the field between toys and kings often resulted in toys having to relinquish their paints and endure threats. Threats were dispensed for any number of reasons, for example: “the ‘scribble scrabble’ that results from the toys’ efforts, ultimately reflects negatively on all writers [...] or that giving up paint to more experienced writers is part of the initiation into the culture.”²⁶⁴ The question of status is as vital to writers as it is in the world of mainstream entertainment. Upon meeting a writer with greater status, the lesser writer will treat them with awe and respect.

Kings and toys working alone or with crews also abide by a set of unwritten rules or ethical codes. The most critical of these rules is that “going over”²⁶⁵ another writer’s work is disrespectful and generally avoided unless initiating a writing battle. Going over refers to the partial or complete covering of someone’s work with your own. In the graffiti subculture, this gesture is interpreted as aggressive. When writers are acknowledged as kings, it is unlikely that their work will be covered over. However, if writers seek to challenge other writers to a graffiti battle in order to determine who possesses greater skills, they will paint over or cross out the work to initiate a competition. If a toy has occupied a prime space with their piece, it is likely to be covered

²⁶³ Miller, 115.

²⁶⁴ Austin, 177.

²⁶⁵ Going over is also sometimes called “x-ing out” or “crossing out” because it entails literally crossing out someone else’s name or writing your tag on top of someone else’s.

up by the work of more skilled writers who, through the act of repainting, assert their rule.

In addition to going over, there exists a set of codes regarding juxtaposition in the physical and social construction of a specific site. For signature graffiti writers the layering or juxtaposing of their work on a given wall reveals a dynamic appropriation of terrain and constructs a specific site as socially valued by the subculture. Writers follow exact rules of etiquette when it comes to the placement of their work. For example, if a writer paints their name directly above or encircles another writer's tag, they communicate their sense of superiority. On the other hand, adding a signature, sometimes with a supportive phrase, next to another writer's piece is a sign of respect – a visual compliment. Whether positive or negative, this sort of visual exchange functions as a site of collective identity negotiation meaningful to those initiated in the subculture. The layering and juxtaposing of graffiti at a given location configures that space into an active site of communication. As Ferrell contends: "since kings are understood to be the masters of technique and style, their pieces are for the most part protected."²⁶⁶ This rule may be violated, however, when space is short.

The lack of space on which to paint is a weighty issue for graffiti writers. While it might seem as though writers use the entire city as their collective canvas, there are a number of factors that limit their ability to intervene in the cityscape. A great number of publicly accessible and visible locations are too dangerous for writing attempts. Also, most writers follow pictorial and ethical codes of behaviour, which dictate that they choose surfaces that do not imbibe paint and are hence easier to paint. They also avoid

²⁶⁶ Ferrell, 87-88.

painting in areas “whose cleanliness or beauty make them aesthetically inappropriate.”²⁶⁷ Furthermore, as Ella Chmielewska in her discussion of signature graffiti explains, while graffiti “marks the particular location and is highly dependent on it, it is most often blatantly indifferent to its details.”²⁶⁸ Even though traditional graffiti asserts itself spatially in the cityscape, it is not necessarily motivated by social concerns that might arise from its placement in a specific site. Chmielewska contends that although its placement might be arbitrary, graffiti is site-specific in that it attaches itself like a parasite to the particular site.²⁶⁹ Graffiti is most often diffused in sites that are favourable in terms of materiality (texture of the wall), visibility, and sometimes, framing.²⁷⁰ Finally, writers prefer to choose locations that attract other writers, so that their work can be seen and evaluated. Taking these factors into account, going over is sometimes not done out of disrespect, but simply out of a lack of space.

The second most valuable rule for writers accords with their reverence for originality. “Biting”²⁷¹ refers to stealing or copying another writer’s style. Although graffiti writers appropriate images from popular culture, borrowing from each other is theoretically not an option. Since personal style is so highly valued, copying someone else’s innovations is viewed in graffiti circles in “much the same way that conventional art worlds negotiate and utilize more formal notions of forgery or copyright violation.”²⁷² While to the untrained eye all graffiti might look similar, in reality each writer has a

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 74.

²⁶⁸ Ella Chmielewska, “Framing Temporality: Montreal Graffiti in Photography.” Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives. Eds. Annie Gérin and James S. McLean, forthcoming 2009, 446.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 439.

²⁷⁰ In her analysis of graffiti writer OMEN, Chmielewska argues that the artist displays his work with the specific parameters of a place in mind, so that his art is framed deliberately by the cultural and physical properties of his chosen site. 451-452.

²⁷¹ Biting is another word for graffiti plagiarism.

²⁷² Ferrell, 87.

signature technique. Working within the pictorial framework of the New York Style, writers produce individual variations through form, design, and colour. Most often, if someone bites someone else's style, they reproduce a character, a specific arrangement of letters, or trademark combination of colours, made famous by another author. In spite of the fact that biting can be interpreted as a sign of respect or as a way to develop one's own style by reproducing someone else's, it is typically negatively received. Respected writers have relatively unique styles and work hard to push their art form to new limits. During the 1970s and 1980s, these unwritten rules of biting and going over combined with graffiti's elements of style worked together to assure the growing organization of the graffiti culture.

As a culture that provides a creative and social outlet for youthful expression, graffiti writing connects youth with their city. Moreover, "inherent in the act of painting New York style is the bravado of a person prepared to transgress both painting conventions and the law."²⁷³ As demonstrated, the writing culture is founded on four basic themes: the "centrality of naming; the concept of building language (building with language, as well as inventing it), or visual and verbal wordsmithing; the idea of constructing an identity in opposition to the state and consumer culture; and the idea of resistance through cultural production."²⁷⁴ Much like the culture of hip-hop, the culture of writing emerged as a response from marginal groups – be they African-Americans and Latinos or youth – to life in NYC. By fashioning a place for themselves in the cityscape, writers have managed to devise a network and language of their own while integrating their voices into the greater civic community.

²⁷³ Miller, 4.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 13.

2.3: From Subway Graffiti to Spraycan Art

During the 1970s, the mass media represented New York's subway system as the site of an "urban crisis."²⁷⁵ According to the press, this crisis of social decay was propelled by, if not derivative of, graffiti writing on subway trains. This section analyzes how, to borrow the title of Joe Austin's book, "graffiti art became an urban crisis in New York City." Although graffiti writing was initially popularized on city walls, and for a short time on buses, in the early 1970s it flourished on subway trains. Writing on subway trains permitted the New York Style to advance both visually and technically because it created a communication network between writers from every neighbourhood. Because subway trains are mobile and thereby dangerous for the writers to paint on, they also inject a great deal of excitement and energy into the writing culture. In addition, these trains afforded writers the possibility to gain "all-city"²⁷⁶ fame as their tags literally travelled across the city and were therefore viewed by a larger audience. Moreover, writers would sneak into train yards in order to piece throughout the night; the yards were akin to studios where people congregated, experimented with designs, and shared ideas. As Ivor Miller states: "the heroism and risk-taking intrinsic to being a successful writer, the magnetic attraction to and intimate knowledge of the trains, the rebellious stance of writers against their society, and a search for self-esteem are all part of the art form."²⁷⁷ As subway trains became inundated with graffiti during the early 1970s, the city not only took notice, but it took action. As Austin argues, graffiti was thus constructed by city

²⁷⁵ Austin, 36.

²⁷⁶ All-city means bombing the entire city with your name – moving beyond your neighbourhood.

²⁷⁷ Miller, 108.

authorities and the media as a “symbol of civic disorder” and as “a central reason for the decline in quality of life in a fiscally fragile and rusting New York.”²⁷⁸ Writing on trains became increasingly dangerous as war was declared on graffiti and police pursuits became a common consequence of writing.

In graffiti literature, there are four books concerned specifically with graffiti writing on subway trains. Craig Castleman’s Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York (1982) is the earliest systematic attempt to trace writing’s history on subway trains. It centres on both the perspectives of graffiti writers and city authorities and in the early eighties was the most complete account of graffiti writing available. This book was followed by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant’s photographic survey entitled Subway Art (1984). Although a shorter and less thorough record of train graffiti, this text is recognized as an invaluable resource for graffiti research because of the hundreds of images it reproduces from the beginnings of this ephemeral art form. In 2001, Joe Austin, then assistant professor in the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University, published Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City. Austin’s investigation of subway art and graffiti’s early history in NYC is the most complete, eloquent, and well-researched book on this subject. Finally, Ivor Miller’s Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City (2002) relies heavily on interviews with graffiti writers to contemplate how “this art form has gone from marginal to central in the American and now globalized culture.”²⁷⁹ By bringing together ideas from these four texts, the following section scrutinizes how graffiti has been peculiarly positioned as both an art form and a crime. The major clampdowns on graffiti writing

²⁷⁸ Rose, 44-5.

²⁷⁹ Miller, 21-22.

during the 1970s and 1980s eventually displaced writing from trains to walls.

Consequently, after the mid-1980s, what had initially been labelled as subway graffiti became increasingly known as spraycan, aerosol, or graffiti art.

Subway Graffiti

“A youngster starting out finds a new community, focused on the subway, which brings together kids from all over the city. He gets a new name and a new identity in a group which has its own values and rules.”

-Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant²⁸⁰

At its height, the culture of writing that developed on NYC’s subway trains stood as “an artistic rite of passage in which thousands of inner-city youth participated in a multiethnic culture of rebellion and creativity.”²⁸¹ Writing graffiti on city trains in contrast to city walls was undoubtedly the reigning factor in the growth and dissemination of the graffiti writing subculture. For some teenagers, trains “offered an escape from the ills of adult society into a self-created world,”²⁸² and within the culture of writing “attitudes about the trains were so strong that anyone who wanted street credibility had to be initiated by painting the beasts.”²⁸³ Writing train graffiti responded to absolutely every need of the graffiti writer. It encompassed the pre-eminent factors of prestige, fame, spontaneity, danger, communication, and competition, which together contributed to the development of both individual identity and that of the subculture itself.

²⁸⁰ Cooper and Chalfant, 26.

²⁸¹ Miller, 36.

²⁸² Ibid, 106.

²⁸³ Ibid, 107.

Although train graffiti originally referred to the dissemination of tags inside the train cars, writers promptly involved themselves in the more dangerous, demanding, and visually expressive feat of painting train exteriors. The risks associated with writing graffiti on subway trains included guard-dogs, police officers, electrocution, and getting hit by moving trains. Getting up on a train thus signalled to others that the writer executed their work under duress. Moreover, it typically communicated the writer's skill and stamina, since the scale of train works tended to be large, meaning that the writer spent more time perfecting their designs in order to work under pressure.

The first major development in the train writing culture occurred in 1972, when writer SUPER KOOL 223 painted his name in big pink and yellow letters on the side of a subway car.²⁸⁴ This gesture marked a significant departure point for the evolution of the New York Style. The fact that trains move not only made the culture of writing more exciting, but this medium also greatly impacted the composition of the work. The graffiti on subway trains was executed with urgency and was designed to be appreciated from both a distance and in a flash. The characters, letters, and colours chosen were therefore typically bold, decipherable, and fun. The vibrancy and dynamism of graffiti was not only better suited to a surface that is, by nature, in motion, but trains were also a primary means of making graffiti accessible. As Tricia Rose explains: "unlike handball courts and building surfaces, trains pass through diverse neighborhoods, allowing communication between various black and Hispanic communities throughout the five boroughs and the larger New York population and disseminating graffiti writers' public performance."²⁸⁵ Writing subway graffiti was a means to popularize a tag beyond a neighbourhood and to

²⁸⁴ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 18.

²⁸⁵ Rose, 43. Rose defends graffiti writing as not only a part of hip-hop culture, but also as a solely Black and Hispanic culture.

exchange formal and stylistic ideas with a larger number of writers. As writer

TRACY168 explains:

you thought your tag would just disappear because there were so many trains. But then it would come back the next day, and you'd see somebody else's tag right next to yours. That was part of the communication thing. The train would shoot over to Brooklyn and somebody over there would see your style.²⁸⁶

This mobility ultimately shortened the distance between writers' works in the various boroughs, and, in turn, created an informal colloquium in which writers could both share their work and receive feedback.

Finally, graffiti on trains was significant because it sometimes included images and slogans addressing all New Yorkers, such as: "Merry Christmas to New York" or "Happy New Years Bronx,"²⁸⁷ opening a dialogue with non-writers while entertaining the masses. As LEE explains, when his crew's whole train painting rode into subway stations, "it was a big show stopper and I think those people who saw it went home that night and didn't watch TV. They talked about the train they saw."²⁸⁸ By visually communicating with each other and the citizens of NYC via subway trains, writers brought attention to their neighbourhoods, life in NYC, and the notion of free public expression.

With time, pieces on train exteriors were sub-divided into four categories: top-to-bottoms, end-to-ends, whole cars, and whole trains. As the name might suggest, top-to-bottoms (T-to-Bs) referred to pieces that covered a subway car from top to bottom, but not for the full length of the car. As Castleman points out, "T-to-Bs are usually done by

²⁸⁶ As quoted in Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 18.

²⁸⁷ Castleman, 43.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

writers who do not have the time, the paint, or the energy to paint a whole car.”²⁸⁹ When a piece extended the full length of a subway car it was known as an end-to-end (E-to-E). Unlike T-to-Bs, E-to-E pieces did not cover the train from top-to-bottom and were usually composed of the signatures of multiple writers linked together, filling the entire space. T-to-Bs and E-to-Es eventually merged; completely covering the full length and width of a subway car – windows and doors included – resulted in a whole car piece. These massive undertakings were generally executed by a group of writers who shared in the construction of the preliminary design and in obtaining the spray-paint needed for the completion of the piece.²⁹⁰ When a whole car was painted, the hierarchy between kings and toys was exercised as the less-skilled writers were appointed to simply fill in the backgrounds while more experienced writers painted the outlines and characters. At times, two subway cars were painted as a single work or “married couple,”²⁹¹ and in some cases, writers managed to paint an entire train from top-to-bottom and end-to-end – the highest possible achievement of subway graffiti writers. Whole car and whole train murals were characterized through their inclusion of “caricatures, cartoon characters, outdoor scenes, holiday settings, and even the writers’ own interpretations of life in the city.”²⁹² These large works were so impressive, time and paint consuming, and dangerous, that they would play a significant role in boosting a writer’s or a crew’s reputation.

“King of the Line,” “King of the Insides,” and “King of Style” were titles reserved for graffiti writers whose work excelled amidst the abundant graffiti on subway

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 31.

²⁹⁰ As quoted in Castleman, renowned graffiti writer LEE explains that to paint a whole train, “we had to get at least 110 cans.” 3.

²⁹¹ Married couples refer to two permanently attached cars, as identifiable by their consecutive numbers.

²⁹² Castleman, 60.

trains. Being king meant being proficient and, symbolically, it also meant claiming territorial rights over a train line. The NYC transit system in the 1970s consisted of three lines: the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT), the Independent Subway System (IND), and the Brooklyn Mass Transit (BMT). By the 1980s, these private companies merged to become the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). Graffiti writers were not only intimately familiar with all of the access points to train lay-ups and yards, but they also learned which trains were most suitable for writing. Painting an entire subway car, which depending on the line measured from fifty-one to seventy-five feet in length by twelve feet in width, would necessitate at least fifteen cans of spray paint;²⁹³ thus, writers spent many hours investigating the surfaces and layout of train cars in order to identify which were most appropriate for their pieces. Many of these early subway train pieces have been documented in photographs and films.

As Joe Austin contends, subway graffiti “was not only an attempt to grab the attention of the public and the commercial media (although writers were happy to oblige any opportunity), but was also an attempt to create an alternative ‘screen’ where the writing community could make itself visible to the city and to itself.”²⁹⁴ In many ways, trains authenticated the writing culture for both insiders and outsiders, which consequently resulted in more attention from the city’s authorities. The New York City Police Department eventually created squads of detectives whose primary goal was to intercept writers. Thus, NYC’s writing culture, which “was created in response to the

²⁹³ Miller, 128.

²⁹⁴ Austin, 66.

climate and contours of that city,²⁹⁵ became classified as a crime by authorities who reasoned that writing was a clearly visible sign that the city was uncontrollable.

Anti-graffiti Campaigns

“New Yorkers at this time were being encouraged by newspaper articles, and editorials to see the writing on the walls simply in terms of disruptive and dangerous youths, fears of impending social collapse, and the urban crisis.”

-Joe Austin²⁹⁶

In his book, Joe Austin investigates how the media and city authorities framed graffiti as a symbol for the socio-economic problems that NYC experienced in the 1970s and 1980s. This misrepresentation of graffiti as a dangerous and violent act symptomatic of other, more serious crimes temporarily forestalled the emergence of graffiti as a genuine public art movement and method of visual intervention by urban youth.

According to writer LEE, “the buffing of the subways was probably the most terrible thing New York City has ever done. It was an art holocaust.”²⁹⁷ The subway system in NYC was, since the 1950s, the “site of many of the city’s most publicized gang and youth crimes.”²⁹⁸ Historically, the subway – as one of the city’s shared public spaces – was a feared location since as a mode of public transportation that crosses all neighbourhoods it connects all NYC residents, some of whom are invariably perceived as undesirable travel companions. According to Austin, the subway was therefore the perfect site for the criminalization of graffiti and for the construction of the graffiti problem as a sign of the city’s lost control over crime. In this section, I will discuss the reasons for the

²⁹⁵ Miller, 26.

²⁹⁶ Austin, 71.

²⁹⁷ As quoted in Miller, 139.

²⁹⁸ Austin, 31.

organization and subsequent failure of the first anti-graffiti alliance (1971-1973), which was spurred by Mayor John Lindsay. This analysis is followed by an investigation of the success of the second attempt at the “war on graffiti”²⁹⁹ (1980-1983) led by Mayor Edward Koch, which resulted in a mass transposition of graffiti from subway trains to city walls.

The anti-graffiti policies and programs initiated by Mayor John Lindsay had a tremendous impact on the social construction of graffiti as a crime especially through media such as New York’s newspapers, “for not only did they report the graffiti policies of public officials but seemingly played a role in motivating and shaping them as well.”³⁰⁰ Earlier, an engaging *New York Times* story published in 1971 that introduced New Yorkers to TAKI 183 and the new trend of tagging was referenced. This article was instrumental in terms of glorifying graffiti writing as a hobby and introducing a plethora of new graffiti writers onto the scene. One year later, another article published by *The Times* reported on the “graffiti problem” as an “epidemic” that created a lot of work for subway maintenance personnel.³⁰¹ This article also advertised the fact that the MTA was spending more than \$500,000 annually to erase graffiti, but that the law did not bar graffiti writing.³⁰² An editorial published in 1972 quoted City Council president Sanford Garelik as he urged New Yorkers to wage “an all-out war on graffiti,” because it “pollutes the eye and mind and may be one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat.”³⁰³ Although counter-studies such as Jack Stewart’s text Subway Graffiti argued

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 7.

³⁰⁰ Castleman, 135.

³⁰¹ Austin, 80.

³⁰² Castleman, 135.

³⁰³ Ibid, 136.

that the writing on the trains should not be categorized as destructive vandalism, but rather as another form of signage within the cityscape, the Mayor was already taking action.³⁰⁴ Lindsay, influenced by Garelik's statement and the editorials that followed, launched an anti-graffiti program in June of 1972 that MTA's Chairman, Dr. Ronan, publicly supported. At this point, The New York City Transit Police Department (TP), which is independent from the NYPD and under the authority of the MTA chairman, assigned over one hundred officers to graffiti patrol.³⁰⁵ Continuing his crusade to criminalize graffiti, Mayor Lindsay, who worked diligently to gain support for his mission, announced the "Lindsay Theory," which alleges that graffiti writing "is related to mental health problems."³⁰⁶ Finally, the General Welfare Committee proposed a bill that made carrying spray-paint and writing on public property illegal. This bill's proposition was followed by an editorial, once again in *The New York Times*, which declared: "graffiti are no longer amusing; they have become a public menace."³⁰⁷ On October 11, 1972, the City Council approved the bill and graffiti writing officially became an illegal activity.

At the same time as graffiti was criminalized by the City Council, *New York Magazine* presented an alternative perspective towards graffiti. The *Magazine* "ridiculed chairman Ronan, Mayor Lindsay, and the *Times* for their attitude toward the new art form" and even distributed "Taki Awards"³⁰⁸ for stylistic achievements in graffiti writing. While some media reports challenged the mainstream perception of writing as a crime

³⁰⁴ Austin, 81.

³⁰⁵ Castleman, 159.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 137.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 138.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 141.

and discussed its cultural values, Mayor Lindsay was further motivated to publicly denounce graffiti as a serious crime and continued to support the eradication of graffiti from subway trains. Graffiti writers, however, were neither discouraged nor intimidated by the new policies and continued cultivating their skills. Subsequent to the press coverage graffiti received in the early 1970s which constructed a connection between youth delinquency, the urban crisis, and graffiti writing, the issue quieted down for a number of years. It also became clear that the city was losing its battle against the obliteration of graffiti.

New York lost its first attempt to eliminate subway graffiti primarily because the initial plan was to repaint graffiti-laden trains. This solution backfired for two important reasons. First, repainting the trains provided graffiti writers with fresh canvases, meaning that the “MTA’s massive erasure unknowingly resolved one of the writers’ most pressing logistical problems: space for new work.”³⁰⁹ As writers painted newly clean trains, their works’ scale increased tremendously. The culture’s visual and social history had been erased, encouraging new attempts at fame and new competitions for the title of king. Thus, in a way, the repainted subway trains afforded writers the opportunity to re-write their history. Throw-ups became the tool of choice for writers wanting to advance their name, since they are bigger than tags and quicker to execute than pieces.

The second reason that repainting trains backfired as a solution was that the task of repainting was often imposed as a sentence for convicted writers. The idea that “buffing”³¹⁰ graffiti could work as a punishment for writers failed: instead of teaching young people a lesson in vandalism, this clean-up sentence proved to be an excellent

³⁰⁹ Austin, 108.

³¹⁰ Buffing, The Buff, or buffed out means chemically removing graffiti. Originally this term was reserved for subway trains, but today refers to the removal of graffiti from any surface.

opportunity for graffiti writers to meet others from all over the city and make plans to go bombing together. In retrospect, the first anti-graffiti alliance failed to obliterate subway graffiti because the manpower, measures employed, and sentencing were not altogether severe enough to hinder hundreds of young, determined, and resourceful writers. Those who thought that repainting trains would “demoralize writers [...] and cause the ‘graffiti fad’ to decline,”³¹¹ were shocked when clean trains were bombed at a grander scale. Throughout the 1970s, as the Transit Police monitored the trains and stations in hopes of catching writers in the act, a sort of cat-and-mouse game developed, where most often the mouse got away. The younger, faster, and more agile writers would typically out-run police officers.

After 1975, although the TP Department had to divert officers from graffiti patrol to other duties, anti-graffiti efforts were strengthened through two main strategies: “a new ‘vandal squad’ enforcement unit within the Transit Police Department and a special carwash that sprayed paint-removing chemical solvents on the trains.”³¹² The first strategy made graffiti writing, by all accounts, a hazardous activity. Vandal squad officers frequented train yards and stalked graffiti writers to their homes. Because the squad researched writing and writers, it was both feared and, oddly, respected. Officers Kevin Hickey and Conrad Lesnewski, for example, or Hickey and Ski as they were known to writers, became like urban legends to graffiti writers because, as writer DEA-2 explains: “they’re like super-cops, like Starsky and Hutch...they’ll swing down onto writers from the elevated tracks to catch them, or grab them right in the yards...they

³¹¹ Austin, 108.

³¹² Ibid, 128.

know all sorts of stuff about us, they're like writers themselves."³¹³ As the vandal squad isolated those writers who were not seriously dedicated to the culture, it made others more aggressive in their approach.

The new carwash strategy proved relatively pointless since the cleaning solvents failed to actually erase graffiti. Instead, the chemical wash made the trains resemble "faded and smudged newspaper full of unreadable, ghostly word and muted, dull colors," and proved that "the MTA was clearly willing to have uglier trains in order to stop writing."³¹⁴ Since the trains were rendered unsightly, writers once again embarked on beautifying them with their original designs. The frequent buffing, however, served to deflect the writing of large pieces. Therefore, as explained above, writers resorted to quantity over quality and because they balanced time and paint efficiency with prowess, the throw-up prevailed. On the whole, the city's first major initiatives to destroy the culture of graffiti writing resulted in several changes within the writing community. Writers became more aggressive and subversive as their culture was criminalized, and the spirit of writing culture transformed from jovial to survivalist.

Between 1980 and 1983 Mayor Edward Koch launched the second war on graffiti. This time what had been referred to as the graffiti problem was more overtly publicized as a major contributing factor to New York's elevated crime rate and general lack of civic order. The official argument against graffiti was that citizens were frightened by it because it is an unlawful disruption of the urban environment, which leads to other, more heinous crimes. Thus, "by removing the offending, unauthorized names from public space, the city's leadership would rescue the citizens from their fears,

³¹³ As quoted in Castleman, 167.

³¹⁴ Austin, 131.

reestablish citizens' confidence in their leaders' legitimacy"³¹⁵ and raise the morale of NYC citizens.

In 1981, Mayor Koch revived anti-graffiti strategies by working closely with the state-controlled MTA to fence train yards, mount razor wire, and provide attack dogs to guard them. This strategy was, as Joe Austin argues, a way to redirect the public's fear regarding the safety of public space onto a visible, unlawful problem that could be eradicated. Mayor Koch's hopes were to appease New Yorkers by proving that his government could control the visual chaos in the city by obliterating graffiti, which would in turn allow people to feel safer. This campaign suggested that the mere appearance of order would socially improve the quality of life in the city. The Mayor worked diligently to implement a successful "clean car program," which designated subway staff to clean trains after each run. Although the subway system was actually facing perilous maintenance problems and Mayor Koch was eventually forced to admit that graffiti was not one of them, he succeeded at repositioning graffiti not only as a crime, but also as the metaphor for New York's crisis. He argued: "preventing graffiti would have a positive psychological impact on subway riders."³¹⁶ Eventually, Koch's strategies proved successful, making the second major war on graffiti one that forever changed the writing culture in NYC.

Since the 1970s, "politicians, transit officials, corporate executives and others have increasingly responded to graffiti as a political and economic issue,"³¹⁷ thereby promoting graffiti as a crime. By orchestrating anti-graffiti campaigns, the city of New

³¹⁵ Ibid, 149.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 210.

³¹⁷ Ferrell, 12.

York not only made writing graffiti more of a challenge and thus more gratifying for writers, it also presented graffiti as a personal threat. Jeff Ferrell, assistant professor of criminal justice at Northern Arizona University, analyzes Denver Colorado's hip-hop graffiti subculture via an interdisciplinary methodology, which combines sociological, ethnographical, and criminological viewpoints. In his book, Ferrell refers to what Sociologist Howard Becker calls the clampdown by those "in the upper levels of the social structure" as an act of "moral entrepreneurs."³¹⁸ These entrepreneurs who construct graffiti as a crime, Becker argues, need to construct "the appropriate enforcement machinery" to accompany their campaign and work with the "rule enforcers" who will operate this machinery for them.³¹⁹ In terms of the criminalization of graffiti, the machinery refers in part to the language used to discuss graffiti as well as the money spent (read: action) by the government. The idea, according to Ferrell, is to "not only attack their targeted groups; they must also attack the public's limited awareness of those groups if they are to create legitimacy and support for their campaigns."³²⁰ Once moral entrepreneurs have instilled a sense of fear or panic in the citizenry, legitimizing the notion of graffiti as a social problem, they can control the perceptions of the masses by presenting graffiti as a growing menace. Soon, citizens who locate graffiti in their neighbourhoods learn to interpret it "in terms of personal threat and violation."³²¹ Therefore, anti-graffiti campaigns essentially forward a method of interpretation "through

³¹⁸ Howard Becker, *Outsiders*. 147-163.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 153 & 155.

³²⁰ Ferrell, 133.

³²¹ *Ibid*, 145.

which the public can perceive and understand graffiti”³²² while simultaneously condemning graffiti and increasing its visibility.

Although Ferrell’s ideas are especially relevant to the graffiti scene in Denver during the 1990s, they can aptly be applied to the situation in NYC. Using the idea of “anarchistic criminology,” Ferrell argues that Denver city officials consider graffiti a problem because it threatens the politically sanctioned aesthetics of public space. As an “alternative style outside the circle of corporate style and consumption,”³²³ graffiti writing is an anarchistic response to this ideology. Graffiti disrespects private property and official notions of order and aesthetics by appropriating walls to display each writer's expressions of style. Although graffiti writers typically eschew politics and decline finding political meanings in their work, the subversive and deviant nature of graffiti is apparent to those who paint it and those who seek to suppress it.

According to Howard Becker, deviance is a transaction between those who do something and those who judge this behaviour: “the deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.”³²⁴ Conversely, any one group of people can formulate and abide by a set of norms that exclude any other group. Based on cooperation, this group thus creates a set of conventions, which can be modified to respond to the group’s needs and to the ever-changing face of culture. As outlined above, graffiti’s construction as a crime was effectively based on such conventions. Graffiti writers share a set of standards that facilitate their organization into a subculture. City officials have a different set of mutual

³²² Ibid, 145.

³²³ Ibid, 197.

³²⁴ Howard Becker, Outsiders. 9.

norms, which label the practice of this subculture a crime. As a result, both groups work as mediators that conceptualized the act of writing graffiti as deviant.

The media, through newspaper articles as well as editorials reinforced this interpretation. New Yorkers were encouraged to “see the writing on the walls simply in terms of disruptive and dangerous youths, fear of impending social collapse, and the urban crisis.”³²⁵ While writers do not create graffiti solely because it is illegal, as analyzed in Chapter Three, the criminal aspect of writing is often a critical impetus for their involvement. Many writers attest that if graffiti were legal, they would no longer be writers. The fame writers seek from within the subculture would be unsubstantiated and the adrenalin rush of writing would be eradicated without the possibility of arrest. Moreover, accessibility to graffiti by those outside of the subculture would destroy its seclusion and sense of community.³²⁶

Much like *The New York Times* article about TAKI 183, anti-graffiti campaigns actually recruited more writers who were hoping for media exposure. Since the youth who wanted to see their names in the news tended not to be skilled writers, they continued to write tags, meaning anti-graffiti efforts increased “the very sort of graffiti most offensive to the campaigners themselves.”³²⁷ The campaigns against graffiti effectively amplified the popularity of graffiti instead of restraining it. In the end, however, “using razor fences, guard dogs, electronic surveillance, and a police force, the transit authority kept writers from the trains,”³²⁸ which signalled a return of graffiti to city

³²⁵ Austin, 71.

³²⁶ As Macdonald indicates, those disapproving of formal graffiti exhibitions tend to “draw attention to the importance of illegality within this subculture and highlight the ways it intersects with issues of power, control, ownership and space.” 8.

³²⁷ Ferrell, 149.

³²⁸ Miller, 48.

walls. This relocation was instrumental to changes in the New York Style since writers now had more space and time to advance their art form.

Spraycan Art

“Graffiti for me was a very positive, artistic outlet. It’s the school from which I evolved artistically... We could have been into a lot of much worse things.”

-ZEPHYR³²⁹

In 1984, Henry Chalfant co-authored a survey of graffiti in NYC called Subway Art. Three years later, Chalfant and Prigoff co-wrote a short, image-laden book entitled Spraycan Art. Clearly, Chalfant was not only documenting history, he also contributed to its development.³³⁰ The goals of Spraycan Art were to explore the style that “emerged from the subway on to walls, handball courts and other surfaces above ground, and ultimately into the galleries of art dealers and collectors” and to explain how hip-hop’s mainstream popularity in the 1980s “helped to spread [hip-hop graffiti] worldwide.” With this research, the authors argue that graffiti “is no longer necessarily illegal and antisocial: it has become a part of mainstream art.”³³¹ This book considers the transposition of graffiti from trains to walls in order to analyze the effect this relocation had on the New York Style. Writer JONONE explains: “without the trains, spray-can art wouldn’t have become what it is,” and LEE stipulates: “what New York City has done in the last ten years is erase that history of its youth. There is nothing left. We can talk about what happened, because we knew, we did it, but people that are just now getting hip to it,

³²⁹ As quoted in Austin, 180.

³³⁰ As a photographer who documented this ephemeral art form, Henry Chalfant continues to be highly respected in the world of writing. In fact, James TOP told Ivor Miller that “when Henry dies, thousands of writers are going to appear at his funeral, even those he didn’t know, for all he has done for this culture.”

14.

³³¹ Chalfant and Prigoff, 97.

there's nothing for them to see."³³² Although today, graffiti in cities around the world is typically disseminated on walls, the writing subculture that developed on subway trains cannot be overlooked as the definitive origin of the New York Style.

The shift from subway to wall graffiti is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. Some graffiti writers began writing on walls in the 1970s and never made the transition to trains. Others wrote on trains and walls simultaneously even as the high visibility of their names on trains was diminishing as a result of buffing. No matter what path a writer chose, as NYC was waging war on subway graffiti, writers generally relocated and continued to develop their practice in the urban landscape. This relocation, however, initiated a conflict between those who tagged and those who executed large pieces. When writing on trains, taggers and piecers ordinarily respected each other's spaces and modes of expression. Taggers mainly bombed the inside of trains, while piecers used the outside to compose their large illegal murals. As expected, taggers chiefly focused on productivity while piecers were concerned with style. After writing was obliterated from subway trains and the culture returned to the walls, the division between bombers and piecers became increasingly pronounced. Those primarily interested in depicting their names in the most visible areas of the cityscape bombed with throw-ups. Those who were motivated to develop the pictorial and technical possibilities of working with spray-paint worked on pieces in areas with lower traffic. The return to the city's walls, therefore, fragmented the culture's system of hierarchy and prestige and prompted writers to adapt their styles as they acclimated to a different medium.³³³

³³² As quoted in Miller, 139.

³³³ Austin, 227-8.

While previously the path to fame was either found in the exhibition of a skilful style or the display of one's productivity, these alternate means of gaining respect divided with the separation of bombers and piecers. Some writers were able to sustain involvement in both piecing and bombing, but as Joe Austin explains, "if bombers literally 'took the streets,' the piecers literally 'went into hiding' after the mid-1980s."³³⁴ This division led to two changes. First, since piecing was less viable in prominent areas of the city, most outsiders came to understand graffiti as consisting solely of tags and throw-ups. Second, the unwritten rules that writers followed during the 1970s, such as going over someone's work or writing on private homes, became obsolete.³³⁵ The increased number of writers coupled with the difficulty of creating overtly public pieces thus pushed those serious about writing to explore new directions. Many writers began fabricating stickers, which were more inconspicuous and easier to get-up, and others began painting freight trains.³³⁶ Some writers also began to produce canvassed graffiti for exhibition and sale in commercial galleries. While graffiti became part of the elite art world for this brief moment in history, it did not have a lasting impact on the culture of writing. As author Martha Cooper explains, "writers had developed what amounted to their own gallery culture on the trains. Their culture in many ways mimicked the art world, but they had their own art world. The kids were their own harshest critics."³³⁷ The transition that graffiti was experiencing "from the streets and train yards to the business world of galleries, [means] the issue of respect has been lost or distorted."³³⁸ Indeed, one

³³⁴ Ibid, 238.

³³⁵ Ibid, 245.

³³⁶ The practice of writing on commercial freight trains is briefly discussed in Chapter Three.

³³⁷ As quoted in Miller, 131.

³³⁸ Ibid, 131.

of the outcomes of writing's transposition from an urban context into a gallery setting was the disruption of a system of prestige, apprenticeship, and camaraderie that had been in place for almost fifteen years. Still, even as the stakes for writing graffiti increased and the culture lost much of its camaraderie, serious writers found new ways to disseminate graffiti and ultimately built writing into a global phenomenon.

A substantial difference between subway and wall graffiti caused the metamorphosis of the graffiti writer into the graffiti artist. During the 1970s, writers considered their works as projects of beautification, but most did not identify their writing as art. During the 1980s, this conception changed as alternative media paid significantly more attention to graffiti as an art form, thus proposing a different way for writers to frame their activity. Even in its most infantile phase, graffiti had an artistic dimension. The early tags that appeared on city walls and subway trains demonstrated a sense of design, in terms of line, form, and space. As explained earlier, when writers evolved in their practice, outdoing one another stylistically and technically, the name metamorphasized into an intricate and visually challenging representation of the self. Much like brand names that circulate in the city, the names of graffiti writers were tailored and adapted to exhibit their expressive capabilities.

On city walls in the 1980s, as writers experimented with spray-can caps and spray-paint control, the letters they produced became increasingly sharp, precise, and defined by straight lines, rather than expressionistic sprays. This transformation was furthered by an upsurge in writing three-dimensional letters. The flat wall surface flourished as an illusionistic, pictorial space that allowed for shadowing, modelling, and perspective. This stylistic evolution encouraged a greater elaboration of the background

which often consisted of a skyline silhouette or brick patterns. It also instituted a more pronounced reliance on popular culture icons. As the culture progressed and grew in membership, pieces became increasingly technically challenging, often referencing the actual urban landscape or depicting the lives and problems of urban dwellers. Sometimes pieces alluded to themes such as poverty, child abuse, or addiction, which suggests that some writers produced pieces “where the message overtook the primacy of the name altogether, thus resembling something like a public service announcement or a strident political slogan.”³³⁹ Writer LEE (Quinones) became famous for this type of representation.

LEE had not only garnered considerable respect for his multiple whole-car paintings and his work with the Fabulous Five crew, he also became recognized as the premier graffiti mural painter. Much like his train pieces, “Quinones’s court murals mingled cartoon imagery with a strong moral sensibility.”³⁴⁰ Initially a subway graffiti writer, in 1979 LEE was invited to exhibit his work at the Galleria La Medusa in Rome. By the summer of 1985, LEE held his tenth solo exhibition at London’s Riverside Studios. In this exhibition’s catalogue, “Lee Quinones: New Horizons,” the introduction asserts that LEE’s work “can be praised for its directness, its pungent commentary on everyday life.”³⁴¹ Unlike many writers, LEE’s graffiti on trains and walls employed a type of traditional mural style whereby cartoonish images were juxtaposed with, as expected, the writer’s signature, but also a legible message such as “stop real crime.” In a mural most famously immortalized in the film *Wild Style* (see fig. 4), LEE’s name figures

³³⁹ Austin, 183.

³⁴⁰ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 62.

³⁴¹ Lee George Quinones, *New Horizons*. London: Riverside Studios, 1985.

legibly in large blockbuster letters majestically set above a myriad of images that frame the scene – typical of his visual vocabulary. Under the cover of a starry night, a dragon confronts the viewers. A graveyard composed of a cracked cross and tombstone that reads “Here Lies?” is rendered to the left of the monster’s fiery pit and to the right of atomic bombs and a combat-ready soldier. Finally, on the right hand side, a young man sits, framed by a relics of a city, solemnly thinking about love lost or broken – this pensiveness is illustrated by a cartoon “think bubble” where a glossy heart is cracked into two pieces. Above the man, a rocket or bomb descends towards him and the city. On a purple bomb that sits nestled in the middle of the mural, the words “self destruct” are written. The conglomeration of objects and symbols in this piece relay a straightforward message – one of death and destruction: in a corrupt and violent world the human spirit is broken.

Aerosol art that was disseminated on city walls in the 1980s called into question the connection between graffiti and another public art form: murals. The tradition of mural painting that was widespread in the United States from the 1960s onwards reached a plateau in the 1980s, in part, as a consequence of graffiti. As Lucy Lippard explains, the graffiti movement’s “youthful dynamism makes some 1930s-inspired murals seem stodgy, and its immediacy appeals to the young.”³⁴² Graffiti in the urban landscape in a way revived the art of mural painting since writers, at times, painted their signatures on the murals, giving them “a living, breathing, sweating identity with their time and environment.”³⁴³ In addition, both traditions are ephemeral, designed to appeal to and

³⁴² Lucy Lippard “Forward” in *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. Eds. Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber and James Cockcroft. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1998, xiii.

³⁴³ Austin, 94.

define particular communities, and are often misunderstood by outsiders. Both are public arts that have been largely ignored by the high art world. Both have been used as “cosmetic bandaids to cheer up neglected neighborhoods,”³⁴⁴ and are intended to empower the community they represent. Also, murals are sometimes imposed on a community, making them meaningless for those living there. Graffiti too is diffused in the cityscape, but is more meaningful for those initiated in the writing culture.

Similarities notwithstanding, the greatest difference between murals and graffiti is that the former is legal whereas the latter is not. Ironically, as graffiti was “being cast as dangerous and demoralizing vandalism in local papers, the federal government was dispensing millions of dollars through the National Endowment for the Humanities for community murals in the same neighborhoods from which writing sprang.”³⁴⁵ Obviously, unlike murals, traditional graffiti writing does not primarily aim to be overtly relevant to socio-political issues. While murals are typically commissioned as projects of beautification, to further political ideals, or to draw attention to specific social issues, they are also often meant to serve, empower, or describe a community. This in itself has prompted some significant debates regarding the differing attitudes towards the “community” implicit in mural painting, and the issue is further complicated if murals are to be compared with graffiti. Whereas murals can be tools of political expression, they are also often conceived to serve or authenticate a discrete community or neighbourhood. As opposed to the anti-social expression of graffiti writers which, in time, develops underground communities, mural projects largely function to address pre-existing populations. Although murals also have a revolutionary, subversive, and critical history,

³⁴⁴ Lippard, xiv.

³⁴⁵ Austin, 6.

most famously exemplified by the Mexican Muralist tradition of José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera which sought to serve the people's needs, they greatly differ from graffiti practices. Unlike murals, graffiti writing generally retreats into the space of aesthetics through the rendition of a signature.

As an art practice in the urban realm, graffiti is primarily a form of visual expression that responds to the socio-cultural dynamics of a city. As demonstrated above, writing graffiti demands a high degree of personal and collective investment. The rewards of participating in this transgressive act are empowering. As Nancy Macdonald succinctly argues, “by writing their name, [graffiti writers] earn fame and respect. By doing it illegally, they build a masculine identity. By excluding girls, they protect this identity. And by excluding the ‘outside’ world, they add power, ownership, autonomy and escape into the mix.”³⁴⁶ In Chapter Three, these ideas are more closely examined in tandem with graffiti's status in art worlds of the 1980s. The movement is scrutinized as both a subculture and a form of pop culture and the popularization of signature graffiti in cities around the world is discussed, focusing on the role of the Internet and freight trains. I also address the participation of women in the graffiti movement, and as will be seen in Part II of the thesis, women are key players in the street art movement.

³⁴⁶ Macdonald, 228.

CHAPTER 3: THE EVOLUTION OF GRAFFITI ART

In this chapter, I continue mapping graffiti's history during the 1980s and 1990s and deepen my assessment of writing cultures by addressing three main transformations therein. The first of the changes that forever affected the culture of writing was the transfiguration of ephemeral graffiti into a lasting entity on canvas. The transposition of graffiti from the street into the context of commercial galleries did not cause the disappearance of graffiti from the cityscape although it did create a rupture within the culture of writing that still exists today. While only some writers participated in elite art gallery exhibitions, the issue of legal versus illegal graffiti production continues to be central for serious writers. The second major change to affect the culture of writing was the popularization and commodification of the New York Style by the mass media. As writing was celebrated through its association with hip-hop culture, it was employed by major companies to advertise and to sell products. Finally, the third major transformation, was the evolution of graffiti beyond NYC. This development not only created a number of writing communities, making a global network of graffiti subcultures emerge, but it also functioned to propel the culture forward, both stylistically and structurally. As the New York Style was imitated by youth worldwide, the growing number of graffiti cultures found new ways to stay connected, especially via the Internet and freight trains.

To interpret the evolution of graffiti art, I employ methodologies developed by art sociologists, which appreciate the process involved in the production, diffusion, and reception of an artwork. The first section of this chapter, "Graffiti and the Art World," continues with the transition outlined at the end of chapter two (from subway to aerosol

art), by addressing graffiti's relationship to the world of high art. This analysis relies heavily on research undertaken by Howard Becker (1982) and Natalie Heinich (2001) which concentrates on the concepts of mediation and collective art production.

The second section, "From Subculture to Pop Culture," analyzes the notion of subculture and discusses how the culture of writing has negotiated a space for itself both as part of and in resistance to the dominant culture. I also analyze women's place in the world of graffiti writing and scrutinize graffiti's association with the culture of hip-hop as a way to explain graffiti's mainstream rise. I draw a parallel between hip-hop's shift from localized subculture to mainstream culture, and graffiti's own transformation into an icon of popular culture. Also, I compare graffiti writing with Pop Art in order to elucidate how both movements followed similar trajectories in terms of their appropriation of, and addition to, popular media and advertising, their relationship to commercial art and the commodity market, and their initial standing in the world of high art.

In "Global Networks," I investigate the evolution of the graffiti movement on a global scale. I review cult graffiti films *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* and illustrate how pertinent these movies were to the dissemination of the traditional signature graffiti style in cities throughout the world and to the solidification of the relationship between graffiti and hip-hop. In dealing with the popularization of graffiti worldwide, this thesis moves beyond the confines of NYC to briefly discuss writing cultures in other cities. Through popular and underground media as well as in the art world, the style of writing that developed in New York initiated a number of writing scenes around the world. These scenes, each with their own heroes, histories, and regional variations, all remained faithful to their NYC roots. The sense of respect, admiration, and affinity that new

generations of writers felt towards graffiti's birthplace is articulated through the style they employed. Of particular interest in this section is the role of the Internet and freight trains in facilitating graffiti's expansion.

3.1: Graffiti and the Art World

In the three subsections that follow, I evaluate graffiti's subsistence in the mainstream art world during the 1980s and 1990s, first, by considering writing's early forays into gallery spaces, and, second, by focusing on a 1983 Sidney Janis Gallery exhibition entitled *Post-Graffiti*. This case study aptly demonstrates graffiti's sudden success and consequent demise in the commercial art world. Finally, I explore the critical and often misrepresented association between graffiti writers and artists Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Early Forays Into Gallery Spaces

"The graffiti writer was literally taken off the streets and subways, planted in art galleries, and heralded as the next big art find."

-Gwendolyn Pough³⁴⁷

When outlining graffiti's transposition from subway trains to city walls in Chapter Two, it was noted that some attempts were made by the arts community to de-criminalize graffiti by framing it as art. This involved the efforts of graffiti writers and alternative gallery curators as well as upscale art dealers and gallery owners who worked to validate

³⁴⁷ Pough, 4.

graffiti writing as an art form. While for some writers the motivation to create work for galleries was primarily a method to reverse the negative status writing had garnered on subway trains, for commercial gallery owners, bringing graffiti inside was predominantly an exercise in capitalizing on a new art trend. Graffiti first found its way into galleries on a small scale during the early 1970s. During the 1980s, however, and specifically between 1980 and 1983, the work of graffiti writers was “heralded as the next big art find”³⁴⁸ in the art world of New York.

In graffiti’s earliest days, writers did not consider themselves artists and had no aspirations to exhibit their work in galleries. As FUTURA 2000 explained: “I’d be afraid to be in a big gallery where they would be trying to make money off me – those people don’t even ride subways! My art’s not for exclusive buyers.”³⁴⁹ While transit officials denounced graffiti as a crime and graffiti writers themselves were happily anonymous to subculture outsiders, New York’s visual arts community was determined to bring graffiti into the fold of the art world.³⁵⁰ Thus, over a short period of time graffiti was transfigured as a canvassed commodity responding to the demand of commercial galleries. This process of commodification began with the advent of an organization called United Graffiti Artists (UGA).³⁵¹

In 1972, Hugo Martinez, a City College sociology student, formed an organization of graffiti writers, which he named UGA. The mandate behind this organization was both to aid writers in developing their creativity in a de-criminalized

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 4.

³⁴⁹ As quoted in Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1998, 36.

³⁵⁰ As Edward Lucie Smith documents, artists such as Claes Oldenburg revered graffiti as avant-garde by praising its capacity to brighten up the city’s landscape. “The Writing on the Wall.” *Art Review* 48.3 (1996): 21.

³⁵¹ Castleman, 117.

setting and to redirect graffiti writing as a legal and profitable enterprise. Martinez's primary goal was for the mass media to re-interpret graffiti as art. He encouraged writers to produce graffiti on canvases so that he could popularize a new art movement by bringing graffiti into galleries. Martinez's rationale was that "if people see graffiti on the walls inside of buildings instead of on walls outside of buildings, they will think it is art."³⁵² His efforts did not go unnoticed. Although initially Martinez's endeavours were not well received by graffiti writers, since they already had a strong sense of collective worth and were not necessarily looking for mainstream acceptance, writers came to respect UGA.

The first graffiti exhibition Martinez organized took place at City College and consisted of a graffiti writing demonstration by some of New York's most respected writers. Subsequently, Martinez arranged a few small-scale exhibitions that "accumulated a cultural capital of favorable reviews from powerful critics lending their support to writing as an art form"³⁵³ and made an impression on graffiti's new audiences. By transplanting graffiti from the cityscape to the confines of a gallery, Martinez managed, to some degree, to re-construct graffiti as an art form. As described by Austin, when graffiti was "removed to a studio or gallery and 'performed' on canvas, its apprehension as an art object was assured, since the 'frame' of art – that is, the context of the (literal) frame, the white walls of the gallery, and the exhibition space – more or less guaranteed its status."³⁵⁴ Still, the organization of UGA lasted a mere three years, mostly because of Martinez's controlling and exclusionary policies.

³⁵² As quoted in Austin, 95.

³⁵³ Ibid, 74.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 94.

Martinez limited UGA's membership to expert writers (kings). The fact that he emphasized aesthetic quality over quantity disrupted the philosophy of getting up and alienated a number of writers who prioritized bombing. Moreover, he controlled the ethnic composition of the organization, turning away African-American and Caucasian writers in favour of Latino-Americans. This sort of manipulation, which was meant to benefit his scholarly study of disadvantaged Puerto Rican teens, eventually led to UGA's disbandment in 1975. It seemed that not only did the UGA organization suffer from "a tremendous amount of racial tension,"³⁵⁵ but it was also, in effect, anything but united, given that it never included more than twenty members and only twelve writers maintained the organization's core membership.³⁵⁶ Furthermore, the group did not succeed in its mission to re-channel graffiti writing from walls to canvases, as only two writers renounced their illegal practices after joining.³⁵⁷ However, UGA was valuable in that, as writer COCO 144 recalls, "when we got organized at UGA, this awareness developed about who we were, what we were about, and how to value ourselves. Because to a certain extent we were labeled as 'those ghetto kids.' When you value yourself, you begin to value the things you do."³⁵⁸ Therefore, while not revolutionary or wholly inclusive as an organization, UGA supplied some writers with room to reflect on the power of their practice and consider themselves artists.

Jack Pelsinger was another unlikely graffiti aficionado, who after frequenting UGA's exhibitions and realizing Martinez's "bigoted attitude toward non-Hispanic

³⁵⁵ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 25.

³⁵⁶ Castleman, 119.

³⁵⁷ Austin, 71.

³⁵⁸ As quoted in Miller, 154.

members”³⁵⁹ decided to start an alternative graffiti organization. The Nation of Graffiti Artists or NOGA was founded in 1974 and functioned as a type of community arts workshop for all those interested in writing graffiti. Not a graffiti writer himself, Pelsinger acted as a facilitator for youth who lacked exposure to NYC’s cultural diversity. As Pelsinger explains, “I wanted to get the kids involved in everything. I took them to museums, readings, free concerts, meetings, demonstrations [...] they were getting into the life of the community.”³⁶⁰ While Pelsinger was instrumental in giving writers a place to meet and share knowledge with younger generations, the organization did not produce any significant exhibitions. Still, both UGA and NOGA formed so as to re-direct the work of graffiti writers into “projects deemed constructive, and to act as public relations liaisons and gain financial support for the culture.”³⁶¹ These organizations arguably had more noble intentions than did upscale art dealers. Through the efforts of Martinez and Pelsinger, the work of graffiti writers gained exposure in the press.

After the first gallery show by UGA members at SoHo’s Razor Gallery (565 West Broadway) in 1973, a continuum of small-scale graffiti exhibitions were organized at the same time as graffiti production on subway trains increased. Early graffiti shows were significant platforms for writers to meet and collaborate and to realize the potential of their work and the strength of their community. The experience of painting together in legal spaces was vital to the community in that “it opened the way for a large group of the

³⁵⁹ Castleman, 127.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 131.

³⁶¹ Alison Pearlman, Unpacking Art of the 1980s. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 101.

best writers of the period to see themselves as galleried artists.”³⁶² Furthermore, these shows acted as a counterbalance to the common idea that graffiti was purely vandalism. Even though the art press that took notice of these early graffiti shows focused more on their novelty than cultural and artistic value, the attention was a valuable catalyst in the appreciation of graffiti as art.

During the spring of 1973, two articles published by *New York* magazine framed graffiti writing as a new artistic movement.³⁶³ These were followed, in 1974, by the publication of the highly acclaimed coffee-table book The Faith of Graffiti by Norman Mailer. In his book composed primarily of photographs, Mailer contextualizes writers’ works within, what he calls, “The Great Tradition of Art” and celebrates writing as the most exciting contemporary art movement. Published texts were extremely influential as intermediaries or mediators, which aided in the configuration of graffiti as art.

Mediation is a concept utilized in art sociology, which advocates that all factors be taken into account as collective actions that socially produce the art object. According to Natalie Heinich, the term designates “everything that intervenes between a work of art and its reception,” especially people, institutions, words, and objects.³⁶⁴ Mediation displaces the analysis from a visual decoding of the work itself to an examination of how the work appears in a social place, since intermediaries exercise an action on the work and can modify it symbolically and literally. Discourse, as explained by Heinich, is one such powerful mediator. Heinich developed the notions of “mise en énigme” and “mise

³⁶² Austin, 189.

³⁶³ Ibid, 72.

³⁶⁴ Natalie Heinich, La sociologie de l’art. 58. My translation.

en intrigue” to explain how discourse creates social meaning.³⁶⁵ The author emphasizes that a work of art must be conceived of as mobile or ever-changing because it is a social object, especially since it exists socially through discourse, which through interpretation transforms the object as it constructs value. “Mise en énigme” could in the case of graffiti refer to the production of a work through a theorist’s discourse, which infuses the object with significance. The early texts written about graffiti, such as Norman Mailer’s book for example, were intent on interpreting and demystifying or resolving the graffiti enigma. This process of interpretation socially produced the work and allowed it to enter into the world of art. “Mise en intrigue” refers to the process of arranging works into a temporal series or narration. Intrigue regarding artists or their work is constructed through the written word, producing legends of artists’ lives. Historically, this sort of reading has been typical of art history which has been constructed on notions of singular artistic “geniuses” within their time.

Graffiti’s inauguration into the world of high art was problematic for the writing subculture. It created a divide between those writers who considered it a worthy enterprise and those who were wholly against the institutionalized art world.³⁶⁶ Although it has been argued that by 1982 graffiti was “the hottest art movement in America,”³⁶⁷ its popularization by a number of commercial galleries did not prevent others from regarding writing “with the self-conscious and elitist condescension that renders the fine art tradition irrelevant to most of everyday contemporary life, except as living room

³⁶⁵ Heinich explains *mise en énigme* as “*Poser l’existence d’un mystère, c’est pouvoir ensuite s’en rendre maître en y appliquant des mots, et du sens. Ainsi se constitue une rhétorique du mystère, où l’expérience du plaisir esthétique est immédiatement articulée à l’hypothèse d’une énigme et à la recherche de sa résolution.*” *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain: Sociologie des arts plastiques*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1998, 311.

³⁶⁶ This major argument is one I elaborate upon when discussing the graffiti subculture in general.

³⁶⁷ As quoted in Ferrell, 9.

decorations for the rich and objects of contemplation for the educated.”³⁶⁸ In short, graffiti writing was not fully welcomed by the art world nor was it written into the history of art as a significant movement; it was simply popularized by a conglomerate of art professionals who capitalized on a new trend of art production.

By the 1980s, some noteworthy relationships formed between writers and art world professionals. For example, when writer LEE met Fred Brathwaite (a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy) who was keen to revive the excitement about graffiti in the art world, he achieved both underground and mainstream recognition for his work. Brathwaite’s marketing savvy, coupled with LEE’s graffiti experience, attracted the attention of Italian dealer, Claudio Bruni who arranged a graffiti exhibition in Rome.³⁶⁹ In another instance, opportunities for writers to openly exchange techniques and experiences were made possible thanks to Sam Esses, a New York businessman and art patron who donated an art studio to writers. Through conversations with Bruni, Esses decided to encourage the production of canvassed graffiti so as to capture and capitalize on this ephemeral cultural phenomenon. While motivated by profit, the studio Esses donated proved to be of great benefit to the graffiti community because it “encouraged many writers to continue working on canvas”³⁷⁰ and it helped to form networks between writers.

The new conglomeration of small, independent Lower East Side galleries during the 1980s reinforced graffiti’s newfound identity as a vibrant, novel form of visual expression. During the early 1980s, graffiti was frequently exhibited at the Fun Gallery and Fashion Moda. The Fun Gallery, which opened in 1981, was the first art gallery in

³⁶⁸ Austin, 187.

³⁶⁹ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*, 63.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 64.

the East Village as well as the first gallery space to give solo exhibitions to graffiti writers. Owned by downtown underground celebrity Patty Astor and artist Bill Stelling, this space, on East 11th street, was designated to showcase graffiti from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Astor had met Fab 5 Freddy in the late 1970s, who had introduced her to graffiti writing. When Stelling, wanting to convert his studio space into a gallery, approached Astor asking if she knew any artists, she recommended her new graffiti friends. Through a series of chance meetings between Astor and graffiti writers as well as up-and-coming artists Haring and Basquiat, the Fun Gallery was quickly established as a sort of reflection of the downtown scene. Astor's popularity and connections assured that the Gallery became a social hotspot and exhibition space for an underground art movement. Fashion Moda, founded in 1978 by Austrian-born artist Stefan Eins, became an informal gathering place for many South Bronx writers. This storefront gallery (located at Third Avenue near 147th street) eventually became a hub of the graffiti movement. As Sandrine Pereira explains: "Fashion Moda acted as a springboard for many graffiti artists who later became integrated into more 'classic' circuits."³⁷¹ Eins encouraged writers both to spray-paint directly onto the gallery walls and to experiment with canvas. The artist also helped legitimize graffiti by sponsoring many outdoor pieces.³⁷² In a website dedicated to the memory of Fashion Moda, Susan Hoeltzel explains, the Gallery was:

a laboratory where untrained artists and those with art school backgrounds exchanged ideas, performed, exhibited and made art-while the neighborhood joined in. Graffiti artists made their transition from subways to canvas here. Jenny Holzer and Lady Pink collaborated, John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres met and began their portrait castings, and Tim Rollins + KOS found an early venue.³⁷³

³⁷¹ Sandrine Pereira, *Graffiti*. Paris: Fitway, 2005, 29.

³⁷² Hoban, 35-6.

³⁷³ <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/vpadvance/artgallery/gallery/talkback/fmsusan.html>

The approach of these gallery owners assisted writers in becoming comfortable with the idea of showcasing their work in a more permanent setting. In fact, their galleries functioned as liaisons, which connected the street with the art world. For example, before opening the Fun Gallery, Patty Astor collaborated with graffiti writers in the cult film *Wild Style*.³⁷⁴ Both Astor and Eins were not curators by trade and were friends with many writers whose work they exhibited. Moreover, although these spaces brought graffiti indoors, their exhibitions did not cause a great deal of controversy. The types of shows these galleries hosted allowed graffiti writers to experiment with their visual vocabulary much as they had on the streets, without restriction.

In June 1980, Fashion Moda collaborated with the artists' collective Colab to produce the *Times Square Show*. This exhibition was held in a dilapidated, former massage parlour near Manhattan's porn district and included "everything from sex toys to punk art to graffiti."³⁷⁵ While the *Times Square Show* is habitually considered as the official introduction of graffiti to the high art world, it was neither purely a graffiti show nor was it held in a formal gallery space. This month-long exhibition of politically and socially-conscious art included a few works by graffiti writers, but essentially the show "documented the convergence of punk/no wave, wild style, conceptual street work, radical feminism, gay liberation and the burgeoning neo-expressionism that would set the agenda for the dynamic New York art world of the early '80s."³⁷⁶ Steven Hager describes the exhibition space as a chaotic representation of life in New York:

stairways were strewn with broken glass, walls were splashed with paint, and life-size rat sculptures were placed strategically throughout the building's five floors in an effort to create a

³⁷⁴ The film *Wild Style* is discussed at length in section 3.3.

³⁷⁵ Hoban, 36.

³⁷⁶ Jeffrey Deitch, "1981: The Studio of the Street." *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street*. Milano: Charta; New York: Deitch Projects, 2007, 9.

proper environment for the work of more than 150 sculptors, painters, photographers, filmmakers, and conceptual artists.³⁷⁷

The February 1981 *New York/New Wave* show curated by Diego Cortez at the P.S.1 gallery followed this exhibition. *New York/New Wave*, which included graffiti works on canvases, was critical in that it set the stage for the solidification of graffiti as art. This exhibition was followed in the fall of 1983 by the *Post-Graffiti* show at the Sidney Janis Gallery, which is discussed at length in the following section.

Published texts, graffiti organizations, and exhibitions had a crucial impact on the reorientation of writers' self-conceptions and on the transformation of graffiti from ephemeral to permanent works. While some galleries and curators, such as those described above, were not overtly positioned to capitalize on graffiti, others were more blatant with their intentions. The massive market boom during the 1980s meant that art acquisitions were regarded as wise an investment as stocks. A trend of fast-paced buying and re-selling of large quantities of art was set into motion. This economic climate resulted in artistic productions that mimicked the laws of supply and demand. The market boom gave rise to a new type of media-savvy, power-hungry curator/owner, not to mention a remarkable number of new galleries.³⁷⁸ New York's East Village became a breeding ground for hip galleries, many of which were "directly connected to the marketing of graffiti art."³⁷⁹ Although East Village galleries initiated a number of art trends during the 1980s, SoHo dealers were primarily responsible for promoting and transforming the careers of artists popularized in the East Village circuit. In his 1981

³⁷⁷ Steven Hager, *Hip Hop*. 65.

³⁷⁸ "The 1980s saw an explosion of some 176 short-lived galleries and clubs on New York's lower East Side or East Village" Erika Doss, *Twentieth Century American Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 208-9.

³⁷⁹ Leonhard Emmerling, *Basquiat*. Germany: Taschen, 2003, 9.

study, SoHo: The Artist in the City, Charles Simpson explains this very phenomenon by analyzing the food-chain structure, which organized the market for contemporary art in NYC.³⁸⁰ Graffiti art in fact “helped transform the East Village into an art district and a focus of art-scouting SoHo dealers.”³⁸¹ Because graffiti was regarded as fresh, lively, dangerous, and urban, and because it was anonymous to outsiders, it captivated the commercial art world. Moreover, its association with marginalized inner-city youth provided a marketable and effective selling point for the media. Art professionals enthralled by graffiti’s potential to rejuvenate the scene eagerly sought writers. Eventually, art dealers selected a handful of the best graffiti writers and worked on turning them into lucrative graffiti artists.

As evidenced by the above discussion, several mediators including published texts, curators, gallery spaces, canvases, and graffiti writers worked collectively to promote graffiti as an art form. In a way, these elements collaborated to construct a fact – that graffiti is art. The transposition of graffiti from subway trains and city walls to galleries, for many meant: “the art ceased to be an act and instead became an object.”³⁸² Because, as Howard Becker would argue, socially constructed objects are always subject to redefinition, graffiti was thus reformulated into art.

In the end, graffiti’s place within the realm of the art world during the early 1970s and again in the early 1980s had a few lasting consequences. Gallery exhibitions contributed to the popularization of graffiti art outside of the United States, as many artists were given the opportunity to show their work in Europe and Asia. And, while

³⁸⁰ Charles Simpson, SoHo: The Artist in the City. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

³⁸¹ Pearlman, 4.

³⁸² Miller, 158.

early graffiti shows may not have been overly successful, they paved the way for the more progressive graffiti exhibitions of the 1990s and today, whereby writers frequently curate their work and host their own exhibitions and graffiti festivals.

Case Study: The *Post-Graffiti* Exhibition

“What began as high jinx of inner city kids has become the newest and hottest in art. Everyone knew that graffiti had arrived when it opened at Sidney Janis.”

-Marc Miller³⁸³

The *Post-Graffiti* exhibition held at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York during the fall of 1983, featured the canvassed works of eighteen graffiti writers and other artists, including: Jean-Michel Basquiat, A-ONE, BEAR, Marc Brasz, CRANE, DAZE, FUTURA 2000, The Arbitrator Koor, LADY PINK, Don Leicht, NOC 167, LEE Quinones, RAMM-ELL-ZEE, Kenny Scharf, and TOXIC. Although prior to 1983, graffiti had already surfaced and been noticed in New York with the *Times Square Show* and *New York/New Wave*, with the *Post-Graffiti* show graffiti was baptized as art. Using the example of this exhibition, in what follows, I will identify the aspects of production, diffusion, and reception which thrust graffiti into the world of high art.

The Sidney Janis Gallery held an enviable reputation as one of the main instigators of the Pop and Abstract Expressionist movements in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁸⁴ Given the Gallery’s status as a pivotal actor in the debut of art movements that have flourished worldwide, the fact that graffiti was exhibited there granted the art form credibility. Moreover, the Janis Gallery was not located on the lower east side but in a

³⁸³ Marc Miller, *Graffiti, Post-Graffiti*. Video recording from Art/New York Series; no. 21. Narrator: Marc H. Miller. New York: Inner-Tube Video, 1984.

³⁸⁴ Austin, 192.

prominent district where gallery visitors expected to encounter “real” art. As noted by narrator Marc Miller in a video documentation of this exhibition: “these artists have graduated, they have made it from subway surfaces to canvas, where they were arrested for doing one, now they’re getting paid to do the other.”³⁸⁵ The fact that graffiti was exhibited at all is in itself a key act of mediation. The gallery space’s power of validation is most often articulated through the exhibition; this context confers upon the objects displayed “a meaning beyond any significance they may already possess as cultural artifacts or objects of aesthetic contemplation.”³⁸⁶ In other words, exhibitions are the answer to visitors’ expectations to encounter genuine works of art in the realm of the gallery or museum space. As Tony Bennett notes, the museum has historically been a site, which fulfils these expectations by displaying knowledge, which is, in turn, a display of power.³⁸⁷

In the realm of a gallery exhibition, power is not only articulated through the gallery space, but also through the curator’s identity. Dolores and Hubert Newmann were respected and instrumental art collectors who invested in numerous prolific artists. They were “among the first to plug into the [graffiti] movement’s radical chic.”³⁸⁸ The Newmann’s devotion to graffiti as active promoters and buyers was central to graffiti’s acceptance as a legitimate art form.³⁸⁹ Before curating the Janis Gallery exhibition, Dolores Newmann organized a graffiti symposium at the New York Society for Ethical Culture in June of 1983. This event, which brought together influential art world veterans

³⁸⁵ Marc Miller, Graffiti, Post-Graffiti video.

³⁸⁶ Peter Vergo, “The Reticent Object.” The New Museology. Ed. Peter Vergo. London: Reaktion, 1989, 46.

³⁸⁷ Tony Bennett, “The Political Rationality of the Museum.” The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 104.

³⁸⁸ Hoban, 38.

³⁸⁹ Marc Miller, Graffiti, Post-Graffiti video.

with virtually unknown graffiti writers, introduced graffiti to the upscale Manhattan art community. Writers gave a demonstration of graffiti by covering a thirty-six foot canvas before an audience of collectors and dealers. After the success of this symposium, Newmann organized the *Post-Graffiti* exhibition to capitalize on the interest in what for the moment was considered “the toast of New York’s trendy art crowd.”³⁹⁰ Therefore, Dolores Newmann was both responsible for popularizing graffiti in New York’s gallery art scene and for creating a demand for graffiti canvases.

As the curator of the *Post-Graffiti* exhibition, Newmann was the chief author of the show. According to Heinich and Pollack critics are “no longer content with discussing the exhibition’s subject, they tend to stress the exhibition as an object in and of itself, more frequently citing the author.”³⁹¹ Thus, the gallery’s setting, which is in itself not an objective arena, is further complicated by the curator’s identity. If galleries and museums are regarded as institutions which enact rituals through the practice of display, then “curators may be seen as ritual specialists... [and] as mediators between two worlds.”³⁹² In the contemporary art world, curators have a sort of celebrity status because they present audiences with what they have selected as worthwhile art, determine what visitors will be told about the work and how they will view it.³⁹³ A curator’s artistic control therefore impacts how audiences appreciate an exhibition since their extensive

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollack, “From Museum Curator to Exhibition Auteur: Inventing a Singular Position.” *Thinking About Exhibitions*. Eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 237.

³⁹² Flora Kaplan, “Exhibitions as Communicative Media.” *Museums, Media, Message*. Ed. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill. London: Routledge, 1995, 38.

³⁹³ As Carol Duncan argues, by visiting an art museum, spectators enact rituals set up by “sequenced spaces and arrangements of objects, its lighting and architectural details provide both the stage set and the script... the museum’s larger narrative structure stands as a frame and gives meaning to individual works.” *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 12.

involvement will, in turn, makes the public respond to their worldview. The presentation of graffiti at the Sidney Janis Gallery was according to a decision made by the owner and the curator that graffiti is a valid art form. In fact, “Janis’s and Newmann’s enthusiasm for the writers’ work on canvas and their partnership in the exhibition were important signs and could have been the herald of another breakthrough New York City art movement, with writers at its center.”³⁹⁴ Thus, the gallery space and the curator were instrumental factors in graffiti’s induction into the world of high art.

The *Post-Graffiti* exhibition also constructed graffiti as art by way of name. The inclusion of the word “post” was enough to signify that graffiti had arrived when it opened at the Sidney Janis Gallery.³⁹⁵ The name signalled the transformation of graffiti from illegal urban iconography to legal canvassed art. It indicated a shift from the subway to canvas, from impermanent tagging to lasting art. In other words, it emphasized “a change in material ground, serving to legally or artistically legitimize what was once ‘outsider’ art.”³⁹⁶ According to the show’s catalogue, the name, however, was not meant to suggest that these writers had renounced their illegal graffiti writing, but that “the show marks an extension in scope and concept of their spontaneous imagery.”³⁹⁷ While an ambitious framing, essentially it is this element, the name, which had the greatest impact on the creation and reception of the works exhibited. Writing’s re-framing as art was part of the packaging for which the gallery world is known. The “naming of styles and movements in the gallery world [...] is a way of guiding purchases as well as

³⁹⁴ Austin, 192.

³⁹⁵ Today, as explained in my thesis, the label “post-graffiti” signifies an entirely different trend of illegal art production that exists alongside traditional graffiti.

³⁹⁶ Kate Linker, “Post-Graffiti.” *Art Forum* 22.03 (1984): 92.

³⁹⁷ Julie Saul, “Post-Graffiti, Sidney Janis.” *Flash Art* 116.03 (1984): 38.

creating contexts of understanding and association.”³⁹⁸ Hence, graffiti art allowed for superficial groupings of many different styles into one category. Often what was labelled graffiti art in the 1980s was not graffiti writing. This fact is made evident in the case of the *Post-Graffiti* exhibition, since writers were grouped with “graffiti artists” such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf.

Basquiat and Scharf did not consider themselves graffiti writers nor were they accepted as such by the subculture. The only connections that authorized this grouping were either their sites of dissemination in public locations – Basquiat’s slogan-like conceptual SAMO works done on city walls (fig. 22) – or the reliance on linear drawing and pop culture references in their works – Scharf’s colourful intersections between cartoon imagery and industrial landscapes (fig. 23). The addition of their works in this exhibition, however, signalled that graffiti writing was part of art trends that were popular at the time.

In the context of the gallery, graffiti is not randomly discovered as it might be on the street, but rather, it is placed within a contrived display meant for consumption. This suggests that, “in addition to what gets shown in museums, attention needs also to be paid to the processes of showing, who takes part in those processes and their consequences for the relations they establish between the museum and the visitor.”³⁹⁹ Curatorial practices are thus fundamental both to what we appreciate in a gallery, since the art objects have been chosen by the curator for display, as well as to how we experience the art by way of spatial arrangement.

³⁹⁸ Austin, 195.

³⁹⁹ Bennett, 103.

The layout of the *Post-Graffiti* show retained elements of graffiti's illegal origins. Alongside the featured canvases, excerpts from the eminent cult graffiti film *Style Wars* as well as photographs by Henry Chalfant, which document outstanding transient graffiti pieces, were displayed. The photographs, which were exhibited independently from the canvassed works, documented the commonplace sites of graffiti production, on trains and city walls, alerting the gallery visitor to graffiti's roots. While these photos were intended as signifiers of graffiti's origins, instead, they functioned as remnants of the past. They were interpreted by gallery visitors as reminders of what graffiti was prior to it becoming art.⁴⁰⁰ Thus, once again the message was clear – through re-contextualization, graffiti had “evolved” into art.

Aside from the photographs and film, the works in the exhibition were predominately canvassed graffiti. Placed on a surface traditionally reserved for serious artistic creation certified, graffiti was transformed. Writers signed their pieces with their tags but labels bearing their real names were also included next to the canvases. In their works, many depicted trains covered in graffiti which was construed by critics as “a compensation for these new, hygienic, viewing circumstances.”⁴⁰¹ The greatest difference between street and canvassed graffiti was the disappearance of the writer's name as the central object of contemplation. The pieces were not traditional depictions of signatures with accompanying imagery: instead they were images with accompanying signatures. Although some writers kept the focus on their tags, most graffiti produced after its legitimization as an art form were no longer about self-representation in the form of a signature. Just as many writers argue that graffiti displayed on canvas in no longer graffiti

⁴⁰⁰ Saul, 38.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 39.

both literally and symbolically, writing one's name as the focal point of a canvassed artwork loses all meaning. No longer a transformation of the urban environment nor a subversive addition to the cultural landscape of signage, a writer's name on a canvas simply does not have the same socio-cultural, personal, or political weight. Because the purpose of the work is different on canvas, the central theme of graffiti writing disappears. Whereas on the street a writer's name is a form of self-affirmation and works to identify the writer as somebody at least to other writers – a persona or even a hero – in the gallery or in private collections, the name has a different function. Instead of communicating with a network of initiates, it represents a mysterious culture to a collection of outsiders. Generally, while the works themselves were well received, graffiti's very presence in a gallery space was the main point of contention amongst critics of this exhibition.

The exhibition generated two noteworthy reviews, one by Julie Saul in Flash Art, the other by Kate Linker in Art Forum. Both authors responded unfavourably to the exhibition. Saul argues that the tactic of contextualization with the use of photographs of urban graffiti worked as a disadvantage to the exhibition. This documentation coupled with graffiti on canvases reinforced that “the work has lost in the transition.”⁴⁰² The author contends that although the materials used for the creation of these canvases and the styles employed remained true to graffiti encountered on the streets, the energy and impact of graffiti vanished in the gallery context. Kate Linker agrees that “what had had

⁴⁰² Ibid, 39.

raw vitality, a rugged vibrancy in its native locale, acquired a forced immediacy and studied nonchalance” within the walls of the gallery.⁴⁰³

Both reviews represent classic responses by critics to formal graffiti exhibitions. While the authors construct graffiti as art merely by writing about it in celebrated art magazines, they deem galleried graffiti as inappropriate since it contradicts the very ethics of the subculture. Countless reviews of graffiti exhibitions argued that in the urban context graffiti is accessible to writers as well as to the general public and should remain marginal so as to meet the subculture’s needs. Some writers such as LADY PINK concur, stating:

*painting on canvas or a gallery’s walls removes the element of risk, of getting one’s name around, of interaction with one’s peers and one’s potential younger rivals. The pieces in galleries cease to be graffiti because they have been removed from the cultural context that gives graffiti the reason for being a voice of the ghetto.*⁴⁰⁴

As critic Suzi Gablik argues, “the social context is what gives it its meaning, and this is being ripped from it” if shown in galleries.⁴⁰⁵ The major theme echoed throughout Gablik’s book, Has Modernism Failed? – that the growth of the art market is a major cause of art’s moral, spiritual, and aesthetic decline – is, according to the author, derivative of a wider collapse of moral and spiritual values within Western society. Gablik asserts that the majority of radical artists reflect our culture of consumerism more than they challenge it. The result is an art that is self-conscious, self-satisfied, and spiritually unreflective. By synthesizing attitudes into movements and charting the trajectory of these movements into the future of art and society, Gablik argues that these

⁴⁰³ Linker, 92.

⁴⁰⁴ As quoted in Miller, 159.

⁴⁰⁵ Suzi Gablik, Has Modernism Failed? New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984, 112.

trends are symptoms of the moral and economic situation of the society that produces the art.

Gablik dedicates a chapter to graffiti: "Graffiti in Well-lighted Rooms." Here, from the perspective of an art critic interested in ethical, economic, and sociological issues, she surveys graffiti's integration into the institutional framework of the art world, and asks: "are we confronted with yet another instance where mass-consumption capitalist economy expands into a taboo art in order to transform private behavior into a commodity?"⁴⁰⁶ Noting that graffiti is "a radical art with a radical methodology because it's illegal,"⁴⁰⁷ the author praises it as a more real art form that stems directly from New York's social condition, but condemns its appearance in the gallery context. Interestingly, her analysis is infused with a number of factual mistakes, which render her reading as one of the misguided mediators that worked to popularize graffiti and subsequently tear it back down within the elite art world.⁴⁰⁸

In the early 1980s, critics were not arguing whether graffiti should be regarded as art, instead they almost unanimously maintained that this art form should remain outside gallery walls. Whereas curators, dealers, collectors, and art patrons were persistent in creating a demand for canvassed graffiti, critics were intent on keeping graffiti in the urban context. This debate in discourse emphasizes the sort of mediation Heinrich describes. Heinrich's insistence on the value of actions or behaviours of individual people (the curator, artists, and critics) in the experience of a work, reveals:

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 106.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 112.

⁴⁰⁸ Gablik insists that Basquiat and Haring are part of the graffiti subculture (106); that Basquiat's heritage is purely Haitian (108); and bases almost the entirety of her text on interviews with these artists, thus (wrongly) reconfirming their status as writers.

*interpréter une oeuvre d'art contemporain n'est pas seulement, pour un critique, l'expliquer, mais c'est aussi l'exécuter, comme on le dit d'une oeuvre musicale; c'est la faire exister par sa mise en circulation dans le monde, grâce a la médiation d'un travail discursif – entre mise en intrigue et mise en énigme – qui doit beaucoup a la qualité de l'interprète.*⁴⁰⁹

While critics tended to be against the formal exhibition of graffiti, by writing about it, they facilitated the construction of graffiti as art.

Although the *Post-Graffiti* exhibition aided in popularizing graffiti and introducing writers to one another, it did not appreciate graffiti for its inherent worth. The curator presented graffiti as just another painting style without analysis of its subcultural affiliations and illegal status. Displayed on canvases, graffiti lost the sense of movement, immediacy, and energy it held in the public realm. The very rawness that attracted New York's high art scene to graffiti was not transferable to a gallery context. In other words, the art world's "respect for writing and for its history had been given short shift, subordinated to marketability and to the profits of dealers and galleries."⁴¹⁰ In the process of graffiti's construction as art, a rupture emerged within the subculture. Writers who exhibited their work in galleries achieved public acclaim for their visual expression but lost their sense of collective control as they exhibited in a foreign realm.

Following the *Post-Graffiti* exhibition, critical responses to graffiti shows meant the New York art scene became disillusioned with graffiti as quickly as it had become enthralled. By 1984, the graffiti movement in the prestigious art world was *passé*.

For a brief moment the inner-city artists, whose work had been followed for years by transit cops, not critics, were the darlings of Fifty-seventh Street and SoHo. But the 'limousine liberals' –

⁴⁰⁹ Nathalie Heinich, *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain*. 324. "To interpret a contemporary work of art means not only, for a critic, to explain it, but it also means making it, like we say about music: through its circulation thanks to mediation of a discursive work – between mise en intrigue and mise en énigme – that much is owed to the quality of the interpreter." My translation.

⁴¹⁰ Austin, 201.

upscale dealers and pseudo radical collectors – soon got bored with baby-sitting and found some new neo movement to market.⁴¹¹

As argued above, whether in or out-of-doors, graffiti became a function of the social groups, urban youth, city officials, or art professionals, who produced and appropriated it. Yet as Martha Cooper aptly describes, perhaps gallery owners “liked the idea of [graffiti] better than they liked the actual art.”⁴¹² In effect, given that graffiti, more than twenty years later, has yet to become the institutionalized art movement some predicted it would become, it is clear that its elusive quality makes it both desirable and yet impossible for anyone to own.

The small galleries on the Lower East Side that displayed graffiti during the late 1970s and early 1980s sought to communicate the liveliness of this burgeoning art movement and to provide writers with a chance to explore their practices in a legal setting. At the same time, powerful commercial art galleries caught onto the downtown trend and attempted to market graffiti as a new art movement – ignoring its history and imposing limitations on the writers’ expression all the while. Within a short period of time, graffiti writing was celebrated within these two different art worlds, each of which had an impact on the movement’s destiny. Were it not for the recognition of writing practices in alternative galleries, the big players would not have co-opted the movement. Consequently, the graffiti world’s cautious attitude towards legal exhibitions in decades to come would lead to a vast array of progressive gallery shows with the writers often taking centre stage as both artists and curators.

⁴¹¹ Hoban, 8.

⁴¹² As quoted in Miller, 160.

Basquiat and Haring

“I think that two similarities that Jean and graffiti in general had in common was that people wanted to harness a wild animal, they couldn’t control him and they couldn’t control graffiti. The art world was bland and they wanted something on their walls. Jean-Michel’s work is very anti-artworld, you know. It’s almost like a curse. And people still love that. They love being cursed at.”

-Lee Quinones⁴¹³

In the context of art criticism or art history, graffiti as an art form is most often associated with the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. This connection is just as problematic as the relationship between the culture of writing and hip-hop discussed in Chapter Two because it falsely constructs a correlation between divergent art practices and consequently writes graffiti out of its own history. The reasons for this grouping are deconstructed in this section.

During the 1980s, only a few legitimate graffiti writers who were part of the subway writing culture – including CRASH, DAZE and LADY PINK – were able to sustain art careers and continued to exhibit their work in galleries. Often, their work was overshadowed by the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring who, according to the art media, successfully made the transition from writing illegal graffiti to making high art. The categorization of Basquiat and Haring as graffiti writers was problematic both for these artists and for members of the writing culture. In effect, neither Basquiat nor Haring were graffiti writers in the traditional sense since they did not utilize the prevalent graffiti iconographical style and visual vocabulary nor were they associated with any particular crew, nor did they follow the ethics of the graffiti world. Moreover, neither artist claimed to be a graffiti writer nor aspired to represent the culture of writing. They had “little

⁴¹³ As quoted in Hoban, 42.

connection to writers and their culture [yet they] were represented in the media as ‘graffiti’ painters”⁴¹⁴ since both artists were friends with graffiti writers, were respected in the subculture for their work, and had connections with the culture of hip-hop. The fact that they wrote illegally on downtown walls (Basquiat) or in subway stations (Haring) prior to their successful art world careers was of little consequence to the culture of writing, yet this is what caused them to be revered as graffiti artists in the gallery circuit. Amongst the community of early New York writers, many were offended by the grouping of these artists with bonafide writers especially since “after their work of creating the subway painting movement, gallery-oriented painters got public attention for the phenomenon, while many of the actual innovators were written out of history.”⁴¹⁵ Because both Basquiat and Haring wrote or drew illegal graffiti in the cityscape to advertise themselves and their work (both had links with hip-hop culture, which, as explained earlier, was associated with the graffiti culture; and both had styles that referenced popular culture) they were categorized as graffiti artists and wrongly identified with graffiti writers.

Alison Pearlman devotes a chapter of her study on American art in the 1980s to the case of “Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and the Art of Subcultural Distinction.”⁴¹⁶ The author conducts visual analyses of several works by Basquiat and Haring and concludes that the artists had “similar social agendas”⁴¹⁷ given that both “combined multiple aesthetics from within and outside of the Western history of art” and were both “capable of speaking to the interests of many different, and sometimes

⁴¹⁴ Miller, 168.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 168.

⁴¹⁶ Pearlman, 203.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 73.

opposed, audiences.”⁴¹⁸ Beginning with these findings, Pearlman argues that deviant subcultures of style, such as graffiti writing, also lie somewhere in-between the acceptance by the mainstream and resistance to it.

Virtually every text written about Basquiat cites his underground reputation in Manhattan as a graffiti writer. This is legitimate, given that Basquiat first came to be recognized in the art world by the phrases he wrote on walls in SoHo and TriBeCa⁴¹⁹ which he typically signed with a copyright logo and the name SAMO⁴²⁰ (Same Ol’ Shit). The often perplexing and impenetrable phrases, such as “Like An Ignorant Easter Suit,” or “Tar Tar Tar (Coal) MCVXLIII,” that Basquiat wrote under his pseudonym were, as Jeffrey Deitch describes, “an essential part of the downtown experience.”⁴²¹ The locations the artist chose for his type of graffiti guaranteed that members of the upscale art scene would notice his legible comments.⁴²² Like Basquiat, Keith Haring also initially gained notoriety through his illegal drawings in subway stations. Aiming to “make his art accessible to as many people as possible,”⁴²³ Haring addressed the mass public in highly populated places so as to communicate ideas to people outside of institutional boundaries. His brand of graffiti consisted of drawings rendered in chalk on subway station advertisement panels that had been covered in black paper in preparation for new ads

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 70.

⁴¹⁹ The artist’s “graffiti assault in lower Manhattan that would eventually bring Basquiat his first taste of glory.” Andrew Decker, “The Price of Fame.” *Art News* 88.1 (1989): 97.

⁴²⁰ Although SAMO is most often recognized as meaning “Same Old Shit,” and suggesting reference to a corporate logo, Smith argues that SAMO “looks suspiciously like an ironic reference to his status as a person of color (‘Sambo’ without the ‘b’).” “The Writing on the Wall.” 20.

⁴²¹ Jeffrey Deitch, “1981: The Studio of the Stree,” 9.

⁴²² Decker, 97. His graffiti style stood out because “SAMO sayings were far more cerebral and literate than the merely vibrant work of some of the pure graffitiists” and his interest in contemporary art was also evident.

⁴²³ Pearlman, 87.

(fig. 24) – a practice he began in 1981 and abandoned in 1985.⁴²⁴ Unlike Basquiat who used words to communicate ideas, Haring created a series of cartoonish characters to make statements typically contingent on metaphors or irony. Although “at first seemingly cheery and upbeat,” Haring’s drawing were “masquerading as cartoons, they had thousands of subway riders a day studying sketches for Armageddon – drawings bubbling with unrestrained eroticism and spinning with signs of destruction.”⁴²⁵ While Basquiat’s and Haring’s particular types of graffiti obviously differ from the work of signature writers, authors have habitually labelled their early work simply as graffiti, making no distinctions between the writing of graffiti and being part of the graffiti writing culture.

This omission is problematic not only because it misrepresents the motivations of these artists in the literature, but more significantly, because it misinterprets the culture of writing in the world of high art. The short description of their graffiti work (above) immediately signals at least three major differences between their practices and those of writers. First, although Basquiat and Haring wrote illegal graffiti in the public sphere, they were both selective in terms of locations and audiences. While authentic graffiti writers also selectively choose their locations, they do so with the prospect of maximal exposure. In contrast, Basquiat wrote graffiti primarily as a way to arouse interest in his art amongst curators and dealers while Haring formulated his own pictorial vocabulary of simplified icons primarily to, like advertisers, address the citizenry at large. His images were not incorporated into a signature, in fact he rarely signed his drawings, and his work did not enter into a visual conversation with New York Style pieces.

⁴²⁴ Ibid, 93.

⁴²⁵ Jeffrey Deitch, “Why the Dogs Are Barking.” in Keith Haring. Tony Shafrazi Gallery: New York City, 1982, 17.

Second, Basquiat's graffiti usually consisted of a clearly written phrase accompanied by the signature SAMO, making his graffiti visually and structurally different from that of writers. Between 1978 and 1980, Basquiat's graffiti either advertised SAMO as a quasi-movement with messages such as: "SAMO as a neo art form;" "SAMO as an end to mindwash religion, nowhere politics and bogus philosophy;" "SAMO as an escape clause;" "SAMO as an end to playing art;" "SAMO as an alternative 2 playing art with the 'radical chic' sect on Daddy's \$ funds," or it was simply used as a signature to a variety of phrases, such as; "life is confusing at this point;" or "a pin drops like a pungent odor." Haring was fond of "using different kinds of public spaces for art display,"⁴²⁶ and like graffiti writers, developed a recurring visual vocabulary and style that made his work identifiably his. Haring's graffiti, characterized by expressive, outlined characters often rendered in popular cartoon layouts, was also atypical from the appropriated pop culture characters graffiti writers sometimes depicted. His characters, like the well-known radiant baby, were decidedly his creations and "unlike most graffiti, Haring's work was almost universally admired."⁴²⁷ The artist habitually worked in subway corridors to develop his visual vocabulary which was composed mostly of explosions, televisions, space ships, barking dogs, and composite-type people rendered in the easily erasable medium of chalk.

Finally, both Basquiat and Haring practiced their brands of graffiti for a short time and stopped diffusing illegal work as soon as they became art world stars. Therefore, unlike other writers, these artists did not write graffiti as a means of belonging to a group

⁴²⁶ Pearlman, 97.

⁴²⁷ Steven Hager, Hip Hop. 67.

of like-minded individuals. Moreover, they did not identify with the system of prestige developed by the writing culture and their graffiti styles were legible.

In addition to Basquiat's and Haring's illegal work, the second major reason they were labelled as graffiti artists was because each had a degree of association with the culture of hip-hop. Both artists collaborated with members from the hip-hop community and visually made reference to that world in their work. Basquiat distinguished himself as an urban poet/graffiti writer, was friends with some authentic writers, and became a fixture in the underground art scene of New York's Lower East Side. Because of his hipster reputation, club owners occasionally invited him to paint murals as a sort of live performance while DJs spun music. Moreover, he took part in group shows on more than one occasion which primarily featured the work of graffiti writers. Keith Haring was greatly inspired by the styles of dancing associated with hip-hop (namely break dancing), pop culture, and advertising. Like Basquiat, Haring also disseminated his work in nightclubs frequented by hip-hop personalities and at times collaborated on his art projects with graffiti writers such as LA II.⁴²⁸

The overarching reason for Basquiat's and Haring's link to graffiti and hip-hop in general was the style and subject of some of their paintings. A number of Basquiat's canvases make reference to hip-hop culture and to graffiti writing, including his 1984 *Untitled (Defacement)* (fig. 25). This work portrays two white cartoon-like police officers hitting a Black man and is understood to represent the fatal beating of graffiti artist Michael Stewart by the NYC transit police. Basquiat's choice to represent this incident not only indicates the artist's interest in the division between white authority and Black

⁴²⁸ Pearlman, 86.

minority, but also the illegality of graffiti writing and the lengths undertaken by transit officials to uphold the law. What Basquiat suggests with this work is that this situation could have happened to him, since he too was a young Black man writing graffiti on NYC streets. The artist's painting style also evokes and is sometimes associated with the scratching and cutting techniques characteristic of hip-hop music. Basquiat's tumultuous relationship with the high art world was instrumental in the evolution of demand for the graffiti style which had prospered as part of hip-hop street culture.⁴²⁹ The growing exposure of his style within NYC's fashionable hotspots soon translated into reverence in the elite art world which promptly hailed the artist to be the "next best thing."⁴³⁰ A specific type of graffiti writing had thus begun Basquiat's art career but in no way should his illegal graffiti have been associated with the graffiti movement. It just so happened that his career boom segued neatly into the discovery of graffiti in high art circles. According to interviews and friends' testimonials, "Basquiat had no intention of being lumped into a category with a bunch of kids who bombed trains."⁴³¹ He was neither a true graffiti writer through style nor intention. His aim was not to cover the city with his signature and paint murals, but rather to get noticed by the mainstream art world. Although some of his friends were graffiti writers, Basquiat never tagged on subways and was not regarded as a writer by members of the graffiti subculture.

⁴²⁹ Basquiat's paintings were for a short time internationally renowned, imitated, and marketed. While his fame was dismissed by some as unjustifiable promotion, the artist's untimely drug-induced death in 1988 initiated renewed interest in his work. It is undeniable that the popularity of his art in the 1980s had an impact on the recognition of graffiti by influential art circles in New York and beyond.

⁴³⁰ See Chapter Five of Nicholas Mirzoeff's Bodyscape for an account of the rise and fall of Basquiat's career. His African-American identity was not only a theme explored in his work, but was also utilized as a selling point by art dealers eager to capitalize on the obscure art of the Black man. Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁴³¹ Hoban, 9.

Once Basquiat's work was welcomed into galleries, his style transformed to include a melding of "naïve, neo-expressionist, graffiti images with references to racism, consumerism and Pop art,"⁴³² thus embodying the art market of the 1980s. Whether his work was read in the context of postcolonialism, hybridity, or Black traditions, it was always ambiguous. His use of words to convey factual information or to label and juxtaposed with images from a great number of social, economic and cultural histories, made Basquiat's work as straightforward as it was indefinite. The coexistence of many seemingly non-related elements in one pictorial space, typical in his work, functioned much like the ambivalent manner in which he was treated by the art world. Alison Pearlman suggests that his method calls into question the "difference between common conceptions of the deviant and the normal worlds on which delinquency as a form of identification depends."⁴³³ Basquiat's work, which often makes references to social types, therefore, like graffiti, had a tendency to reference groups or individuals through style.

Basquiat's 1981 canvas *Untitled* (fig. 26) suggests another possible way to read his work as similar to that of traditional graffiti writers. Like many of his paintings, the canvas is a colourful and chaotic representation of recurring icons. A similar description would apply to a graffiti piece. The use of words, crowns, pop culture references, characters, and the evidence of movement in his pieces are also factors that characterize signature graffiti. The repetitious portrayal of the crown in this work, coupled with the word "famous," are symbols close to the graffiti writer's heart – to be famous and renowned as a king on the scene. Moreover, the movement created through the depiction of lines and paint strokes to construct an undecipherable yet unified whole is emblematic

⁴³² Pernilla Holmes, "Report Card: Jean-Michel Basquiat." *Art Review* 53.6 (2002): 77.

⁴³³ Pearlman, 82.

of the graffiti signature. Basquiat's naïve style, his characteristic combination of elements, the extraordinary energy of his paintings, and his street work, together provide a number of catalysts for comparisons with traditional graffiti. Similarities aside, the artist's work is not symptomatic of the visual tradition that evolved around the name.

Like Basquiat's paintings, Haring's prolific career has also inspired some comparisons to signature graffiti. Some graffiti writers like FREEDOM, for example, have recognized Haring's style as similar to wildstyle:

if you look at Keith Haring, every mark, or line has to offset every other line. It's the same with Paul Klee. In wild-style, every shape has to bounce off another shape. That's to me what it's about. Now when you're doing it in such an intricate form, plus you have to do that within a scheme of letters, that's when wild-style comes alive, because everything interconnects with something else. It is a harmonious composition. The whole thing has a story.⁴³⁴

Haring's canvases are often cluttered with cartoon characters or characters from popular culture, and his energetic use of line functions like a motif that constructs his visual language, echoing characteristics associated with traditional graffiti. Haring's 1982 canvas (fig. 27) featuring two people lifting an over-sized television displaying Mickey Mouse epitomizes his style. His practice depends on the rendition of movement through the action of lines, the repetition of a logo that invariably functions as the artist's signature, and the pop culture reference all neatly packaged in a thickly outlined, cartoon frame. Both the use of the marker and the purposeful drips in this work are comparable to the materials and the techniques of graffiti production. In another instance, this time a collaborative piece with writer LA II (fig. 28), Haring's scrawl-like patterns are intertwined with the writer's signature. Haring's tendency to completely cover a surface with thick, animated lines that frame, compose, and give rise to the work itself, is perhaps the most obvious point of comparison with graffiti. Still, more than just vibrant

⁴³⁴ As quoted in Miller, 132.

expressions of line, image, and design, Haring's oeuvre, as Jeffrey Deitch notes, has "a quality of menace, a sense of impending violence, and of sexual explosion." His pieces "diagram the collective unconscious of a city – a city that moves along happily enough, but just barely enough to keep from degenerating into the dog-eat-dog, topsy-turvy world of Haring's images."⁴³⁵ Unlike the culture of signature graffiti writing, Haring's work, especially his brand of graffiti in subway stations, are pictorially uncomplicated yet empirically complex. His work, which deals with world events, God and religion, technology, and popular culture, directly addresses audiences through its readable and intriguing imagery.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that "through media marketing strategies, Basquiat and Haring were linked to the graffiti movement, even though they did not claim to be writers."⁴³⁶ As CRASH explains, "Keith and Jean-Michel were on the perimeters of our art form, they weren't fully integrated into it."⁴³⁷ What writers are primarily upset about is that "the more museums and art histories focus on and theorize about Basquiat and Haring as representative of the subway painters, the less the public knows about the dynamics of aerosol culture."⁴³⁸ This thesis's articulation of the problematic framing of Basquiat and Haring as graffiti writers is motivated by this very obscurity.

In all three subsections on graffiti and the art world, I have emphasised how graffiti was either interpreted as art or how the work of some artists, particularly Basquiat and Haring, was interpreted as graffiti. In each case, whether through early organizations

⁴³⁵ Jeffrey Deitch, "Why the Dogs are Barking," 19.

⁴³⁶ Miller, 170.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 172.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 169.

like UGA or mainstream graffiti exhibitions such as the *Post-Graffiti* show, the graffiti object itself fulfilled the demands of a given audience or circumstance. Howard Becker, in his text “The Work Itself,”⁴³⁹ takes a sociological perspective to analyze the very construction of that notion. Becker’s point of view is especially revealing in deconstructing the configuration of graffiti into an art object.

Becker argues: “any work of art can [...] be seen as a series of choices.”⁴⁴⁰ He also stipulates that we cannot speak of the work itself because there is no such thing, and that such a thing can only be distinguished by a group of like-minded people – an art world, for example – that collectively and contextually constructs the work itself. Becker makes these claims based on the notion that “the very idea of ‘the work itself’ is empirically suspect.”⁴⁴¹ It is therefore impossible for anyone to entertain the idea of the work itself because “there is no such thing.”⁴⁴² Instead, there are moments in time, as we have seen with the Janis exhibition, when a work appears and can be considered different from all others. Significantly, Becker also proposed that the work itself is never finished because of the numerous variations it undergoes. From slight restorations to grandiose new versions, a single art work can manifest itself in a multitude of ways. The reception of the work of art is thus informed by choices, or “conventions as to what – which of the many forms it takes from moment to moment – counts as the ‘real,’ ‘basic’ work and which kinds of variation don’t matter.”⁴⁴³ As made evident by early graffiti exhibitions, the object in question – graffiti – can therefore be considered as the work itself, but only

⁴³⁹ Howard Becker. “L’oeuvre elle-même.” *Vers une sociologie des oeuvres*. Eds. Jean-Olivier Majastre and Alain Pessin. Paris: L’harmattan, 2001, 449-464. English version: “The Work Itself” available from: <http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/thework.html>.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁴² Ibid, 2.

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 2.

by those who can distinguish or determine what the work itself is. Finally, Becker contends that a work of art is never truly finished because its completion is determined by its reception. Its reception will in turn be different for every receiver, or viewer; therefore, it might seem impossible to speak unanimously about the work itself.

Consequently, Becker argues that the work itself can only be conceived through adherence to conventions by persons with specialized knowledge.⁴⁴⁴ Members of a given art world, for example, who understand each other, can work together and invoke conventions, which in turn define norms. These conventions are the result of group cooperation and are neither deliberate nor arbitrary. Conventions are chosen in context, “in the course of their participation in the social organizations of the world in which works of that kind are made.”⁴⁴⁵ Hence, as Becker makes clear, everyone who participates “in the making of the work has some effect on the final choice of ‘the work itself.’”⁴⁴⁶ The art work is therefore the result of a series of choices since “a full understanding of any work means understanding what choices were made and from what range of possibilities they were made.”⁴⁴⁷ While the art work is the product or final choice of all the people who participate in its making, this process “is continuous, and never settled for good.”⁴⁴⁸ For this reason, an inquiry into a work of art is endless.

This sort of sociological inquiry Becker proposes provides a method with which to access how and why graffiti has been continually framed as either art or vandalism. Using galleried graffiti as a case study, I agree with Becker on the premise that artworks

⁴⁴⁴ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds*. 25.

⁴⁴⁵ Howard Becker, “The Work Itself,” 2.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

are socially produced and forever in a state of construction. As outlined above, the context of graffiti diffusion is inextricably linked to the intended meaning of the work.

3.2: From Subculture to Pop Culture

In this section, I analyze graffiti as a subculture, focusing specifically on questions of deviance, youth, and illegality. Deviant subcultures, such as Skinheads, Punks, and others studied by Dick Hebdige in Subculture: The Meaning of Style, construct their own styles or modes of behaviour and expression from the plethora of existing conventional possibilities and alter them to produce styles which are deemed threatening to the so-called mainstream. Given that I have already discussed the question of style in the maintenance of the graffiti subculture, the focus here is on the vital issue of illegality, which leads into a discussion of gender issues. As Ivor Miller states, “aerosol art embodies attitudes of resistance to assimilation. By advertising the uniqueness of their identities, writers developed an inclusive culture based on creative principles.”⁴⁴⁹ Some writers use popular culture icons in their work, but object to the display of graffiti in mainstream institutions. Others maintain both illegal and legal graffiti careers. This consideration proposes an assessment of graffiti as an art movement similar to Pop Art in terms of its negotiation of popular culture. Also, I investigate the factors that led to hip-hop’s move into the mainstream so as to explain graffiti’s own popularity outside of its subcultural parameters.

⁴⁴⁹ Miller, 36.

Illegality and Youth

“Grasping the broader implications of their actions, some writers fantasized that through creating a multi-ethnic culture based on an aesthetic mastery of unreadable scripts, they could build their own reality, create their own history, and define themselves within it.”

-Ivor Miller⁴⁵⁰

Nancy Macdonald’s exploration of graffiti writing as a subculture (2002) analyzes the problems inherent in the existing subcultural literature and, using the graffiti writing culture as a model, offers new ways of defining subcultures. In her research, Macdonald tackles the Functionalist and Marxist problematic fixation on class as the definitive rationale for subcultural participation and argues that gender and age should be accounted for as valuable factors for analysis. In the course of her research, Macdonald recognized that for most serious writers, graffiti is not simply what they do, it is their way of life.⁴⁵¹ Still, writers differ in their opinions on how the subculture should be maintained – a tension analyzed in this subsection.

In what follows, I investigate the criticality of graffiti’s illegality and contemplate the notion of graffiti as a “moral career.” As Macdonald posits, “graffiti represents a moral career in its purest form. Gaining respect, fame and a strong self-concept is openly expressed as a writer’s primary objective and the subculture is fully set up to support this goal.”⁴⁵² In assessing how graffiti is both reliant upon and resistant to mainstream cultures, I emphasize issues of deviance and illegality as the driving forces behind the graffiti subcultural framework.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 85.

⁴⁵¹ Macdonald, 52.

⁴⁵² Ibid, 66.

In her book, The Graffiti Subculture, Macdonald explains that, historically, two schools of thought have addressed subcultures: the Functionalists in 1950s America and the Marxists at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s in Birmingham, UK.⁴⁵³ While both Functionalists and Marxists agreed that all subcultures stem from working-class origins, they disagreed in terms of analysis. Functionalists favoured “reaction” as an explanation for subcultural involvement, claiming that the working-class was unable to bridge the gap with societal values normalized by the middle-class, and that this disappointment led to involvement in delinquent activity.⁴⁵⁴ Marxists, on the other hand, utilized “action” to analyze how “subcultural members emerge as working-class rebels” using the subculture as a “way of resolving the contradictions of their subordinate class position.”⁴⁵⁵ Both schools claimed that all subcultures were “problems” originating in working-class ghettos, thus, as Macdonald explains, ignoring other possibilities for subcultural membership such as age or gender. The consideration of class as a defining characteristic of subcultural participation in the culture of graffiti writing cannot be substantiated, Macdonald argues, since youth from all backgrounds employ creative means to develop a sense of self and construct a dialogue with one another and their city. In her fieldwork, Macdonald discovered that although overwhelmingly male, the graffiti subculture could neither be defined by its class nor its ethnic composition. In fact, interviews conducted with numerous graffiti writers by Ferrell (1996), Macdonald (2002), and Miller (2002) demonstrate that writers come from

⁴⁵³ See Chapter 3 in Nancy Macdonald’s The Graffiti Subculture for a discussion on the class orientation of subcultural theories advocated by the CCCS.

⁴⁵⁴ In Albert Cohen’s Delinquent Boys: the Culture of the Gang. New York: Free Press, 1955, the author explains how failure to meet the terms of mainstream goals creates a reaction which subverts these goals into insignificant ideals and leads to deviance.

⁴⁵⁵ Macdonald, 37.

all walks of life.⁴⁵⁶ Age, however, does seem to factor into a graffiti career, thus supporting contentions from youth culture researchers.

An illegal graffiti career is usually a full-time endeavour which does not provide financial rewards; therefore participants are likely to be young. The comforts of dependent living and without adult responsibilities enable total emersion in the graffiti subculture. As writer ZAKI clarifies:

it's no coincidence that most people in graffiti are about 12, 13 when they start and most people when they get to 20, sort of, slow down. I think there may be several reasons for that, i.e., you've got to go out and earn a living and it's against the law and it takes a lot of time and effort... You calm down a little bit, you don't take so many risks, but it's usually financial, like, you've got to pay a mortgage or you've got kids or something like that.⁴⁵⁷

As writers get older, "their energy declines, their activity decreases and their attitudes change."⁴⁵⁸ Frequently, this change is contingent on the need for financial stability, and is a consequence of the more severe repercussions of committing illegal acts.

The graffiti subculture proposes a career path compelling enough to entice membership while fulfilling social needs – a situation similar to a career path in mainstream cultures. In his book, Outsiders, Howard Becker employs the example of drug use to popularize the concept of a "career path" when explaining deviant involvement.⁴⁵⁹ Becker articulates that making use of an illegal activity to construct a male identity entails a conscious, premeditated act of deviance, asserting: "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders."⁴⁶⁰ Becker, however, omits an analysis of the intentions of the crime-committing individual. He

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 86-87.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁵⁹ Howard Becker, Outsiders.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, 8.

overlooks the possibility that deviant behaviour often has a deliberate purpose as does graffiti writing whereby illegality is one of the subculture's main principles. Graffiti's criminalization made writing more revered because of the extreme pressure under which writers worked – “the greater the danger, the greater the respect.”⁴⁶¹ Since illegal graffiti writing is a criminal type of career, subcultural participation can perhaps be best understood in this case as a moral career, or a “regular sequence of changes...in the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others.”⁴⁶² The previously described developmental steps graffiti writers take – from tag to throw-up to piece – can be seen as part of a career path defined by public appreciation, which, within the subculture helps shape a writer's identity.

The graffiti subculture is a part of, but also stands apart from the rest of society. In terms of its place of dissemination, its visual language, and its subsistence as an alternative culture, the graffiti subculture is firmly tied to mainstream cultures. Indeed, as Louise Gauthier explains, “while graffiti subcultures are distinct from more recognized and legitimate socio-cultural systems, they often borrow symbols and beliefs from them though often in order to distort, exaggerate, or invert them.”⁴⁶³ The subculture necessitates these ties to mainstream cultures in order to position and define itself beyond the parameters of the dominant order. Graffiti is at once physically accessible and functionally inaccessible to outsiders. The fact that outsiders make contact with graffiti but have no direct path of entry into its meaning and purpose facilitates a sense of power and superiority with writers. By creating a world of their own, neither easily penetrated

⁴⁶¹ Macdonald, 84.

⁴⁶² Erving Goffman, *Asylums*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, 119.

⁴⁶³ Gauthier, 55.

by non-writers nor intended to be understood, writers can exclude mainstream audiences from accessing their work, thus reinforcing the vitality of their world. Writers are cognizant that most people cannot read their graffiti, and this positions them as members of an exclusive scene – a scene that is visible to everyone but insignificant to most. Therefore, the graffiti subculture exists but only because it preys on the ignorance of outsiders: “for only by hiding, and being misunderstood and criticized, can it find the ‘distance’ that enables it to be a ‘world apart.’”⁴⁶⁴ This world apart is supported by a structure made for and by the writers themselves, thus responding to the immediate needs of subcultural members. In Macdonald’s words, the subculture “offers freedom and autonomy, it also provides structure, stability and support. Rules and roles maintain order, discipline and guide behaviour.”⁴⁶⁵ Through the construct of the subculture, writers participate in an alternative system, which both defines their actions, and aids in the negotiation of their identities.

Earlier, I noted that although graffiti writers constitute what may seem like a unified group of people, it is anything but. This point is stressed here, especially in light of the controversy regarding the production of legal versus illegal graffiti. Graffiti subcultures are composed of people by no means united in their points of view, their personal realities, or their ideas about graffiti. As Miller explains, “writers do form a community, but one of strong-willed individuals with a variety of motivations and feelings about what they do.”⁴⁶⁶ To this effect, writers’ lack of consensus regarding legal work is unsurprising. The impetus for the division is straightforward. Some wish to keep

⁴⁶⁴ Macdonald, 162-3.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, 187.

⁴⁶⁶ Miller, 20.

graffiti ideologically hidden and inaccessible to mainstream audiences, arguing that its illegality and sense of mystery empowers them and makes writing more pleasurable: as a subversive act, graffiti writing must remain illegal. Others wish to advance their art form in new directions and make a living out of it, asserting that graffiti can still be meaningful when disseminated legally. The debate thus “centers around how, where and why graffiti should be practiced,”⁴⁶⁷ a question upon which writers have trouble agreeing.

The most common starting point for writers is to get-up illegally. The risk involved escalates bravado and the thrill of getting up develops self-confidence. Furthermore, being part of a world that functions like a secret society is enticing as an alternative community. Moreover, the possibility of creating a different identity exercised in the public sphere is an attractive way to access that realm. Writing graffiti affords writers the opportunity to gain recognition and fame from a peer group. In short, “by conforming to certain illegal conventions, writers are promised a powerful degree of legitimacy.”⁴⁶⁸ Most writers value the subcultural authenticity, fidelity, and control that illegal writing facilitates. Working autonomously on their own schedules and on their own terms provides writers with a self-generated, creative, venture. At the same time, the subversive community writers have created responds to their needs and simultaneously offers freedom while providing stability and support in the form of a community.⁴⁶⁹ Working legally simply does not impart the same rewards.

The most compelling and credible argument for the dissemination of illegal graffiti originates from those who have the most to gain from illegal graffiti and hence,

⁴⁶⁷ Macdonald, 165.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 171.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 187.

the most to lose from legal writing. As writer SKORE states, “as style developed on the street, for the street, by the street, graffiti, in my opinion, loses its essence and whole point in an enclosed space.”⁴⁷⁰ The idea that true graffiti, by definition, has to be illegal in order to be meaningful is persuasive given graffiti’s function in the cityscape. Many early writers “were absolutely against selling their art, the point being that it was for free, in defiance of a system that put a price tag on everything.”⁴⁷¹ Illegality is therefore essential as a prime component in the facilitation of identity construction. Illegal writers revel in their subculture, their lack of conformity to art world or mainstream standards, and their criminal activity. The fact that their art is indecipherable and against the law affords writers a place for themselves in the cityscape and allows them to identify with an exclusive culture that breeds in the face of opposition. Writing legally disrupts the entire reason for doing graffiti, and quite often legal writers “are portrayed as ‘packaged goods;’ fakes who have exchanged their true persona for one that attracts, rather than repels, outsider interest.”⁴⁷² Still, the idea of moving into the commercial graffiti market is gaining popularity today because it tends to afford writers a comfortable position both inside and outside the subculture.

While establishing a new outsider audience moves writers out of subcultural boundaries, they can often claim the best of both worlds by doing legal work, “while keeping, and possibly even enhancing, their place and audience within the subculture.”⁴⁷³ To achieve this, writers must have first established themselves on the streets and must typically continue to create illegal work even once their legal careers bloom. Still, from a

⁴⁷⁰ SKORE quoted in Macdonald, 166.

⁴⁷¹ Miller, 154.

⁴⁷² Macdonald, 174.

⁴⁷³ Ibid, 90.

“purist point of view, the raw work done in public spaces is still the most powerful element to date.”⁴⁷⁴ Writers interested in making legal work typically have pictorially and technically developed writing skills and they also tend to be older. To maintain status in the writing culture as bombers, writers have to continually get-up and get noticed. This is more difficult for older writers who have more responsibilities and less free time. Many who have crossed over to legal careers either continue to dabble in the creation of illegal graffiti on a less-intense scale or “relinquish their illegal careers without losing their identity or credibility.”⁴⁷⁵ The respect they have garnered as subcultural heroes allows many writers to transition into other avenues while maintaining a subcultural status as long as they do not belittle the work of illegal writers. Conversely, those that have never gotten-up illegally are disrespected within the subculture because they have not worked under pressure or taken part in a graffiti scene. In addition, those who have achieved cheap fame ⁴⁷⁶ are not highly regarded. Evidently, subcultural status, sites of diffusion, and motivation are all chief considerations in determining a writer’s status.

To sum up the magnitude of the graffiti subculture, I remind the reader of the possibilities that the culture offers young people. By writing graffiti, early NYC writers “could construct vital parts of their identities as young adults, artists, political beings, and New Yorkers.”⁴⁷⁷ An illegal writing career permits urban youth to choose a new identity, become part of an alternative system of competition and prestige, and gain confidence through a strong self-concept. Therefore, much like my earlier contention that hip-hop

⁴⁷⁴ Miller, 154.

⁴⁷⁵ Macdonald, 88.

⁴⁷⁶ Cheap fame signifies achievement not worthy of recognition, as it has not been worked for.

⁴⁷⁷ Miller, 26.

culture functions as an identity-building tool, I propose that the same can be said for graffiti writing.

Gender Issues

“This subculture must be acknowledged for what it is. Not a site for ‘youth,’ but a site for ‘male’ youth – an illegal confine where danger, opposition and the exclusion of women is used to nourish, amplify and salvage notions of masculinity.”

-Nancy Macdonald⁴⁷⁸

As Nancy Macdonald rightly establishes, the culture of graffiti writing, while on the one hand represents a rejection of mainstream conventions, is, on the other hand very traditional in its stance on the participation of women.⁴⁷⁹ Women were most definitely a minority in graffiti writing’s early days. There are many reasons cited for the lack of female participation: the dangers associated with writing on subway trains; the potential sexual violence of traversing the city at night time; the fact that women might have less of an interest in proving themselves as brave by partaking in an illegal activity; the different kinds of responsibilities women have; and most of all, that the idea of being a minority amongst men in an unwelcoming milieu is not overly enticing for women. Aside from being caught by city authorities, women, especially in the early New York days, had to cope with hurdles established by and from within the subculture.

While style is paramount to the negotiation of status within the graffiti subculture, the construct of the subculture itself, which is defined by its illegal practice, is an invaluable platform for writers to work out and sustain their masculine identities. This subculture could not function, as Macdonald argues, as a site of masculine construction if

⁴⁷⁸ Macdonald, 149.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, 139.

its activities were legal. Through the illegal work that writers do, they earn respect and recognition from their peers as fearless, strong, independent, and rebellious, which validates their maleness. As such, the purpose of the crime of graffiti writing is to “build, confirm and even amplify their [writers’] masculine identities.”⁴⁸⁰ Expanding on research that recognizes crime as a resource for the development of a male identity, Macdonald notes that in conversation, writers often define their actions as masculine.⁴⁸¹ The legal and personal dangers and the rebellious nature of writing graffiti are factors that writers conceptualize as male and use as achievements attesting to their masculinity. Furthermore, the recognition writers receive from their peer group for having confronted dangers in the field attests to their bravery and thus indicates that risks are primarily taken for the benefit of gaining respect from others.⁴⁸² The recognition and status writers achieve function as rewards that should be understood not as “naturally evolving by-products of this subculture, [but as] its sole reason for being, and a writer’s sole reason for being here.”⁴⁸³ The purposeful exclusion of female writers is thus essential to the development of a (male) writer’s identity.

As a young woman researching the male-dominated graffiti subculture, Macdonald notes that she represented a safe audience as an outsider, not a writer herself, because she posed no threat to the writers’ masculinity.⁴⁸⁴ Women who penetrate the subculture do so with some difficulty because while “male writers work to prove they are

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, 97-8.

⁴⁸² Ibid, 104.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 68.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid, 60-1.

‘men,’ female writers must work to prove they are not ‘women.’”⁴⁸⁵ To gain any measure of respect from their male peers, women have to suppress signs of their femininity in terms of their behaviour and prove themselves to be dedicated and skilled writers over and above their male counterparts. In addition to this substantial obstacle, women must also withstand a competitive male environment where women, whether accomplished writers or beginners, are judged primarily based on their looks and typically characterized as “slutty.”⁴⁸⁶ Judging a woman’s reputation based on her imagined sexual activities rather than on her art, allows male writers to keep the subculture as a “masculine safe house.”⁴⁸⁷ Still, this fact has not deterred female writers but it has affected their numbers and the recognition (or lack thereof) of their work.

Beginning with the pioneering work of NYC female writers EVA 62, LADY PINK, and BARBARA 62 for example, women’s presence in the male-dominated world of graffiti has greatly expanded. Two years after his international photographic survey of graffiti, Graffiti World, Nicholas Ganz published the long overdue sequel Graffiti Women (2006). In a way, it is fitting that women writers be awarded their own hardcover volume. After all, their participation in the graffiti world has been insufficiently celebrated. In the book’s forward, post-graffiti artist SWOON describes how when audiences discovered that she was a woman, “there was a lot of attention coming my way for being female, and it just made me feel alienated and objectified, not to mention patronized.”⁴⁸⁸ This is not an uncommon reaction given that many women on the scene are either girl-friends or hangers-on and not actual writers themselves. The numerous

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, 130.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid, 146-7.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 149.

⁴⁸⁸ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, Graffiti Women. 9.

testimonials given by female writers in published materials clarifies that women have a harder time proving themselves in the graffiti subculture purely because of their gender. Women must work more diligently by perfecting their styles, painting in dangerous places, and proving that they are fully dedicated to writing so that they may gain respect. To gain notoriety, however, all they have to do is be female. While, becoming a respected female writer takes extreme devotion, becoming famous, as PINK notes, takes nothing at all: "I was already famous as soon as I started, just because I was a girl."⁴⁸⁹ Of course, this sort of quick fame is more of a curse than blessing since it does not require any skills.

In her analysis of women in the hip-hop world, Nancy Guevara interviewed LADY PINK to identify the challenges the writer faced as young woman on the early graffiti scene.⁴⁹⁰ In the course of the interview, the author discovered that PINK and her female colleagues employed a "deliberately feminine" style, which they hoped would "help lead to the recognition of girl writers and will controvert the oppressive attitude of their male peers."⁴⁹¹ Although ambitious, writers like PINK had a much harder time carving a place for themselves within the subculture mostly due to jealous male writers who were quick to cross out and discredit the women's work. The hostility women faced, and to a large extent continue to face in the graffiti world coupled with the dangers of painting at night in subway yards, kept many aspiring female writers from gaining recognition. Still, some, like LADY PINK, persevered and using their own style and subject matter, have been written into the movement's history. In fact, today, recognized both for her artistry and her participation in a male-dominated subculture, PINK virtually

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁹⁰ As Guevara explains: "Lady Pink was a consummate graffiti writer by the fall of 1980, at age fifteen."

52.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, 53-4.

stands for the participation of women in graffiti's early days both as a female role model and through the subjects she paints.

PINK's website, www.pinksmith.com, displays her work from the past and present, as well as that of her husband, Smith. The categories featured on the site which exhibit the artist's pieces, include commissioned murals, fine artworks, subways, illustrations, special projects, and public murals. As her tag name alone suggests, PINK uses bright, soft colours for her pieces (see fig. 5). Many of her subway works are rendered, unsurprisingly, in pink and adorned with hearts, lips, or flowers. In the majority of her pieces, she depicts women as strong heroines. For example, in a 1983 canvas called *The Breakdown*, a collaborative work with Jenny Holzer, PINK depicts an angry, Amazon-like feminine figure towering over skulls and subway trains (fig. 29). Above the scene, the phrase, "The breakdown comes when you stop controlling yourself and want the release of a bloodbath," establishes the work's theme. Whether this is directed towards other (male) writers or men in general is unclear. The addition of subway trains in the background, however, implies that this frustration is graffiti-specific. The combination of bombed trains and skulls suggests that this "bloodbath" is a figurative assault of graffiti (the release of paint) on an otherwise controlled terrain. The woman's fierce expression further proposes that she has gained dominance over the field (graffiti scene), and with her skills, has "killed" all other writers. The heroine's attire is perhaps a reclamation of the sexualized female body which, in the graffiti world, has created barriers for women's participation.

Today's female writers approach their writing from two opposite angles. Some take advantage of the anonymity of writing to disguise their sex or at least not call

attention to it, while others are keen to make their work, through subject matter, colour, and style, appear blatantly feminine. The work of MAD C, ZORI4, SUPA B2, and STEF for example in no way hints at the gender of its makers (fig. 30). Meanwhile, SHIRO, NINA, and YUBIA's graffiti is most definitely feminine by virtue of its rounded style of lettering, and "girlie" characters rendered with big eyes, butterflies, and hearts (fig. 31). Since the late 1990s, the most crucial change in the work of women writers has come from their involvement in the street art movement, as discussed in Chapter Four.

Writing and Popular Culture

"Rap music was easier to co-opt and exploit because the production costs of an album are far less than those of a film, and it's easier to produce and sell thousands of rap records than one piece of graffiti art on canvas. Rap – like other forms of Black music that went before it – was ready-made for capital gain."

-Gwendolyn D. Pough⁴⁹²

Gwendolyn Pough argues that each element of hip-hop "has experienced moments of co-optation and exploitation by the mainstream."⁴⁹³ This thesis argues that graffiti's co-optation has followed three distinct paths, each of which have led to mainstream successes for graffiti writers. The phrase "mainstream success" is used carefully, as it acknowledges that any attention graffiti has attracted has not challenged its criminalized status. Graffiti writing did, however, gain popularity in the 1980s and 1990s primarily through its association with the world of hip-hop, the commercial art world, and advertising campaigns. Dick Hebdige describes popularization, which leads to

⁴⁹² Pough, 4.

⁴⁹³ Ibid, 4.

commodification, as the demise of a subculture.⁴⁹⁴ This however, is not the case for graffiti writing. Having already described its sustenance in the art world, in this subsection I review rap music's move from the South Bronx to international airwaves as a way to explain how graffiti, which was framed as an element of hip-hop, gained popularity. I also compare graffiti with Pop Art to access its connection to pop culture, advertising, and branding. Much like Pop Art, which was at once critical of a cultural system of consumption and commodification but also contributed to that system, graffiti positions itself outside of mainstream cultures yet heavily relies on and makes use of pop culture imagery.

The label "hip-hop graffiti" frequently used in the literature to describe the traditional signature writing style, suggests that there exists a specific graffiti style, one associated solely with hip-hop. Hip-hop graffiti as a title did not surface in the literature until the 1980s when scholars began writing about hip-hop culture as a whole. The abundance of research specifically addressing hip-hop is testament to its significance as a cultural movement. It is of particular interest to my research, however, that every major book on hip-hop – Dimitriadis, 2005; Perry, 2004; Pough, 2004; Keyes, 2002; Kitwana 2002; and Rose, 1994, amongst others – excludes a discussion of graffiti. While each author mentions graffiti as an element of hip-hop or even dedicates a few pages to it, there is always some reminder that elaborating on graffiti does "not fall within the parameters of this book."⁴⁹⁵ Conversely, those who have written solely about the graffiti writing culture – Macdonald, 2002; Miller, 2002; Austin, 2001; and Ferrell, 1996 amongst others – tend to only briefly mention graffiti's hip-hop lineage. This scenario is

⁴⁹⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*. 95-96.

⁴⁹⁵ Keyes, 1.

intriguing in that it suggests a degree of resistance to the idea that hip-hop and graffiti writing are related. Although the connection between these cultures is often articulated, authors studying hip-hop culture concentrate on the music, while those researching the writing culture focus on the notion of the subculture or graffiti on subway trains. The connection between these two cultures in this section has much to do with the fact that both gained worldwide attention at virtually the same time, and that this success hinged on the media-constructed affiliation between hip-hop and graffiti.

The “exploitation and co-optation” of hip-hop described by Pough and virtually every other hip-hop theorist, began in the late 1970s when the culture was already in full swing. The distinct musical genre that emerged earlier that decade was originally only recorded “on homemade cassettes or eight-track tapes and sold at a high price to fans or friends.”⁴⁹⁶ Blaring from ghetto blasters, rap music was eventually heard by a growing number of people and by 1979 the first commercial rap recording, “Rapper’s Delight,” was distributed by Sugar Hill Records. This hit:

Ruptured the art form’s sense of continuity as a live practice known to all its “in-group” members – largely poor, black, and Latino youth in ghettoized urban areas like Harlem, New York. This rupture was a defining one for hip hop as it came to mark the arts’ entrance into the public sphere of worldwide cultural discourse, where it has remained ever since. This shift towards in-studio production has affected the art in a number of crucial ways, especially by redefining hip-hop culture by and through the relatively narrower and more easily appropriated idiom of rap music.⁴⁹⁷

Since its initiation onto 1980s pop charts, rap music has developed stylistically and musically. With time, and as it spread globally, the rap genre diversified especially as non-urban and non-African Americans were making it, and hip-hop music became subdivided into a number of styles. By the 1990s, rap music had become “a vehicle for

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, 67.

⁴⁹⁷ Dimitriadis, 2.

global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world.”⁴⁹⁸ As hip-hop became an international phenomenon, the link between rap music and hip-hop culture was widely broadcast. This sort of connection facilitated the commercial mass media’s selling of hip-hop as a complete package.

As rap gained success, it required a visual form of representation that was as new, hip, and as “street” as rap itself. Graffiti was the logical choice. Hip-hop already embodied a visual culture represented through fashion, album covers, and posters. However, graffiti’s illegal status which connotes danger, its indecipherable aesthetic which implies a secret society, its reliance on the name which suggests self-empowerment, and its roots which are planted in the ghetto, could aptly reflect rap’s energy. Moreover, graffiti writing was also associated with disenfranchised and rebellious youth. All of the key elements were in place to make a smooth if not predictable connection between graffiti writing and hip-hop. Both cultures were understood by their practitioners and by outsiders as alternatives to gang membership. Both required very few instruments or materials and promoted self-expression. Both were created for youth by youth as a way to socialize while engaging in creative endeavours. Still, as writer PHASE 2 emphasizes: “many writers never listened to rap, many writers were more partial to headbanging than head-spinning and a huge amount of rappers, breakers and so-called Hip Hoppers couldn’t tell you the first thing about writing.”⁴⁹⁹ Ironically, while hip-hop theorists argue that hip-hop culture has been co-opted and exploited by mainstream multi-national companies to sell products, hip-hop has used the

⁴⁹⁸ Tony Mitchell, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001, 1-2. Mitchell explains the local specificities of hip-hop in various countries, emphasizing the connection between hip-hop and ethnic minorities who appropriate rap’s style to articulate their hybrid identities or cultural spaces.

⁴⁹⁹ As quoted in Austin, 203.

culture of graffiti writing in a similar way. Writing has been taken advantage of to sell hip-hop products, and as such, it has been used by the culture of hip-hop. Whether graffiti writers agree with the connection between hip-hop and graffiti, their visual vocabulary continues to be utilized to sell numerous hip-hop products, from CDs to T-shirts.

To use a contemporary example to illustrate this dynamic, in 2002 hip-hop diva Missy Elliot released an album entitled “Under Construction” (fig. 32). The central theme of the songs that feature on the CD is in large part about revisiting hip-hop’s roots. To illustrate this idea, each photo-montage featured on the CD jacket is a visual manifestation of hip-hop’s four elements. On the cover, Missy, dressed head to toe in b-girl attire, sits on a cement block located on a sidewalk and next to an old ghetto blaster, which itself is strategically positioned near wall graffiti. The stage is set – Missy Elliot dressed in hip-hop clothing is “hanging out” on a graffiti-laden street listening to rap music. All four full-colour photographs inside the CD sleeve exhibit this sort of scenario: a tough-looking Missy in breaker clothing on stoops, streets, and playgrounds, framed by tags and pieces. The largest graffiti piece, which is used as the backdrop in three photos, legibly reads “Missy ‘Misdemeanor’ Elliot,” and features an image of a huge boom-box set within a rugged landscape littered with orange pylons – a means to illustrate the idea that Missy (and hip-hop itself) is “under construction” (fig. 33). Furthermore, most of the clothes worn by the people who appear in the photo-shoot have graffiti on them and Missy’s name is rendered as a tag, adorned with stars and crowns, a number of times. Together, all of the imagery displayed in the CD’s packaging clearly communicates the idea that Missy Elliot, a true hip-hopper herself, advocates a return to the genre’s “old

school” days.⁵⁰⁰ As the artist expresses in the album’s intro: “Let’s take hip-hop back to the rope, follow me.”

Around the same time as hip-hop music became a vehicle for the dissemination of signature graffiti writing, advertisers for a number of products tapped into graffiti as a hip, urban tool for marketing. As Miller explains, “just as urban youth culture was influenced and then transformed by mass media, aspects of it were studied and then absorbed by those who created the media.”⁵⁰¹ A quick scan through advertisements found in mainstream magazines, in bus shelters, or on billboards from the 1980s onwards, attests to the use of graffiti writing to sell commercial products that might reach their target audiences. In *Aerosol Kingdom*, Miller describes a number of examples whereby well-established brand names made use of graffiti to appeal to a young, hip market. For example, Louis Vuitton created bags with an airbrushed look in the 2001 Milan fashion show entitled “Spray-On.” Also, in the late 1980s, Paloma Picasso employed the graffiti form as inspiration for a jewellery design called “Gold Scribbles,” made for Tiffany & Co. In other arenas, instead of appropriating graffiti’s visual vocabulary, companies hire graffiti writers to design their ad. For example, in 1994 LEE created an advertisement for “Absolut Vodka.” The relationship between the Absolut Vodka brand and graffiti writing is a long-standing one. For instance, the company has supported Montreal’s annual *Under Pressure* festival many times. The *Under Pressure* hip-hop festival was first held in 1996 with only 23 participating graffiti writers. By 2001, the festival had

⁵⁰⁰ Lyrically, this idea is expressed in the song “Back in the Day,” which includes these words: “What happened to those good old days? When hip-hop, was so much fun, ohh, house parties in the summer y’all (c’mom) and no one, came through with a gun, it was all about the music y’all, it helped... to relieve some stress, ohh, we was under one groove y’all, so much love between North and West, remember when we used to battle, on the block before the lights came on, ohh mama said we would be Straight A kids, if we did our homework like we knew those songs...”

⁵⁰¹ Miller, 175.

grown to be one of the largest events of its kind in North America featuring over one hundred graffiti writers from all corners of the globe, thirty DJs and MCs, numerous breakdancing crews, and most importantly, an estimated five thousand spectators.⁵⁰² From its inception, the festival has been scheduled over two summer days: a hip-hop musical extravaganza on the first night and the main event beginning in the early morning of the following day. Absolut Vodka has acted as the main sponsor for *Under Pressure* in both 1999 and 2000. Urbanx-Pressions, the festival's organizers, note on their website that, "Absolut have advertised on 3 occasions in Under Pressure magazine hiring Urbanx-Pressions to design ads that would better reflect their involvement in the events while effectively reaching their desired market."⁵⁰³ For their part, on their website, Absolut Vodka has commented on the brand's collaboration with artists explaining, "Absolut is a creative product with creative communication. The creativity of the artists helps in retaining the vitality and freshness of the Absolut brand, ensuring continued impact and inspiration."⁵⁰⁴ Furthermore, Absolut advertises that the brand does not persuade artists to collaborate with them "Ever since Andy Warhol made a picture of the Absolut bottle, it has become prestigious for artists to collaborate with the Absolut Company. The idea of the collaboration is that the artists create their own personal interpretation of the bottle."⁵⁰⁵ For *Under Pressure* the Absolut Company provided writers with paint and scaffolding. In return, writers included a representation of the Absolut bottle on the festival's main wall.

⁵⁰² Bernard Lamarche, "Les artistes de la bonbonne a l'oeuvre – Le Graffiti aux Foufs." Available: <http://www.ledavoir.com/2002/08/06/6603.html> 6 August 2002.

⁵⁰³ www.urbanx-pressions.com

⁵⁰⁴ www.absolutvodka.com

⁵⁰⁵ www.absolutvodka.com

In addition to advertisements, graffiti can be related to the Pop Art movement as a way to analyze its visual vocabulary, commercial appeal, and troubled relationship with the art world. It has been said that Pop Art “borrowed from the media [...] and gave back to the media. It borrowed from advertising, and advertising returned the compliment.”⁵⁰⁶ Graffiti writing functions in a similar way. Graffiti has been compared to Pop Art in at least one notable text – Ivor Miller’s Aerosol Kingdom. In his book, Miller argues that writers, “far outdoing action painters such as Jackson Pollock in their use of bodily motion, express as much of their contemporary urban condition, including the influence of advertising, new technologies, and anarchic impulses.”⁵⁰⁷ The author goes on to describe that, “graffiti is related to Pop Art in the sense that Pop emerged as a consequence of the media-saturated environment of New York City. The sensibilities of Pop Art were related to the impact of the popular press, movies, advertising, and television in our visual culture.”⁵⁰⁸ Miller’s argument is echoed in Janice Rahn’s book, Painting Without Permission, where the author focuses on the practice of appropriating pop culture imagery in both Pop and graffiti, explaining, “the hip-hop aesthetic is constantly under construction as it appropriates sounds and images of consumption into recycled productions.”⁵⁰⁹ Indeed, paralleling the Pop movement with the graffiti movement is an effective way to pinpoint how both reference pop culture and the capitalist tradition of branding, thereby simultaneously contributing to the culture of commodification and criticizing it.

⁵⁰⁶ Carol Anne Mahsun, Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue. Ed. Carol Anne Mahsun. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989, 1.

⁵⁰⁷ Miller, 4.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, 173.

⁵⁰⁹ Rahn, 180.

In her book, Pop Art and Consumer Culture, Christin Mamiya documents the rapid rise and acceptance of Pop Art as a movement, which, as the author asserts, reflected and promoted the culture of consumption that had come to maturity in the post-war decades.⁵¹⁰ By adopting the images, strategies, and entrepreneurial roles of the corporate world, Pop artists, Mamiya argues, joined collectors and dealers in reinforcing an ethos of commodification in art and consumption in the wider society. By reproducing in their works the logos and products of the marketplace, adopting the presentational modes and techniques of advertising, and engaging in the cult of self-promotion, Pop artists mimicked the dominant cultural style, and thus both drew from an ideology of consumer culture and “contributed to the legitimation of that very system.”⁵¹¹ As Mamiya argues, Pop Art’s success was thus due to its relationship with American consumer culture as it both reflected and contributed to the rampant consumption of the 1960s.

Mamiya’s ideas regarding Pop, especially that “by introducing elements and sensibilities from mass culture into high art, the Pop artists were destroying the very pedestal upon which traditional high art rested,”⁵¹² are paralleled in this thesis’s research on graffiti’s early forays into the New York art world. Like the Pop movement, graffiti was greatly influenced by advertisements and capitalized on the recognizability of brands while simultaneously reinforcing the culture of commodities through its distribution. Both Pop and graffiti artists worked to blur the distinction between the consumption of consumer goods and fine art, and, in effect, took the culture of their time on its own terms.

⁵¹⁰ Christin Mamiya, Pop Art and Consumer Culture: American Super Market. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, 4.

⁵¹² Ibid, 163.

Mamiya argues that the Pop Art movement was drawn into the institutional matrix that reinforced an ideology of consumption. As graffiti writing was popularized through the culture of hip-hop, it paradoxically became both an expression of resistance and a marketable advertising strategy. The work of both Pop and graffiti artists reflected and responded to the cultural climate of the day by capitalizing on the ethos of consumption both as means of critique and dissemination. As Miller suggests, these crossovers and contradictions point to the fact that: “throughout the history of the movement, writers have had complicated relationships with the mass media, with corporate advertising, and with the galleries.”⁵¹³ The similarities that can be drawn between the movements are especially revealing in a visual analysis.

The graffiti film, *Style Wars*, features a subway piece of Campbell’s Soup cans. Painted by Fab 5 Freddy, this piece depicts eight identical cans, each with a different caption: Dada Soup, Pop Soup, Fabulous Soup, Fred Soup, Futurist Soup, TV Party Soup, Tomato Soup, and Blank Soup. This example is visually obvious in that it mimics the archetypal Pop artist, Andy Warhol’s infamous renditions of Campbell Soup. The tradition of re-working the soup cans made famous by Warhol continues today with the work of some street artists who paint the iconic image as an homage and a point of reference for their visual tradition (fig. 34). Although, at times, graffiti writers have made such overt references to the work of Pop artists, most of the time, parallels are drawn between the two with the visual strategies developed by the subculture.

⁵¹³ Miller, 153.

Pop artists like graffiti writers represent “mass-produced images and objects by using a style which is also based upon the visual vocabulary of mass production.”⁵¹⁴ Writers animate their pieces through loud colours and cartoonish imagery and use commercial strategies such as the reproduction of their logo (their name) and copious reminders of their existence. Paralleling graffiti with Pop Art is an effective strategy towards an analysis of co-optation, appropriation, and advertising. Through their work, graffiti writers mimic the same corporate strategies they rebel against, through visual over-saturation and punchy logos. Moreover, as explained above, while writers often appropriate and re-work images and techniques from advertising, their aesthetic is also often used to sell a variety of products.

The union between graffiti and advertising is as logical as it is absurd. On the one hand, graffiti and mainstream ads have much in common – they are both in the business of self-promotion, they use bright colours to communicate their designs, they make reference to commercial products or characters from popular culture, and they both adopt varying strategies to reproduce their names or logos in the cityscape. On the other hand, using the work of graffiti writers to promote a product is thoroughly against the subversive nature of graffiti. Also, advertisers use designated spaces in the cityscape to mount their ads whereas graffiti writers defy the rules of commerce by publicizing themselves throughout the cityscape. The above debate regarding legal and illegal graffiti production, namely in the form of graffiti art on canvases sold through commercial galleries, is just as relevant when it comes to commercial imagery.

⁵¹⁴ Robert Rosenblum, “Pop Art and Non-Pop Art.” Pop Art: A Critical History. Ed. Steven Henry Madoff. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 131.

Today, whether graffiti writers willingly participate or not, many well-known companies use graffiti vocabulary to sell products. Most recently, car company Volvo launched a graffiti focused campaign to promote the U.K. sale of the Volvo C30 R-Design. I first came across this ad on the side of a double-decker bus in the summer of 2008 in London, England. In the ad, a photograph of the Volvo is set against a colourful backdrop of graffiti and large legible text, which reads: “Some Say It’s Criminal, Others Great Art” (fig. 35). Given that no other visual or textual information is provided aside from the graffiti, the car, the phrase, and the fact that the advertised Volvo sells for £14,995, the message the company suggests is that while the price of this Volvo is so low, it is “criminal,” its design is so good, it should be considered “art.” Equating the Volvo C30 with graffiti, which is both art and crime, allows the advertisers to access a number of selling points: a ready-made debate with regards to graffiti will inspire conversation; the fact that a hip, controversial art form is being used to sell this product implies that the product is for people who are themselves hip and edgy; and the idea that Volvo like graffiti is designed for busy, urban streets. Volvo U.K.’s website clearly establishes these connections.⁵¹⁵ The slogan above the Volvo C30 reads: “Great Design Provokes Great Debate...£14,995 Settles It.” On the website, a link to the caption “Art or Crime?” features the Volvo C30 nestled in a graffiti setting where a new heading reads: “Where Do You Draw The Line?” Clicking on “Join The Debate” leads to a paragraph that begins with the words: “Life is full of choices. Judgements. Times when we have to decide one way or the other.” The navigator is then given the choice to decide between “Art?” or “Crime?” Choosing “Art?” guides the site’s visitor to a description of the car’s artful

⁵¹⁵ <http://www.volvocars.com/uk/campaigns/Local/C30/Pages/default.aspx>

design, beginning with the question: “Can a car be art?” Choosing “Crime?” leads to information about the car’s low pricing and no interest payments and begins with the following: “Is it a crime to shock people? Should we be locked up for appreciating quality? It’s not a crime. But it is criminal.” Taken together, all of the text, technical details aside, suggests that whether one appreciates or denounces graffiti is a personal choice, but one that should be made carefully given that the line should be drawn at quality. Words aside, the Volvo C30 is visually contextualized on the website by graffiti, whereby under the cover of night and observed by security cameras, the car is surrounded by spray-painted city walls. Obviously graffiti’s edginess is used here to imply hip, urban, artful car design. The Volvo Company set the stage for consumers to decide whether graffiti is “good” (art) or “bad” (crime), but through its campaign implies that the Volvo C30 is, for lack of a better description, as cool as graffiti.

In another instance of graffiti co-optation to sell a product while simultaneously expressing a point of view, in 2008 the Schick-Gillette Company uses a graffiti backdrop to sell their Quattro Titanium Trimmer (fig. 36). In this case, instead of hipness, graffiti epitomizes dirt, decay, and rubble. Here again, graffiti dominates the background, although this time, instead of figuring as a fun and colourful visual language, throw-ups are employed to suggest an unappealing and grimy form of visual pollution. The razor – Quattro Titanium Trimmer – victoriously cuts through the unsightly graffiti to reveal what looks to be a snow-capped mountain set against a vibrant blue sky (fig. 37). The words “Nettoyez tout,” which translates to “clean everything,” encapsulate this idea of

good (the razor/cleanliness) overcoming evil (graffiti/dirt).⁵¹⁶ Below this scene, a short caption explains that the Trimmer will “free your skin” by removing all unwanted hair. The use of graffiti to illustrate this idea, of course suggests that cities too should be “freed” from graffiti, which is set here within a debris-filled landscape and juxtaposed with the majestic beauty of the natural world. Taken together, the examples of the Volvo and Schick campaigns represent a sample of the varied roles graffiti serves for advertisers.

3.3: Global Networks

This section is meant to identify the movement of the New York Style beyond its home as it manifested itself in cities around the world and came to constitute a network of subcultures. The previous two sections which explored graffiti’s subsistence in the art world and its popularity as an icon of popular culture, pointed to the art form’s move beyond its birthplace. Here, two well-known graffiti films, *Wild Style* and *Style Wars*, are analyzed to prove their instrumentality in spreading the New York Style throughout North America and internationally. I also briefly examine scenes in Los Angeles and Montreal to illustrate this expansion and prove that although each possess their own histories and regional variations, they remain faithful to the culture of signature graffiti writing that originated in NYC. This analysis of the New York Style worldwide is

⁵¹⁶ Although I have only come across this poster in French, on Schick’s website the slogan “Free Your Skin,” dominates this campaign (www.schick.ca). An abbreviated version of the English TV commercial which utilizes the same graffiti motif can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PooLik56z10>

followed by a discussion of the dissemination of graffiti on the Internet and on freight trains.

Wild Style and Style Wars

“Streets are filthy, crime is high, people look suspicious when you walk by [...] South Bronx y’all that’s where I dwell, to a lot of people it’s a living hell, full of frustration and poverty, but wait that’s not how it looks to me, it’s a challenge, an opportunity to rise above the stink and debris, gotta start with nothing and then you build, follow your dream until it’s fulfilled.”

-Excerpt from rap performed in film *Wild Style*.

The consolidation of hip-hop as a cultural movement, with graffiti as one of its four principle elements, was mass-marketed through a variety of means. Most influentially, it was popularized through several books and films. The semi-documentary film *Wild Style* released in 1982 featured well-known New York writers alongside several hip-hop personalities. The movie, directed by Charlie Ahearn, became an unexpected hit with local and international audiences and announced to the world that an exciting movement had blossomed in New York.⁵¹⁷ In 1983, Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver released the documentary film *Style Wars* – a much more methodical and revealing examination of the writing culture and of break dancing, framed within the context of hip-hop. These films, along with books about the hip-hop phenomenon, such as Steven Hager’s Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti (1984), were widely distributed and are noteworthy since they not only recounted hip-hop culture’s history, but also provided some crucial “how-to” information enticing others to

⁵¹⁷ Austin, 205.

get involved.⁵¹⁸ The hype around the look and sound of hip-hop was instrumental to graffiti's worldwide dispersal.

As a semi-fictional account of New York's hip-hop culture, *Wild Style* was instrumental in spreading the culture nationally and internationally. The film proposed a number of tenets about hip-hop in general and graffiti in particular: that hip-hop originated in the South Bronx and its innovators were largely Black and Latino; that graffiti, break dancing and rap music together represented hip-hop; and, that there is a conflict in the graffiti community centered around legal writing.

Wild Style is set almost entirely in the South Bronx. Not only does the movie include a number of shots that capture the devastated landscape of the South Bronx in the 1970s, but it also features real-life DJs, MCs, and break dancers from that neighbourhood – people recognized as the originators of hip-hop. While most graffiti writers in the film appear under pseudonyms that differ from their tag names, other hip-hop personalities such as Grand Master Flash, Busy Bee, the breakers of the Rock Steady Crew, Cold Crush, and Double Trouble, play themselves. The fictional aspects of the film have more to do with the storyline and the dramatization of graffiti's entry into the world of high art, than with those who acted in the film. Graffiti writers LEE Quinones, known in the movie as Raymond or "Zoro" and LADY PINK, who portrays Rose or "Lady Bug," play the romantic leads of the film. Fab 5 Freddy, a real-life graffiti writer, plays the character "Phade," a young deejay and former writer who networks with reporter "Virginia," played by Patti Astor, to gain entry into the high art world.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, 205.

The first scene of *Wild Style* evokes the dangerous yet thrilling nature of graffiti writing. Zoro (LEE's character) scales a graffiti-laden wall to sneak into a train yard and attempts to paint trains overnight. As the soundtrack of distant sirens suggests, Zoro is entering the hazardous conditions of yards and lay-ups, which are risky due mostly to the third rail, moving trains, and police officers. Indeed, Zoro's adventure is cut short as two policemen chase him out of the yard. This opening sequence is followed by an animated *Wild Style* logo, which marks the official beginning of the film. The logo stretches, retracts, dances, and changes colours, all to the rhythmic beat of a rap soundtrack and record scratching. From the very beginning of *Wild Style*, the audience is thus alerted to the fact that graffiti writing is both fun yet dangerous and connected to rap music. As the film progresses with montages of actual subway graffiti from the era as well as authentic performances by deejays, emcees, and breakers performing in local South Bronx clubs, the storyline develops. The plot illustrates the division in the subculture between those wanting to fashion a career out of legal graffiti production, and those who consider legal work to go against the very nature of graffiti writing.

The foremost storyline centers around the "selling" of graffiti. While Zoro represents an outlaw who preaches that true graffiti neither belongs on canvas nor on sponsored-walls, his girlfriend Lady Bug (PINK's character) and her crew⁵¹⁹ are actively involved in community-beautification projects that organize writers to paint murals for local businesses. Two opposing viewpoints emerge. The position of the first is that only illegal writing is authentic to the graffiti culture, while the second perspective reflects the idea that graffiti should be employed in the creation of empowering community art. The

⁵¹⁹ The fictional UNION crew is made up of celebrated real-life writers: CRASH, DAZE, CAZ, and OBE.

conflict portrayed in the film, although romanticized, is realistic. Many writers in the 1980s feared that graffiti, through commercialization by outsiders, would be corrupted. Thus, while some writers were keen to paint on legal walls, they were resistant to the outright selling of graffiti. In the film, acting as a go-between linking the graffiti with the art world is Fab 5 Freddy's character, Phade. Depicted as everyone's friend, Phade pushes for the recognition of graffiti and rap by the mainstream media. By trying to "sell" graffiti, Phade alienates hardcore writer Zoro who believes Phade is exploiting the subculture. However, once acclaimed reporter Virginia, Patti Astor's character, is initiated into the worlds of hip-hop and writing, Zoro has a change of heart about the purpose of his work. As he is romanced by members of the elite art world that Virginia introduces him to and is commissioned to make canvas pieces, Zoro re-examines his stance. By the end of the film, Phade's approach prevails as he organizes an outdoor concert featuring deejays, emcees, break dancers and graffiti art, thus bringing together all of hip-hop's elements in a legal setting. The final montage, while devoid of dialogue, eloquently communicates the message of *Wild Style* as it cuts between DJs spinning music while MCs perform rhymes, break dancers show off their moves and Zoro paints a mural.

This low-budget tale of love and success was pivotal to the global popularization of graffiti within the context of hip-hop. Interestingly, in addition to the conflict regarding the production of legal graffiti played out in the film, the actual process of making *Wild Style* suggests a much more real form of commercialization. Since most actors in the film were playing themselves or characterizations of themselves, by participating in the making of this project, they were literally commercializing their

subculture. Although Fab 5 Freddy, LEE and PINK were acting out roles under different aliases, they were also truly living the conflicts represented in the film. Also, Patti Astor, who played the reporter, in reality co-owned East Village's leading graffiti art gallery – the Fun Gallery. In a way, by blurring the lines between fiction and reality *Wild Style* as a product was guilty of the very commercialization it described. The movie worked to popularize graffiti as an element of hip-hop and make stars out of writers who were willing to sell their work– or their work on the silver screen – to outsiders.

In opposition to *Wild Style*, *Style Wars* was a real documentary which recounted the story of the booming hip-hop culture by focusing specifically on graffiti writing and break dancing. Instead of developing a fictional storyline, the directors were dedicated to capturing the energy and vitality of graffiti writing as it existed in NYC circa 1982. The plot line that takes form through the wide range of interviews, scenes from the field, and narrated commentary in the film, describes the ordeals and triumphs writers faced in the production, diffusion, and reception of their work. The film is a veritable and sincere slice of history and credible as the source for information on the subway writing culture in New York, especially in its 2004 re-released version which includes follow-up artist interviews, photographs of subway graffiti, and feature commentary. Still, much like *Wild Style*, it too merges graffiti with hip-hop though more via the narration than through the actual action and testimonials from writers.

The opening sequence of *Style Wars* is a poetic, visual account of graffiti's early days and their true dependency on the subway system. Wagner's dramatic, building music figures as the soundtrack for a subway train as it pulls out of a yard at night. As the train picks up speed, it passes a lamppost that illuminates its outer core, at which point

the viewer is introduced to the colourful, coded signatures and images that completely cover the train's exterior. From here, the scene is edited to include a collage of break dancing and graffiti writing shots all to the soundtrack of rap music. The narrator's opening statement summarizes the main plotline of the documentary when referring to subway writing, he says:

it's called bombing and has equally assertive counterparts and rap music and break dancing ... graffiti writing in New York is a vocation, its traditions are handed down from one youthful generation to the next. To some it's art, to most people however, it's a plague that never ends, a symbol that we've lost control.⁵²⁰

From the beginning, it is communicated not only that graffiti is a part of something greater (hip-hop), but also that it is a nuisance to the majority of the population. Indeed, the film delivers on both fronts. While writers and their subway art constitute the bulk of the footage, their experiences are interwoven with those of city officials – Mayor Edward Koch, the New York Transit Authority spokespeople, police officers – NYC residents, and break-dancers.

As a “manual” for future generations of graffiti writers, *Style Wars* is insightful. The film's director-producers both document the history of the movement to date (1983), and offer vital “how-to” information about the culture and art of writing. For example, writers are filmed congregating at the legendary “writer's bench” at the Grand Concourse and 149th street station in the Bronx to sign each other's blackbooks, criticize the work that goes by on trains, and discuss issues relevant to illegal writing. Also, writer SEEN takes the audience through the creation of a piece from the stages of production to the design and layout, types of spray-paint used, and painting techniques. Other writers explain how they “rack paint,” discuss their individual versions of wildstyle, and share

⁵²⁰ Narrator's opening remarks in film *Style Wars*.

some sketches. As the opinions of writers are explored, the sense of community NYC writers shared in graffiti's early days becomes evident. While every writer's motivation for getting up is as personal as their style, *Style Wars* captures the sense that for these teenagers, writing was an instrumental outlet of expression that provided them with a sense of identity and created an exciting and creative community. Upon reflection on his writing career, LEE for example, expressed: "I can safely say that graffiti saved my life, it gave me my outlet, it gave me my sense of who I am."⁵²¹

As a documentary of subway writing, *Style Wars* is unmatched. The movie is filled with footage of painted train cars, and gives as much of a voice to those in favour of graffiti writing as to those wholly against it. As expected, the majority of those speaking favourably on behalf of graffiti are the writers themselves, however, a number of art enthusiasts also contribute approving remarks. Towards the end of the film, we witness the opening of a graffiti exhibition (gallery unnamed) where a number of unidentified gallery-goers and art critics comment positively on the graffiti canvases displayed, referring mostly to the financial potential graffiti offers the art market. For example, one man explains: "for the past 20 years, there really hasn't been anything 'hot,' there's been no movements since Pop art, any retailer, and let's face it a gallery is indeed a retailer, is always looking for something hot that they can merchandise and sell to the public." Another woman who speaks excitedly about the energy conveyed on the graffitied canvases, asserts: "as an investment, I feel so strongly that if you get in on the bottom of anything, it's gotta be a good investment and this is definitely going

⁵²¹ Follow-up interview with LEE in "bonus features" of film *Style Wars*.

someplace.”⁵²² In strong opposition to the favourable commentary by graffiti writers and those who gained from selling it, is the multitude of interviews with anti-graffiti citizens and city officials. Amongst the most memorable comments from those opposed to “graffiti vandalism” is Mayor Edward’s Koch’s insistence that graffiti is “a quality of life offence and you can’t just take one of those quality-of-life offences; it’s like three-card-monte and pick-pocketing and shoplifting.” Mayor Koch goes on to say: “the response a three-time repeater should get would be five days in jail, now, obviously, a murderer, if you believe in the death penalty as I do, you want to have the option of executing a murderer, you wouldn’t do that to a graffiti writer.”⁵²³ Apart from such angry and sometimes bizarre comments by city officials, the film also captures the measures undertaken by the MTA to eradicate graffiti, including the razor-wiring of subway yards, the use of guard dogs, and the buff (as discussed in Chapter Two).

The only truly problematic aspect of *Style Wars* is the suggestion that writing is an element of hip-hop culture. As mentioned above, this film worked hand-in-hand with *Wild Style* to popularize the culture of writing as a feature of the booming hip-hop phenomenon. Interestingly, however, the falsity of this grouping is exposed in one of the follow-up, current-day interviews (available on the 2004 edition of the film) with Fab 5 Freddy. Throughout the film itself, apart from scenes depicting writers painting juxtaposed with scenes showing break dancers battling and all to the soundtrack of rap music, the hip-hop connection is not overtly explored except through two voice-over comments made by the narrator. In the first, the narrator asserts: “in the 1970s, rapping and breaking became the prime expressions of a new young people’s subculture called

⁵²² Both comments from gallery scene in film *Style Wars*.

⁵²³ As quoted in film *Style Wars*.

'hip-hop' – graffiti is the written word. There is a the spoken word of rap music and then there's the acrobatic body language of dances like 'breaking.'" In the second speech the narrator delivers, he explains: "the idea of style and competing for the best style is key to all forms of rocking. With the rap MC it's rocking the mic, for the b-boys, it's rocking your body in break dancing, or for writers rocking the city with your name on a train."⁵²⁴

Commentary aside, throughout the entire movie writers are shown spending time with other writers, while break dancers are filmed "hanging out" with other break dancers, each group apparently oblivious to the other's activities. Moreover, these two groups of young people do not make any reference to the fact that one might be linked with or necessary for the other. In actuality, apart from the previously unreleased, bonus interviews, crossovers occur on only two occasions. First, one (toy) writer sings a little rap, and second, the film features footage of a break-dancing battle backed by a slide-show of graffiti projected on a wall. In the interviews broadcast as part of the film's "special features," we learn that this event was orchestrated by Henry Chalfant. As Fab 5 Freddy explains:

at the time I had thought, like this graffiti thing was going on over here by itself, and then this hip-hop thing was going on over here by itself, and the break dancing was a thing that would happen but it really wasn't like woah let's go run and see these break dancers, you know it was just all apart...I had the idea that this was all one thing and there was a definite link, like Henry was instrumental in that, so, we did this performance where I was rapping he was showing slides and the Rock Steady Crew was break dancing and the press was there, and the press kinda put the spotlight on it and then it blew up, like woah this thing is happening.⁵²⁵

Watching *Style Wars* without a critical eye would convince anyone that hip-hop, indeed, developed as a movement that encompasses these visual, musical, and rhythmic traditions. However, upon closer examination, the superficiality of these connections

⁵²⁴ As quoted in film *Style Wars*.

⁵²⁵ As quoted in "bonus features" of film *Style Wars*.

becomes apparent. As argued in the previous chapter, it is understandable how and why graffiti writing became framed as a part of hip-hop and today, some writers have embraced this connection by referencing how the movement in graffiti letters parallels the movement of break dancers.⁵²⁶ Still, if it were not for films such as *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*, graffiti, break dancing, and rap music would not have been globally recognized as constituting one movement.

During the early 1980s, as youth outside of NYC were introduced to hip-hop through films such as *Wild Style*, books such as Hip Hop, and most importantly, rap music, many embraced this new facet of popular culture. As Nicholas Ganz notes: “with hip-hop, graffiti entered almost every Western and Western-influenced country and then started to edge out further afield.”⁵²⁷ Those already writing graffiti or wanting to emulate the graffiti style popularized as an element of hip-hop, had an increasing number of resources that functioned as manuals for the imitation of New York graffiti. Subway Art, Spraycan Art, and Getting Up taught aspiring writers all over the world about the New York Style and culture of graffiti writing. As described by Denver writer FIE, upon discovering graffiti through films, writers like him, in other parts of the United States “tried to research, and we got any books we could find. I got Getting Up, and I read that and you know, from then on I was just addicted.”⁵²⁸ Moreover, these publications “helped accelerate the professional artistic careers of many writers and launched the art into a global phenomenon.”⁵²⁹ Writer FUTURA 2000 even referred to these books as Bibles, “the Old Testament and New Testament. If you are in these books, essentially you have

⁵²⁶ Writer DOZE for example argues that “break dancing and graffiti art are similar because both are about the creation of motion.” As quoted in “bonus features” of film *Style Wars*.

⁵²⁷ Nicholas Ganz, Graffiti World. 9.

⁵²⁸ As quoted in Ferrell, 43.

⁵²⁹ Miller, 149.

become immortalized in the whole lore of graffiti.”⁵³⁰ The notoriety some New York writers gained through their participation in films or through the immortalization of their work in books, helped launch their careers outside of their home cities. Moreover, their work was used as templates for new generations of writers wanting to be part of this exciting movement.

New York Style Worldwide

“Worldwide, the hip-hop style finds uncanny similarity in both language and style in far-flung corners of the globe.”

-Susan Phillips⁵³¹

The spread of the New York Style nationally and internationally is attributed in large part to the popularity of hip-hop music. Although some cities in the United States (Philadelphia, Los Angeles) and in Europe (Paris, Madrid, London), had established graffiti or stencil art scenes before the advent of hip-hop and the New York Style, it was only with the arrival of hip-hop that writing cultures truly began to develop outside of NYC. In addition to hip-hop music and culture, signature graffiti was also gaining recognition in cities around the world because of formal exhibitions and the travels of New York writers throughout the United States and other parts of the world. As the style gained popularity, it was marked by innovations, sometimes culturally inscribed, yet it continued to be “reproduced with remarkable precision.”⁵³² That the style remained constant as graffiti was diffused globally is testament to its cultural weight. Interestingly,

⁵³⁰ Ibid, 21.

⁵³¹ Phillips, 331.

⁵³² Ferrell, 11.

given that the culture of writing had developed on subway trains, people from all over the world travelled to NYC to write themselves into that history. As Joe Austin remarks:

each year, a number of writers from other U.S. cities and from other parts of the world come to New York to write on the subway trains and certify that they are 'true' writers. For instance, in the summer of 1992 I met writers from California, the Netherlands, Australia, and Germany who were scouting out connections with New York writers to bomb clean trains.⁵³³

Credit for the global spread of graffiti should also be attributed to zines and the Internet. As hip-hop expanded beyond American borders, magazines began to popularize the graffiti style associated with this culture. Some independent magazines (zines) geared more specifically towards writers, provided the culture's participants with a collective voice as well as a legal arena for the presentation of their work. Self-produced zines, which legally circulated photographs of mostly illegal graffiti, were instrumental in the creation of communication networks. The *International Graffiti Times* for example, published in NYC, provided writers with an alternative platform, one in which writers could freely converse regarding graffiti matters much like they had done in the train yards. As this medium became increasingly popular as a forum for discussion and as zines circulated worldwide, gaining fame became possible on a much larger scale. Consequently, it also meant that "New York City took on a new identity among writers from all over the planet: New York City is the Writers' Homeland."⁵³⁴ Reproduced photographs in zines, and later on the Internet, enabled writers to connect their local scene to those in other parts of the world, which equipped writers with a new platform for the development of a system of prestige.

⁵³³ As quoted in Miller, 107-8.

⁵³⁴ Austin, 228.

By the early 1980s, as the New York Style infiltrated European graffiti scenes, an incredibly large network of writers was forming. Writers in a number of cities in England, Germany, France, and Spain, which already had graffiti scenes unconnected to hip-hop and the New York Style, began to employ the American style. As London's FADE 2 explains: "graffiti in this country has come like a model, an airplane model. It's come here already built. Graffiti in America has taken years to develop, all the styles like your wildstyle and bubble lettering. Over here we haven't added anything to it apart from brushing up on a few techniques."⁵³⁵ Indeed, in the early days many European writers were outright copying the graffiti they had encountered in films and photographs from the United States as a way to practice and develop their own techniques. Berlin's Turkish B-Boys, for example, copied Zoro's (LEE's character in *Wild Style*) cartoon rendition of a masked man and crudely wrote "Wild Style" next to the character as a tribute to the film. While many were quick to incorporate the New York Style into their already existing practices, others acknowledged it simply as an alternative to their own approach. In England, for example, where many writers in Bristol, Wolverhampton, and London picked up on the New York Style, others, influenced by the Punk rock scene, continued to write political graffiti, which led to a highly evolved stencil graffiti scene.

In 1987, Chalfant and Prigoff reported in Spraycan Art that writers in Paris painted primarily in vacant areas throughout the city.⁵³⁶ Graffiti writing as it existed in NYC did not grab hold of Parisian writers for many years with only a handful of active writers employing that style during the 1980s. However, by the end of the decade, "le

⁵³⁵ As quoted in Chalfant and Prigoff, 60.

⁵³⁶ Ibid, 70.

graff s'est imposé comme LE phénomène culturel de la jeunesse."⁵³⁷ Graffiti exploded in concurrence with the French rap music movement of the 1990s. A similar scenario occurred in Montreal. While the city was not devoid of graffiti prior to hip-hop's invasion, it took until the 1990s for the scene to truly take form. Montreal had a history of politically and socially relevant graffiti, which appeared throughout the city's centre and its boroughs. This non-stylized form of graffiti writing was executed by any number of non-affiliated youth and addressed national and local politics, namely Quebecois nationalism, Bill 101, socio-economic issues, racism, and First Nations issues. It was only by the end of the 1980s that several small collectives of graffiti aficionados influenced by the New York graffiti style began to write signature graffiti.

Montreal graffiti has been the focus of at least five publications: Montréal graffiti,⁵³⁸ Graffiti et loi 101,⁵³⁹ Les murs de la ville: les graffitis de Montreal,⁵⁴⁰ L'art sous les bombes,⁵⁴¹ and Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture.⁵⁴² Of these, Denyse Bilodeau's and Janice Rahn's studies offer the most complete accounts of the graffiti scene in Montreal since the others consist mainly of photographic surveys. While I have found these published texts only marginally useful given their lack of critical analysis and their factual inaccuracies, Louise Gauthier's 1998 thesis Writing on the Run: The History and Transformation of Street Graffiti in Montreal in the 1990s is an excellent resource on the Montreal scene. In her thesis, Gauthier explains: "signature

⁵³⁷ Stephanie Lemoine and Julien Terral, In Situ: Un panorama de l'art urbain de 1975 à nos jours. Paris: Editions Alternatives, 2005, 38. "Graffiti has imposed itself as THE cultural phenomenon for youth."

⁵³⁸ Jeanne Demers, Josée Lambert, Line Mc Murray, Montréal graffiti. Montréal: VLB, 1987.

⁵³⁹ Jeanne Demers, Graffiti et loi 101. Montréal: VLB, 1989.

⁵⁴⁰ Denyse Bilodeau, Les murs de la ville: les graffitis de Montreal. Montreal, Quebec: Liber, 1996.

⁵⁴¹ Marie Roberge, L'art sous les bombes. Outremont, Quebec: Lanctot éditeur, 2004.

⁵⁴² Janice Rahn, Painting Without Permission.

graffiti began to appear in significant numbers in the city only at the end of 1992,⁵⁴³ and was primarily shaped by writers FLOW, SIKE, STACK, and TIMER. Gauthier notes that while tags initially dominated the scene, by the winter of 1993, throw-ups began to appear.⁵⁴⁴ She goes on to argue that the dissemination of graffiti in Montreal signals the “globalization of culture, particularly youth culture,”⁵⁴⁵ as this visual language has come to be adopted internationally by young people from all backgrounds.

Today, Montreal is “one of the most painted cities in North America.”⁵⁴⁶ This is especially visible through the great number of legal walls throughout the city, the immense popularity of Montreal-based international festivals, such as “Under Pressure”⁵⁴⁷ and “Meeting of Styles,” and the support of contemporary galleries like the esteemed Yves Laroche Gallery.⁵⁴⁸ The signature graffiti movement is alive and well in the city and writers are increasingly employed by businesses to render their logos. In conjunction with the active writing scene, a number of street artists take part in the creation of Montreal’s alternative cityscape. Aside from ROADSWORTH, artists OTHER, who primarily displays his distorted portraits on freight trains (fig. 38), TURF ONE, who paints on found surfaces like wood panels and metal sheets (fig. 39), and OMEN, who bridges traditional graffiti writing and street art with his own brand of portraiture (fig. 40), typify the diversity of the Montreal scene.

⁵⁴³ Gauthier, 46.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid, 60.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, 99.

⁵⁴⁶ Pablo Aravena quoted in Joshua Knelman, “Graffiti goes six-figure legit.” *Globe and Mail*. Saturday, August 4, 2007.

⁵⁴⁷ Under Pressure is both a bi-yearly magazine and the name of an international graffiti convention, www.underpressure.ca

⁵⁴⁸ www.yveslaroche.com The urban gallery thrives on the showcasing of work by established and emerging underground and cutting edge graffiti, tattoo, comic, pop, illustration and surrealist artists.

In 2006, Steve Grody's Street Styles and Art: Graffiti L.A. was published. This text focuses on the Los Angeles scene since the early 1980s, by featuring full-page colour photographs and extensive interviews with L.A.'s premier writers. As the author explains: "hip-hop brought graffiti to the masses, but other youth Pop movements already present in Lost Angeles from the 1970s to the 1980s also contributed to L.A. graffiti's development including the punk and heavy-metal music scenes."⁵⁴⁹ By reflecting on the scene's early influences as well as its current techniques and ethical issues, Grody explains that today, L.A. has developed an original street art scene that has writers and artists from all over the world bidding to participate.

Before Grody's book, Susan Phillips's Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A. was the premier text on the graffiti scene in Los Angeles. Phillips's chapter on "Hip-Hop Graffiti" expresses that when the style migrated to L.A, ten years after its New York explosion, it encouraged many young people involved in the city's pervasive gang culture to view graffiti crews as safer alternatives to gangs. As Phillips explains, signature graffiti's success in L.A. points to the "failure of gangs to serve their intended purpose [...] and counters the stereotype that writing hip-hop graffiti is a pathway to higher levels of crime."⁵⁵⁰ Ultimately, by mimicking and adding their own interpretations to the New York Style, West Coast writers generated their own subculture, one which today coexists with gang graffiti. As Phillips summarizes: "the single phenomenon of hip-hop graffiti involves entirely different groups of people, crosses racial and social boundaries of class, and connects ethnic groups within the city of Los Angeles."⁵⁵¹ In a city as diverse as L.A.

⁵⁴⁹ Grody, 12.

⁵⁵⁰ Phillips, 314.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, 332.

with a long-standing tradition of *cholo* (gang) writing,⁵⁵² the signature graffiti styles that have migrated from New York have unsurprisingly been adapted by crews that overrun a number of the city's graffiti-laden neighbourhoods. Today, as Grody's book emphasizes, L.A.'s graffiti scene is incredibly active and varied. While some writers who started by writing *cholo* graffiti, such as CHAZ (fig. 41), have segued into the gallery world, others, like SABER, have become legends on the international scene (fig. 42). In 1997, SABER painted a piece so big it took 97 gallons of paint and 35 nights to complete and can be seen via satellite.⁵⁵³ Others writers, like ASYLM (fig. 43), a long-standing fixture on the L.A. scene, have developed their own brand of traditional writing combined with intricate, surrealistic personages.

The representation of the New York Style in cities like Montreal and Los Angeles is also echoed by the various campaigns and policies aimed to suppress it. As Jeff Ferrell explains, graffiti's history has been plagued by "the interplay of cultural innovation and institutionalized intolerance, and the politics of culture and crime."⁵⁵⁴ Thus, while regional scenes continue to progress, especially as writers broaden the graffiti vocabulary with countless individualized additions, writing graffiti continues to be a manifestation of a junction between creativity and illegality – this tension sustains and fuels graffiti scenes around the world.

⁵⁵² Cholo, or gang writing, uses distinctive letterforms and has been part of the L.A. cityscape since the 1930s. Grody, 9.

⁵⁵³ www.saberone.com

⁵⁵⁴ Ferrell, 16.

The Internet and Freight Trains

“Websites are being used to extend the culture globally. Writers from Europe, South America, and New York are creating connections on the web, and then travelling, meeting, and painting together.”

-Ivor Miller⁵⁵⁵

The Internet is an invaluable and controversial tool for the dissemination of graffiti. From the mid-1980s onwards, after successful anti-graffiti campaigns, photography, and later the Internet, became the “major medium for the transmission of writers’ work around the globe.”⁵⁵⁶ Photographs that had been taken of 1970s NYC trains and forever memorialized in books now also appear on the Internet. Many old school writers who represent iconic fixtures in graffiti’s history have constructed websites that both immortalize their pieces on subways and are venues for the dispersal of their contemporary work.⁵⁵⁷ Websites that are specific to the preservation of graffiti’s history, in a sense, carry on the legacy of what writing was and have added tremendously to what graffiti has become. Virtually any writer today can post photographs of their work on the Internet and contribute to the ever-growing culture of writing. Thus, “websites are being used to extend the culture globally.”⁵⁵⁸ A quick Web search reveals numerous graffiti sites set up by writers and graffiti fans, illustrating that a global graffiti culture has emerged within this domain. Web pages such as artcrimes.com, woostercollective.com, bombingscience.com, ecosystem.org, visualorgasm.com, lounge37.com, and at149st.com are just a sample of the pages that display photographs of graffiti sightings as well as

⁵⁵⁵ Miller, 143.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁵⁷ See BLADE’s website for example: www.bladekingofgraf.com

⁵⁵⁸ Miller, 143.

information about writing's history, individual writers, and graffiti exhibitions.⁵⁵⁹ These websites enable artists to view graffiti from all corners of the globe without leaving their homes, thus demonstrating “the enormous liberty that the Internet has granted individuals to trade and exchange openly beyond traditional limitations.”⁵⁶⁰ The formation of this legal alternative has tremendously escalated the global evolution of graffiti culture by becoming an invaluable resource and tool of empowerment.

To illustrate the comprehensive nature of graffiti on the Internet, I will briefly examine the web page artcrimes.com – a well-organized resources with numerous links. This website is a collaborative virtual graffiti art gallery featuring writers and crews from cities around the world. The site, established in 1994, was the first graffiti site on the Internet and continues to be one of the biggest in terms of traditional graffiti dissemination. The creators of artcrimes.com advocate for more legal graffiti venues and have established this site “because it is so hard to get books published and to keep photos and blackbooks⁵⁶¹ from being seized and destroyed... [making] the Internet the best way to publish and preserve graffiti information.”⁵⁶² artcrimes.com is ordered into categories including “photos and images,” which showcases international graffiti with emphasis on the USA and Europe, and provides links to “Featured Artists,” photos of “Trains,” and “Blackbooks.” “Shows and events,” a type of graffiti calendar, advertises exhibitions and other past and future graffiti-related events. Meanwhile, “Fun,” is an interactive category which enables users to paint graffiti on virtual trains. “Goods and Services” includes the

⁵⁵⁹ Many graffiti web pages have links and tailor-made sections dedicated to graffiti scenes in specific cities. Moreover, the information provided about specific writers, exhibitions, and events is updated by a community of international writers.

⁵⁶⁰ Massimiliano Gioni, “An Interview with Olu Oguibe.” *Third Text* 47 Summer (1999): 57.

⁵⁶¹ Homes of graffiti writers are often searched by the police, and any graffiti-related material, including sketchbooks are confiscated or destroyed.

⁵⁶² Art Crimes. <http://www.artcrimes.com/index/story.html>

artcrimes.com store, which sells everything from toys and T-shirts made by writers to spray-paint and works on canvas. “Information and resources” specializes in graffiti news, interviews, articles, books, videos and magazines. Finally, “Other Sites” contains links to other graffiti web pages, alternative media, as well as art and hip-hop sites. Overall, this site is an excellent example of how graffiti has infiltrated the Internet and how the Internet has altered the face of graffiti.

The sheer number of pages dedicated to graffiti suggests that writers are sharing styles, ideas, and developing friendships without having to physically meet. As writer FUTURA describes, “the Web is really an extension of graffiti...[It] became a virtual wall that anyone was free to write on, however they wished.”⁵⁶³ Furthermore, author Sandrine Pereira asserts that the Web is “an indispensable means of communication to writers seeking to exercise their talents in countries where graffiti has a very much lower profile or where obtaining basic materials such as spraycans and caps is still virtually impossible.”⁵⁶⁴ As such, it is a medium not without problems – the pros and cons of graffiti on the Internet is an issue analyzed at length in Chapter Four.

In 2006, Roger Gastman, Darin Rowland, and Ian Sattler published a book entitled Freight Train Graffiti. This 350-page text includes thousands of photographs, testimonials from writers, and comprehensive histories of the American Railroad, the New York Style and freight graffiti. While this is not the first publication⁵⁶⁵ to report on the culture of freight train writing, it provides the most thorough and complete portrait of a movement that arose from the culture of writing. As the authors explain, by the late

⁵⁶³ As quoted in Miller, 142.

⁵⁶⁴ Pereira, 69.

⁵⁶⁵ The first known reference to freight graffiti was printed in 1984 in the popular New York-based graffiti magazine, *International Graffiti Times* (IGT).

1990s, a great many writers focused on graffiti diffusion on freight trains first and every other surface second, creating a freight writing subculture. Those who identify themselves as “freight writers” as opposed to graffiti writers, “learned to paint on freights, adjusted their style to freights, and were members of freight crews.”⁵⁶⁶ Because freight writing evolved from subway and wall writing and is sometimes said to be a component of the post-graffiti movement, it is pertinent to my discussion of graffiti’s global circulation.

The New York Style has been in evidence on freight trains since the early 1970s. Unsurprisingly, the first widely-recognized freight graffiti was disseminated by prolific subway writers like TRACY168 and IZ THE WIZ. However, at this early stage, these NYC writers did not aspire to achieve recognition for their freight work, in fact for them, painting freights was a novelty, “something interesting to test their paint on.”⁵⁶⁷ In other parts of the United States, such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia, where writers did not have a history of subway writing, freight trains became an alternative medium for graffiti diffusion. Wanting to emulate the New York Style of subway writing, youth in other parts of the country, and eventually, other parts of the world, wrote freight graffiti and set in motion a new network of writing. In NYC, the final crackdown on subway writing in the 1980s, which transposed graffiti onto city walls, motivated some writers to find another surface that would move their work with the same dynamism as subway cars. By the end of the 1980s, some writers began focusing their energies solely on freights when they realized that “writers in other cities were not only painting freights themselves, but

⁵⁶⁶ Gastman, Rowland, and Sattler, 168.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid, 81.

also seeing freights painted by other writers.”⁵⁶⁸ The culture of freight writing even prompted certain “old-school” subway writers (ZEPHYR, SACH), to make their presence known on freights. This “helped validate the form in the eyes of many young writers,”⁵⁶⁹ and assisted in the development of a culture that in many ways mimicked its subway predecessor.

As freights were getting “bombed” more frequently, letter styles and techniques were adapted to conform to the surfaces and shapes of the trains.⁵⁷⁰ Much like writers in the 1970s adjusted their letterforms and designs to fit subways, freight writers in the 1990s perfected styles that “could be identified and recognized at a distance or while passing by at high speeds”⁵⁷¹ (fig. 44). In continuum with the aesthetic of subway graffiti, freight writers also appropriated iconic cartoon characters or sometimes wrote greetings such as “Happy Holidays” next to their stylized names. Apart from aesthetic and technical modifications, other aspects of the subway writing culture were revived by freight writers, namely competition, crews, “learning the line,” “chasing numbers,” and “benching.”

As soon as writers realized that freight cars could give them more exposure than subway cars because they travelled greater distances, they began perfecting their freight pieces. By the late 1990s, “what was once viewed as a novelty with the larger culture was now being used by artists to showcase their work across the country.”⁵⁷² As freight crews formed with members from all over the United States, writers became competitive with

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, 134.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 140.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid, 126.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid, 174.

⁵⁷² Ibid, 165.

their work by “going for numbers,” just as they had been on subway trains and city walls, and spent time “benching” and “learned the lines.” Akin to subway writers who recorded their work via photographs and blackbooks to keep track of their activities, freight writers “chased numbers.” This practice refers to writing the number of a freight train s/he has painted next to his/her piece as proof of productivity. Reminiscent of the NYC subway “writers’ bench” which referred to designated hang-outs where writers would congregate to watch trains pass, critique work, and share ideas, freight writers began “benching” to view work from all over the country. Finally, “learning the lines” simply refers to becoming competent in their craft. Once again, comparable to serious subway writers’ knowledge about train schedules, routes, train types and surfaces, freight writers learn all they can about their “canvases” as a form of strategic planning.

Interestingly, the Internet is viewed as both a blessing and a curse in the world of freight writers. It is considered a blessing for the obvious reasons that it provides a forum for communication and exchange, making feedback instantly possible and allowing for a virtual form of “benching.” However, some freight writers consider the Internet as a “false representation of what is really out on the lines.”⁵⁷³ Hardcore writers typically eschew uploading their work on the Net because many have utilized the medium to claim unjustified fame. It takes only a few minutes to upload a number of photographs onto the Internet, making it seem as though a writer is especially productive. Yet, photos can be taken at different times and do not necessarily reflect a writer’s activity. Moreover, because of the proliferation of graffiti on the Internet, it has become almost impossible to recognize a writer’s work based on his/her regional style. Still, as most writers worldwide

⁵⁷³ Ibid, 224.

would agree, the Internet has done a greater service than disservice to the global scene as an international means of communication.

As Louise Gauthier notes, freight trains are an invaluable vehicle for graffiti dissemination because they travel beyond the city's parameters. As such, much like the Internet, they "have enabled writers to develop and sustain an inner-city and international network of communication."⁵⁷⁴ Graffiti subcultures today have not only moved beyond the street, so to speak, via freight trains, gallery exhibitions, and the Internet, but have also produced opportunities for their members to create spaces that respond to their sense of self and community.

⁵⁷⁴ Gauthier, 260.

PART II

THE POST-GRAFFITI MOVEMENT

CHAPTER 4

STREET ART AND THE CITY

Post-graffiti or street art has been typified as “all artistic incursions in the urban landscape that derive directly from the graffiti painted on New York train cars.”⁵⁷⁵ The main objective of this chapter is to analyze street art as it exists within the spatial, cultural, and material context of a city. Doing so broadens the discussion of the work itself to the implications and consequences of diffusing illegal art works. The three sections that constitute this chapter on post-graffiti practices, each question distinct yet related aspects of street art production, such as: performance and identity, liminality and site-specificity, and urban visual culture. Beginning with a general discussion of the discourse surrounding public art, street art is situated within debates that question site-specificity and public spaces. Attention is thus drawn to the disparities between public and street art and how these might be reflected in the kinds of projects street artists undertake. Drawing on the work’s connection to the urban context it occupies, I investigate the relationship between the performative act of the work’s production, the illegality of its diffusion, and the sustenance of the artist’s identity in its reception. Key issues of site and space in public art discourse are isolated, as they prove significant for an analysis of post-graffiti art in the physical and social spaces of a city. The challenges street art poses for notions of site-specificity and the material, built environment of a city are crucial to an examination of how the work might be received in the context of the urban landscape. Finally, a way in which art historians can access post-graffiti practices

⁵⁷⁵ Bou, 6.

is established, by situating them within the visual culture discourse and by examining street art's livelihood in galleries and on the Internet.

In my discussion of graffiti, I mentioned that women have become more involved in graffiti production in the post-graffiti era. Indeed, as evidenced by the work of artists analyzed in this chapter, when new forms of graffiti emerged during the 1990s, specifically with stickers, stencils, and posters, the rules of writing loosened and the culture of street art broadened to be more inclusive in terms of technique and style. This was especially meaningful for women because it created a safer environment in which to work and obliterated the stringent criteria of style. As Nicholas Ganz explains, the street art movement:

attracts few or none of the 'male obstacles' you associate with the graffiti movement, and women tend to be seen in a positive light and supported. This could be something to do with the culture's 'young' history or the 'safer environment' of street art – stencilling or putting up a poster can take less time and there carries fewer risks – or the fact that street art seems to be an art form in which men don't feel the need to assert their masculinity to the same degree, an area where women aren't seen as 'the competition.'⁵⁷⁶

Many female artists working within the realm of illegal street art production agree that the ability to diffuse their work in the daytime, the lack of a macho prestige system, and the possibilities for materials and techniques make street art production more conducive to female participation.⁵⁷⁷ These urban art practices are thus “opening up [avenues] to those who might have been alienated or excluded from its [traditional graffiti's] 'illegal core.'”⁵⁷⁸ Whether working on the street in post-graffiti aesthetics or traditional graffiti writing, women today have certainly made a mark in graffiti worlds.

⁵⁷⁶ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, Graffiti Women. 11.

⁵⁷⁷ See Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, Graffiti Women.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid, 13.

In the three sections that follow, I examine street art practices that illustrate the major themes which characterize this brand of art production – illegality, motivation, materiality, and spatiality. The street artists introduced in Chapter One, whose work is analyzed here in terms of case studies, are, SWOON, OS GÊMEOS, VEXTA, BANKSY, ROADSWORTH, INVADER, MISS VAN, PEZ, and JACE. Before delving into my street art analysis, I remind the reader that the emergence of post-graffiti art does not imply that graffiti has been surpassed or left behind, but rather, that graffiti coexists with the varied interventions typified as post-graffiti. In today’s urban landscape, signature graffiti writers continue to advance their pictorial vocabulary, and the subcultures fashioned to maintain this cultural form persist. Urban art, that subsists alongside signature graffiti in the cityscape, signals a significant expansion in illegal art practices. Post-graffiti art, however, in no way means to eclipse graffiti or enter into visual battles with the work of traditional writers. In fact, while some writers may not fully support post-graffiti interventions, street artists, many of whom have participated in graffiti subcultures prior to their individualized practices, consciously tend not to interfere with or obstruct graffiti’s space.

The emergence of street art communicates a move away from the complex, stylized, and formalized rendition of the signature, yet while visually and structurally different, graffiti and post-graffiti practices overlap in a number of ways. The exploration of letterforms may have been replaced with logos, characters, and stencils for many urban painters, however, the seriality, multi-sitedness, and subversions of graffiti are reflected in post-graffiti interventions. While this part of my thesis shifts the discussion from signature graffiti subcultures to a variety of contemporary urban painting styles, the

methods employed in Part II could be applied to my analysis in Part I and vice versa. Of course, the differences between these two movements, namely in terms of techniques, materials, messages, and memberships, necessitate critical attention. Given that street art has not been analyzed in academia to any significant degree, my contribution to the fields of art history and visual culture, as well as to the study of graffiti and post-graffiti practices lies primarily in the discussion that follows. Chapter Four could have extended my graffiti analysis from the 1990s until today, however, the fact that I am proposing this transition is symptomatic of the rise in popular interest regarding the practices grouped under the post-graffiti label. What has come to be known as street art signals an expansion of the types of graffiti disseminated in the urban environment, still in its coexistence with signature-based graffiti, these art practices demand a critical analysis both as similar and distinct modes of expression.

4.1: Art in the City

An analysis of post-graffiti art ought to benefit both from a reading of its precursor, graffiti, and from a measure of contextualization in terms of the multitude of other art practices which are displayed in or facilitated by a city – collectively known as public art. In the first part of this section, “Public vs. Street Art,” my intention is to evaluate whether street art has a place within the public art paradigm. Beginning this inquiry with a brief discussion of the public art discourse establishes some major points of contention, namely regarding space and site, which are evaluated in a concentrated way in the following section. The focus here is, first and foremost, on street art’s function

as, using Howard Becker's terminology a separate "art world,"⁵⁷⁹ to rationalize its alienation from public art discourse. By emphasizing the movement's illegality as linked to its history and its practitioners' greatest motivation, I analyze the problematic framing of post-graffiti within the public art paradigm.

In the second part of this section, "Performing Identity," the purpose is to underline questions of context and authorship as central to the performance of identity fundamental to post-graffiti production. Drawing on Kevin Hetherington's text on the intersection between space and identity,⁵⁸⁰ I investigate the particularly complex relationship between the lifecycle of the work and the desire to disseminate it illegally in a city. Furthermore, I examine street art as a performative art form that through acts of diffusion and reception sustains the artist's identity. Fundamental to my discussion is the work of SWOON, which exemplifies the call to display art in the street, MISS VAN to represent the relationship between street art as a performative gesture and the audience as a participant in that process, and VEXTA to illustrate how painting on the street feeds one's identity as an anonymous author.

⁵⁷⁹ Howard Becker, Art Worlds.

⁵⁸⁰ Kevin Hetherington, Expressions of Identity.

Public vs. Street Art

“By creating art in public places, artists draw attention to the city spaces and re-examine areas thought to have had no artistic interest [...] By personalizing, customizing and subverting, artists are creating their own sign language.”

-Tristan Manco⁵⁸¹

Should street art be considered as a subfield of public art discourse? Street and public art practices are not entirely different, even if street artists rarely acknowledge the work of “official” public art, and the public art discourse is all but devoid of street art analysis. Both art paradigms are conceptualized and contextualized in relation to a city – a complex realm, which can be understood as a set of relationships between things, places, people, and time.⁵⁸² Still, necessary differences exist. Illegality, motivation, history, materiality, and spatiality are the foremost aspects that differentiate street art as a category outside of public art – characteristics necessary for street artists to express their brand of art in a city. Both public and street art necessarily negotiate the very meaning of public space, however, the nature of that negotiation is different. The intention here is not to summarize the entirety of the public art discourse, but rather to outline the general trends in the history of public art practices, focusing specifically on new genre public art, to contemplate how and why street art functions differently in the cityscape.

Public art refers to a vast assortment of art forms and practices, including, murals, community cultural development projects, memorials, civic statuary, architectural detail (or architecture itself), outdoor sculpture, ephemeral art (dance, performance, theatre), subversive interventions, and for some researchers, graffiti and street art. Encountered in

⁵⁸¹ Tristan Manco, *Street Logos*. 11.

⁵⁸² Malcolm Miles, for example, considers art in the public realm as a complex arena of social engagement and process of criticism. *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

both outdoor and indoor environments, public art can be experienced in a multitude of places – parks, libraries, public squares, city streets, building atriums, and shopping malls. At times, public art projects are commissioned in order to enrich a public environment with a work that integrates itself with the surrounding architecture, urban design, and landscape, with the intention of enhancing a specific site’s socio-cultural context. However, while these types of projects continue to exist, there are many other public art practices that are not disseminated in the interest of a governing or commissioning body, and that question this sort of dialectic.

In her assessment of the diverse public art practices from the 1960s until the end of the 1990s, Miwon Kwon⁵⁸³ reveals that radical changes occurred within the movement especially in terms of public accountability. Public art has been categorized through several paradigms. For Kwon, the art-in-public-places paradigm encompasses works, typically modernist abstract sculptures, placed outdoors to decorate the plazas fronting governmental or corporate buildings. The premiere public sculpture that functions to this effect is Alexander Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse* (1967), which stands in the Calder Plaza in front of the Grand Rapids City Hall in Michigan, surrounded by International-Style office buildings as “the gift of art” for the general public. To counter this “plop art” model, art-as-public-spaces projects were conceived as more site-conscious or context-driven works that sought integration with the surrounding architecture and cityscape. Perhaps the best-known example of this approach was Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981-89) – a controversial sculpture unveiled in New York’s Federal Plaza to critically engage the notion of a cohesive public space by obstructing the site with an object. And finally,

⁵⁸³ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*.

the art-in-the-public-interest (or new genre public art) model incorporates mostly temporary city-based programs focused on social issues rather than the built environment and through collaborations with marginalized social groups aims to service the community.⁵⁸⁴ According to Suzanne Lacy, this approach to public art “uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.”⁵⁸⁵ Lacy exemplified this genre of public art production with John Ahearn’s South Bronx project (1992-93), conceived as an installation of three life-sized sculptures of that neighbourhood’s residents. As opposed to Calder’s modernist figure or Serra’s post-minimalist sculpture, Ahearn’s piece is considered more accessible because people could identify with, and be empowered by, his statues of real neighbourhood folk. The new genre public art is thus more interested in the process of democratic dialogue based on audience collaboration, than in a tangible end product. Moreover, it seeks to create social change for a unified public sphere. This aspiration is problematic for some, like Kwon, who explains that these collaborations tend to maintain a degree of paternalism towards their audience members, and that new genre public art “can exacerbate uneven power relations, remarginalize (even colonize) already disenfranchised groups, depoliticize and ramify the artistic process, and finally further the separation of art and life (despite claims to the contrary).”⁵⁸⁶ The seemingly democratic process of collaboration, Kwon argues, seeks to define a community as a unified and distinguishable group and does not account for the

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, 60.

⁵⁸⁵ Suzanne Lacy, “Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,” Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. Ed. Suzanne Lacy. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, 43.

⁵⁸⁶ Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another. 6.

fact that regardless of audience involvement or lack thereof, the artist and the governing body still makes the definitive decision regarding what constitutes the project.

The question of what exact criteria define public art as “public” has been addressed by a number of theorists. For example, Hilde Hein argues: “the sheer presence of art out-of-doors [...] does not automatically make that art public – no more than placing a tiger in a barnyard would make it a domestic animal,” consequently, its “mere integration into the ordinary life of people fails to bestow social meaning upon it and does not render it public.”⁵⁸⁷ Hein concludes that public art in fact politicizes the status of art, as it questions the notion of public locations and accessibility. Miwon Kwon agrees that modernist works commissioned for government buildings, for example, have no meaningful public qualities.⁵⁸⁸ The overwhelming problem with public art then, seems to be the lack of consensus about what defines a public and what constitutes public space. As Malcolm Miles suggests, public art should benefit from its own critical discourse which involves issues including: “the diversity of urban politics and cultures, the functions and gendering of public space, the operations of power, and the roles of professionals of the built environment in relation to non-professional urban dwellers.”⁵⁸⁹ Indeed, art in public spaces that are not defined as art-viewing spaces, such as museums for example, functions and is received differently than art produced for display in galleries. Whereas in formal exhibition spaces visitors expect to experience “real art,” in the context of the urban environment, the artwork may be encountered unwillingly – in other words, by people who did not expressly set out to view and experience art – and,

⁵⁸⁷ Hilde Hein, “What is Public Art: Time, Place, and Meaning” in *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* 54:1 Winter 1996, 4.

⁵⁸⁸ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*. 284.

⁵⁸⁹ Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City*. 1-2.

this encounter thus proposes a series of questions, confusion, or dismissal. The notion of public art implies that certain spaces, which are effectively public, facilitate an experience of art contextualized in that realm. Often, however, art in public spaces is simply not recognized as such, as in the case of graffiti or street art. Without validation in galleries or museums, the public artwork is frequently dismissed.

The criminalization of graffiti because of its inscription directly onto the walls of a city, begs the question: is public space in fact public? As graffiti researcher Janice Rahn rationalizes: “in a democracy, how can society condemn those who have no monetary means to claim their own space and to work toward changing and interacting with their environment?”⁵⁹⁰ The debate regarding art, space, and democracy, propagated most notably by Rosalyn Deutsche in her discussion of “Public Space and Democracy,” is one that considers urban space as a “product of conflict.”⁵⁹¹ Public space is neither politically nor socially neutral: it is a space that breeds conflict, be it physical, socio-political, aesthetic, or cultural. Theoretical assessments of public space can readily be applied to public art, no matter how it is conceptualized – art as public space, art in public places, or art for the public. Public art and public space evoke the concept of democracy by virtue of connotation. The term public implies “‘openness,’ ‘accessibility,’ ‘participation,’ ‘inclusion’ and ‘accountability’ to ‘the people.’” Discourse about public art is, then, not only a site of deployment of the term public space but, more broadly, of the term democracy.⁵⁹² Public art projects are, according to Deutsche, often thought of as democratic – projects that integrate themselves into their allotted spaces. However, who

⁵⁹⁰ Rahn, 174.

⁵⁹¹ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*. 278.

⁵⁹² Rosalyn Deutsche, “The Question of ‘Public Space.’” 1998. Paper presented at the 8th Annual American Photography Institute National Graduate Seminar. Available from: http://www.thephotohistoryinstitute.org/journals/1998/rosalyn_deutsche.html

these projects benefit or exclude are broader questions, which are especially revealing in the consideration of street art. As unauthorized art forms manifested in public spaces, graffiti and street art suggest that public art is as political as the space it inhabits. Public art aids in the creation of political space, because not only does it occupy a physical space in a city, but it also creates a public by engaging people in the experience of art. As a physical body or set of relationships, public space is complex and guarded. Street art as an unsanctioned art movement, penetrates the cityscape and occupies this space, displacing the boundary between public and private uses of space. Street art implies that public space is not, as a matter of course, about location, as much as it establishes a process of social engagement, criticism, and relationships. As suggested by Vito Acconci: “public space is made and not born,” and “public art has to squeeze in and fit under and fall over what already exists in the city.”⁵⁹³ Following Acconci, I understand street art to be part of public spaces that constitute the city itself, rather than simply being objects in a city. Art within those spaces, “belongs to the cities. It is of the cities. It is for the cities.”⁵⁹⁴ If we consider, as Mischa Kuball has, that a city is a laboratory full of temporary installations and interventions, then we can conceive of the fact that “everything that moves in the city is ‘public’” and that “every gesture made in the city is political.”⁵⁹⁵ These observations return us to the question of the social production of space, as explored by Henri Lefebvre.

⁵⁹³ Vito Acconci, “Leaving Home: Notes on Insertions into the Public.” *Public Art: A Reader*. Ed. Florian Matzner. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004, 29.

⁵⁹⁴ Siah Armajani. “Public Art and the City.” *Public Art: A Reader*. Ed. Florian Matzner. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004, 71.

⁵⁹⁵ Mischa Kuball, “And, it’s a pleasure...”/The Laboratory of Public Space.” *Public Art: A Reader*. Ed. Florian Matzner. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004, 291.

Another crucial issue in public art discourse is that of community representation and engagement, which is theorized under the framework of new genre public art since a great deal of art-in-the-public-interest is predicated on the idea of social activism and community collaboration. In short, the problem is that the community is often regarded as a fixed referent, and thus whom it defines is taken for granted or ignored. New genre public art's ambition to represent, interact with, or speak to a specific community, with the hopes of forging a more meaningful relationship between artist and audience, has in some ways shifted the discussion to accountability. Public art discourse has thus been transformed, from debates regarding aesthetics and design to social accountability – changing the fixation on site to those who occupy it. In the pursuit of issue-based dialogue between artist and community, many questions arise, most prominently: how do people become identified as a community? Who determines these parameters? What roles should each actor play? What issues define the community? The problem with community for public art discourse is reflected by new genre public art's embrace of the notion, rather than a critical engagement with it. Instead of being conceptualized as a fluid entity, the community has been idealized and to an extent described as a discrete social body.

For post-graffiti artists who produce less visually cryptic projects than the work of signature writers, on account of their reliance on characters, logos, and narratives easily read by the general public, the question of communication and community is a valuable one. Rather than fixating on dialogue 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. The legible medium of stencilling for example, has

become popular for many artists, partly because, as stencil artist VEXTA explains: “stencils, and especially ones that don’t include text, break down a lot of social barriers. They can appeal to anybody from any class and also break down language barriers. In that way you can reach a broader audience in the community.”⁵⁹⁶ SWOON, who works primarily with portraits of city dwellers rendered on recycled newsprint and wheat-pasted onto city walls, is particularly interested in relating the materiality and subject matter of her work to the physicality and experience of a city. The artist explains that she “wanted to make things that were valueless, because they couldn’t belong to any one person, and in that way they would belong to everyone.”⁵⁹⁷ The notion of community for many post-graffiti artists enables them to envisage their work as a reflection of, a response to, and an experience with the citizenry. The city itself, as an urban community which inspires the production of art, is conceptualized not only as a pivotal constituent of the work itself, but also as a framework for art practices not directed at any one group of people in particular.

As described above, some key issues that drive public art debates include democratic space, public or community accountability, and site engagement. Apart from the reality that most public artworks are commissioned or at least authorized, the distinctions between public and street art might not be immediately apparent. However, as questions of legality, motivation, and history are examined in this section, as well as materiality and spatiality in the next, the disparities between public and street art become more pronounced.

⁵⁹⁶ VEXTA quoted in Smallman and Nyman, 143.

⁵⁹⁷ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

The matter of legality is an expected starting point, as it might very well answer the query: why has street art been marginalized or altogether omitted from public art discourse? Art historians interested in public art have had no general points of access when it comes to graffiti research. Because academic graffiti studies have been largely relegated to social scientists, who are typically more interested in the phenomenon of graffiti subcultures than in the work itself, art historians have had no genuine historical records of graffiti or its analysis in visual terms. Perhaps art historians are suspicious of graffiti as a subject of inquiry because of its reputation as the work of subcultural groups composed of young, non-artists. As explained in Part I of this dissertation, graffiti's early forays into the world of high art were received as trendy, money-making endeavours, which affected how the movement was viewed in years to come. This research project stipulates that it is not a lack of artistic integrity that has demoted graffiti, but rather that because of its brief history as part of the elite world, art historians tend to steer clear of an art form that has proven itself more significant in its illegal, urban realm.

Street art's illegality is also a driving force for its practitioners as it allows the artists to work in an unmediated manner and fosters the movement's function as an independent art world. Post-graffiti art disseminated throughout the cityscape as visual resistance to sanctioned imagery and designated public spaces, coupled with its illegality, as well as its association with the culture of graffiti writing, can be thought of as its own "art world," an idea theorized at length by Howard S. Becker.

In Art Worlds, Becker theorized that art production results from the collective activities and shared conventions of a specialized world. In his research, Becker came to define art world members, as cooperating individuals who via their conventional joint

knowledge, together create an art world system.⁵⁹⁸ This system, and not any one individual produces an art object meaningful for that world. Becker's worlds are conceived of as self-contained units that do not easily facilitate the possibilities of crossover. As Becker theorizes, any one group of people can build up and abide by a set of norms to create an art world that excludes any other group. These norms can be modified at any time to respond to the group's needs and to the ever-changing face of culture. In order to cooperate as a uniform group, however, its members must share a set of conventions. The function of an art world as a socio-economic network that continually defines, validates, and maintains the cultural category of art is useful towards an understanding of the world of street art.

Using Becker's terminology, street artists constitute an art world – one with its own code of ethics and stylistic principles. As an art world that operates for the most part outside institutional frameworks and legality, street art is distinct from other mainstream worlds where the patterns of collective activity are more easily observed. Especially because of its association with the culture of graffiti writing, which is difficult for outsiders to understand since it appears as a sort of coded dialogue, street art might seem as an abstract and spontaneous act of rebellion. However, it is in fact a cooperative, routine activity, which produces patterns that together constitute the art world. Thus, the historical association with graffiti subcultures and the motivation to work illegally are central factors that differentiate street from public art. Because graffiti has not elicited a sustained art historical discourse, in either its legal or illegal manifestations, public art theorists simply do not have an established base of graffiti scholarship which they can

⁵⁹⁸ Becker defines an art world as: "a network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for" *Art Worlds*. x.

expand upon. It might seem that in order to say something meaningful about graffiti or street art, one would have to summarize its entire history – as those who have written about graffiti tend to do, this thesis included. I have argued elsewhere that “unlike the early galleried graffiti of the 1970s and 1980s, recent graffiti forays into the gallery space have been overwhelmingly more coherent and successful.”⁵⁹⁹ The fact that graffiti and street artists continue to exhibit and garner positive feedback for their legal work while sustaining thriving illegal careers is testament to the works’ significance.

Post-graffiti artists, with their guerrilla projects engage urban communities at large, therefore their work is not defined by potential address, representation of, or engagement with a specific community, and thus differs greatly from new genre public art. As a criminalized art form, street art questions who the streets belong to, and points to the fact that the answer is not only political and economic, but also aesthetic. The battle for the street is a battle for property, space, appearance, and perception, which might prompt the question “which is the worse crime, the carefully planned and monitored aesthetic environments, the controlled uniformity, of downtown shopping districts, subway stations, and gentrified neighbourhoods, or the graffiti which interrupts them?”⁶⁰⁰ The political and frequently undemocratic functions of contemporary deployments of the terms public art are complicated by the fact that public space is less a location and more of a process. As Deutsche argues, public art is a tool within larger socio-economic restructuring of urban environments. Deutsche’s assertion that “public space as the site of democratic political activity can repeat the very evasion of politics

⁵⁹⁹ Anna Waclawek, *Exhibiting Hip-Hop Graffiti*. M.A. Dissertation. Australia: The University of Sydney, 2003. 5.

⁶⁰⁰ Ferrell, 186.

that such an assertion seeks to challenge,⁶⁰¹ forms the basis of Miwon Kwon's critical examination of the ways in which community public art exacerbates uneven communal power relations by re-marginalizing disenfranchised peoples.

As demonstrated above, questions about public art and the democratic aesthetics of shared public space are productive for graffiti and post-graffiti research. Many other compelling crossovers between the work of artists who produce public art projects and street art practices exist. The same issues are at stake for artists who create responses to the visual material in a city or to a city as a built environment. Krzysztof Wodiczko's politically-charged large-scale projections on public buildings and monuments, for example, explore history and contemporary issues by giving life to otherwise stark public structures and by challenging public spaces. Like street artists, other artists working in the public sphere, like Ken Lum, negotiate identity in relation to the culture of a city. Many of Lum's works relate to the imagery produced in urbanity, with the goal of challenging conceptions of identity vis-à-vis processes of cultural and political assimilation. Both public and street art practices can also be read as performances in the urban realm, which capture dimensions of everyday experiences and potentially challenge the status of high art. Vito Acconci's performances, for example, are at once fiercely personal and examine the relationship between public and private spheres by bringing art into everyday life. Public art projects, much like street art, can also be fleeting and can be executed in liminal or marginal spaces. Andy Goldsworthy's practice, although typically considered as land rather than public art, is very much a transient exploration of liminality. Finally, in their interactions with urban environments both

⁶⁰¹ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*. 25.

movements can explore banality in a city and create new spaces of meaning by aesthetizing the street. Gordon Matta-Clark's site-specific series of "building cuts," whereby the artist removed walls, floors, or ceilings from abandoned buildings to create ephemeral works out of unwanted remnants functioned as performative gestures. Still, major differences in terms of function, motivation, and history, make the consideration of street art under the rubric of public art difficult.

My reluctance to advocate the categorization of one under the other is predicated on the apprehension that as a subset of public art, street art's historical roots and practitioners' motivations would be obscured. While I believe that the omission of an art historical analysis has been detrimental for graffiti and post-graffiti research, leaving it trapped in constant flux between the ethnographical research of social scientists and the biased and uncritical texts of graffiti writers and street artists themselves, I also argue that street art should benefit from a dialogue which both speaks to the major issues that differentiate it from traditional objects of art historical inquiry and asserts the characteristics that make it a critical study for art historians.

The most productive graffiti studies would account for both the social realities of graffiti production via sociological methodologies as well as for the movement's visual history through an art historical discourse that encompasses analyses of the city, public art, and visual culture. Therefore, public art discourse is relevant to street art analysis, especially if the term public is broadened to include considerations of public culture and if the term art encompasses questions of urban visual culture. After all, as argued above, street art is its own art world and as such it cannot simply be inserted into an already rich complex of narratives of public art.

Performing Identity

“You remain humble when engaged in street art as your work doesn’t last, you paste something outside, only for it to disappear. You produce something, merely to give it away.”

-Flower Guy⁶⁰²

Thus far, I have identified that post-graffiti art poses challenges for public art discourse because of its historical association to signature graffiti, its practitioners’ motivation to work illegally, and its disruption of public spaces, which all complicate its potential analysis within existing categories of public art. Dealing with the question of motivation more closely, I investigate issues specifically relevant for street artists and their audiences, as experienced through their engagement with the urban realm. Street art’s *raison d’être* in the cityscape is in many ways about the fostering of a relationship between the artist, the viewer, and the physical and cultural spaces of a city. This section begins with a closer examination of illegality, using SWOON’s practice to decipher why the urban environment is such a crucial constituent of the street artwork, and why so many artists choose to participate in the creation of its visual language. Next, with the example of MISS VAN’s art practice, I debate the concept of participatory viewership to contemplate the role of performance in the dissemination of street art. Finally, I analyze VEXTA’s imagery to interpret how street art’s sustenance as a largely anonymous movement impacts the work and the author’s identity.

While the work of a number of artists could articulate the specific connection between street art and a city, SWOON’s particular brand of imagery is examined here to illustrate the call to display art illegally in a city, in this case, New York. After years of formal art training in various classes and at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute, SWOON became

⁶⁰² As quoted in Claudia Walde, Sticker City: Paper Graffiti Art. London: Thames & Hudson, 2007, 65.

disillusioned with the direction of her work as well as with the art system for which her creations were destined. Instead, influenced by readings on the ephemeral realities present in the cityscape in addition to being inspired by the work of Gordon Matta-Clark who uses the construct of a city as a starting point for its re-conceptualization, the artist began making forays into the urban environment. Wanting to “create something which embodied some of the same principles of creating temporal moments of beauty which were more a part of the city itself than a singular object,”⁶⁰³ SWOON set out first with handmade stickers and small collages, quickly moving to the appropriation of billboards, bus shelters, and other spaces reserved for visual commerce, before developing her now trademark portraits on city walls. Life-sized, realistic renderings of family, friends, and neighbourhood folks, the artist’s studies are meticulously executed in paper, linoleum, and wood block prints. Working from photographs and allowing the image to dictate the medium, SWOON produces her fragile portraits, which take up to two weeks to complete,⁶⁰⁴ in a painstakingly precise way. Her works are then wheat-pasted onto city walls, happily prepared for the inevitable process of decay and destruction that awaits them.

The overwhelming attraction of the artist’s work, and the reason for her art’s popularity, is not only due to the subject and artistry of her practice, but also because her art seems organically suited to the material complexity of a city’s environment. The marriage between her art and the street is one which is continually shifting and developing, but ultimately SWOON’s art works, conceived of as impermanent processes, are appealing due to their visual generosity. Her art addresses the daily operations of city

⁶⁰³ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

⁶⁰⁴ SWOON notes that: “the paper cut outs take about a week, the linoleum and wood block prints maybe two weeks.” Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

streets in physical ways because in the end, it decays, is “valueless” and belongs to everyone and to no one. The artist’s rich and detailed representations of real people are as giving, in terms of creativity and labour, as they are given to the ever-changing interactions with their physical and social environments. As semi-spontaneous, unregulated additions to the metropolis, her works layer the city with inviting gestures that are as direct as they are open-ended. When asked what her work signifies, SWOON answers: “human connection, paying attention, moments of surprise, participation in the creation of your urban environment.”⁶⁰⁵ Through the materiality of her pieces, subject matter, and chosen sites of dissemination, these ideals are indeed reflected. Perceiving the street as a space that encourages fleeting connections between people and places, the artist exhibits her ephemeral works typically on “abandoned buildings, rundown warehouses, and broken walls,”⁶⁰⁶ which nurtures this collaborative process, and engenders a conversation. SWOON’s hand-crafted posters most famously rendered in recycled newsprint are typically attached to spaces in a city that are physically accessible to passers-by, thus purposefully inviting a connection between pedestrian space and the cityscape. As the artist is particularly interested in relating the materiality and subject matter of her work to the physicality and experience of a city, she often seeks to populate places that are vital to the construction of a city, but at the same time peripheral, and prefers working with fragile materials, which disintegrate with time and reflect the immediacy of a city. She says:

advertising is always trying to place itself a million miles above us, looming down with the shiniest, flashiest, most disconnected depictions of beauty, just out of reach like the rest of its

⁶⁰⁵ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

⁶⁰⁶ Kirk Semple, “Lawbreakers, Armed with Paint and Paste: Underground Artists Take to the Streets.” *The New York Times*, July 9, 2004. Available from: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E0DC133BF93AA35754C0A9629C8B63>

promises, and I find myself trying to get down below that, at eye level, where people are walking and to depict the life that exists here at the bottom edge, our ordinary reality as it remains connected to the ground.⁶⁰⁷

The desire to work in the liminal, marginal, or non-spaces of a city is discussed at length in the following section, crucial here, is the aspiration to maintain a relationship between the lifecycle of the work and that of a city.

Reflecting on her work, SWOON explains:

lately I have wanted to give all of my attention to reflecting our humanness, our fragility and strength, back out at us from our city walls in a way that makes all of these fake images screaming at us from billboards seem irrelevant and cruel [...] what I am doing can function like a tiny gift pasted onto our everyday existence. If it is at all possible, I want to make a small moment of refuge in human connection out of paper stuck to a wall.⁶⁰⁸

Playing with wall texture and colour, as well as positive and negative space, SWOON's portraits of friends and people she encounters in her experiences of cities, especially through their use of holes, function as interactive spaces where urban dwellers and the cityscape are reflected back onto the surface of a city itself. Experiencing her work is akin to looking at the city through the city, as though it were a mirror reflecting itself. For example, in this depiction of a young woman (fig. 45) SWOON's emblematically sketchy style reveals a portrait that morphs gradually into first part-organic part-built environments, and second into escalators populated with vacant-looking shoppers. Thus, the imagery of the work reveals a movement from the personal – portrait – to the impersonal – shopping mall. Displayed on a red brick wall in Buenos Aires, this print, like many others, discloses a number of narratives that in the final analysis explore individuality in the context of a city. The complexity of SWOON's portraits both in terms of production and narrative, are indirectly organic in nature. The piece's measured openings work to expose the material surface beneath it while simultaneously relaying

⁶⁰⁷ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

⁶⁰⁸ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, *Graffiti Women*. 204.

something about the experience of everyday life in a city – that it is fractured, disjointed, convoluted. As a realm occupied by individuals that are for the most part anonymous to one another, a city is a dynamic, temporal, permeable space. SWOON's visual language asserts that exact temperament. Her portraits open themselves to a city, literally and figuratively, and so are gestures, which not only materially translate the experience of a city, but also symbolically facilitate a connection between the individual and the collective. The temporality of her work visually translates the experience of being part of a city's fabric. Moreover, many of her pieces are created such that they seamlessly fit into a space, thus blurring where they might end or begin. The perforations that characterize much of her work allow for this sort of personalized conversation, whereby the unrefined character of her art is much more "of the street" than most of the imagery in the urban landscape. Many of SWOON's pieces have been reproduced in a number of contexts, which begs the question: if the same, or very similar, work can be diffused multiple times in a number of sites chosen by the artist, is each variation meaningful in a different way? Indeed, the seriality of SWOON's practice allows the pieces to take on new meanings with each execution, making the work and its context feel entirely different with every rendition (fig. 46). While the physical piece itself metamorphoses by virtue of its sustenance in a permeable space, so do all of the elements, which support its exhibition. With time, both the work and its context of display change thus involving the artist in the imagery of the cityscape and translating the experience of change through the visual gesture. Mirroring the movement of a city, the framing of SWOON's work in the street contextualizes it as part of the artist's daily life, and emphasizes the street as a key ingredient in the work's production.

The birth and death of an artwork in the complex of a city is attractive to many post-graffiti artists for conceptual and structural reasons, such as impermanence, transformation, unwarranted response, challenge, freedom of performance, and action. The particular character of SWOON's portraits, especially those rendered in paper, materially amplify the responsive quality of street art. Using a city as a canvas to re-create otherwise anonymous spaces and working with ephemeral material, accentuates the liveliness of one's relationship with the work and the city itself. When the work in question is ephemeral it engages concerns specifically linked to its site of dissemination. In her musings on public art, Hilde Hein writes: "many works are temporary or even ephemeral, thereby escaping the neglect due to habituation that befalls more permanent public art."⁶⁰⁹ The experience of urban painting as an ephemeral process is inextricably linked to the work's meaning as an element of a city's changing fabric. As the paper SWOON uses ages, rots, curls, tears, and disappears, it reflects the cycle of life and in so doing it generates a relationship between the audience and her work, the work and its context, and the everyday life of a city's population. A different type of universe to that of the gallery, the cityscape as a non-curated exhibition space allows for artistic actions that oppose passivity and that resist the idea of permanence. The everyday life of a city fosters movement and fleeting moments as well as varied spaces of participation. When unsanctioned, the participatory acts challenge the terrain and assist in the creation of new spaces of meaning. Therefore, working in a city is both an anonymous expression of artistic freedom, and a participatory sort of performance, which facilitates the negotiation of self as well as the personalization and re-articulation of the visual cityscape.

⁶⁰⁹ Hilde Hein, Public Art. 91.

The idea of performance as well as audience participation is a meaningful one for street art. According to art historian Martha Buskirk,⁶¹⁰ an art object is not only constructed through its site of dissemination, but also through the viewer who experiences the work “as a series of unfolding encounters.”⁶¹¹ While the circumstances of a work’s presentation are invaluable as they lend a hand in determining one’s experience of it, so are the circumstances of the viewer’s relationship with the work. In her analysis of organized artistic interventions in the city of Toronto, Lisa Gabrielle Mark remarks that for audiences who actively seek the artists’ work, it is a chance to “experience a form of art that is completed by its interaction with an audience and to delight in the disruption of the daily. For those who happened upon the works, unaware of their context or intentions, it was a hiccup in the meaningless mundanity of life in the city.”⁶¹² Similarly, street art is not consistent with the viewers’ expectations. The unexpected, in terms of place and imagery, is one of its greatest qualities, because it encourages a strong response. As Buskirk observes: “what happens if the object itself is also contingent, subject to shifts in material or configuration over time?”⁶¹³ Street art as an object that depends on its relationship to its context and to its audience in order to express its meaning in the urban environment, is also complicated by its ephemeral nature. Seemingly spontaneous and guerrilla-like, street art through its reception can communicate uncensored ideas that can elicit ideas and perhaps action. Moreover, authorship can be thought of as more overtly participatory given that street artists habitually create their works anonymously, leaving it up to the audience to participate in

⁶¹⁰ Martha Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art.

⁶¹¹ Ibid, 22.

⁶¹² Lisa Gabrielle Mark, “The Secret Life of the City” Accidental Audience: Urban Interventions by Artists. Ed. Kym Pruesse. Toronto, ON: offsite collective, 1999, 19.

⁶¹³ Buskirk, 23.

the production of the piece through their experience with it. The space appropriated and subsequently vacated by the artist, is made apparent as a space to be now occupied by the viewer. Of course, any work of art, anonymous or not, can be interpreted as the work of both the artist and the audience through the process of reception, however, this relationship is particularly acute in street art. Because of its temporal nature, and because the artists work under pseudonyms unknown to most viewers, the ambiguity of authorship invites the spectator to consider the work in the present moment. Experiencing the work thus often raises the central question of authorship – who painted this and why? The audience’s surprise encounter with the work in the context of a city creates the experience of the work, but also implicates the audience in its production, given that one’s interpretation of the work shapes its constitution. While we habitually access the art object through discourse, institutions, and other people, including the artist, we also construct it socially through the process of reception. Pierre Bourdieu has proposed that the reception of an art object is a continual re-creation as a consequence of plural re-readings.⁶¹⁴ By engaging with the work, accidentally or otherwise, street art’s authorship converts into a community affair.

Exhibiting work in spaces that are part of people’s everyday lives invites the questions: how implicated is the spectator in the work’s significance? And, can we assume that simply because of its livelihood on the street, post-graffiti art is somehow more accessible or more meaningful to people’s lives? Unwarranted art practices diffused in the urban realm at the artist’s expense are arguably more accessible because of the inability by any one individual to purchase or own them, since they are displayed for the

⁶¹⁴ As quoted in Vera Zolberg, Constructing a Sociology of the Arts. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 92.

citizenry. Although we cannot measure whom street art reaches or affects in the same way that such an assessment cannot be made with regards to the plethora of advertising and signage in the public sphere, we can assume that street art operates from a unique vantage point in a city. Its illegality and diversity of style ensures that neither its production nor its consumption is limited by private taste or financial reward. On the margins of what is designed for us to see and consume in our cities, street art responds to the needs of its makers and those open to receive it, as an art world of resistance. In other words, although we might see it without really looking at it, street art challenges the art system, consumer culture, and overly mediated urban environments, while promoting freedom of thought and expression and often advocating social consciousness. The intersection between the street, the work, and the viewer is one that cannot be taken for granted as it is neither guaranteed nor measured. What street art can promise is an element of surprise upon discovery, and, in that moment, the work's transitory completion. The meeting point of art, place, and person can be conceived of as its own space, something SWOON recognizes as "a moment of recognition, a wink from another human presence which is there but not there, like a little reflection of self embedded in the wall."⁶¹⁵ Although both graffiti and street artists acknowledge a city as a space of communication, post-graffiti art, through figuration, logos, and words seeks to communicate more specified ideas. The space of communication SWOON underlines, for example, figures the work into its environment, its interaction with other physical and visual elements, as well as its socio-cultural context. In short, this space is performative.

⁶¹⁵ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

If art-making and art-viewing are actions with the artists and publics as the actors, then it follows that the experience of street art, either through production or reception, is an embodied gesture which constitutes a type of performance. Performance scholar Peggy Phelan argues: “interaction between the art object and the spectator is, essentially performative.”⁶¹⁶ In his chapter on “Performance and Identity,” Marvin Carlson explains that performances in general have a socio-political dimension and are “associated with the construction or exploration of personal identity.”⁶¹⁷ As possibilities for the exploration of cultural dynamics, performances tend to simultaneously express personal and socio-cultural identity, often making a division between the two impossible to distinguish. One might even argue that “culture – is now viewed as performance.”⁶¹⁸ These performance scholars thus suggest that art exhibited on city streets can be conceived of as performative actions that involve the artist and their work, the space of a city, and the viewer. Hence, what the artist chooses to express, or personal identity, together with the site of dissemination, or cultural context, produces a performance when experienced by the viewer. As a kind of social performance with the audience at the core of its realization, street art is a process that through contact with the environment of the street and social interaction, establishes the artist’s social identity. Directly linked to the everyday life of a city, post-graffiti art works propose powerful crossovers between the artist’s expression and the viewer’s experience of the urban environment – a concept illustrated here with the art of MISS VAN.

⁶¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*. Eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, 147.

⁶¹⁷ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2004, 157.

⁶¹⁸ Jens Hoffmann and Joan Jonas, *Perform*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005, 12.

The exaggerated display of femininity in MISS VAN's pieces is immediately apparent. Boldly colourful and playful, her *poupées* (dolls) "seduce you in such a way that can completely transform the way you look at the city. Suddenly the city itself, like MISS VAN's characters, becomes sensual, sweet, alive and full of mischief."⁶¹⁹ When in the early 1990s MISS VAN began disseminating her unique brand of street art in Toulouse, her glamorous, feisty creations were certainly not the graffiti norm. Today, as an internationally-renowned artist whose canvases have been exhibited in galleries across Europe and the United States, MISS VAN continues to stay true to her imaginative aesthetic. As opposed to the work of VEXTA and SWOON whose characters are renditions of real people, MISS VAN operates in the same vein as JACE or OS GÊMEOS whose characters are all fantastical creations part of a recognizable visual series. However, unlike the predominantly male personages fashioned by the Brazilian duo or JACE's sexless gouzou characters, MISS VAN's creations are most definitely feminine. In fact, their femininity made explicit by their soft, round shapes, long, flowing hair, and sultry *maquillage*, also defines their controversial allure.

Fashioned with acrylics and latex paints, MISS VAN's dolls are striking. The artist prefers to work in places characterized by "nice architecture or a wall full of tags, or dirty wood panel, or any sort of detail that will make my painting more special."⁶²⁰ Admitting that her dolls originally functioned as substitutes for her signature and as self-portraits affirming the artist's identity as a woman in a male-dominated graffiti world, eventually her creations much like their creator have matured both in terms of style and meaning. The early characters that MISS VAN disseminated on the street were more

⁶¹⁹ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, *Graffiti Women*. 92.

⁶²⁰ Caleb Neelon, "Miss Van." *Swindle Magazine*. Issue 9. Available from: <http://swindlemagazine.com/issue09/miss-van/>

graphically simple than they have become in recent years as a result of experimenting on canvases and within gallery walls. Occasionally accompanied by cuddly animals or toys, which are meant as proxies for boys (boy-toys), her dolls are visually provocative especially thanks to their suggestive attire, exposed flesh, poses, and expressions. At times, the positions the dolls emulate coupled with their miniscule costumes, render these characters almost pornographic. The artist, however, who has “always liked painting a sexy doll in an inappropriate place to provoke strong reactions,”⁶²¹ insists that her pin-up inspired women are never vulgar, simply suggestive. Her interest in playing on ambiguities and depicting females as both girls and women, has resulted in a number of creations that are vaguely melancholic, arrogant, sweet, erotic, naïve, and exceptionally alluring.

Theatre researcher Jill Dolan explains: “people do performance, in both performative and material ways; publicly practicing performance makes it a tool of both expression and intervention, of communication and fantasy, of reality and hope.”⁶²²

MISS VAN’s characters enable a relationship between the artist and the cityscape whereby the participation of the viewer in the fantastical world the artist depicts constitutes the performance. While some have judged her dolls as offensive to women and have acted out their anger by painting the dolls’ faces black, the artist asserts that such reactions are silly “because it’s just painted images and fantasies, and people need to see it with more distance. It’s like something bringing you away for a few seconds, like

⁶²¹ Caleb Neelon, “Miss Van.” *Magda Danysz Gallery* website. Available from: <http://www.magda-gallery.com/ang/missvantexte.htm>

⁶²² Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 91.

daydreaming, when you're walking down the street."⁶²³ Fantasy and her artistic intentions aside, MISS VAN's paintings are provocative because of their overtly erotic imagery. Painting on the street however, is less politically fuelled for the artist in comparison with the actual content of her paintings. As opposed to primarily forging a connection materially and spatially with the city, MISS VAN's work encourages a connection with its viewers. Whether in the environment of the street or the gallery, her dolls promote an exchange with the viewer or visitor. In fact, MISS VAN hopes her dolls facilitate the following message:

*Elles véhiculent une image provocantes, parfois un peu érotique. J'ai envie qu'elles troublent, qu'elles interpellent, qu'elles suscitent des fantasmes. Je veux qu'elles fassent réagir, peu importe la réaction. J'aimerais faire décrocher les gens de leurs pensées, leur faire oublier leur quotidien.*⁶²⁴

In the seductive and disconcerting colourful playfulness of her creations the artist not only expresses her fantasies, but also appeals to the imaginations of her audiences. For example, this latex painting found in Barcelona in 2005, is at once charming yet confrontational, whimsical yet sensual, cute yet dangerous (see fig. 18). The doll's loosely arranged braid, revealing pink attire, and heart-shaped petulant mouth, echoed in her necklace, creates a comfortable, dreamy, and sexy scene. The suggestive pose atop a deer, with pink stars illuminating the scenario further implies intimacy and erotica. The scene as a whole is soft, delicate, and otherwise fanciful, if not for the doll's somewhat disturbingly direct gaze. A repeated motif in MISS VAN's work, the eyes are unsettling because they disrupt an otherwise sexual fantasy. Somewhere between the palette's softness, the deer's beckoning stance, and the doll's buoyant manner, lies the work's true

⁶²³ Caleb Neelon, "Miss Van." *Swindle Magazine*.

⁶²⁴ MISS VAN Interview. *Magda Danysz Gallery*. Used with permission. "They are provocative, at times erotic images. I want them to create intrigue and facilitate fantasies. I want them to make people react – no matter what that reaction might be. With these works, I would like for people to be able to detach themselves from the gravity of their thoughts, and to step outside of their everyday lives." My translation.

appeal. The carefully rendered scene of innocence and naivety is in actuality anything but, given the doll's menacing gaze and the teasingly mischievous imagery. As a whole, the image is further complicated by its contextualization in an austere and unwelcoming landscape where grey walls are decorated with more traditionally "severe" graffiti. One's interaction with the art object, which attracts attention in the context of a city because of its bright palette, seductive imagery, and ambiguous charisma, initiates a personal and cultural performance that involves the artist and viewer. The artist first performs her work through the process of diffusion, at which point the work itself performs socially by virtue of reception. Both the personal and social performance of the piece is dependant on the site of confrontation. MISS VAN's art in the urban environment is a testament both to self-identity and authorship, as it is also an access point for the audience to participate in the work's production.

Earlier, in my discussion of graffiti subcultures, I noted that masculinity is a crucial part of graffiti writing. With the work of MISS VAN, amongst others, a comparable investigation of femininity is being staged in the cityscape. According to Tim Cresswell, "the mobilities of bodies combine in space and time to produce an existential insiderness – a feeling of belonging within the rhythm of life in place."⁶²⁵ For artists who insert the human hand into otherwise regimented city spaces, their practices become a vehicle through which their social identities are shaped. By creating work which, albeit anonymously, reflects selfhood, urban artists are not only facilitating dialogues with the materiality of a city, but they are also asserting their selves. Many female post-graffiti

⁶²⁵ Tim Cresswell, Place: A Short Introduction. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 34.

artists who have rejected the signature-fuelled subculture, create work which both announces them as women and renounces the historically male graffiti tradition.

Authorship and identity are valuable points of inquiry for an examination of both the artist's experience and that of the viewer. As argued above, authorship can be considered participatory through the act of reception, which is an invaluable site of interpretation. Composed of spaces designed to accommodate the flow of traffic – pedestrian or vehicle – a city, as a planned, architecturally defined, urban realm, is always in flux. By virtue of authorized and unauthorized movement within the cityscape, its make-up alters. Circumventing ordinary expectations of a city's visual imagery, street art's transient interpretations of sites emphasize the uses of public space – particularly as works in progress. As such, the artworks also function as vehicles for identity negotiation vis-à-vis their sites of dissemination. By focusing on the stencilled artworks of Australian artist VEXTA, I analyze the fruitful intersection between authorship and anonymity in the process of identity formulation, in relation to the cityscape.

VEXTA reckons that a good stencil is “something that makes you think, that's easily understood by a lot of people, that engages your mind, and crosses a lot of boundaries.”⁶²⁶ The artist moved from Sydney to Melbourne in 2002, to be part of the “stencil revolution.”⁶²⁷ During the 1990s, as the city of Melbourne underwent an urban facelift, during which the downtown core was refurbished, street art was “sprayed and plastered across this fresh urban landscape [and] reflected these changes.”⁶²⁸ As a growing number of artists participated in the dissemination of street art, especially in the

⁶²⁶ Video “Cutouts” Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8h8CWYyDpU>

⁶²⁷ See website www.stencilrevolution.com for examples of how Melbourne artists are “collectively reconstructing the urban canvas.” Since stencil artist PRISM set up this website in the late 1990s, it has come to include over 15,000 registered users worldwide.

⁶²⁸ Smallman and Nyman, 8.

form of stencils, the city, its citizens, and the media began paying attention to this phenomenon. Since the late 1990s, Melbourne's stencil art scene has garnered success through its continued development on the city's streets, but also through the Stencil Graffiti Festival, numerous gallery exhibitions and short documentary films, newspaper articles and internationally renowned publications.⁶²⁹ Artists from all over the world, including BANKSY, have been drawn to Melbourne to participate in the expansive gallery of urban art.

VEXTA's stencil art often focuses on portraits, which resonate with the public on an emotional level. Armed with an uncompromising interest in painting for the city and its inhabitants, the artist displays her work "where people can see it and where it can do the most good, where it can have the most influence on a day to day, real level in our world."⁶³⁰ Characterized by bold colours in which detailed portraits of friends are juxtaposed with splashes of paint and fallen leaves that emulate hands (fig. 47), VEXTA's creations tend to be melancholic interpretations of socio-political realities as well as the joys and sorrows of everyday life. The hand/leaf motif, both ominous and lively,⁶³¹ is one the artist returns to continually because "they represent a connection of ourselves to our surrounding natural world."⁶³² Indeed, contrasting organic elements such as plants, leaves, or dripping paint with playful or provocative images of people enables the artist to captivate viewers' attention. VEXTA's fascination with "the way we are

⁶²⁹ Jake Smallman and Carl Nyman, authors of *Stencil Graffiti Capital: Melbourne*, explain that although Melbourne has a zero tolerance policy regarding graffiti, the city was one of the major sponsors of the 2005 Stencil Graffiti Festival. Moreover, the National Gallery of Australia and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image have exhibited stencil art videos, works on paper, and stencil photographs.

⁶³⁰ Smallman and Nyman, 143.

⁶³¹ VEXTA has noted that responses to this motif are varied, and while "some people really love them," others "find them menacing and frightening." Interview with the author. March 18, 2008.

⁶³² VEXTA Interview with the author. March 18, 2008.

motivated by pleasure and pain,”⁶³³ is echoed throughout her pieces that are frequently explorations of emotional states of being or moments lived. The artist’s subject matter is at once personal and universal, which makes the messages of her work accessible to a wide variety of people. Moreover, her artistry as well as the size and complexity of her stencils enthralls viewers. Anonymous on the street, but well known within street art circles, especially in Melbourne where she represents a female minority in a male world, her colourful expressions of vulnerability, playfulness, tranquillity, or action have propelled the artist to make art for the sake of the city. Identity, in VEXTA’s work, is less concerned with the self and more preoccupied with the space her work inhabits.

The idea of performance is beneficial for an analysis of VEXTA’s urban interventions, especially considering that the artist understands her practice as “intrinsically connected to the city in its medium, message and form.”⁶³⁴ Kevin Hetherington argues that while identity is about identification and organization, it is also about spatiality.⁶³⁵ The author explains: “in part, this means that identity involves an identification with particular places, whether local or national. It also means that certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity.”⁶³⁶ When asked whether she considers her work site-specific, VEXTA explained that yes, often a place, in terms of “shadows, the light, shapes, and the general surrounds,” inspires creation.⁶³⁷ Moreover, the artist also mentions that the Melbourne street art scene is currently so active that artists “are

⁶³³ VEXTA Interview with the author. March 18, 2008.

⁶³⁴ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

⁶³⁵ Hetherington, 105.

⁶³⁶ Ibid, 105.

⁶³⁷ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

taking over entire sections of the city!”⁶³⁸ This facilitates visual communication amongst artists and creates a sort of performance which signals an artist’s presence and activity in the city. As VEXTA remarks, “I am often putting up stickers as little ‘hello’s’ to my other friends who make the same kind of art I do...little visual breadcrumbs of where I have been.”⁶³⁹ Through the process of dissemination throughout the city, street artists are both reconstituting the environment’s visual landscape and their own identities. The city thus becomes a framework within which one’s identity is performed and simultaneously made visible and accessible to the rest of the world.

With the piece *Welcome to Australia* (see fig. 13), VEXTA was inspired to comment on Australia’s severe immigration laws.⁶⁴⁰ Painted for a Fringe Festival exhibition on a door of shed 14 in Melbourne’s Docklands, this large work demanded the artist to be strapped into a harness in order to freely access the space. This method functioned technically, and as the artist explains, it also introduced “a theatrical element to my work that also drew attention to issues of accessing spaces, be they walls, buildings, communities, societies or countries.”⁶⁴¹ Taking into account the theme expressed in this work, the issue of access is one that benefits from this sort of performative expression. VEXTA’s rendition of combat-ready riot police ironically placed beneath a welcoming caption was provoked by a contemporaneous situation. The artist explains:

a few days before we were to begin painting I learnt that some refugees who had been broken out of a detention centre had turned themselves in because life was too hard for them with no support. The fact that these people had come to my country asking for help and looking for supports and

⁶³⁸ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

⁶³⁹ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

⁶⁴⁰ Daniel Ziffer, “Illegals Come in From the Cold.” October 6, 2004, Available from: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/05/1096949485055.html>

⁶⁴¹ VEXTA Interview with the author. March 18, 2008.

had been met with such hostility, degradation and exclusion made me angry, so I decided to make an artwork showing what I felt, was the image that Australia was projecting to the rest of the world. The photo I used to create the stencils of the riot police came from a close friend of mine who went to Baxter detention centre to protest its existence. Incidentally all detention centres in SA are now closed.

VEXTA's style successfully expresses a powerful message by offsetting the crisp imagery of riot-suited police officers with dripping paint, and by contrasting the written phrase with the image below. This piece, authored by an Australian, is both meaningful to the artist's own political views and to her national identity. Everything about *Welcome to Australia* feeds the work's significance, especially its palette, location, and size. The black, white, and grey set a solemn tone and emphasize the severity of the situation. The fact that this mural is located on the doors of a shed where shipping containers are stored is also emblematic of the inhumane conditions many refugees face to reach their destination. Moreover, the sheer size of the work is daunting, and the officers depicted at ground level situate the viewers in direct confrontation with them. The immanent violence of the scene is also accentuated by the dripping paint. Painted on the street, this work, now destroyed, was a powerful exploration of controversial governmental policies with regards to refugees and immigrants, and reached a number of people who contacted the artist to express their views on the situation.⁶⁴²

Working with paper, linocuts or woodcuts (SWOON), stencils and spray-paint (VEXTA), or acrylic and latex (MISS VAN), the artists discussed above all express diverse ideas though their figurative works displayed in the matrix of a city. Their differing approaches to figuration are driven by material, visual, and personal concerns. SWOON's project to reproduce portraits of people and stories encountered in a city onto

⁶⁴² The artist explained that "the piece was really well received and I had many people approaching me and telling me that they agreed with what I was saying in my work and that it made them feel like they were not alone in these feelings." VEXTA interview with the author. March 18, 2008.

city walls in a manner that accentuates both the permeability of that environment and its intricacy, is, in essence, a detailed exploration of that realm. Her motivation, echoed visually and materially to “show people images from our own lives that are beautiful and real, and not asking for anything in particular (no pressure to be anything or buy anything),”⁶⁴³ has successfully been translated for New Yorkers, many of whom treasure SWOON’s art.⁶⁴⁴ Working in another style entirely, VEXTA’s more durable portraits of friends that aim to reach the viewer emotionally are motivated not as explorations of the citizenry, but as methods to participate in a city’s imagery. The artist’s dislike for the “coldness of our urban environment,” and her belief that “art is extremely important in our society,” motivates her to paint portraits she hopes explore the soul of a city.⁶⁴⁵ Finally, MISS VAN’s dolls, which are ultimately based on some physical and character aspects of their author, are neither explicitly portraits of real people nor reflections on a city. Instead, as fantasies pasted on city walls, her works are stylistically in keeping with some commercial imagery, but reflect personal narratives. As the artist “deftly balances the playful and the alluring with a precision and skill that allows her characters to be insightful, multi-dimensional and fully realized,”⁶⁴⁶ she proposes ambiguous stories that are left for the viewer to complete. As illustrated above, each of these artists, no matter what her chosen pictorial vocabulary, in terms of both style and content, with her practice mediates the cityscape through performances that invite viewers to explore the construction of city spaces.

⁶⁴³ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, Graffiti Women. 204.

⁶⁴⁴ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFYxhD71A3c&feature=related> for example.

⁶⁴⁵ Smallman and Nyman, 143.

⁶⁴⁶ Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald, Graffiti Women. 91-2.

4.2: Site and Space

The dialogue regarding site and space is fundamental to public art's role in a city as well as its function as art. The intention of this section is to briefly outline this discussion as a starting point for the exploration of how street art might stimulate these debates. I examine BANKSY's, ROADSWORTH's, and INVADER's art practices, in order to consider what kinds of spaces street artists work in. What does this reveal about public space? Is street art site-specific? In "City Space," Henri Lefebvre's and Rosalyn Deutsche's ideas regarding public space are explored, and subsequently the analysis is concentrated on the kinds of spaces street artists utilize. Specifically, using the notion of liminality, as described by Kevin Hetherington amongst others, I investigate ROADSWORTH's work. Next, starting from Michel de Certeau's exploration of a city's everyday life, I consider INVADER's project in order to scrutinize the function of street art. Finally, "Site-Specificity," examines Miwon Kwon's investigation of the term's implications, and broadens the discussion to include issues of materiality and James Gibson's theory of "affordances" through an analysis of BANKSY's work.

Debates regarding the public realm, which focus on site-specificity, space, and public art, often make distinctions between the terms place, space, and sphere. According to cultural geographer Tim Cresswell, "places are very much things to be inside of."⁶⁴⁷ Place refers to the particular, it is a portion of, or a particular point in space. Hence, in the analysis of site-specific public art, place is referred to here as a specific geographical or physical point in a city. Public space and the public sphere are more complicated arenas

⁶⁴⁷ Cresswell, 10.

of inquiry. Rosalyn Deutsche argues: “space is not an entity but a relationship.” It is a constructed area that has boundaries and thus creates exclusions. Constituted by boundaries then, “public space only has meaning in relation to something that is excluded—a space excluded as private.”⁶⁴⁸ References to public space throughout this chapter, are, following Deutsche, meant as a political site, a collectively produced realm that in public art discourse is contested. The public sphere, for Jürgen Habermas, developed with the rise of bourgeois society and the division between public and private realms. It is an area in which individuals congregate to constitute a public body. In the public sphere, individuals assume political identities and form public opinions.⁶⁴⁹ Furthering Habermas’s model, Deutsche suggests that public art, which operates in the public sphere, is a political act, because it functions “as work that occupies or designs physical spaces and addresses pre-existing audiences with a conception of public art as a practice that constitutes a public, by engaging people in political discussions or by entering a political struggle.”⁶⁵⁰ The political dimension resides in every art practice however, public art in particular provides a vehicle for commissioning bodies to impose their visions of space. The governing ideology of the public sphere is exclusionary and as Deutsche argues creates conflict – a dynamic reflected by street art practices.

⁶⁴⁸ Rosalyn Deutsche, “The Question of ‘Public Space.’”

⁶⁴⁹ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964).” *New German Critique*. 1.3 (1974): 50.

⁶⁵⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*. 289.

City Space

“The street is the only place where we know something is real – not exaggerated or interpreted. Free public interventions rebel against submissive consumption. They are, by definition, forms of subversive protest.”

-Francesca Gavin⁶⁵¹

While a number of academics have theorized the implications of public art in the public spaces of a city, the important scholarship of Rosalyn Deutsche and Henri Lefebvre are emphasized here. By fusing critical aesthetic theory with urban theory regarding the social production of art and space, Deutsche, widely recognized as one of the foremost thinkers on the politics of space in relation to contemporary art, calls for a democratic spatial critique, which takes account of the conflicts that produce and maintain spaces.⁶⁵² Deutsche’s critique depends on Henri Lefebvre’s influential contention that social space is a social product and that every society produces space through sets of relations, including symbolic representations.⁶⁵³

In The Production of Space,⁶⁵⁴ Lefebvre argues that space is produced and reproduced through human intentions even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it. A space is an inter-linkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meaning, and routines of life. Every social organization thus produces an environment that is a consequence of the social relations which animate it. Society produces space just as space produces society. Furthermore, by producing a space according to its own nature, a society not only materializes into distinctive built forms, but also reproduces itself. That is, space is both a

⁶⁵¹ Francesca Gavin, Street Renegades: New Underground Art. London: Laurence King Pub., 2007, 7.

⁶⁵² See Rosalyn Deutsche, Evictions.

⁶⁵³ See Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

medium of social relations and a material product that can affect social relations.

Although resistance is always possible, even if the consequences are harsh, it is ideologically constructed by the dominant social echelons and by the ruling class.⁶⁵⁵ For Lefebvre, space is thus primarily a political instrument, one that ensures homogeneity and control.

Lefebvre's theory of space attempts to unify conceived, perceived and lived aspects of space into a single code, thus empowering citizens to intervene and shape the various spaces they inhabit. Since space is continually in a state of production, it embodies endless opportunities for modifications and resistance. Malcolm Miles argues that Lefebvre's notion of "a representation of space" refers to conceptions of space that "use signs and codes to enable a common language of space."⁶⁵⁶ Through these signs a city is made visible. Public art functions as one of the elements that maintain the image of a city. Most pertinent to my discussion of urban art in urban space, is Lefebvre's contention that "the production of things in space" has become "the production of space,"⁶⁵⁷ which is systematized in a manner that facilitates the privatization of public space to favour the flow of commodities. "Abstract space" for Lefebvre is a tool of social control – it is the space of capitalism, which is categorized by domination, creates exclusion, and is under surveillance. "Abstract space" is "at once, a means of production, an object of consumption and a property relation."⁶⁵⁸ Still, even this category is vulnerable to resistance through spatial interventions on an individual level. As post-graffiti practices demonstrate, while abstract space is a site of power and control, it is

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid, 125.

⁶⁵⁶ Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City*. 46.

⁶⁵⁷ Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value." 285.

⁶⁵⁸ Henri Lefebvre quoted in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*. 75.

simultaneously penetrable and subject to destruction and to the creation of new spatial relationships or “differential space,” which promotes the production of difference.⁶⁵⁹

Both Lefebvre and Deutsche focus on space as a capitalist tool, which is organized, used, and promoted for capitalist ends. Referring to specific kinds of officially sponsored public art projects, Deutsche posits that the “the real function of the new public art [is] to present as natural the conditions of the late-capitalist city into which it hopes to integrate us.”⁶⁶⁰ Essentially, the author writes that space produced for greater capitalist gains is not only a means of production, but also a “means of control, and hence of domination, of power.”⁶⁶¹ For Deutsche, the practices of urban design, and ultimately certain kinds of public art, work to impose coherence, order, and rationality on space. The author contends that public art occupies spaces announced as public, which are in actuality under the control of city authorities.

In keeping with an understanding of public space as capitalist, I argue that street art’s ability to deliver meaningful commentaries within “abstract space” is largely a function of its illegality. Spatiality as both the production and reproduction of society is a site of contestation, a site where both the majority and minority can, and in fact, must reconstitute their realities. 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 subsists on the margins of a city’s structure, signals an invasion of “public” space. The urban fabric, as it responds to the overwhelmingly capitalist organization of a city, is torn by street art. Unsanctioned art projects infuse the public sphere with moments of

⁶⁵⁹ Differential space will “put an end to those localizations which shatter the integrity of the individual body, the social body, the corpus of human needs, and the corpus of knowledge.” Henri Lefebvre. The Production of Space. 52.

⁶⁶⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, Evictions. 66.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid, 26.

fracture, spaces of disruption, and even subjective uses of territory, which can be understood as alternatives to other forms of public art or corporate imagery.

ROADSWORTH argues:

I think cities inspire graffiti and street art simply by virtue of the number of people and therefore potential viewers but also as a response to all of the other visual media that exists, particularly advertising. I think that graffiti and street art, whether conscious or not, is somehow a response to the atmosphere that exists in cities and in some cases an effort to break through the everyday 'noise.'⁶⁶²

By personalizing public spaces and reworking prominent advertising areas, street artists are critically examining the experience of contemporary urban life. As Jeff Ferrell notes, "graffiti provides a sort of public art outside political or corporate control, and by its presence reclaims public space from city planners, corporate developers, and their aesthetics of authority."⁶⁶³ As such, it points to the mythology of public art and space, which seduces citizens into believing such democratic categories exist.

In addition to the capitalist spaces of commercialization, a number of other types of public spaces collectively contribute to the specific environment of a city. Even within the capitalist economy of space, gaps or marginal spaces exist, which while often neglected, are necessary for the conceptualization of a city as complex arena. Not every city space is monitored, commercialized, depersonalized, or functionalized. Some spaces are unrestricted, unobstructed, open, empty, isolated, forgotten, unmanaged, or bleak. Liminal spaces, as physically or conceptually on the periphery of the mainstream, do not follow the regulations normally prescribed to public spaces by mass culture. Instead, as amorphous spaces, the liminal allow for the possibility of hybridization and the formation

⁶⁶² ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

⁶⁶³ Ferrell, 185. Ferrell uses the concept of "aesthetics of authority" to describe the political and economic authorities who design and control public space.

of new systems of tradition. As Susan Broadhurst explains, in liminality “there is a definite blurring of set boundaries.”⁶⁶⁴ This ambiguity is a precondition for the germination of post-graffiti in spaces often considered trivial. It is also through the process of space reclamation by renegade artists, thus through the exploration of liminality, that identities are negotiated. Indeed, a relationship between space and identity is made significant via a symbolic connection to marginality. Anthropologist Victor Turner describes the liminal as: “a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure.”⁶⁶⁵ Turner explains that liminal spaces are most often located on thresholds and characterized by their lack of societal norms, rules, and guidelines, thus offering endless room for new possibilities of creation.⁶⁶⁶ In her study of Montreal signature graffiti writers, Gauthier argues, “by claiming abandoned areas and “non-sites” as spaces worthy of being used, writers pay tribute to them and bestow value upon them.”⁶⁶⁷ Furthering Gauthier’s claim, I suggest that street artists not only produce a layer of new meaning in marginal sites, which both reinvents them and connects them to more prominent sites in a city, but in that lawless space, they also negotiate their identities.

What Henri Lefebvre calls “representational spaces,” understood roughly as the remaining parts of the urban environment where alternative perspectives can develop, play an invaluable role in a city’s structure. Unconscious or hidden, liminal sites are

⁶⁶⁴ Susan Broadhurst, Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory. London and New York: Cassell, 1993, 13.

⁶⁶⁵ Victor Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual. Eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1990, 12.

⁶⁶⁶ Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structures and Anti-Structures. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969, 95-96.

⁶⁶⁷ Gauthier, 258.

everyday spaces that afford creativity and resistance. In Places on the Margin,⁶⁶⁸ Rob Shields explores the complex of images and meanings that reflect the social reality of a marginal place. The author argues that on the outskirts of social convention, marginal places present opportunities for subversion. The socio-cultural and spatial reality of a marginal place, what Shields calls “social spatialization,” is contingent on the meaning people ascribe to it. Spaces can thus become socially central to people’s lives and by taking on this symbolic significance they are converted into spaces essential for the negotiation and performance of identity. As such, marginal places are physical centres of congregation and symbolic centres for identity constitution. Kevin Hetherington agrees with Shields when he argues: “such places have a social centrality such that they act like shrines for those who live outside of the conventions of a society [...] and become sites of social centrality for the reproduction of marginal or outsider identities.”⁶⁶⁹ As noted earlier, the absence of rigid guidelines in liminal spaces affords street artists the opportunity to create and recreate their selves without fear of reprimand or rejection. Indeed, Turner agrees: “in the interim of ‘liminality,’ the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements.”⁶⁷⁰ Therefore, an artist working within the framework of liminality, is in a space where anything is possible.

Non- or indeterminate spaces as removed far enough from the mainstream to offer constantly shifting boundaries that are permeable instead of fixed, perfectly respond to

⁶⁶⁸ Rob Shields, Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

⁶⁶⁹ Hetherington, 107.

⁶⁷⁰ Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1974, 13-14.

the needs of street artists. If liminality “represents a liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life because of its interstitial nature,”⁶⁷¹ then, the opportunities liminal spaces offer for freedom of action and expression, are especially significant for artists working on the margins of acceptability in terms of spatiality, materiality, mainstream culture, other forms of public art, and art history. Through the liminal ritual, using Hetherington’s terms, of producing street art, the artists transgress society’s norms, thus enabling a process of identity renewal.⁶⁷² The marginal site provides a symbolic resource for the maintenance of alternative identities, and is thus a site of new meanings and transgressions. As centres of cultural resistance, liminal spaces rearticulated as spaces of activity by street artists become spaces of performance, identity, and transformation.

Non-spaces such as rooftops, alleyways, parking lots, tunnels, bridges, sidewalks, and city walls, are part of the infrastructure that creates a city, but does not define it – at least not from a consumption-driven, capitalist standpoint. In his book, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Marc Augé argues that contemporary post-industrial societies are filled with spaces rather than places. Space, he suggests is an abstract term, which is malleable and loaded with what the author calls “non-places.” Non-places are “formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces.”⁶⁷³ These banal places, which are both everywhere and nowhere in particular, connect us to our destinations and are defined through the transmission of information and images making

⁶⁷¹ Rob Shields, Places on the Margin. 84.

⁶⁷² Hetherington, 113.

⁶⁷³ Augé, 94.

them more private than we realize.⁶⁷⁴ In contrast to the determined non-places Augé describes, Elizabeth Wilson explains that interstitial or indeterminate spaces are different because of their ambiguous purpose or “because they are places in between, leading from one more clearly defined place to another,” thus facilitating “imaginative uses by individuals.”⁶⁷⁵ In an almost poetic gesture, street artists, who largely conceptualize their work as anti-capitalist and anti-establishment expressions of free speech, reinvent liminal socio-spatial sites, transforming them into sites of action, communication, and beauty. Partly relegated to such spaces by virtue of illegality, and partly drawn to them as drab canvases awaiting attention, street artists’ exploration of interstitial spaces accentuates our experience of the urban environment.

Visual imagery in a city is predominantly composed of advertisements displayed prominently in prime locations. Acting either as counter-advertisements, or additions to sanctioned imagery in a city, post-graffiti art functions as a necessary opposition to corporate representations of how a city is visually organized – what does and does not belong. It does so at times directly on or next to authorized imagery, and at times in neglected spaces. Street artists, not unlike some public artists, are interested in the circulation of the public, and in temporal systems of organization. It is art in motion because a city itself moves. Street art is thus most often found in urban environments, because it is within the framework of urbanity that artists can respond to ordained imagery, and create uncensored spaces of dialogue. By disseminating their work in liminal spaces, street artists emphasize a number of obscured urban realities: that much of

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁶⁷⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, “The Romance of Indeterminate Spaces.” Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis. Eds. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach. New York: Routledge, 2001, 259.

what may seem to be public, is in fact private space; and that an unauthorized public art contributes as much to the production of space and a city's visual culture, as sanctioned projects. To illustrate this, and further develop the notion of non-spaces, I examine the work of ROADSWORTH.

ROADSWORTH's chosen site of dissemination, the road, although an invaluable constituent in the organization of a city, is also typically a space devoid of artistic expression. The artist explains that his work resides in the liminal space of the road because the road "has a unique status in that its sole purpose is one of transit, of movement. One does not typically dilly dally on the road. In this sense it is not a location at all but an 'anti-location,' an intermediary between points A and B."⁶⁷⁶ The space of the road is intriguing for the artist, especially because its markings constitute a language that he finds "irresistibly ripe for manipulation, subversion, satire and poetry."⁶⁷⁷ On his website, www.roadsworth.com, he explains that working on the road allows him to both "jolt" drivers and provide pedestrians with a "pause for reflection" in an otherwise utilitarian space.

ROADSWORTH is best known for his stencils in the Plateau and Mile End neighbourhoods of Montreal, applied directly onto roads using the same yellow and white paint as that of official street marking. Some of his more popular works include the fashioning of a zipper out of existing double lines, thus inviting city dwellers to undo their predetermined ideas about what does and does not belong in the public sphere (fig. 48); the alteration of pedestrian crossings into a huge boot print, which dwarfs the surrounding area implying that the street ultimately belongs to pedestrians (fig. 49); and

⁶⁷⁶ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

⁶⁷⁷ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

loudspeakers, inspired by prison speakers because they tell people what to do, much like advertising (fig. 50). These stencils, assumed by some Montrealers to have been commissioned by the city, brought “some life onto Montreal’s otherwise drab and potholed Plateau streets,”⁶⁷⁸ and were overwhelmingly well received by the neighbourhood’s residents.

On November 29, 2004 ROADSWORTH’s reign as Montreal’s best-known stencil artist ended when he was caught while stencilling one of his pieces. Suddenly, the subtle images that had “quietly aroused the imagination of passers-by,” thrust the artist into the limelight when media reports of his arrest became public.⁶⁷⁹ The official explanation for ROADSWORTH’s arrest was “breach of public security.”⁶⁸⁰ From a purely legal standpoint, his work poses a safety hazard because his imagery is not found in the driver’s handbook, and could thus confuse drivers. The artist was charged with fifty-three counts of mischief, a \$265,000 fine, and possible banishment from the city for three years. Following his arrest, disputes about the role of art in public spaces ensued with “intellectuals, city officials, lawyers, artists and art fans debating the rights and responsibilities – not to mention penalties – guerilla street artists can expect.”⁶⁸¹ After a great deal of pressure from Montreal citizens, including an online letter-writing campaign to “save” the artist organized by Chris Hand of Zeke’s Gallery, ROADSWORTH was finally offered a deal on January 17, 2006, just minutes before his hearing. The artist accepted a conditional discharge – meaning no criminal record – and a massive reduction

⁶⁷⁸ Patrick Lejtenyi, “Roadsworth Busted.” December 9-15, 2004 Vol.20 No.25 Mirror. January 3, 2006 <http://www.montrealmirror.com/2004/120904/front.html>

⁶⁷⁹ Laura Boudreau, “The New Beautiful City: A Divided Highway.” January 23, 2006. Spacing Publications. February 10, 2006 <http://spacing.ca/art-roadsworth.htm>

⁶⁸⁰ Claire Flannery, “Art on the Road Fails to Appeal to Montreal Officialdom.” March 7, 2005. Circa Art Magazine. December 14, 2005 <http://www.recirca.com/artnews/396.shtml>

⁶⁸¹ Patrick Lejtenyi, “Roadsworth Busted.”

in the number of mischief charges from fifty-three to five. He was sentenced to serve eighteen months probation during which he could not use stencils or spray-paint without the city's approval. He also had to pay \$250 and serve forty hours of artistically-motivated community service.

ROADSWORTH uses context, since he fabricates his stencils with specific locations in mind, and simplicity of visual representation, to create meaningful images. ROADSWORTH's intention "to create a language that would function as a form of satire, accentuating the absurdity inherent to certain aspects of urban living, urban space, and public policy"⁶⁸² is only possible in the urban context. His aim to not simply use the street as a canvas, but to interweave and integrate his designs in and around the already existing road markings, works to make people question the language of a city. For the artist, "the banality and utilitarian symbols of the street were crying out for a little poetry."⁶⁸³ He found that the authoritarian language of the street was a good starting point for satire, since "in the city the road is the conduit where everything happens; there's a certain reverence for it – you don't touch the road, you don't touch people's cars – and I wanted to make fun of that and poke through that façade."⁶⁸⁴ By using the same paint colours as that of official infrastructural markers, ROADSWORTH's work remains within the confines of the city's language, but also brakes its visual monotony.

Much like signature graffiti writers who usually feel either "under-represented or misrepresented in official channels (political and educational realms, for example),"⁶⁸⁵ street artists, like ROADSWORTH, search for other possibilities of representation within

⁶⁸² Laura Boudreau, "The New Beautiful City: A Divided Highway."

⁶⁸³ Claire Flannery, "Art on the Road Fails to Appeal to Montreal Officialdom."

⁶⁸⁴ Sarah Colgrove, "Graffiti Artist Faces 53 Counts of Vandalism." January 31, 2005, Volume 94, Number 32. The McGill Daily. February 8, 2006 <http://www.mcgilldaily.com/view.php?aid=3517>

⁶⁸⁵ Gauthier, 93.

the social realm of a city. Motivated either by a sense of alienation, rebellion, powerlessness, social agency, or righteousness, street artists' integrity is often linked to their marginal status as artists within a greater, more organized and controlled art world. In order for urban painting to fulfil its role as an alternative layer of meaning in city spaces, which both reinvents non-spaces and connects them to venerated sites, it needs not only to remain illegal, but also to push boundaries. On the periphery of mainstream visual imagery, sanctioned public art, and the discipline of art history, street art as a movement, embodies a unique position as a provocative tool. As an illegal form of art, urban painting challenges the very notion of public space and the commercialism rampant in the cityscape. The infrastructure of a city, dominated by architecture, public art projects, monuments, and official signage, commands order and stability, and is supplemented by various forms of advertising, which create a type of urban chaos. With colours, lights, flashy designs, attention-grabbing slogans, and scale, corporations add a visually muddled scene to otherwise uniform streets. A city is thus not only a functional space through which to move, it is also a strategic space, through which to sell. The addition of unsolicited art to the visual culture of city is, I argue, a welcome, if not necessary, act of opposition. Whether exhibited in non-spaces, or as modifications to billboards and other popular sites of visual consumption, urban painting functions as a reminder of free thought, free expression, and individuality in networks of conformity. It provokes some people into taking action, as evidenced by the growing number of street artists inspired to create as a response to one another's work, and it aggravates the urban landscape. This is a good thing in that it allows for the communication of socially meaningful messages within the urban environment.

Earlier, the meaning of contextualizing street art within the urban city was explored with the example of SWOON's imagery. A city's spaces, as liminal (ROADSWORTH), performative (MISS VAN), and identity-building (VEXTA) sites, which involve the artist, the artwork, and the viewer, were also analyzed. The question I turn to now is not one of motivation, but one of meaning. Having answered: Why make art on the street? I now ask: How does street art function in the context of the city? Personal benefits aside, the aim here is to discuss post-graffiti's meaning as a transitory, yet tangible art object in the city: What does it do? How does it do it? And, what does it mean?

The complex of a city is a realm made active by its people; the idea of place-making is examined here through the work of INVADER. In The Practice of Everyday Life,⁶⁸⁶ Michel de Certeau writes: "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statement uttered."⁶⁸⁷ Said differently, the street when used by the pedestrian in this case, is by virtue of this act transformed. As a process of "appropriation," "spatial acting-out," and "relations," walking is an activity that creates opportunities for people to subvert their reality. In the immediacy of the everyday, a city is continually re-mapped as it is navigated. Space, de Certeau argues is a "practiced place. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers."⁶⁸⁸ Individuals, through their experience of a city adopt the urban organization, but also render it personal through their improvisational movements. Street

⁶⁸⁶ Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid, 97.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid, 117.

art as an element of everyday life engages the contemporary city and reshapes places through human activity.

In cities as varied as Paris, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Bangkok, and Perth, the artist known as INVADER diffuses his unique brand of street art. INVADER's logos are characterized by pixelated mosaic tile representations of characters from 1970s Atari video games. Most of his work references the iconic game "Space Invaders,"⁶⁸⁹ though at times, he creates characters from other games such as "Pac-Man" and "Super Mario," for example (fig. 51). The small coloured squares the artist employs to fashion his characters are cemented onto locations chosen for their aesthetic or strategic appeal. Every one of INVADER's mosaics is made up of approximately 120 squares, and each composition exists as the only one of its kind. Compared to the work of other street artists, his practice stands out for several reasons: each piece is unique, with its own serial number identifying its series, much less ephemeral (most of his pieces are intact years later given their material nature), and their sites of diffusion are obsessively documented.

The artist's nom de plume not only describes his work visually, as renderings of characters from video games, it also communicates his actions – he visually invades spaces:

*l'invasion d'une ville est quelques chose de très intense. Je m'immerge alors complètement dans mon rôle d'envahisseur. Je prépare mes modèles à l'avance, et je voyage avec. Une fois sur place j'agis vite, et en même temps c'est comme une performance qui s'étale sur plusieurs jours, ça prend au moins une semaine. Je quadrille la ville pour que l'on sente la présence des envahisseurs.*⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁹ The premise of Space Invader (the game) is as follows: "Earth is under attack from rows of bomb dropping aliens, and you need to defend it! Your goal is to earn points by shooting the aliens before they can land." Available from: <http://www.mobygames.com/game/space-invaders->

⁶⁹⁰ As quoted in Matthieu Marguerin, "Art After Video Game." Available from: <http://www.space-invaders.com/> "A city's invasion is very intense. I completely immerse myself in my role as invader. I prepare my models in advance and travel with them. Once I've reached my destination, I work fast, but at the same time it feels like a performance, spread over many days – it takes at least one week. I traverse the city so that the invaders' presence is felt." My translation.

The word invasion signals a threat or attack, as such it is especially well chosen to describe the work of a street artist whose work is illegal (invasive), yet whose imagery is light-hearted and non-threatening. When asked whether his work has a political message, the artist responds: “the act itself is political, as 99% of the time I don’t have authorization [he also exhibits his work in galleries]. Otherwise, it’s more an experiment than a protest. Obviously there’s the gaming aspect too, as I’ve spent the past eight years travelling from city to city with the sole objective of getting a maximum score.”⁶⁹¹ With his invaders, the artist is not only transplanting virtual video game characters into reality, he is also transforming the city into a video game. The invasions, carefully detailed on city maps which are available for purchase through the artist’s website, are for the most part less spontaneous than one might imagine. When viewed on a map, the specific sites chosen for one series sometimes together form an image of one massive space invader, as in Montpellier. Also, while many are in locations frequented by pedestrians, some are displayed on iconic sites, such as his mosaic installed in December 1999 beneath the letter “D” on the “Hollywood” sign.

INVADER’s work is not only visually, materially, and conceptually original in the world of street art, as Shepard Fairey describes, it also “lends itself perfectly to architecture.”⁶⁹² Since his works are cemented into the built environment and are typically out of reach they are rarely removed by authorities thus, they remain, especially in Paris where over five-hundred pieces reside, permanent reminders of the possibilities of unlawful urban interventions. As such, they are a part of and play a part in the

⁶⁹¹ Interview with Invader available on his website: <http://www.space-invaders.com/>

⁶⁹² Shepard Fairey, “Space Invader.” *Swindle Magazine*. Issue 03. Available from: <http://swindlemagazine.com/issue03/space-invader-2/>

constitution of a city and enable the artist to produce a visual dialogue unencumbered by popular taste and demand. By making art that is not supposed to be there, in spaces that are not supposed to matter, street artists like INVADER are bridging a gap between official and unofficial space or, said differently, private and public uses of city spaces.

Given their appearance and placement, often INVADER's pieces seem to be lurking. Frequently rendered with sideways glances, both in populated and desolate spaces, INVADER's characters give the impression that they are observing us. Their quiet presence in the most unexpected places can be read in a number of symbolic or metaphoric ways. The aliens could function as a clues that graffiti and post-graffiti as unsanctioned practices are alien to the otherwise controlled terrain of a city. Similarly, as "watchful eyes" they can be interpreted as reminders that the urban environment is monitored by various surveillance measures (see fig. 16). Also, as somewhat permanent fixtures that are part of an impermanent art movement, the icons inhabit an in-between space in terms of graffiti debates. Due to the artist's "clean," measured aesthetic and the durability of his creations, his works are considered less offensive than most other graffiti practices, thus suggesting that certain types of street art practices are more accepted. INVADER's work creates a paradox as it is both an illegal art object and a playful fixture in the cityscape. Although the artist, like every other street artist discussed in this chapter, personalizes and subverts public spaces, he does so with a recognizably commercial aesthetic. As re-creations of popular video game characters, INVADER's images are observably less explorations of the self, the ephemerality of the urban environment, or socio-political ideas. Instead, through their appropriated imagery and resilient design, his pieces function more clearly as examinations of place through materiality.

Like ghosts, the space invaders' guest appearances work ambiguously to illuminate a site, thus re-articulating it. As personal renditions of widely recognized commercial images, INVADER's characters function as both appropriations and subversions. Like all art in the cityscape, the space invaders are part of a continually evolving urban narrative. As such, they are sites of transition, of inquiry, and of permeability. Reverting back to my original line of questioning regarding street art's function and meaning, I argue that street art, like public art, functions as a place-making tool that marks city spaces, and thus becomes part of urbanity. But, how does street art function in the context of a city, in a way that is different from graffiti?

The artworks of both movements either integrate themselves into or disrupt the visual landscape of a city. The greatest differences between graffiti and street art in terms of function and meaning, however, lie in their respective pictorial vocabularies and hence the messages they might communicate. While traditional graffiti is essentially an affirmation of self within a network of initiates, street art, while it might also represent its maker, generally communicates a variety of ideas. Often satirical, political, figurative, and fun, street art stands in opposition to graffiti in its inclusivity. Signature graffiti traditions are so closely guarded and often associated with mischief and vandalism that they offer no real point of access for outsiders and are typically conceived as cryptic expressions that work to distance people rather than draw them in. The major difference between graffiti and post-graffiti in terms of function, thus rests in what the work visually communicates.

Following de Certeau's argument, in the active process of re-using a city (street art and graffiti production), lie opportunities for subversion. According to the authors of

The Power of Place,⁶⁹³ a place describes a specific geographical location that holds varied meaning for people. By turning spaces into places, graffiti and street artists both read a city and write it. However, because unlike most public art projects, the work of writers and street artists is illegal, it holds a particular position in the context of a city to personalize spaces and emphasize the functionally private reality of public spaces. Using urban space to create non-profit, non-commissioned art, street artists participate in the visual culture of a city, an idea I return to in the last section of this chapter.

Site-Specificity

“A work is sometimes created for a particular spot. The artist begins by searching for the right place and then creates the picture. In practice, locations that guarantee a longer lifespan are preferred.”

-Claudia Walde⁶⁹⁴

Over the past three decades, the changes in the art/site relationship in public art discourse have been the chief indicators of the transformation in which public artworks are declared as publicly relevant. The physical and discursive delineation of a site, whether understood as architecture, landscape, institutional framework, theoretical debate or social issue, has determined the formal, material, and conceptual configurations of the public art work, as well as circumscribed the process by which the public in public art would be constituted. As Miwon Kwon explains, the concept of site-specificity is “a “problem-idea [...] a peculiar cipher of art and spatial politics,”⁶⁹⁵ because it displaces

⁶⁹³ John Agnew and James Duncan, The Power of Place. Boston: Unwin Hyman. 1989.

⁶⁹⁴ Walde, 65.

⁶⁹⁵ Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another. 2.

questions of authorship and originality onto a site or a community. Thus, the site in public art discourse directly influences how the publicness of an artwork is determined.

Initially, artworks were legitimized as public simply because of their placement in public spaces – understood as spaces with unrestricted physical access. In this conception, the space, envisaged as a neutral architectural background, as opposed to the work itself, describes the site. So as to counter the criticism this model acquired, site-specificity, conceived of as an insistence that the work be unique to the conditions of its site of dissemination was encouraged by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the General Services Administration (GSA). Making a direct link between art and site was a means to render the work more public through spatial integration, as opposed to critical intervention. By the 1990s, public art's principles to create artworks that would "disappear" into the site, so as better to serve the community in a harmonious way, displaced the importance of a physical site by focusing on the community and its social issues. Thus, instead of addressing the site's physicality, artists concentrated on engaging the concerns of those who occupy it. Hence, as Kwon indicates, public art is predicated on a major rethinking of site-specificity in both aesthetic and political terms.

The admirable pursuits of new genre public art, have, according to Kwon, not shifted the centrality of the artist as representative of authenticity, thus endowing a site-specific work with unrepeatability and uniqueness. The author has argued that site-specific public art can unearth repressed histories and initiate the rediscovery of marginal places, but by that same token, it can also extract the historical dimensions of places so as to serve the needs of the artist or the commissioning body.⁶⁹⁶ Public art thus has the capacity

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid, 107.

to map social relations within urban spaces, something often suppressed by economic forces, which appropriate the myth of artistic production as de-politicized. As Rosalyn Deutsche explains, site-specific art has two main objectives: to criticize the idea that artworks are autonomous objects, and to expose how autonomy denies art's socio-political functions.⁶⁹⁷ As such, I would argue that street art is indeed site-specific. However, the idea that site-specific works incorporate precisely chosen contexts as components of the work, and that site-specificity denotes permanence, poses greater challenges for post-graffiti art.

Urban art practices in many ways respond to their site of dissemination much more politically than some public art projects that seek to dialogue with specific communities about particular issues. Illegal urban art does not aim to create a comfortable arena for an outsider's negotiation of self and relationship to others. Instead, it raises questions about how such determinations are made, why, and whom they serve. In this way, street art is a sort of responsible, radical public art in that, using Rosalyn Deutsche's words, it disrupts rather than secures, the seemingly coherent urban site it inhabits.⁶⁹⁸ If site-specific art can critically examine the experience of urbanity and the built environment, as proposed by Miwon Kwon, it does not necessarily do so in a self-reflexive way, as suggested by street art.

Joseph Kosuth writes that a work's "context becomes the content: it's the architectural, the social, the psychological, and the cultural – as well as the historical terrain, which binds them."⁶⁹⁹ Post-graffiti art is a site-conscious art form that disrupts the

⁶⁹⁷ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Public Art and Its Uses." 159-160.

⁶⁹⁸ Rosalyn Deutsche, "The Question of 'Public Space.'"

⁶⁹⁹ Joseph Kosuth, "Public Text." Public Art: A Reader. Ed. Florian Matzner. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004, 193.

balance of art designed as public space, and simultaneously seeks integration into the urban landscape. The notion of site-specificity in relation to my corpus is valuable in that it informs my interpretation of the work as both locally and internationally meaningful. Locally, the artists might choose sites that are especially significant to their experience of their own city. This sort of diffusion is crucial for the production and negotiation of self-identity within one's immediate context. Internationally, the sites chosen for dissemination are, or become, arenas for social exchange, and aid in the construction of the world of street art as one that operates within the urban environment, but outside of its sanctioned parameters.

The consideration of street art as site-specific entails a number of problems: first, that the work of one artist can be found in a number of cities throughout the world (INVADER), and second, that the same artwork can be disseminated time and again in seemingly random locations (SWOON). Bearing this in mind, can we think of post-graffiti art as site-specific? In some ways yes, but only if the term site is understood as not contingent on a specific geographical location but rather as a socio-political, cultural context, or if it is broadened to include types of sites, such as: billboards, rooftops, walls, bridges, roads or simply city streets. Street art is site-specific in that the artists seek out particular places in the context of a city that best respond or benefit from their practices, however, it is often not site-specific as a permanent work with a fixed address. It is difficult to make generalizations regarding site as sometimes works are specifically chosen for already politicized locations, while other times, pieces are put up in arbitrary places. In reality, the only physical or environmental specification for street art is that it is disseminated in the urban realm. The urban environment is, by all accounts, the only

condition necessary for the proliferation of an art practice that seeks to make space for guerrilla acts of visual expression that can respond to ordained imagery, and create uncensored spaces of dialogue.

Alison Bain, in her article “In/visible Geographies: Absence, Emergence, Presence, and the Fine Art of Identity Construction,” investigates “ways in which social subjects are created and create themselves in and through the material and imaginary spaces of the city.”⁷⁰⁰ Through her analysis of the occupational identity of professional contemporary visual artists in Toronto, Bain concludes: “whatever the spatial scale, location matters. Those places and spaces that artists inherit and occupy, which frame their lives in real and imagined ways, are integral to the construction and maintenance of their identities.”⁷⁰¹ Bain’s ideas apply as much to her sample of artists established in the high art world as they do to urban artists. If we consider, as Bain has, that identity is contextual and thus never fixed, we can conceive how the relationship between street art and the construction of urban identities is relative to particular places. Often, artists choose their sites of dissemination both for visibility potential and for the relationship they might feel to particular places. Montreal artist ROADSWORTH for example, for many years, only circulated his work within a small portion of the city’s Plateau Mont-Royal neighbourhood. The streets that became his canvases were part of his daily commute and were thus most familiar and meaningful to the artist’s experience of the city. In her study of signature writers, Ella Chmielewska also notes: “graffiti works reflect how the writers define and organize their own *position* in public space,

⁷⁰⁰ Alison Bain, “In/visible Geographies: Absence, Emergence, Presence, and the Fine Art of Identity Construction.” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Royal Dutch Geographical Society KNAG, vol. 95(4), 09/2004, 419.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 425.

communicating their emotional attachments to particular *locus* and circumscribing the condition of ‘sense of place.’”⁷⁰² By contributing to the cityscape’s visual culture, street artists negotiate their social identities as citizens and artists. When asked how he understands his work in connection to the city, ROADSWORTH explained:

graffiti and street art are examples of different ways that people manifest their relationship to a city or place in general. One could say the same for any activity that takes place in a certain place but I think that the way in which street artists and graffiti writers interact with a city is one of the most direct and literal manifestations of this relationship.⁷⁰³

The relationship the artist refers to is possible especially because the artistic interventions proposed by street artists intertwine with the construct of a city and directly contribute to its visual language. Through the desire to shape their vision of a city, street artists also construct a vision of themselves. As a type of cultural investigation, the work of these artists both reinvents the urban landscape and builds a network of like-minded individuals who together compose a sort of underground community. This community, which includes a great variety of personalities, backgrounds, artistic styles and techniques, as well as beliefs, has a common desire for “doing your own thing without any limitations, giving something back to the street, making people smile and think, causing reactions.”⁷⁰⁴ Within those parameters, whatever the message, medium, or tactic, street artists formulate a group of individuals who share an idea of what should constitute urban social life.

As indicated by the work of artists such as ROADSWORTH, who with stencils interweaves his imagery with the signage of the road, street artists often display their work in locations specifically chosen as sites that generate dialogue, where the artists can

⁷⁰² Chmielewska, 460.

⁷⁰³ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author, October 12, 2007.

⁷⁰⁴ Hundertmark, 9.

visually respond to the already existing features and marking, or create new avenues for visual discourse. ROADSWORTH relies on the structure of the urban terrain as a necessary condition for the conception and production of his work. The artist's road stencils are typically attachments to or alterations of road signage and other physical road features, such as crosswalks, parking spaces, sewer-hatches, and parking meters. His work can thus be read as specific to the sites of the road which prescribe certain behaviours in the city – stop, turn, park, yield, cross, etc. By juxtaposing his stencilled creations next to road signs, the artist proposes a different interpretation to signs and symbols most pedestrians and drivers are accustomed to. Thus, for his practice, the language of the city is an indispensable prerequisite. Still, although he goes “to a fair amount of trouble in tailoring an image to its intended location” ROADSWORTH explains that the “location itself is rarely of particular significance unless one considers the road a ‘location.’” For him, choosing the road as a site of dissemination was partly contingent on “what seemed like an exaggerated deference shown to the road, even by graffiti writers whose work nevertheless saturated the surrounding walls.”⁷⁰⁵ His art practice folds the site into its significance so completely that experiencing the work and the site becomes one in the same.

SWOON's visual vocabulary demonstrates the same tendency. Wanting “to create a situation where the block suddenly makes more sense with the addition I would make,” the artist “started to more closely watch people and what they were doing outside.”⁷⁰⁶ Through careful placing, her urban artworks and their surrounding landscape together compose a specific context. Of course, a site is volatile, since it can be transformed

⁷⁰⁵ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

⁷⁰⁶ Pitchaya Sudbanthad, “Paper Faces, Paper Cities.” *The Morning News*, New York. Available from: http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/new_york_new_york/paper_faces_paper_cities.php

repeatedly either through the work's removal or through further additions to the space by other artists. As it is transformed through additions, erasures, and any other signs of performance, the site lives and thus becomes valuable for street art culture. The work's engagement with its context thus creates a particular space – it temporarily apprehends a discrete place.

In terms of diffusion, most street artists exhibit their work in a number of cities throughout the world. Whenever possible, street artists travel to locations where the urban art scene is booming, graffiti penalties are somewhat less severe, or interesting work is being made. Much less overtly than signature graffiti writers, post-graffiti artists are, in that sense, influenced by each other's work. Interestingly, what this sort of international dissemination suggests is that variations of the same work can create meaningful spaces of dialogue in a number of very distinct locations. Often, an artist who has constructed a distinguishing visual vocabulary, like SWOON for example, displays a version of the exact same piece in different neighbourhoods or in different cities, emphasizing both the work's transformation as it inhabits diverse sites, and the alteration of the site as the work enters it. The multi-sitedness of SWOON's work is essential to its meaning, and in that way it is an example of site-specificity which depends on the materiality of the city.

INVADER also travels throughout the world and chooses a number of otherwise unremarkable places to display his characters. Integrated into the complex of urban life, his characters, when found, create a moment of surprise. For those initiated in the artist's oeuvre, locating one of his works in the most unlikely places throughout the world is akin to finding one piece of the puzzle - an original in a series, which crosses geographical boundaries, and questions the production of spaces.

The question of juxtaposition in the physical and social construction of a specific site is also of considerable value for street artists. The layering or juxtaposing of their work in a particular location reveals a dynamic appropriation of terrain and works to construct a specific site as socially valued by the culture. Moreover, it alerts us to street art's relationship with a specific context through the process of space alteration. The chosen site, with time, becomes one of communication and activity as artists dialogue with one another through their positioning of their work. Although post-graffiti artists tend not to abide by any sort of hierarchical system of display, they often position their work near the work of other artists, as a sort of acknowledgement of collective venture, appreciation of one another's work, and development of a scene. To explore site-specificity as it pertains to street art further, I examine BANKSY's art practice to question the role materiality plays in street art's site-specificity, and to investigate whether certain urban features afford the dissemination of street art.

Adhering to the New York Style of writing, BANKSY began producing graffiti during the 1980s. Nicholas Ganz contends that BANKSY switched to stencilling when "abandoned by the rest of this crew because he painted too slowly, he had to hide from the authorities for six hours beneath a train. With stencils he was able to filter his humour and irreverence into a powerful visual punch."⁷⁰⁷ BANKSY's visual manifestations are organized on his website, www.banksy.co.uk, into three broad categories: outdoors, indoors, and drawings. While his outdoor works are typically characterized by large stencils, his most popular indoor pieces are interventions on flea-market paintings. Subsequent to purchasing a painting and infusing it with an element of his own creation,

⁷⁰⁷ Nicholas Ganz. Graffiti World. 138.

BANKSY illegally displays his altered paintings in esteemed museums, such as the Louvre or the Tate. His art practice as a whole advocates a do-it-yourself attitude so as to communicate unencumbered culturally-relevant messages.

His 2005 book Wall and Piece, which is the compilation of three small self-published books, includes his “Advice on making stencils,”⁷⁰⁸ which expresses the artist’s thoughts on graffiti’s social role. He argues: “graffiti is not the lowest form of art. Despite having to creep about at night and lie to your mum it’s actually the most honest art form available. There is no elitism or hype, it exhibits on some of the best walls a town has to offer, and nobody is put off by the price of admission.” He continues: “The people who truly deface our neighbourhoods are the companies that scrawl their giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you’re never allowed to answer back.”⁷⁰⁹ The artist’s philosophy when it comes to his art practice is evidently one of freedom of expression and defiance against the control of public space.

Despite creating a great number of works on city walls, BANKSY has also participated in numerous formal exhibitions, which have attracted members of the high art world as well as dealers and celebrities. Recently, his Los Angeles exhibition “Barely Legal,” received a great deal of publicity, especially because animal-rights activists were furious about the exhibition of a painted elephant.⁷¹⁰ His popularity in recent years has

⁷⁰⁸ Banksy’s “Advice on making stencils” from Wall and Piece. UK: Random House, 2005, 205.

⁷⁰⁹ Banksy, 6.

⁷¹⁰ In the exhibition, which opened on September 16, 2006, Banksy painted the hide of an eight-thousand-pound elephant to match the red and gold fleurs-de-lis wallpaper of the constructed gallery space. As an accompaniment to this piece, a handout was distributed proclaiming that the elephant in the room was global poverty.

gained such momentum that on February 13, 2007, the celebrated street art website Wooster Collective, www.woostercollective.com, reported on a phenomenon they named “The Banksy Effect.” In the article, the authors explain that as a point of entry for many people to not only see art in a new way, but to accept art as a part of their daily lives, BANKSY like Andy Warhol before him, they say, has redefined art and in the process has become a social icon. Furthermore, they argue that the artist is “the single greatest thing that has happened not only to the street/urban art movement, but to contemporary art in general.”⁷¹¹ Such high esteem is unmatched in the world of post-graffiti and positions BANKSY as the best-known street artist amongst mainstream audiences.

BANKSY’s project to produce nine paintings on the controversial security barrier around the West Bank town of Bethlehem as a comment on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, is a pertinent example for a discussion of site-specificity especially in terms of materiality. In The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception,⁷¹² American psychologist James Gibson develops a theory with regards to visual perception which proposes that our “reading” of the environment inevitably leads to a course of action. Gibson argues that there are “affordances” or clues in the environment that perceived immediately, almost unconsciously, indicate, if not facilitate, possibilities for action. In short, affordance theory states that perception drives action. Working from Gibson’s theory of environmental psychology as well as from perspectives in cultural geography, Rob

⁷¹¹ See http://www.woostercollective.com/2007/02/the_banksy_effect.html to access full article. The Wooster Collective is one of the best street art Internet sites. Founded in 2001, the site is dedicated to showcasing and celebrating ephemeral art on streets in cities around the world.

⁷¹² James J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

Shields, with his analysis of regional markers and identity,⁷¹³ argues that regions are momentous in the realization of individuality. To explore this theory, Shields partly relies on Gibson's affordances to explain that there are resources that afford the everyday performance of identity. Regions, for Shields, "may act as a resource for individuals and communities, a powerful label which frames policy decisions, a surrogate for other non-spatial markers of identity and intersections such as socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnicity."⁷¹⁴ The idea that certain regions afford certain actions is especially revealing for an analysis of BANKSY's West Bank project. As a liminal space, the security barrier is, using Eyal Weizman's description, a "strategic point."⁷¹⁵ Weizman contends that "the frontier is a deep, highly fragmented, and elastic space," and that it challenges "the static nature of territory with an open-ended process of dynamic expansion."⁷¹⁶ The notion of affordances together with Weizman's description of architecturally strategic points or "points of intensity," suggests that particular environments make the physical or symbolic development of specific actions available. These actions, together constitute a site meaningful for the actors and viewers. For BANKSY, the Israeli West Bank barrier, as an extremely controversial wall, afforded the possibility for visual protest.

In a BBC World report about BANKSY's images on the wall that separates Israel from Palestine, the artist says: "the segregation wall is a disgrace...the possibility I find exciting is you could turn the world's most invasive and degrading structure into the world's longest gallery of free speech and bad art." In fact, while condemning the wall,

⁷¹³ Rob Shields, "Intersections in Cultural Policy: Geographic, Socioeconomic and Other Markers of Identity." *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal*. 35:3, 2004, 150-164. Available from: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb039/is_ai_n29061365?tag=artBody:coll

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Eyal Weizman, "Strategic Points, Flexible Lines, Tense Surfaces, Political Volumes: Ariel Sharon and the Geometry of Occupation." *The Philosophical Forum*. Volume XXXV, No. 2, Summer 2004, 221.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid, 226.

the artist has also made reference to it as: “the ultimate activity holiday destination for graffiti writers.”⁷¹⁷ The 425-mile (680-kilometre) long concrete frontier which Weizman categorizes under the “politics of verticality” as an architectural erection that “like a gun or the tank [...] is used by the Israeli state to apply its strategic and political agenda,”⁷¹⁸ served, for BANKSY, as the perfect location for his own brand of art terrorism.⁷¹⁹ The nine characteristically satiric paintings he created on the Palestinian side of the barrier, all echo the same agenda: freedom, escape, and peace. His initial 2005 stunt prompted many locally produced visual explorations on the wall, and the artist himself returned in 2007 to create another series of works as part of the collaborative exhibition *Santa’s Ghetto Bethlehem 2007* organized in Bethlehem. BANKSY offered “the ink-stained hand of friendship to ordinary people in an extraordinary situation,”⁷²⁰ so as to revitalize tourism to the region.

Painted in broad daylight, BANKSY’s 2005 barrier images are as large as they are ironic. Children are depicted in a number of the pieces, either gleefully playing with buckets and spades beneath a tropical paradise (fig. 52), floating towards the top of the wall by holding onto a bundle of balloons (fig. 53), or kneeling at the base of a rope ladder that spans the barrier’s height (fig. 54). In other images, the artist transforms the wall into an enormous living room setting complete with armchairs, a coffee table, and window, which looks out on a lush, idyllic landscape (fig. 55). Or, more characteristic of his work, he portrays scissors that plead to be used so as to cut along the dotted line and undo the wall. Together, the pieces express a simple vision – joy, freedom, and beauty.

⁷¹⁷ Available from BANKSY’s website and: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/4748063.stm>

⁷¹⁸ Weizman, 221.

⁷¹⁹ BANKSY on several occasions, including on his website, has described himself as an “art terrorist.”

⁷²⁰ Brie Schwartz, “Artist Draws Attention to Bethlehem.” CNN.com/world. December 12, 2007. Available from: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/12/03/banksy.bethlehem/>

The site the artist chose to adorn with his sardonic imagery, already pregnant with meaning, was both spatially and materially selected for its transformative potential. Materially, the massive grey wall is the ultimate blank canvas for street artists who typically look for frequented spaces in which to create their work. The structurally remarkable barrier, awash with political tension is spatially an invaluable site. Not only, as a structure and symbol, does it provide the perfect backdrop for post-graffiti art, but ideologically it creates a politically-repressive situation artists can react against. BANKSY's comment that he just wants "to make the right piece at the right time in the right place,"⁷²¹ could just as well apply to the desire of most street artists. Certainly painting on the West Bank barrier responds to that aspiration, as the wall, already a controversial site, is layered with new meaning and avenues of discourse with the addition of post-graffiti art. The creation of a physical border, a symbol rendered visible, a "temporarily permanent"⁷²² wall, is matched seamlessly with graffiti, itself a transient reminder of the public/private divide. While the histories of each are dissimilar, for a discussion of site-specificity, a productive comparison can be made on the level of symbolic meaning. Both symbols of strife, their conjunction reflects the site's implication as a materially and spatially invasive structure. While BANKSY's images themselves are perhaps not overtly political when experienced out of context, they create a situation the artist is best known for – in their effortless, humorous imagery the works are suggestive. They further suggest that the wall is an oppressive structure, one that polarizes people and heightens a loss of peace and freedom. The artist explains that the barrier: "stands three times the height of the Berlin Wall and will eventually run for over 700 km - the

⁷²¹ Shepard Fairey, "Banksy." *Swindle Magazine*. Issue 08. Available from: <http://swindlemagazine.com/issue08/banksy/>

⁷²² Weizman, 227.

distance from London to Zurich. The wall is illegal under international law and essentially turns Palestine into the world's largest open prison.”⁷²³ With the optical illusions created for this site-specific project BANKSY has succeeded in doing what he is revered for – crossing cultural borders with simple and accessible imagery.

In conclusion, what I suggest in this section is that while street art poses challenges for discourses on public space and site-specificity, through a discussion of the role materiality plays in the production of post-graffiti practices as well as a proposition that certain urban features afford these types of unwarranted acts of visual expression, I explain that street art practices create contextually rich explorations of urbanity. Just as streets are transformed into spaces through people’s movement, street art through its physical interaction with city spaces, alters the urban fabric via its material impermanence and the imaginative dialogues it fosters.

4.3: Public Culture

Street art in a city, as site and space-specific practices, is not only a fascinating object of inquiry for art historians interested in public art and the urban environment, but also for those interested in the dynamics of visual culture. I’ve titled this section “Public Culture” to underline the inseparability of the urban visual climate from the culture of a city. Although very broad and highly theorized, public and culture are concepts fundamental to an appreciation of a city as a framework that is shaped and shapes everyday lives. Earlier, I argued that public art discourse, especially regarding public

⁷²³ Sam Jones, “Spray Can Prankster Tackles Israel’s Security Barrier.” Guardian.co.uk, August 5, 2005. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/aug/05/israel.artsnews>

space and site, is relevant for street art analyses. However, I also called for a broadening of the term “public” to include visual culture. My intention here is to establish a way in which art historians can research street art by reading it as part of the visual culture of a city, which aids in the creation of a public culture. First, in “Urban Visual Culture,” I question street art’s role in the city’s visual language, especially as a relevant object of inquiry for art historians. I illustrate this discussion with the work of OS GÊMEOS. Next, in “Galleries and the Internet,” I contemplate the problematic position these platforms create for the presentation of post-graffiti art.

Urban Visual Culture

“One of those everything-and-nothing terms that gets academics excited, visual culture has become an umbrella for scholars of art history, film studies, social history, literature, philosophy – even optical science. They are interested in how ways of seeing predominated at certain periods of time among certain groups of people.”

-Scott Heller⁷²⁴

The visual structure of a city is characterized by authorized and unauthorized public art projects, advertising campaigns, street signage, and more generally, the built environment. Together these elements define the look and feel of a cityscape and shape the urban visual landscape. A city’s visual culture is an important component of “public culture.” The concept of public culture has been defined by scholars as a set of relationships between the economic, social, cultural, and environment elements of a city and its citizens. All manner of art produced in the public spaces of a city, are images that respond to, interact with, or intervene with particular spaces. Those spaces, which are

⁷²⁴ Scott Heller, “What Are They Doing to Art History?” *Critical Perspectives on Art History*. Eds. John C. McEnroe and Deborah F. Pokinski. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002, 291.

thus transformed, even if for a little while, are an important ingredient in the production of public culture. Whether it is designed specifically for a space or appears there illegally, art in the public realm of a city is a significant part of urban life and urban visual culture. The architectural landmarks of a city create one layer of meaning: one definition of space, one visual marker. Of course, this one layer is interpreted and experienced differently by each one of us. Street art imposed on a city's architecture proposes another layer of meaning. By suggesting that a city, as a built environment, together with its visual composition, plays a role in the framework of urbanity, I argue that street art as an ingredient in the culture of a city is an invaluable object of inquiry for art historians. The question that dominates my analysis is: What is street art's role in a city's public culture?

The relationship between street art and a city, as I have argued, is one that can be thought of in meaningful terms if we broaden the art historical object of inquiry to a category of images that is not "special" but rather "popular." Post-graffiti art is special in terms of its history and wide breadth of visual production. But because the objects that typify these art practices are not singular, and because they are "free," they also fall within the realm of popular or commercial art. A space of production and consumption, the cityscape embodies immeasurable places. In our daily interactions with a city, we encounter and experience any number of spaces designed for public consumption. If there are places in a city reserved for advertisements propagated by corporations, then there are also places for the graffiti propagated by individuals. The images disseminated in our cities are bound to our reality – whether the reality is that we are consumers (advertisements), we have laws (road signs), or that we rebel (graffiti). They are all aspects of modern life. Studying our visual culture is in a way tapping into which images

are used within a particular society, what they tell us about ourselves, and whom they represent. ROADSWORTH reasons that:

if you can see it, it becomes a part of the visual culture. That's the thing about cities. There's so much going on visually speaking and a lot of it is manipulative in some way. My contribution to this landscape employs its own brand of manipulation that is informed in many ways by the overall visual culture.⁷²⁵

Street art, like advertising or other signage and public art projects, delivers a message in public space, which, instead of encouraging consumption, encourages personal expression and free thought. When I asked PEZ whether he considers his work as part of the visual culture of the city, he replied that he understands his practice as an alternative to the existing culture of the city.⁷²⁶ The idea that street art functions as a visual alternative is echoed by VEXTA's statement: "my work adds to the visual-ness of the city and acts as an alternative to advertising and signage."⁷²⁷ On some level, most street artists do the work that they do as a way to participate in the creation of a visual culture they can feel a part of. While signature graffiti writing is more obviously motivated by youth looking to carve out a niche for themselves within their community and the city at large, for post-graffiti artists the motivation tends to be more politically-guided. The work is not only an expression of self, and a way to create a space of communication in a city, it is most significantly a negotiation of what participation in a city's visual culture represents.

Visual culture has become an important area of research, namely as a subsection of cultural studies, because, as Warna Oosterbaan argues, we live in an era in which the

⁷²⁵ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

⁷²⁶ PEZ Interview with the author. October 15, 2007. "Considero mi trabajo como algo alternativo a la cultura que hay en mi ciudad."

⁷²⁷ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

word gradually seems to be replaced by the image.⁷²⁸ Whether the image is more seductive, more accessible, or more universal, it is undeniable that through advancements in electronic production and digital reproduction, images more readily permeate our cultural landscape. While definitions of visual culture, much like those of public art, are ever-expanding, I understand visual culture as images tied to other cultural elements. To study visual culture, is thus to contemplate a world where the connection between images and other cultural signifiers are necessarily linked.

While visual culture and visual art have much in common, as Kitty Zijlmans asserts, they do not converge because “the difference between both relates to the current understanding of art. With the present influx of images and the many crossovers between art and other visual forms of expression, the understanding of art is particularly under pressure.”⁷²⁹ What Zijlmans refers to is the boundaries of art historical scholarship. Traditional Art History is focused on visual production that is first and foremost “art,” while visual culture focuses on visibility in a broader sense. In order to incorporate art history’s traditional objects of inquiry within the myriad of other culturally relevant visual forms, many academic departments are fusing both fields together, so as to research broader categories of images. Visual culture, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, is new “precisely because of its focus on the visual as a place where meanings are created and contested.”⁷³⁰ Whereas, art historical research tends to emphasize form, content and the function of art within historical contexts, visual culture studies are more concerned with contemporary, everyday experiences of the visual. It follows then, that the discipline of

⁷²⁸ Warna Oosterbaan, *The Image Society: Essays on Visual Culture*. Eds. Frits Gierstberg and Warna Oosterbaan. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers. 2002, 7.

⁷²⁹ Kitty Zijlmans, “Art History and Current Visual Culture.” *The Image Society: Essays on Visual Culture*. Eds. Frits Gierstberg and Warna Oosterbaan. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers. 2002, 71.

⁷³⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Introduction to Visual Culture*. 5-7.

art history can either be conceived of as an aspect of visual culture studies, or that art historians should, and in fact many do, expand their scope of research to include questions of visual culture. After all, “art works are not neutral depictions of reality, but subjective representations based on time, place and culture. They are constructions of reality and thereby ‘guilty’ of imagery.”⁷³¹ To consider street art as an ingredient in urban visual culture, summons the question – should every visual form of expression in a city be entertained as an object of inquiry relevant to the history of art? Where do we stop? If we want to consider every visually expressive element as somehow pertinent to an understanding of a visual culture, how do we limit ourselves?

Considered together, the work of my chosen artists resonates with a similar undercurrent: as a whole, their practices have developed through a material, physical, conceptual, and symbolic exchange with cities. The undercurrent is thus that each practice is reliant on the built and cultural environment of a city as a key ingredient in the work. Thus, to answer my original question: What is street art’s role in public culture? I answer that because public culture is essentially an expression of relationships, street art’s role is to both respond to and feed these relations. Its very presence in the urban terrain does just that. To illustrate this idea further, I employ the work of the brothers known as OS GÊMEOS.

OS GÊMEOS’s work has everything to do with the visual culture of their city. Although the twins have become well-known in Europe and America thanks to their participation in a variety of festivals and exhibitions, their work is very much tied to their hometown of São Paulo. The Brazilian graffiti art scene has a long history, most recently

⁷³¹ Zijlmans, 75.

documented in the book Graffiti Brasil (2005). OS GÊMEOS figure prominently in that history as pioneers and innovators. Working together to produce an impressive body of work, the twins “mine Brazilian folktales, literature, and their own mutual family and world of fantasy for source material.”⁷³² Painting with latex and rollers and outlining with spray-paint, as is common for Brazilian street artists, the brothers disseminate their work as a response to the reality of life in a country “where the government doesn’t care about you, where there are no laws, where people are paid miserable salaries and are still smiling.”⁷³³ Their imagery populated with expressive characters is distinctive in terms of style, technique, colour, and narrative. As the authors of Graffiti Brasil explain, the country’s isolation from scenes in America or Europe, encouraged Brazilian artists to be inventive and develop original styles. Part-emulation and part-originality the Brazilian scene thus become an exciting mecca for diversified techniques. By slowly moving away from more traditional graffiti writing to the development of their now trademark characters, the brothers found their own voice amidst the visual culture of the city.

Their yellow characters dressed in a myriad of colours and textures are all typically composed in the same way – their rectangular torsos are topped with lemon-shaped heads with flat features, and balanced with the thinnest extremities. Although the eyes of both the males and females are pulled far apart, the men tend to have beady little half-opened eyes, while the women’s eyes are huge and wide-opened (figs. 56 & 57). Typically, the male characters are represented in mid-action, while the women stand, kneel, or sit in a quietly confrontational manner. The men are also largely depicted as causing havoc: robbing, rioting, or terrorizing the neighbourhood. The narratives the

⁷³² Tristan Manco, Lost Art, Caleb Neelon, Graffiti Brasil. 64.

⁷³³ Os Gemeos Interview, May 16, 2003. Available from:
http://www.lost.art.br/osgemeos_interview_01.htm

brothers most often draw from originate in Brazilian folklore as well as the everyday reality of living in a sprawling metropolis. Their art projects are entirely dependent on character explorations of their city. Their visual vocabulary is thus a function of the environment their work inhabits.

Visual culture has been described by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill as “a social theory of visibility, focusing on questions of what is made visible, who sees what, how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated,”⁷³⁴ by W.J.T. Mitchell as a “visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision,”⁷³⁵ and by Norman Bryson as “distinct from traditional art history; and to the extent that this is so, it is an area in which sites and occasions for cultural analysis, resistance, and transformation are bound to proliferate and multiply, in tandem with the regime’s own expansive tendencies.”⁷³⁶ Taken together, these definitions all point to the possibilities visual culture provides as a method of accessing the realm of creation positioned outside of the art historical canon. A study of urban visual culture, and specifically in this case, of illegal urban painting, signals the need for art history’s expansion, so that it might reveal the histories of art. Urban painting is a reflection of the fact that our lives have become shaped through contact with, and consumption of, images outside the field of art history. In a cross-mediated world, our experiences of culturally meaningful visual content appear in multiple forms, and as we have seen, these migrate between each other. Street art, as an amalgamation of medias and fields of visual imagery, concretely dematerializes the

⁷³⁴ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture. London: Routledge, 2000, 14.

⁷³⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture.”

⁷³⁶ Norman Bryson, “Visual Culture and the Death of Images” in “Responses to Mieke Bal’s ‘Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture.’” Journal Of Visual Culture, 2003, Vol 2(2): 232.

boundaries between art and non-art or high and low art through an accessible and culturally fertile visual vocabulary.

Within the parameters of visual culture, the work of street artists, like Pop artists before them and contemporary artists who reference popular culture in their work, can be appreciated for its socio-political concerns. Over fifty years ago, Jasper Johns celebrated common objects, Robert Rauschenberg used mass-media images in his work, Roy Lichtenstein focused on comics as a central component of American popular culture, and Andy Warhol employed a pictorial vocabulary that reinforced the connection between icons of mass-production and consumer culture. Through their varied practices, today's street artists echo many of the same ideals. Much like contemporary artists Jeff Koons and Ron English, for example, street artists are immersed in contemporary mass consumer culture and explore popular brand imagery and advertising to subvert their strategies. What today's urban visual culture suggests is that the propagation of illegal imagery is a true reflection, critique, and addition to an otherwise controlled art world.

Galleries and the Internet

"There is no question that the Internet is why street art's the huge rockin' scene it is today. And full credit goes to the Wooster Collective for doing a tireless and magnificent job of shepherding us all along. They light a fire daily."

-Dan Witz⁷³⁷

While the urban domain is undoubtedly of primary significance for both the dissemination and experience of street art, I now return to two other controversial post-graffiti realms – Galleries and the Internet. Both spaces pose fascinating challenges for

⁷³⁷ As quoted in Pitchaya Sudbanthad, "Roundtable: Street Art." *The Morning News*. Available from: http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php

street artists, and essentially force the question: When does street art cease to be street art? In what follows, I investigate the roles these sites play as new avenues for street artists as well as the problematic situations these platforms might create for street artists and the experience of their work.

Street art's ephemeral nature in the context of a city is, as discussed above, typically an ingredient of the work itself. In its interactions with a changing environment, "a new work of art is created every day."⁷³⁸ While many artists, including SWOON, choose to exhibit in galleries or on the Internet, the erasure of the transient work creates a paradoxical situation in that the work is no longer of the street. In a city, street art is ephemeral due to its medium, illegality, and site of dissemination. For the most part, the material artists use are not very durable and this is accentuated by the urban environment which subjects the work to weather, pollution, and buffing. The illegality of graffiti and street art considerably impacts on both its transient nature and on the intention of many of its producers, who want to establish a connection with the city without necessarily getting permission to do so. In the context of the gallery, street work necessarily becomes something else. As SWOON explains: "in the gallery setting I try to take advantage of that over-precious, protected space to create a small world, the work changes immensely because it is about creating a whole environment."⁷³⁹ Whether experienced as a transposition or completely re-worked to better suit the gallery environment, street art when performed indoors, is simply different. Some artists, such as MISS VAN and SWOON take advantage of that space to spatially and materially distinguish their indoor from their outdoor practices.

⁷³⁸ Walde, 65.

⁷³⁹ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

Judging from the reactions of my chosen artists, there exists a consensus of sorts in terms of participation in gallery exhibitions. Many artists, including VEXTA explain that gallery spaces “give me a chance to create things that are more complex and intricate...its completely different from making work for the street.”⁷⁴⁰ The difference, which continues to be criticized as negative by some artists and critics, is in fact positive for many street artists. MISS VAN for example, uses her gallery exhibitions as opportunities to “experiment more with different techniques and media that I can’t use in the streets [...] it’s easier to concentrate on my painting and to make it evolve.”⁷⁴¹ For his part, ROADSWORTH explains that gallery or not, his interest lies in doing work that intervenes or integrates within a given space: “I find that any and every space and/or situation has different possibilities and challenges.”⁷⁴² Obviously, street art is no longer street art when displayed off of the street. Some people from within as well as outside street art culture, criticize and object to this very disparity. Yet, perhaps in a more defined way than traditional graffiti writers, many street artists who participate in indoor exhibitions have been successful because of their concentrated efforts to make work that is beyond the scope of their street practices.

Whereas some graffiti and street art exhibitions fail, most often because the transposition from the street to the gallery has not been accounted for spatially, many succeed, especially when the gallery space is conceived of as a new field of exploration. Today, post-graffiti exhibitions rarely rely on frames or conventional display strategies. Instead, the work is oft presented directly on the walls in a chaotic manner or one that

⁷⁴⁰ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

⁷⁴¹ Caleb Neelon, “Miss Van.” *Swindle Magazine*.

⁷⁴² ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

might replicate the busyness of city life. For example, street signs are frequently “integrated into the scene, or the walls themselves are painted with apt motifs.”⁷⁴³

Interestingly, while the space of the gallery typically dictates a particular mode of presentation, and appeals to a specific audience, welcoming street work indoors largely disrupts these criteria. While some artists such as MISS VAN use the gallery to create more detailed pieces, which pushes her practice forward both conceptually and technically, others like SWOON, employ the space to construct environments that lie somewhere between both the spaces of the street and those of the gallery.

Since her first gallery exhibition at age 26 (eight years after her first street painting), MISS VAN’s practice has notably evolved, especially with the work she has done for the Magda Danysz Gallery in Paris.⁷⁴⁴ Although initially attracted to working in the streets as a way of “boycotting the conventional art world,”⁷⁴⁵ with time, the artist has seen her practice flourish in the context of the gallery. While painting on city walls “came naturally,” is in keeping with the artist’s “rebellious spirit,” and enables MISS VAN to make her art “accessible to a larger public audience,”⁷⁴⁶ in the gallery she found the time to expand her aesthetic vocabulary. As opposed to the crisp outlines and simple forms that characterize her street work, on canvases, the artist’s dolls have become much more detailed renditions of soulful expressions and precise modelling (fig. 58). The graphic lines have given way to a lighter, more unstable aesthetic which renders the dolls more ambiguous and expressive. Commenting on her 2007 exhibition at the Magda Danysz

⁷⁴³ Walde, 173.

⁷⁴⁴ MISS VAN has been represented by the Magda Danysz Gallery since 2002, and has since participated in five solo and group shows exhibited there.

⁷⁴⁵ *Magda Danysz Gallery* website. Available from: <http://www.magda-gallery.com/ang/missvantexte.htm>

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Gallery, *Atame* (meaning “attach me” in Spanish),⁷⁴⁷ the gallery owner writes: “today the artist is presenting a far more sensual, more intimist, a much more womanly aspect of herself.”⁷⁴⁸ For this particular exhibition, MISS VAN’s preoccupation with hair as a powerful feminine weapon, is a mature exploration of femininity and sexuality, however, the recurring fascination with playful, erotic images of women and animals is still very much at the forefront of her practice.

With the canvases prepared for this show, MISS VAN’s works function on a different plane to her street work – one where the artist is in control of the environment her dolls inhabit. Some of the works were hidden behind heavy velvet drapes, which offered the visitor a private and intimate viewing experience, unimaginable in the urban environment. The dolls, rendered more like goddesses than the play-things the artist is known for with her street imagery, transformed the space into one of heightened sexuality as well as fragility. Besides their lighter quality, MISS VAN’s dolls have become quieter for this exhibition – a characteristic accentuated through a major change, their closed eyes. Whereas in the cityscape the artist’s dolls display a menacing stare, in the context of this exhibition, the girls float in blindness. MISS VAN explains: “I think it was something more introspective, something more intimate to have the eyes closed and to give feelings and emotions without the eyes.”⁷⁴⁹ Although a lot less comic strip inspired and a lot more hauntingly fragile, the artist’s *Atame* show is still consistent with her overall message to “disturb and provoke fantasies. I would like them [the dolls] to make

⁷⁴⁷ *Atame* ran from November 24 until December 29, 2007.

⁷⁴⁸ *Magda Danysz Gallery* website. Available from: <http://www.magda-gallery.com/ang/missvan2007.htm>

⁷⁴⁹ As quoted in Lainya Magana “MISS VAN.” *Juxtapoz*. No. 90, July 2008, 74.

people forget their daily lives.”⁷⁵⁰ However, her exploration with three-dimensional installations has proven that in a gallery context, MISS VAN’s visual language can transmute to express an engaging theme.

In a similar vein, SWOON with her exhibitions chooses to “benefit and take advantage from the use of a roof.”⁷⁵¹ However, unlike MISS VAN’s carefully arranged portraits prominently displayed on the gallery’s walls, SWOON’s work is scattered and at times hidden throughout the space. As the artist explains, the gallery affords the use of materials not suitable for the outdoors, and spawns “a whole different thought process.”⁷⁵² For SWOON, the gallery setting has fostered the creation of entire worlds. The artist uses the gallery as a supplementary medium for giant installations – projects unrealistic in the spaces of a city. In 2005, for New York’s Deitch Projects Gallery, SWOON did just that.⁷⁵³ For the exhibition, SWOON took over and subverted the SoHo gallery: she re-created an urban somewhat stage-like universe in the hopes of constructing a space that when entered functioned like a “handmade cityscape full of hidden corners to discover.”⁷⁵⁴ For this project, SWOON drew on Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City which was bulldozed in 1993 – an overpopulated industrial slum where squatter ruled. Her trademark cut-outs hung or pasted throughout the space worked to create a chaotic scene where subway train tracks, homes, bridges, fire escapes, power lines, street signs, scaffolding, and people interact and together compose an environment evocative of a city (fig. 59). Unlike MISS VAN’s intimate *Atame* exhibition which

⁷⁵⁰ Magda Danysz Gallery website. Available from: <http://www.magda-gallery.com/ang/missvantexte.htm>

⁷⁵¹ Marc Schiller, “Swoon.” *Swindle Magazine*. Issue 04. Available from: <http://swindlemagazine.com/issue04/swoon/>

⁷⁵² Ibid.

⁷⁵³ The show, entitled *SWOON*, ran from July 7 until August 13, 2005.

⁷⁵⁴ “Swoon.” Available from: <http://www.designboom.com/contemporary/swoon.html>

focused on character exploration, SWOON's project was one of space exploration. SWOON's installation, affectionately fashioned by hand, produced a fascinating study of an outdoor environment indoors. Aiming to build a city akin to those that haunt the artist's dreams, her project functioned like an "amalgamation of every place I have ever been to. I want my installations to be an experience not at all related to say, a day at the mall." Moreover, with the exhibition the artist wanted to "make a hybrid of the rules of painting, attention to color, form, rhythm and so on, and my dreaming mind, which loves nothing more than to explore strange landscapes."⁷⁵⁵ Hybridization aptly describes the universe SWOON created.

After a year of construction, in the Fall of 2008, SWOON unveiled yet another project for Deitch Studios on the East River in Long Island City. The "Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea"⁷⁵⁶ exhibition combined seven floating sculptures or hand-made boats made by SWOON and seventy-five of her friends (fig. 60), with the installation itself (fig. 61). SWOON's ambitious project merged floating sculptural cities, fashioned out of found materials and scrap wood, performance, and her recent explorations of portraiture set within majestically organized scenes of urban decay. The thick ropes used to tie the boats feed into the Gallery's space and lead up to the show's central piece – a massive sculpture of two sisters. The rest of the exhibition space, reminiscent of the show described above, displays an extraordinary number of pieces intertwined with found objects and constructed architectural forms. Her installation, which is divided by an imagined flood line, depicts images and portraits that derive from the sea on the bottom and city narratives on top. SWOON "imagines that if the water of the East River were to

⁷⁵⁵ SWOON Interview with the author. October 25, 2007.

⁷⁵⁶ This exhibition was held from September 7 – October 19, 2008 in Deitch Studios, 4-40 44th Drive (on the East River), Long Island City.

rise, her boats could float into the shelter of the gallery space [...] The parallel narratives of the exhibition represent a convergence of her life on the river and her life as a street artist in New York City.”⁷⁵⁷ While similar to her first solo exhibition at Deitch Projects Gallery, this show affirms SWOON’s increasingly complex vision as exercised in the gallery space. The fragility and incredibly textured and detailed representations of people (fig. 62), elements from the natural world, and cities (fig. 63), in many ways echo the atmosphere of urbanity but also forge an entirely unique way of conceptualizing the city’s chaos. SWOON’s street practice is in no way diminished through this sort of exhibition, in fact, juxtaposed with each other and the artist’s hand-made city, her portraits reverberate a new level of consciousness in her practice.

In addition to its dissemination in formal exhibition spaces, street art, much like graffiti, is further complicated through its appearance in photographs and on the Internet. While photography and graffiti practices often go hand in hand, and in fact some argue that: “signature graffiti may be one of the most photographed contemporary urban phenomena,”⁷⁵⁸ the graffiti photograph infrequently alerts us to the work’s specific location. As a matter of fact, “if elements of the specific urban context are drawn into the [photographic] frame, they are most typically used as a backdrop against which graffiti is set, or graffiti is treated as visual shorthand for transforming them into a generic urban scene.”⁷⁵⁹ These dynamics of graffiti’s photographic representation are both understandable and problematic. Understandable, because frequently taken by the artists, the photographs rarely serve as anything more than a documentation of the work itself.

⁷⁵⁷ Deitch Projects press release, available from:
<http://www.deitch.com/files/projects/SWIMMINGCITIESPR.pdf>

⁷⁵⁸ Chmielewska, 443.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid, 444.

As for any artist who might take photos to document their work, the context is seldom the primary focus. Rather, the pictures record the aesthetic character of the piece – its detailed composition. This is also problematic since the erasure of the work’s relationship to its place of diffusion obscures its material presence in a particular site. Consequently, the record of the work exists but in a sort of void, where site and time is obsolete. This dislocation prevents a complete reading of the piece, since unless we actually experience the work live, we do not have access to its impact in or experience of a particular urban context. Still, photographs, especially for those involved in graffiti or street art production, are a primary resource for the study of style and technique, and for documenting and sharing one’s work with colleagues around the world. In dealing with the relationship between ephemeral works and photography, a complex situation develops, one that Martha Buskirk aptly describes:

we have works that are about immediacy of experience accomplished through the direct presence of the body, but an immediacy that has to be imagined through the mediation of accounts and documents. The more immediate, the more ephemeral, the more of-the-moment or of-the-place the work is, the more likely that it is known through images and accounts, the two sometimes working together, sometimes in isolation from one another.⁷⁶⁰

The experience of graffiti or street art, often encountered at a distance, especially via photographs posted on the Internet, is thus incomplete, but as Buskirk argues, “that does not necessarily mean that its significance is diminished.”⁷⁶¹ Practically, photographs of graffiti are the most valuable foundation on which the movement survives and indeed, evolves. Were it not for the numerous photo-based publications and websites of graffiti, the movement would be quite literally lost. For this reason, since the work’s lifespan in

⁷⁶⁰ Buskirk, 222.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid, 223.

the urban context is limited, it is predominantly through photography that we have access to graffiti's global history.

Since documenting the movement through photographs has become the primary means by which the work is known, in a way, the document constitutes the work itself, which blurs the line between event and account, between experience and object.

Photographing graffiti, Ella Chmielewska argues:

is an activity that uses its subjects as 'ready mades.' It appropriates them and brings them into focus, thereby drawing attention to its own expression. While graffiti forces itself into the visual space of the city, photography adds graffiti to the anthology of (urban) images and elevates it to the status of 'worth looking at.'⁷⁶²

Certainly, experiencing graffiti through the medium of photography in many ways authenticates the work. As does diffusing those photos in cyberspace and published materials. In Part I of my dissertation, I discussed the Internet as an invaluable tool of empowerment for graffiti writers, and a critical resource for both the documentation and evolution of the graffiti writing movement. As a continuation of that discussion, I focus on JACE's work to analyze the type of relationship the Internet mediates.

There are of course both positive and negative aspects to disseminating post-graffiti art on the Internet. On the one hand, it "allows the movement to be completely inclusive on a global level."⁷⁶³ This inclusivity refers to the possibilities of distribution the tool allows for, which for artists means invitations to participate in projects and exhibitions, and a much larger audience base. On the other hand, while the work can be accessed by a greater number of people, by virtue of the medium, it also distances the viewer from it. By mediating a personal engagement with the work, the Internet dilutes the street art viewing experience. I asked ROADSWORTH if he considers the Internet a

⁷⁶² Chmielewska, 440.

⁷⁶³ Pitchaya Sudbanthad, "Roundtable: Street Art."

valuable tool in the dissemination of his art, and while he responded that the Internet has definitely provided him “with a much wider ‘audience’ than would otherwise be possible,” he also pinpointed the Internet’s problematic “authority.” He explains:

You could alter a photo in photoshop (an example comes to mind where someone faked the tagging of Airforce One using photoshop) put it on the net and claim that you are a street artist. Or you could hit one or two spots (they could be in your own backyard) take a picture and put it on the Internet and give an impression that you are a street artist that gets up. I think the Internet is an amazing tool and it has been beneficial to me but it is also interesting how it can be used to represent ‘reality.’⁷⁶⁴

The artist’s sentiment is one echoed time and again amongst street artists who simultaneously value the Internet and criticize it for complicating and at times trivializing street art. VEXTA explains: “I find the idea of creating street art only to photograph it and publish it on the Internet a strange one as it takes your work completely out of context and often the art loses too much.”⁷⁶⁵ Indeed, because the Internet both brings people in contact with the work and distances them from it, PEZ too emphasizes that graffiti should primarily be experienced in the streets.⁷⁶⁶ On the Internet, the true gift of street art as an element of surprise encountered accidentally vanishes. Still, for every con there is a pro and as SWOON for whom working on the street is partly a desire to communicate with people, explains: “the Internet has represented a sort of barometer of the success of that communication. I’ve received so many stories about my work that I would have no way of hearing otherwise.”⁷⁶⁷ As a tool for exchange, which brings street art off the street, the Internet, akin to gallery exhibitions, is thus another controversial venue for the post-graffiti movement – an idea I explore further with JACE’s work.

⁷⁶⁴ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

⁷⁶⁵ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

⁷⁶⁶ PEZ Interview with the author. October 15, 2007. “El graffiti esta en la calle!!!”

⁷⁶⁷ Pitchaya Sudbanthad, “Roundtable: Street Art.”

After years of traditional graffiti writing, JACE wanting to assert his individuality developed his “gouzou” character, displaying it most famously in his hometown of Saint-Pierre, Reunion Island. His graphically simple and stylistically identifiable character has cemented JACE as a well-known artist on the urban art scene. Most interesting about the artist’s gouzous is where they appear and what they happen to be doing. After working with the same character for sixteen years, the artist still finds ways to delight, shock, and impress by diffusing his gouzous in the most unlikely places, acting out hilariously improbable scenarios. Although he has exhibited gouzous in many corners of the world, he is best-known on Reunion Island where even the official tourism website promotes his work as an attraction⁷⁶⁸ - quite uncharacteristic for an illegal art form.

JACE’s character is faceless, gender-neutral, and typically orange. On the artist’s website, www.gouzou.net, gouzous can be found in all manner of representation under “peinture,” “affiche,” and “graff.” Whether dangling from cliffs (see fig. 14), sunbathing by the seaside, roasting in an oven, or getting cleaned in a washing machine, gouzou is forever represented in a jovial, colourful way. Likewise, on billboards the character pokes fun at people he interacts with or enhances the scene with satire. JACE’s characteristically playful and whimsical works are primarily disseminated in countries and cities not especially recognized as graffiti-centres, such as: Le Havre, Budapest, Mayotte, Bali, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Hong Kong. The Internet is thus, an especially important tool for audiences to experience his work. Notable too, is that photographs of his pieces include a far greater sense of context, perhaps because of their

⁷⁶⁸ “The World Gouzous” Available from: <http://reunion.runweb.com/lang-EN-page-1114-2V-page>Welcome-to-the-world-of-Gouzous.html>

“exotic” locations. Whereas the majority of street artists work primarily in busy urban centres, for JACE who lives on Reunion Island, that possibility is not an everyday reality. The photographs available on JACE’s website, thus, in a way stand in for the work itself. Although the artist is well-known in street art circles, his website is the access point for his creations.

Today, JACE’s gouzous, along with innumerable other characters, stencils, logos, stickers, posters, and other illegal interventions into the urban landscape are catalogued on a daily basis on popular street art websites, such as www.woostercollective.com. As the site’s homepage proudly announces Wooster is the name of a street in the Soho section of New York City, and the Collective is dedicated to showcasing and celebrating ephemeral art placed on streets in cities around the world. Since 2001, the Wooster Collective has been the main virtual access point for street art. This website not only displays daily photographs and videos of urban painting, it also features a great number of links and podcasts and its archives can be searched by category or date. This comprehensive site suggests that street art and graffiti in general are movements or subcultures that are becoming “Internetized.” Meaning that the amount of written, visual, and personalized information about these movements found on the Internet surpasses the possibilities of an individual’s actual engagement with these art traditions. In a way, the Internet is not only a source of information about graffiti it is also swiftly becoming the primary vehicle for an encounter with the work. Thus, the discourse around the graffiti subculture and the post-graffiti movement is moving into the virtual realm – a realm which unifies those who have access to it, but fundamentally distances its users from a physical experiences with the works themselves.

CHAPTER 5

URBAN PAINTING TODAY

In 2008, I travelled to London, Paris, Barcelona, and on numerous occasions, New York. Apart from the insights I garnered from the informal interviews I conducted with artists, curators, gallery owners, and museum professionals, most pertinent to my research was the experience of graffiti and street art through my explorations of these cities as a pedestrian. Visiting culturally rich urban centres with the exclusive goal of encountering graffiti proved enlightening. Ultimately, my live experience of these varied cityscapes not only reaffirmed my hypothesis – that a critical dialogue centred on urban painting is imperative – but the overwhelming pervasiveness of this art genre also confirmed that urban painting is a quintessential art movement of the twenty-first century.

In London, I attended the *Cans Festival* – an international exhibition of stencil graffiti.⁷⁶⁹ Over thirty stencil artists, including VEXTA, BANKSY, and ROADSWORTH, were invited to take part in the exhibition, however, once it was opened to the public, anyone could contribute their work to the myriad of images. By the third, and last, day of the festival, the otherwise unceremonious site was transformed into one of the richest displays of stencilled graffiti in the world. As an organizer of the event, BANKSY, succeeded not only with his own characteristically witty, large-scale commentaries (fig. 64), but also with the sheer number of visitors the event attracted. Thousands of people, from toddlers to the elderly, visited the site, purchased the

⁷⁶⁹ *Cans Festival* was held over a Bank Holiday weekend in a tunnel on Leake Street (Waterloo), May 3-5, 2008.

exhibition's "catalogue," and relished in the show's participatory format. The event accumulated a great deal of media coverage, from the BBC to CNN, and hundreds of websites now feature photographs and videos of the art work that was incorporated into the exhibition on a daily basis. My own experience of the exhibition instigated the following observations: there is something inherently strange about queuing for hours to experience street art; this illegal art form is extremely popular with Londoners of all ages; and, the numerous references to popular culture, Pop Art (see fig. 34), and BANKSY (fig. 65) in the art works themselves, signals that this movement is both a part of artistic traditions and imparts contemporary relevance.

Apart from the growing number of post-graffiti exhibitions in established galleries and museums, film documentaries,⁷⁷⁰ and non-scholarly publications, graffiti art can today be found in diverse advertising campaigns. In addition to the examples discussed in this thesis, I continually find my object of inquiry manifested in an assortment of situations. For instance, in just one week, I received a Simons⁷⁷¹ fashion catalogue in the mail that featured all of its models in graffiti saturated landscapes (fig. 66), I came across the HSBC Bank ad campaign which highlights graffiti in the "art" portion of its "your point of view" poster series, and I received the Université de Montréal's student agenda 2008-2009, which, on its cover, features a graffiti writer spray-painting the University's main building (fig. 67). These examples alone demonstrate the blatant commodification of graffiti in North America's cultural landscape. Urban painting is not only relevant as an icon of popular culture relatable to fashion, controversial advertising, and student

⁷⁷⁰ See for example, Pablo Aravena's *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting* (www.nextthemovie.com), and Jon Reiss's *Bomb It!* (www.bombit-themovie.com).

⁷⁷¹ Simons is a Quebec-based clothing store chain (www.simons.ca).

agendas, it is also an incredibly widespread genre of artistic expression displayed in some of the world's most popular urban centres.

In addition to my experiences with street art in London, I observed a veritable interaction between traditional graffiti writing and post-graffiti art in Paris and Barcelona. Signature graffiti is possibly the first and last art form tourists encounter on their way to and from the airports. It saturates bridges, underpasses, overpasses, subway tunnels, and other otherwise drab walls that frame the outskirts of a city. In Paris, traditional writing rules the urban landscape, while street artists participate in the dialogue in more selective ways. Although signature graffiti can be found just about anywhere, especially on the city's peripheries, street art is concentrated in the heart of the city. This observation reflects the differing principles of each graffiti mode – writers celebrate bravery and omnipresence as they dialogue with one another, and street artists communicate with a more heterogeneous portion of the population, right in the city's core. While street art is abundant in Paris, the pieces are typically smaller, as with stickers for example, making the work less obviously ubiquitous. This difference signals that, at least spatially, graffiti still dominates the urban landscape.

In Barcelona, where New York Style graffiti in tandem with street art practices more readily share the same spaces, signature writing still prevails in terms of size and quantity. Except for the work of some exceedingly active street artists, such as PEZ (fig. 68), whose characters figure on a large scale on almost every downtown street, street artworks tend to be in the middle of the city, but are simultaneously secluded. Some artists, like MISS VAN, who started out purely working on the street and later became renowned in the gallery context, have applied their experiences with canvas to their

outdoor practices. In my encounters with MISS VAN's current street projects in Barcelona, I found the works to be much softer, and less aggressive towards their surroundings (fig. 69). Indeed, the artist reveals: "*je veux qu'elles s'intègrent de manière assez discrète. D'un côté je n'ai plus rien à prouver et en plus les lois sont de plus en plus dures avec le graffiti.*"⁷⁷² Often, street art is simply not as "loud" as traditional graffiti, and thus sometimes more difficult to spot.

The intersection between graffiti and post-graffiti is conceived in a number of ways, empirically by writers and artists, and spatially through their exhibition in a city. While for some artists, like PEZ, writing graffiti was essential to their eventual experimentation with different modes of street art,⁷⁷³ for others the evolution is not so readily observable. PEZ's fish functions and is disseminated in the same tradition as tagging, the difference, is of course visual, in that a fish in a variety of playful executions stands in for a signature. ROADSWORTH, who identifies with the signature graffiti movement in terms of his moniker and social circle, remarks that his connection to graffiti is "as much an identification as it is a reaction to it."⁷⁷⁴ In truth, his practice is materially and visually distant from graffiti and thus functions in a distinct way. Like ROADSWORTH who has friends in the signature graffiti community, VEXTA too has a social graffiti connection. Fundamentally, however, she contends that the graffiti world is generally "a bit too boycore and internalized for me."⁷⁷⁵ Street artists and graffiti writers share the same framework of urbanity for the execution of their pieces. Their visual

⁷⁷² MISS VAN Interview. Magda Danysz Gallery. Used with permission.

⁷⁷³ PEZ Interview with the author. October 15, 2007. When asked about his practice's connection to signature graffiti, PEZ answered: "Si, si el graffiti no hubiera existido nunca hubiera existido mi personaje, yo emepe haciendo firmas por toda la ciudad, as la esencia de decir yo he estado aki."

⁷⁷⁴ ROADSWORTH Interview with the author. October 12, 2007.

⁷⁷⁵ VEXTA Interview with the author. January 28, 2008.

languages and their communities, however, differ to such extents that the experience of their work culminates in completely different appreciations.

With this thesis I set out to analyze the function and meaning of graffiti cultures in the contexts of cities, art worlds, and visual studies. By reviewing the New York Style's genealogy, its formal composition, and its evolution into a complex art form practiced in cities around the world, I have emphasized its function, namely as a tool for identity negotiation and visual subversion. By accessing graffiti's problematic history both as a sub and a pop culture, unpacking its difficult relationship with galleries and legality, and countering its incessant association with hip-hop, I have insisted upon graffiti's role as a long-standing pictorial tradition that has always been connected with the major social trends and cultural innovation of its time. From its materialization within the context of urbanity, to its dematerialization on the Internet, graffiti contests the boundaries of visual culture. My cross-cultural and cross-contextual study offers a new vantage point for art historians to analyze this international movement as expressive of the contemporary flow between fine art practices and popular culture.

In my investigation of current graffiti modes, manifested in the urban landscape as varied visual interventions that fall under the rubric of street art, I have extended my analysis to question graffiti's meaning in the cityscape. I evaluated urban art's role as a public art, scrutinized the work of some artists as both performative and at times site-specific, and addressed the contemporary debates regarding post-graffiti exhibitions and the movement's livelihood on the Internet. Through this analysis, I have described post-graffiti practices as thoroughly connected to graffiti writing, yet ideologically and visually separate. Because of the prevalent use of figuration, legibility, and frequent

socio-political relevance of street art, these art practices are constituents of the urban landscape that artfully communicate with both the citizens and the material structure of a city. As documentary director, Pablo Aravena remarks: “this art movement is pushing the boundaries of Western culture while being born within it.”⁷⁷⁶ Indeed, for cultural historians and art theorists, the most compelling facet of all manner of post-graffiti practices should reside in this very reality – street art operates as a dynamic reflection of and addition to peoples’ experiences with city life and visual culture. As such, it is an unmediated, uncensored, visual dialogue, that in its production, incorporates the materiality and spatiality of a city as well as the personal and culturally-driven encounter between artist and audience.

For art historians, my thesis provides an ideal opportunity to question some of the discipline’s canonical categories such as style, subject, and signature. For a field of study that accesses its objects of inquiry firstly through form, content, style, and medium, and secondly through its social context, meaning, artist, patron, and viewer, the graffiti and post-graffiti movements provide incredibly rich narratives. Uncovering the movements’ socio-political intentions and investigating the works formally and contextually, proves fundamental to the works themselves and to their viewers. Graffiti cultures, as sophisticated forms of communication, both shape and are shaped by their social contexts. Engaging with these movements with a critical, art historical eye reveals not only the impetus for their creation, but also our responsibility as viewers to allow the objects to speak while uncovering their function.

⁷⁷⁶ Press kit for film, *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting*, Available from: http://www.nextthemovie.com/presskitpdfs/PK_NEXT_Eng.pdf

The categories of style, subject, and signature – or who made it and who paid for it – are exceptionally pertinent to the study of works of art that fully fit into art historical ways of seeing, but simultaneously disrupt these fundamental classifications. As I have argued, style is a key element in graffiti analysis. Personal, regional, and period styles characterize art historical inquiries and these groupings are extremely relevant for graffiti writers as well. Distinctive individualizations of a common visual vocabulary account for stylistic breakthroughs or discrepancies; geographical adaptations allow for the proliferation of a number of varied scenes associated with one international network; and reading pieces within the framework of a specific time facilitates the study of stylistic and technical developments. The categories of subject and signature prove immeasurably more complicated for an analysis of graffiti within the discipline of art history, namely because the signature is the subject. A formal graffiti analysis focused on line, colour, composition, form, volume, technique, material, texture and space, discloses writers' styles, and thus, their approaches towards their subject matter – their signatures. If graffiti “is the urban act of the disaffected city dweller,”⁷⁷⁷ then it is also an artistically infused expression of dissatisfaction.

The study of post-graffiti art practices allows art historians to scrutinize a movement that truly reflects a global artistic community: one that in the twenty-first century ideally reflects the future of art and art history. As the traditional boundaries of artistic creations loosen, the study of art expands to examine practices of appropriation, neo-expressionism and conceptualism, craft and feminist art, a return to the body and figuration, public art, as well as digital and installation pieces. The post-graffiti

⁷⁷⁷ Alan Turley, *Urban Culture: Exploring Cities and Cultures*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005, 100.

movement has a place within these dialogues as an exploration of our cultural landscape using an amalgamation of both traditional and new media and imagery. As unwarranted performative gestures, street art practices provide both a counterbalance to commercial and sanctioned images that populate the cityscape and respond to increasingly fertile explorations of public space. In Francesca Gavin's words, street artists are "renegades, deserting both the frustrations and commodification of the art world, and the aesthetics and rigidity of graffiti."⁷⁷⁸ Their projects foster exchanges with the built environment, commercial imagery, canonical movements within the history of art, and urban, street cultures. As such, post-graffiti practices epitomize contemporary visual culture.

Today, exhibitions such as MoMA's "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions,"⁷⁷⁹ "© MURAKAMI" at the Brooklyn Museum,⁷⁸⁰ and "Street Art, Street Life: From the 1950s to Now" showing at the Bronx Museum,⁷⁸¹ display the work of artists that are part of the ongoing development of contemporary art as it intersects with the street, animation, popular culture, and the visual language of cities. Moreover, contemporary artists Barry McGee, whose installations reflect Mexican muralist traditions, graffiti influences and commentaries on urban life; Ron English, whose self-described popaganda comments on advertising strategies and brand imagery; and, Nikki S. Lee whose infiltration projects question identity, ethnicity, and subcultures, all reflect the preoccupations and issues which stand at the forefront of graffiti and post-graffiti practices. These artistic ventures hint at the crossovers between the cultural forms shaping the streets and the questions that persist in the contemporary art world.

⁷⁷⁸ Gavin, 6.

⁷⁷⁹ "Drawing Now" ran from October 17, 2002 – January 6, 2003 at the Museum of Modern Art in Long Island City, N.Y.

⁷⁸⁰ This exhibition ran from April 5 – July 13, 2008.

⁷⁸¹ September 14, 2008 – January 25, 2009.



Figure 1. Examples of tags. Barcelona, Spain. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

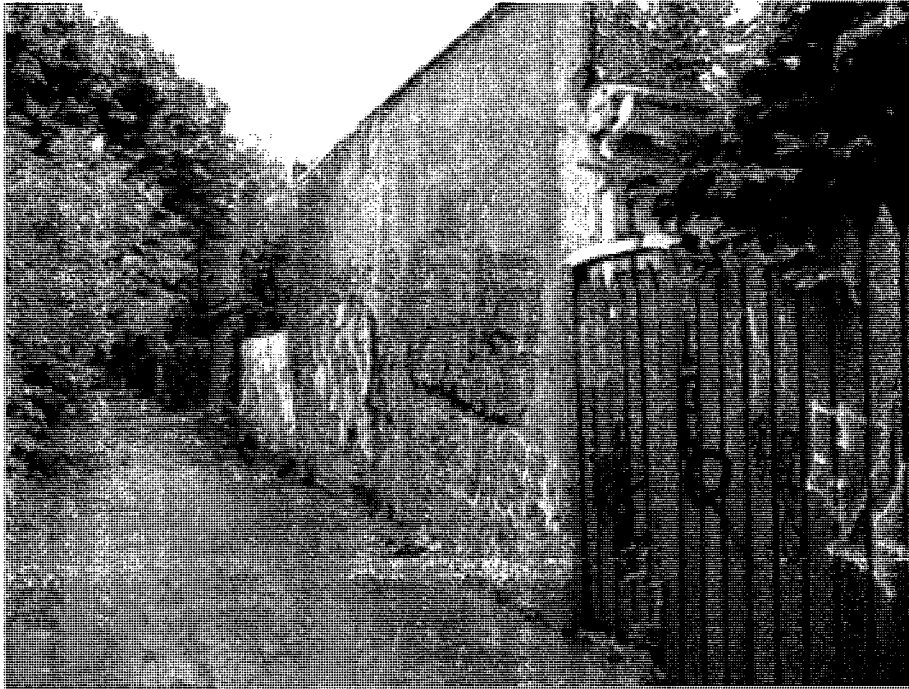


Figure 2. Example of throw-ups. Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author, 2007.



Figure 3. Example of a piece. Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author, 2007.



Figure 4. Example of LEE's work, c. 1981, available from:
http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_86/east1.gif



Figure 5. Example of LADY PINK's work, c. 1980, available from:
<http://www.pinksmith.com/Site%203/SUBWAYS%20+%20FREIGHTS.html>



Figure 6. Example of BLADE's work, c. 1975, available from:
<http://www.teako170.com/blade75.jpg>



Figure 7. Example of DAZE's work, 1979, available from:
<http://www.at149st.com/images/daze3.jpg>



Figure 8. Example of CRASH's work, 1983, available from:
http://z.about.com/d/arthistory/1/0/J/F/brookmuse_graffiti_02.jpg



Figure 9. Example of NOC 167's work, 1984, available from:
http://www.graffiti.org/fargo/noc_167_the_bronx_1984.jpg



Figure 10. Example of TRACY 168's work, 1974, available from:
http://nymag.com/guides/summer/graffiti060626_1_560.jpg



Figure 11. BANKSY, *Mona Lisa Rocket*, available from:
www.nohaycomolodeuno.blogspot.com



Figure 12. ROADSWORTH, *Bike Path*, available from:
<http://www.roadsworth.com/main/index.php?showimage=213&category=2>



Figure 13. VEXTA, *Welcome to Australia*, available from:
http://farm1.static.flickr.com/127/354646262_29c280b707_o.png

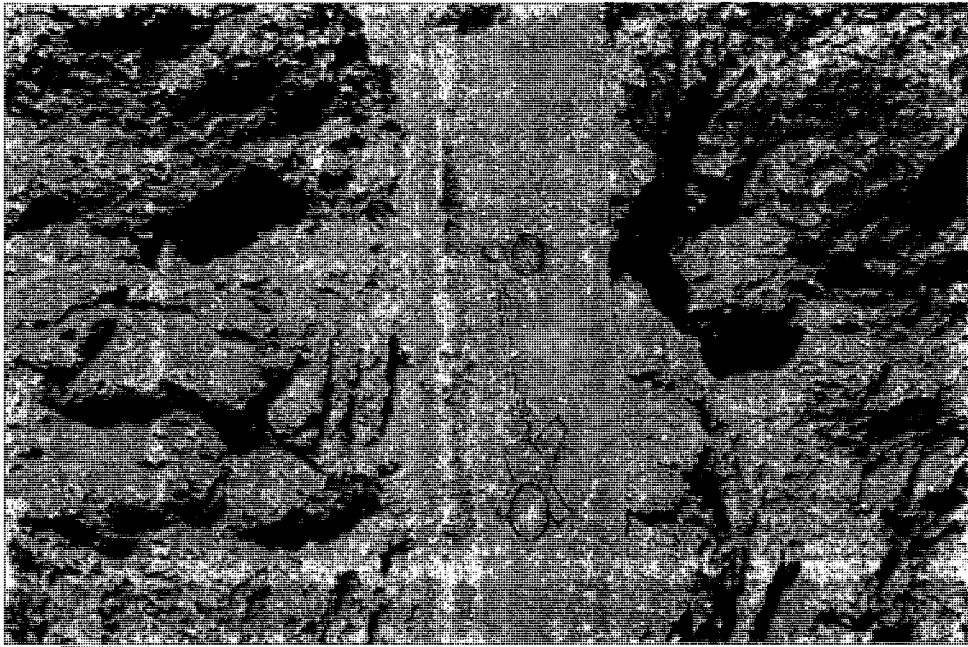


Figure 14. JACE, *Gouzou Hanging*, available from:
<http://images.imagehotel.net/ea2943595d.jpg>



Figure 15. PEZ. Barcelona, Spain. Photo taken by the author, 2008.



Figure 16. INVADER. London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.



Figure 17. SWOON. New York, USA. Photo taken by the author, 2008.



Figure 18. MISS VAN, available from: Christian Hundertmark, The Art of Rebellion 2: World of Urban Art Activism. Mainaschaff: Publikats Verlag, 2006, 91.



Figure 19. OS GÊMEOS, available from:
http://www.ekosystem.org/0_Images/Streets/barcelona/osgemeos_5.jpg



Figure 20. Example of piece with characters. *Meeting of Styles 2007*, Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author.

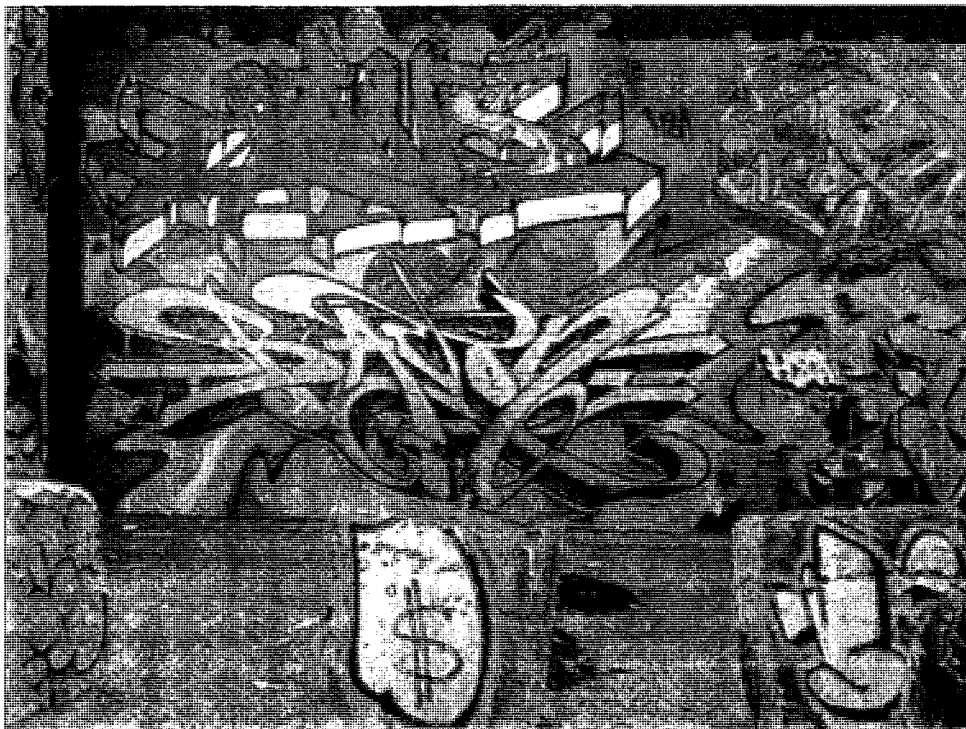


Figure 21. Example of pieces, *Meeting of Styles 2007*. Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author.

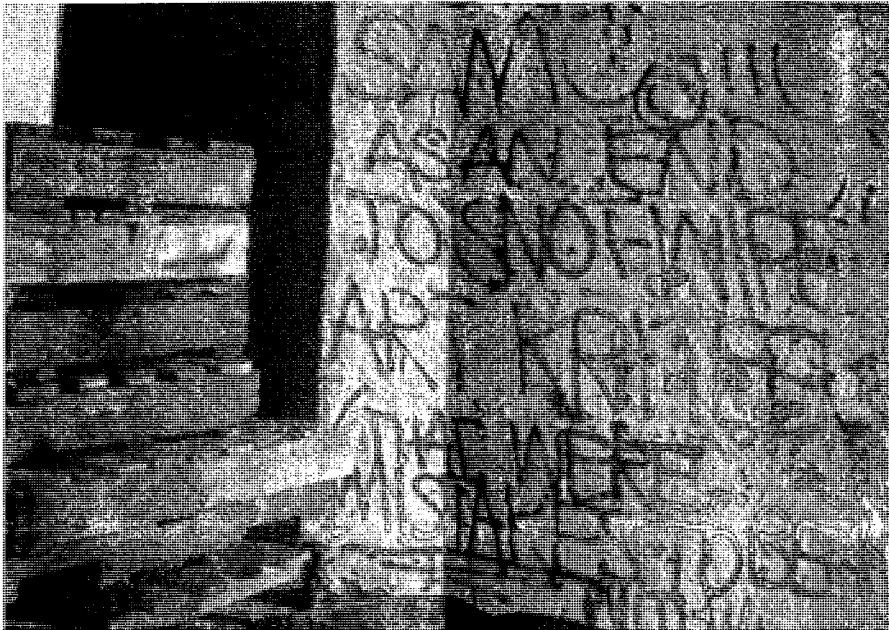


Figure 22. Jean-Michel Basquiat's SAMO graffiti, available from: Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street. Milano: Charta; New York: Deitch Projects, 2007, 134-5.

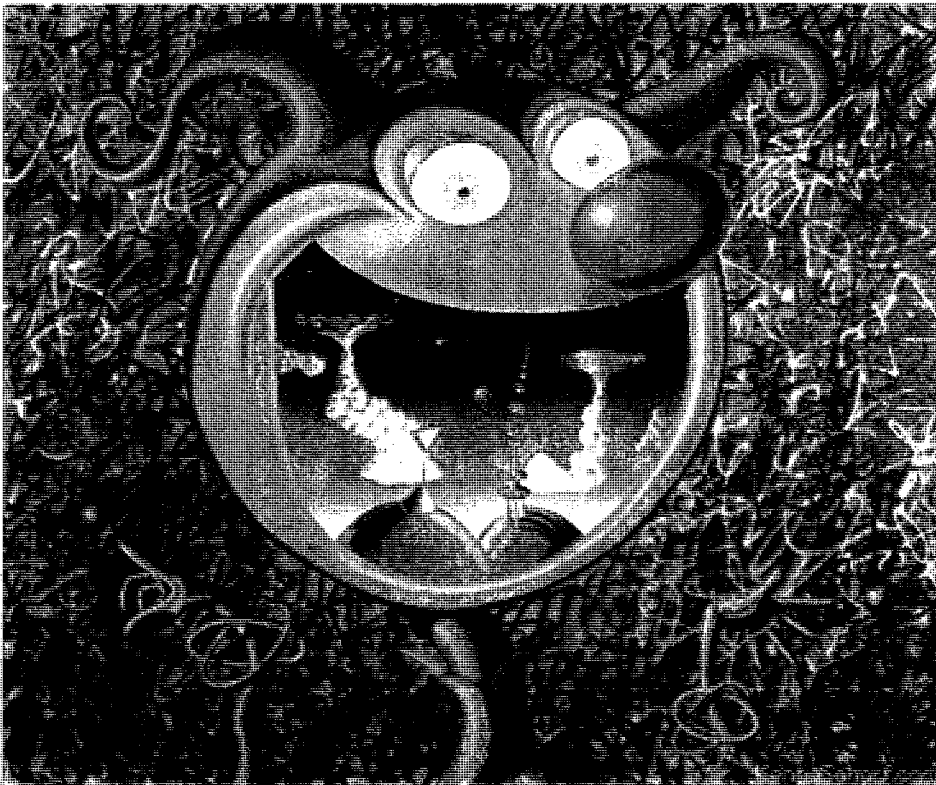


Figure 23. Kenny Scharf, *The Funs Inside*, 1983, available from: www.kennyscharf.com



Figure 24. Example of Keith Haring's subway drawing, available from: Keith Haring. New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1982, 88.

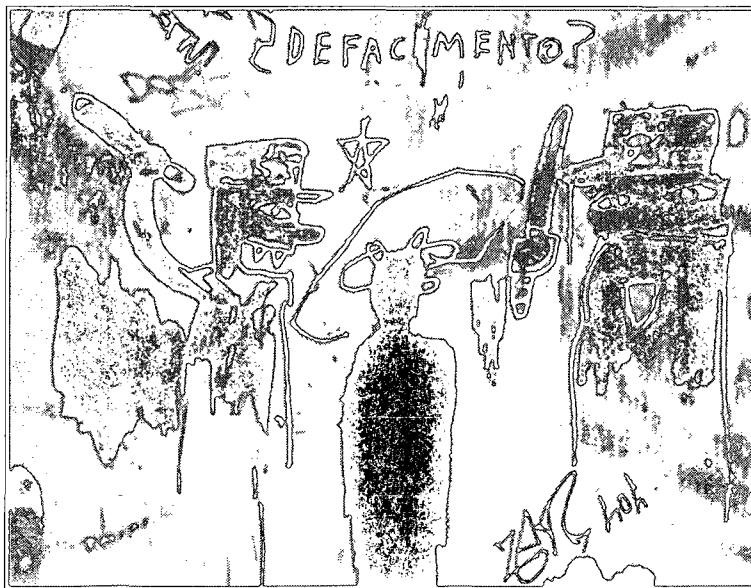


Figure 25. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Defacement)*, 1984, available from: http://www.octobergallery.com/paintmagazine/images/fa_basquiat1.jpg



Figure 26. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled*, 1981, available from: Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street. Milano: Charta; New York: Deitch Projects, 2007, 221.



Figure 27. Keith Haring, available from: Keith Haring. New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1982, 52.

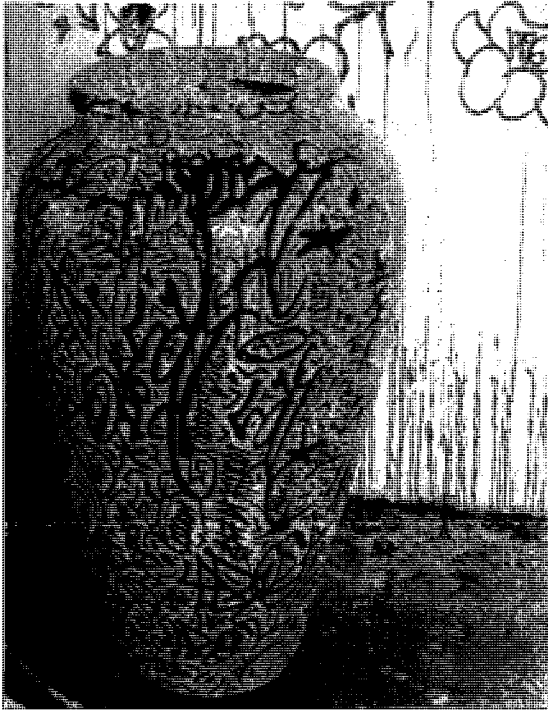


Figure 28. Keith Haring with LA II, available from: [Keith Haring](#). New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1982, 39.

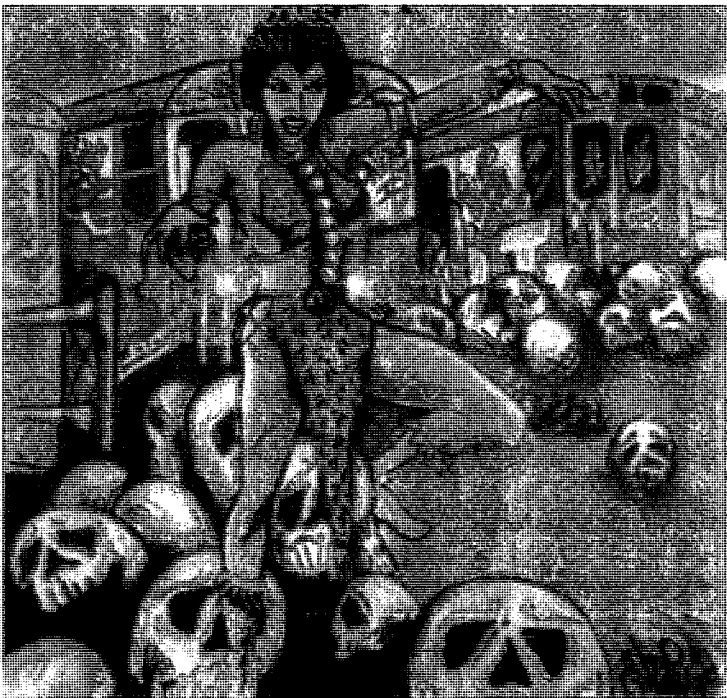


Figure 29. LADY PINK with Jenny Holzer, *The Breakdown*, 1983, available from: <http://www.pinksmith.com/Site%203/FINE%20ARTWORK.html>



Figure 30. MAD C, available from: Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald. Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents. New York: Abrams, 2006, 79.



Figure 31. YUBIA, available from: Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald. Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents. New York: Abrams, 2006, 133.

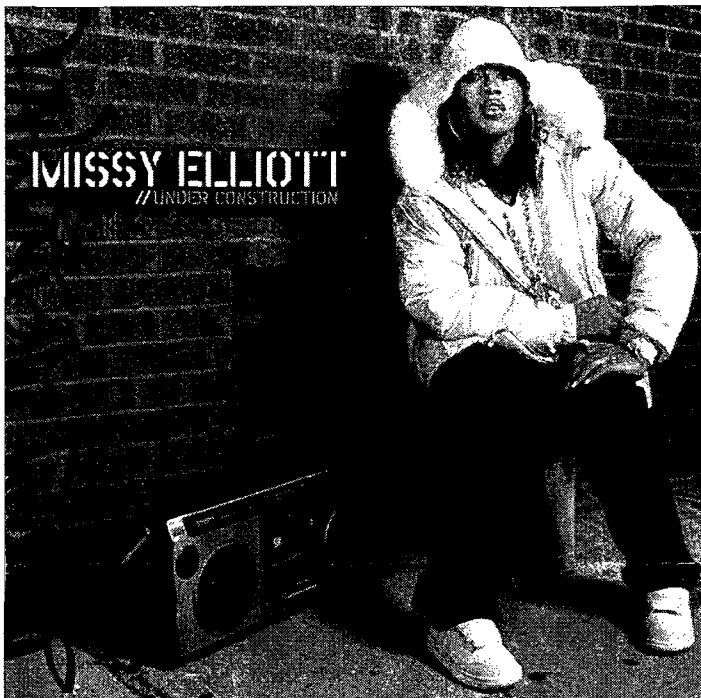


Figure 32. Missy Elliott's *Under Construction*, CD cover. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 33. Missy Elliott *Under Construction*, inside CD jacket. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 34. Contemporary example of Campbell's soup cans, *Cans Festival*, London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

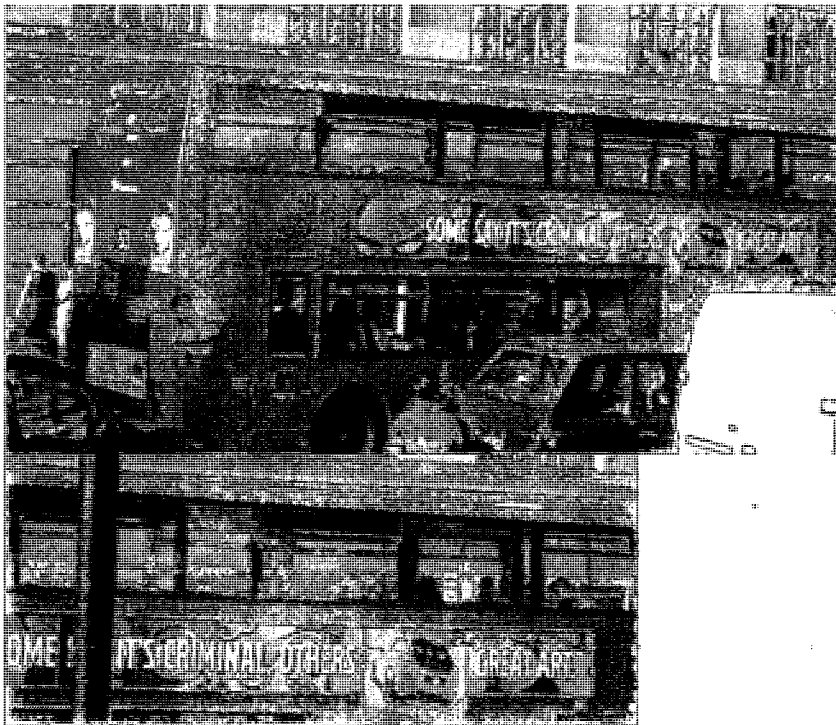


Figure 35. Volvo ad campaign, *Some Say It's Criminal, Others Great Art*. London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

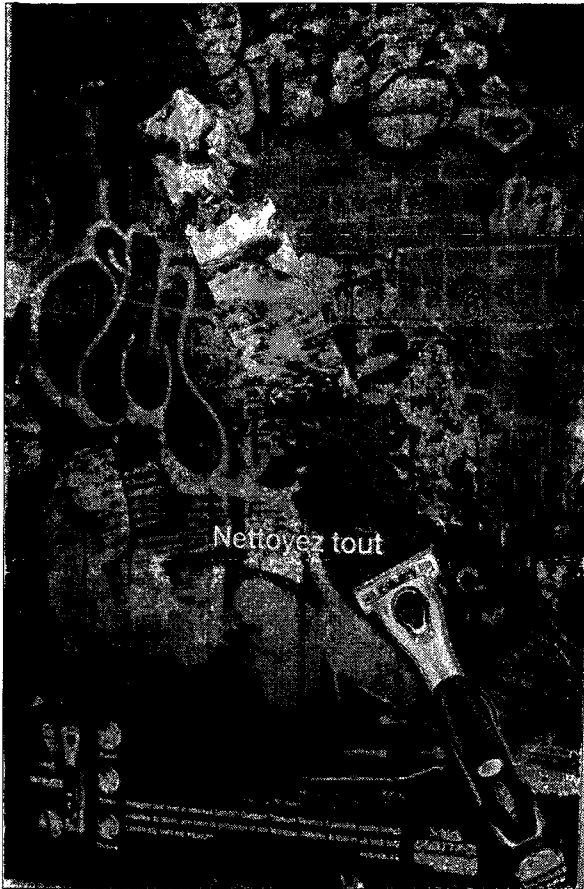


Figure 36. Schick Quattro Titanium Trimmer ad campaign. Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

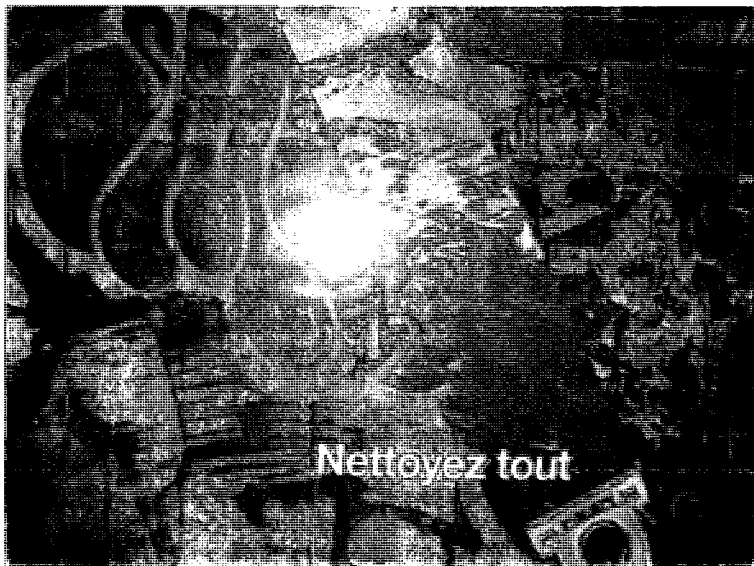


Figure 37. Close-up of Schick Quattro Titanium Trimmer ad campaign. Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author, 2008.



Figure 38. OTHER, available from: Nicholas Ganz, Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, 86.



Figure 39. TURF ONE, available from:
<http://www.woostercollective.com/images2/turf1.jpg>



Figure 40. OMEN, *Under Pressure* 2007, Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 41. CHAZ, available from: Steve Grody, *Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art*. New York: Abrams, 2006, 10.

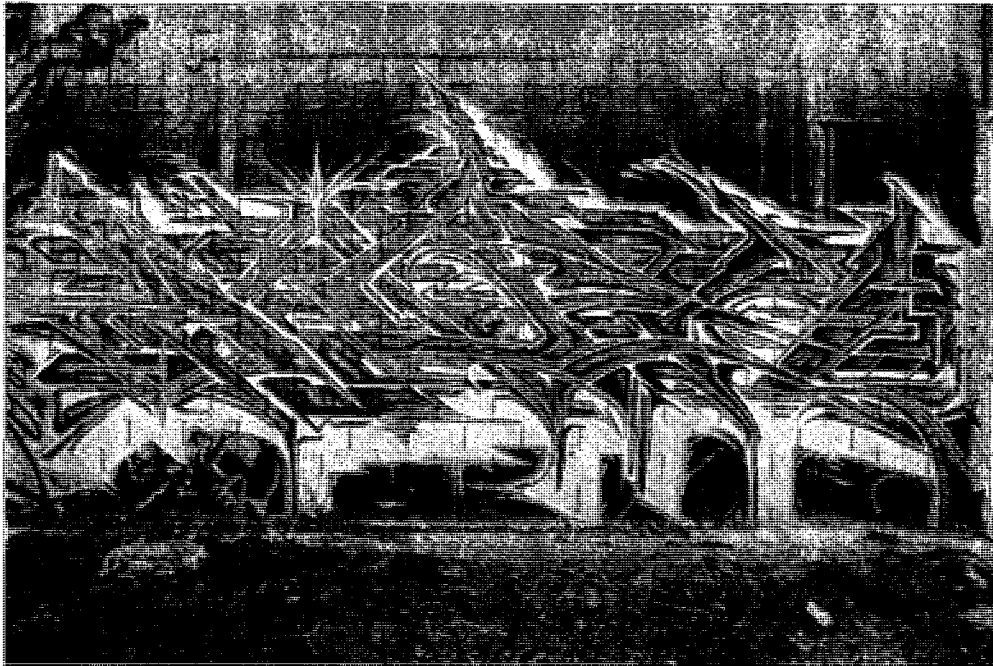


Figure 42. SABER, available from:
http://www.fresnobeehive.com/archives/upload/2007/07/Saber_af_191.jpg

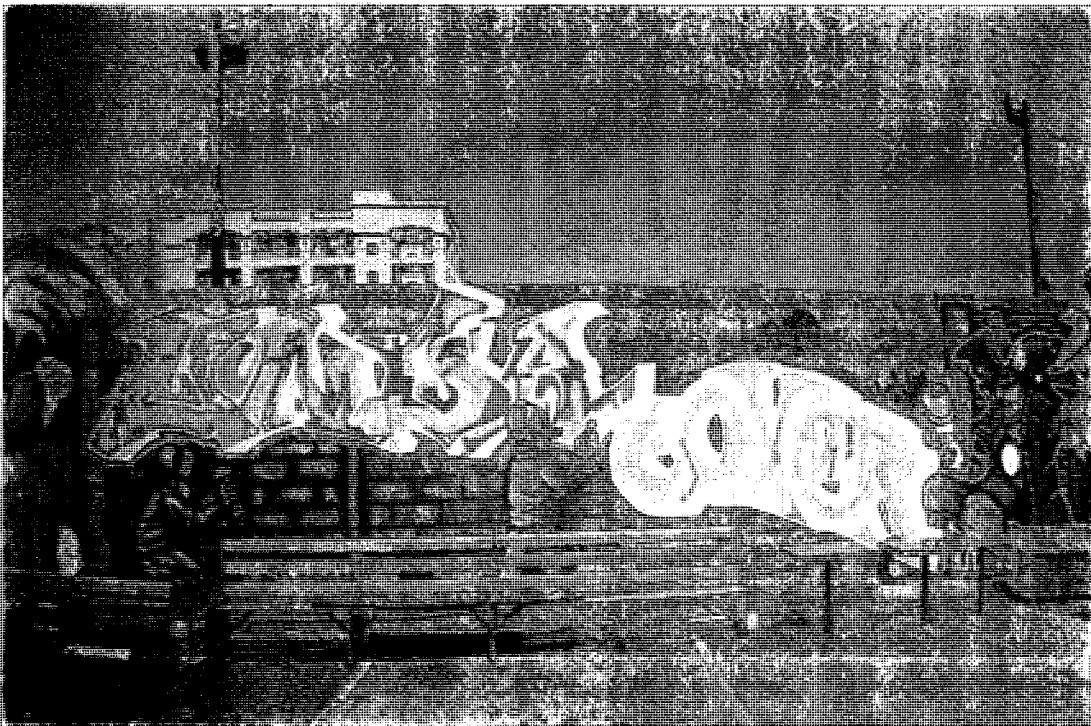


Figure 43. ASYLM, available from: Steve Grody, Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art. New York: Abrams, 2006, 139.



Figure 44. Freight train graffiti. Montreal, Canada. Photo taken by the author, 2007.



Figure 45. SWOON, available from: Nicholas Ganz, Swoon, and Nancy Macdonald. *Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents*. New York: Abrams, 2006, 207.

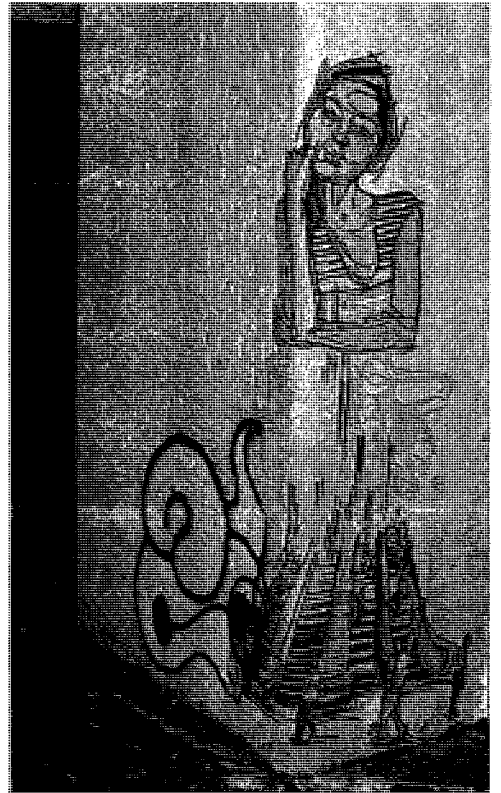
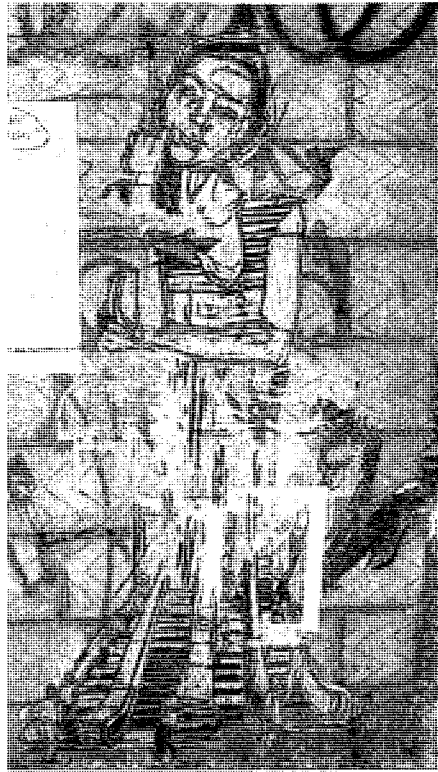
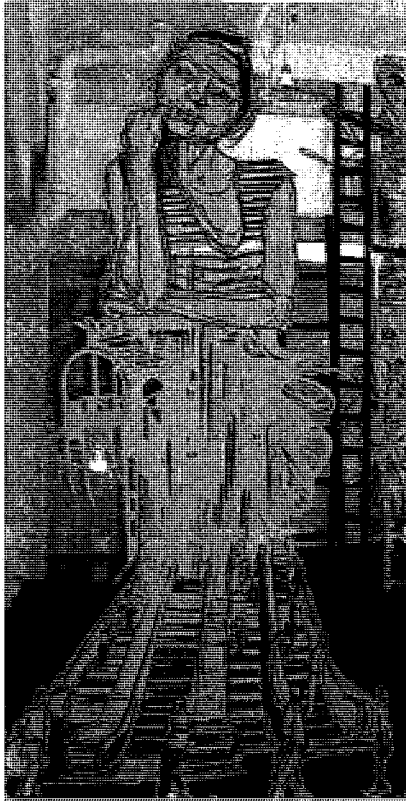


Figure 46. SWOON, photos taken by the author, 2005-7.

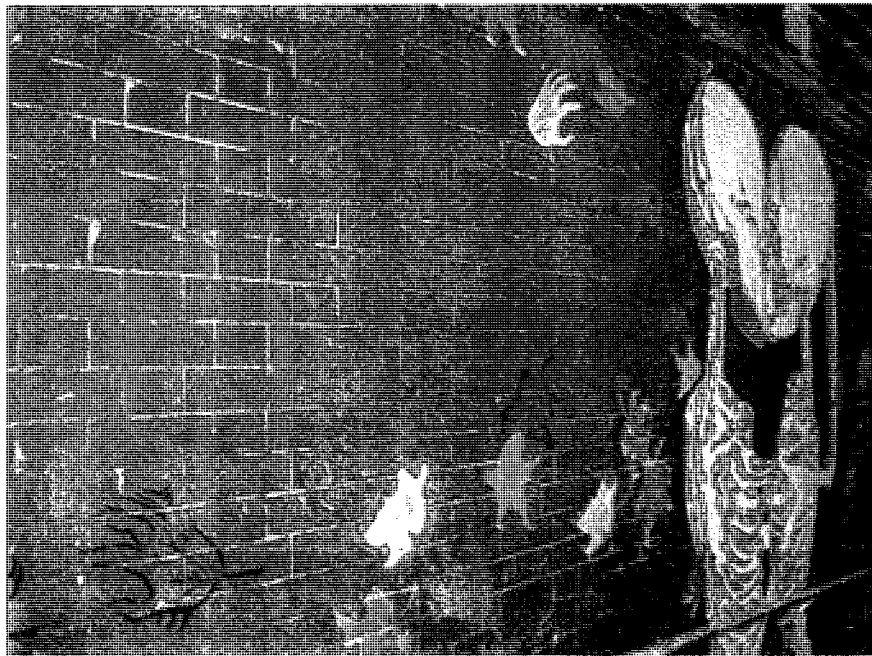


Figure 47. VEXTA, *Cans Festival*, London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

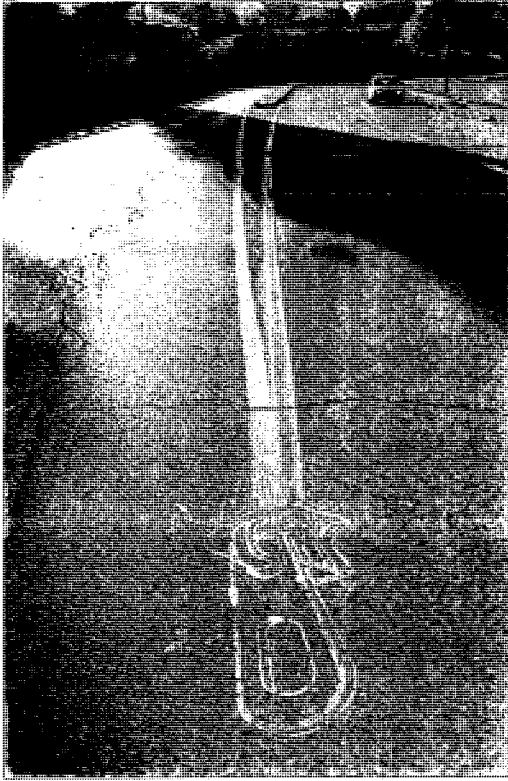


Figure 48. ROADSWORTH, *Zipper*, available from:
<http://www.roadsworth.com/main/index.php?showimage=211&category=2>

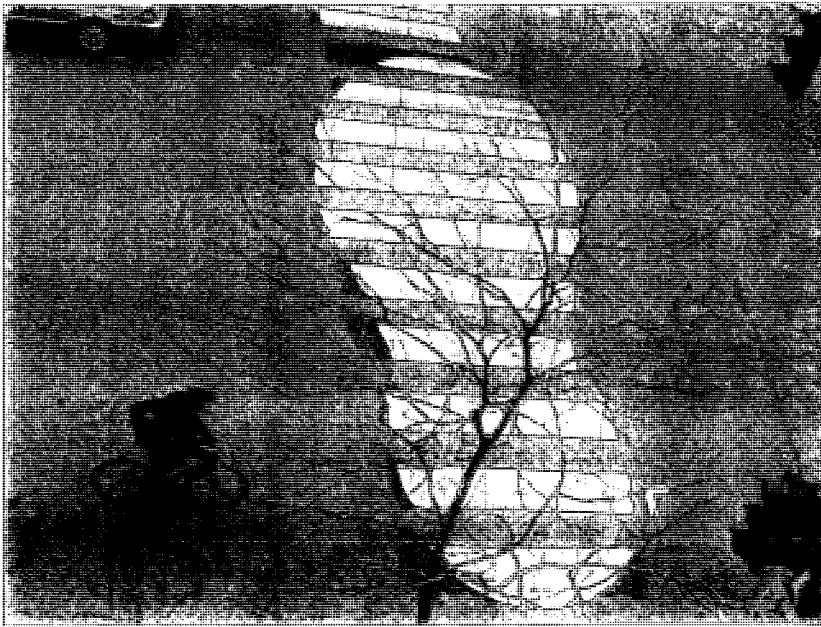


Figure 49. ROADSWORTH, *North American Footprint*, available from:
<http://www.roadsworth.com/main/index.php?showimage=163&category=2>

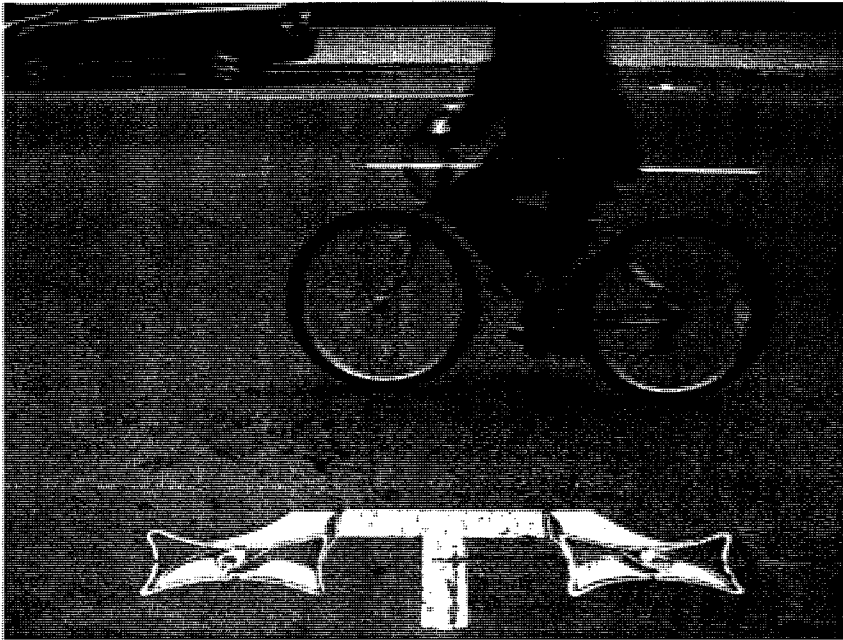


Figure 50. ROADSWORTH, *Attention All Drivers*, available from: <http://www.roadsworth.com/main/index.php?showimage=31&category=2>

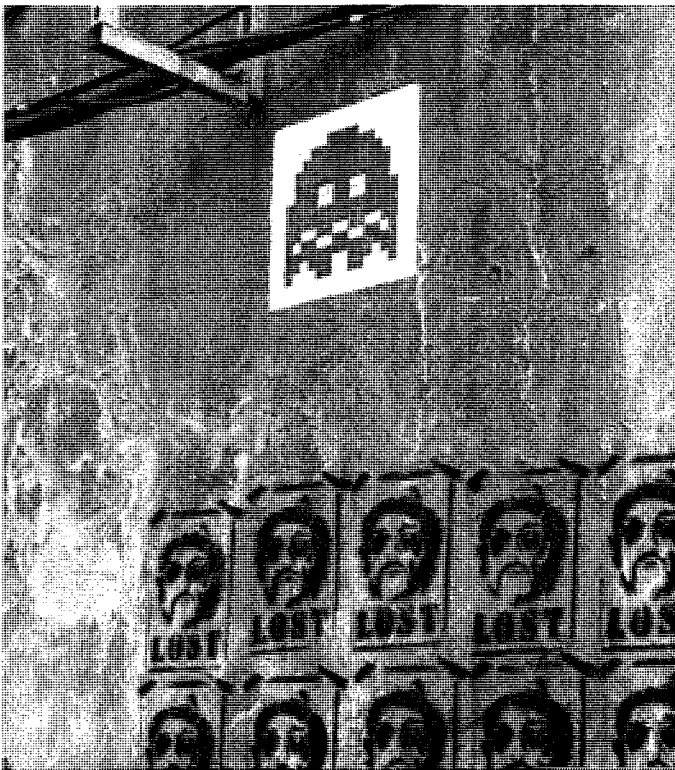


Figure 51. INVADER. London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

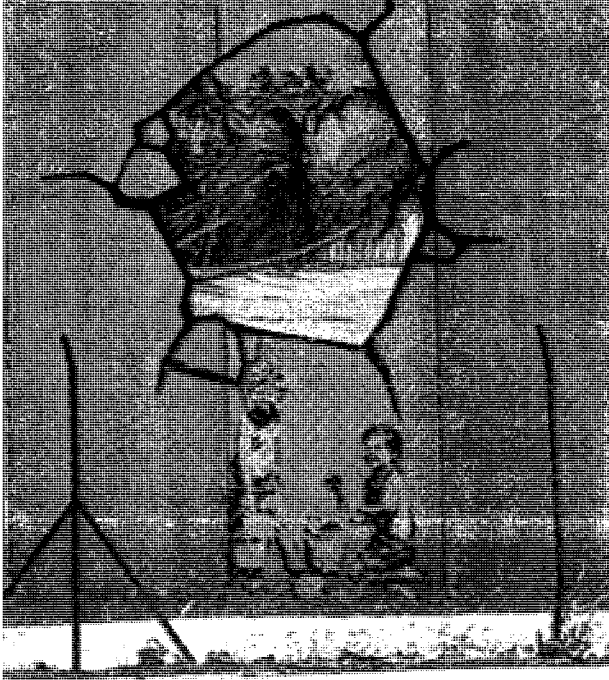


Figure 52. BANKSY, available from:
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/pictures/0,,1543331,00.html>



Figure 53. BANKSY, available from:
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/pictures/0,,1543331,00.html>

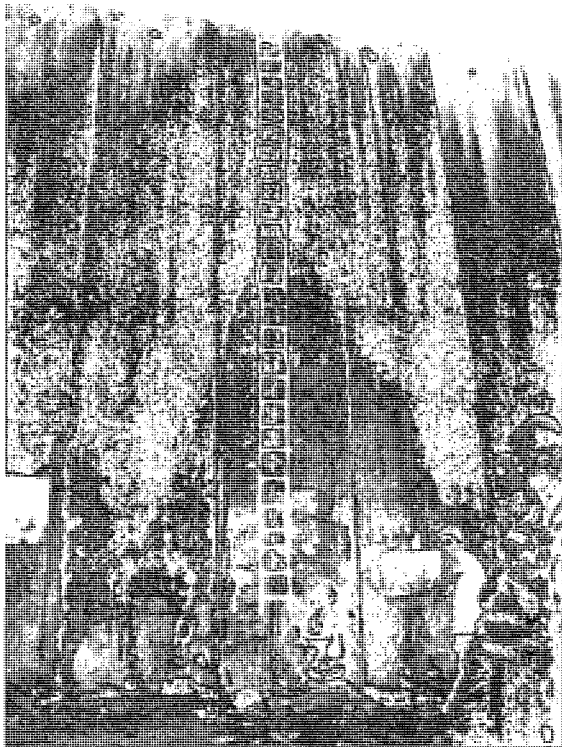


Figure 54. BANKSY, available from:
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/pictures/0,,1543331,00.html>

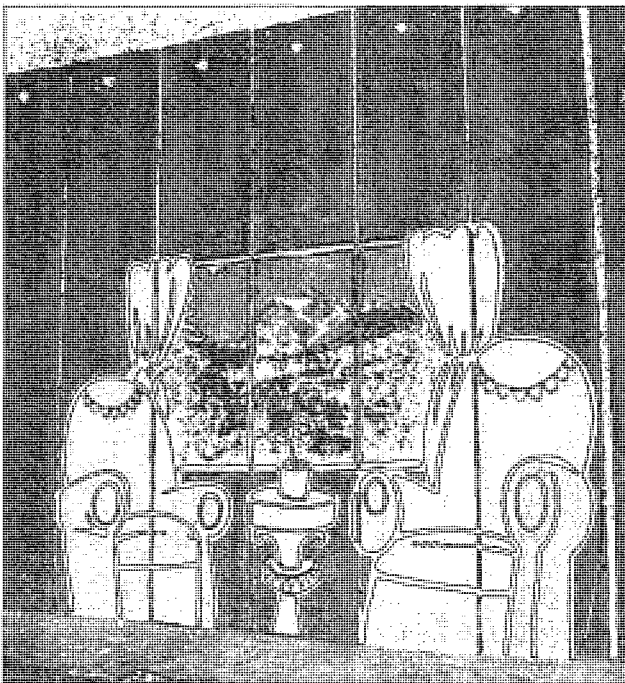


Figure 55. BANKSY, available from:
<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/pictures/0,,1543331,00.html>

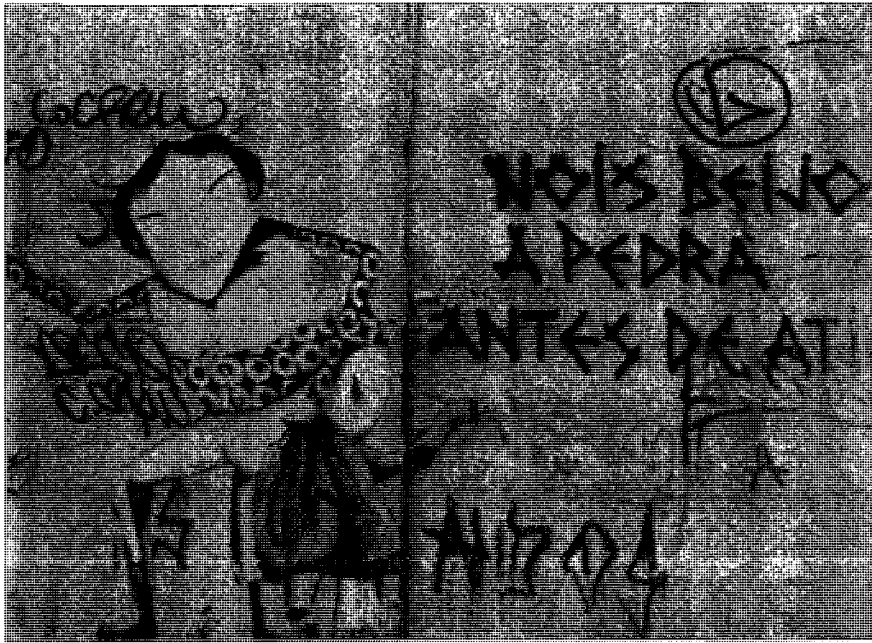


Figure 56. OS GÊMEOS, *We kiss the stone before we throw it*, available from: Tristan Manco, Lost Art and Caleb Neelon. Graffiti Brasil. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2005, 68.



Figure 57. OS GÊMEOS, available from: Tristan Manco, Lost Art and Caleb Neelon. Graffiti Brasil. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2005, 66.



Figure 58. MISS VAN, *Atame*, available from: <http://www.supertouchart.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/missvmagda8.jpg>

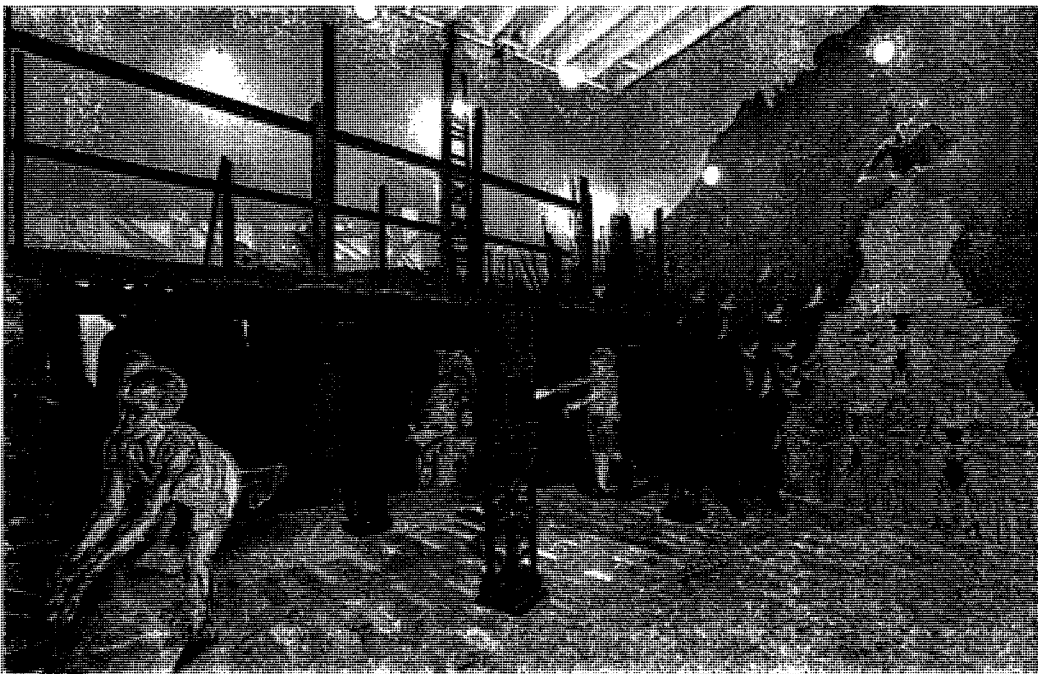


Figure 59. SWOON, Installation view, *SWOON*, Deitch Projects, July 7 - August 13, 2005.

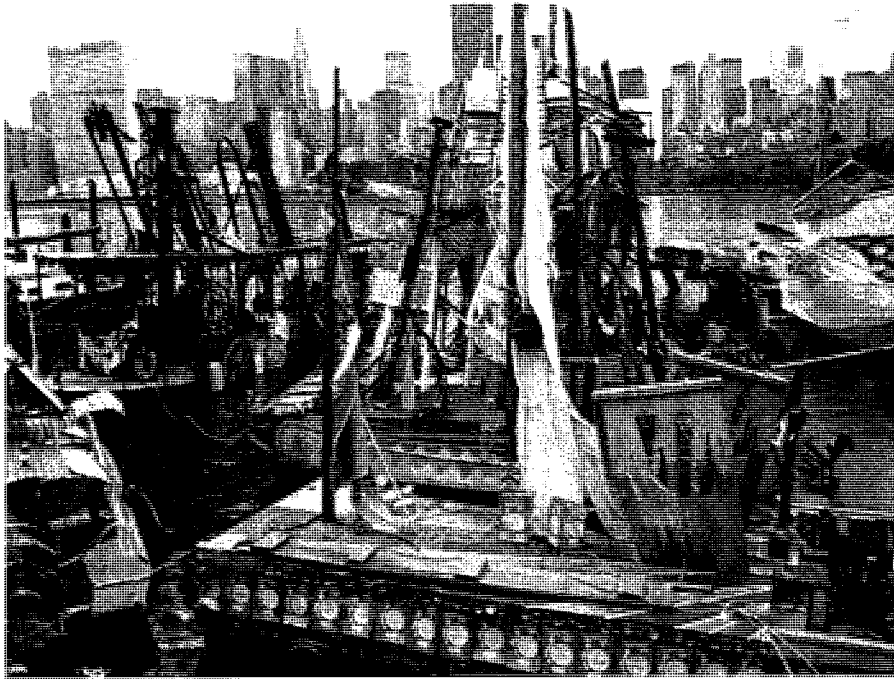


Figure 60. SWOON, view of boats from exhibition *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*, Deitch Studios, New York. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

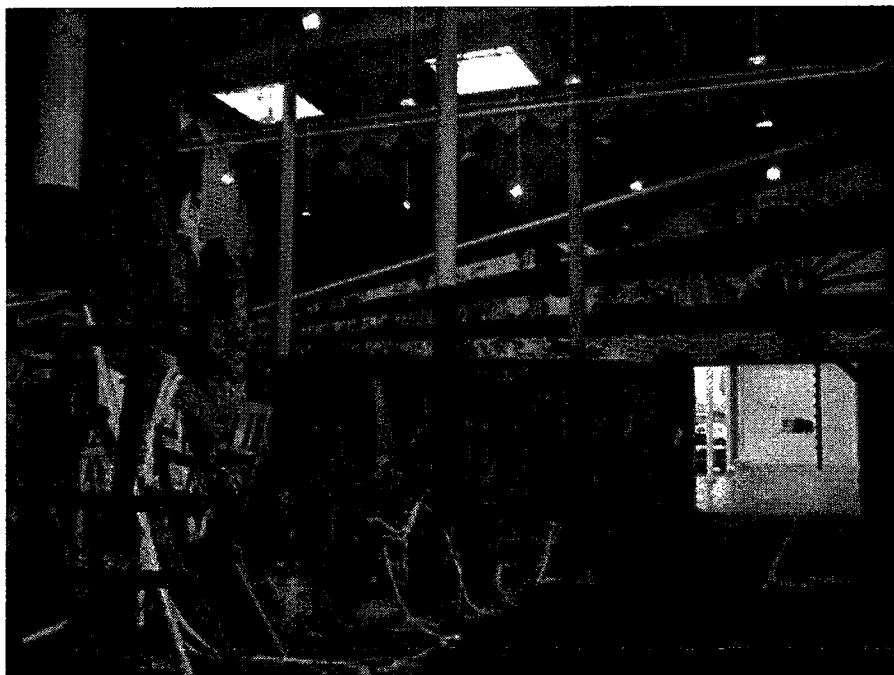


Figure 61. SWOON, Installation view, *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*, Deitch Studios, New York. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

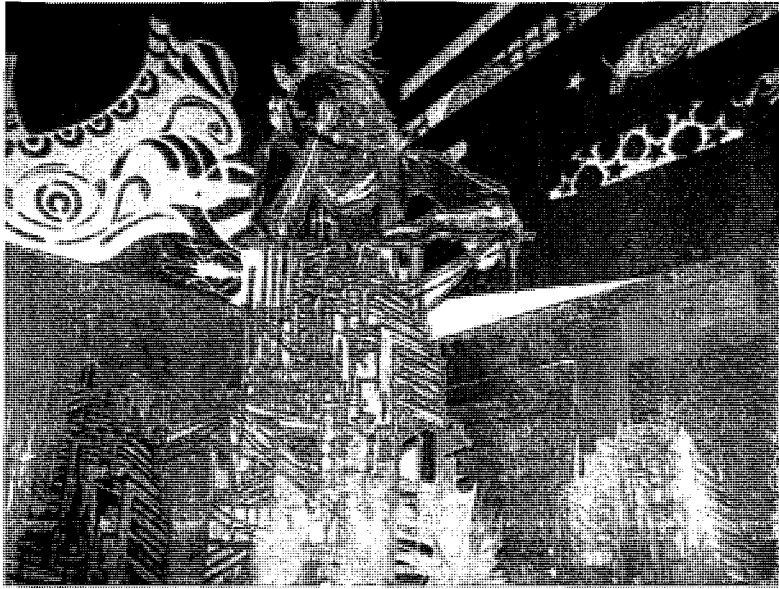


Figure 62. SWOON, from exhibition *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*, Deitch Studios, New York. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

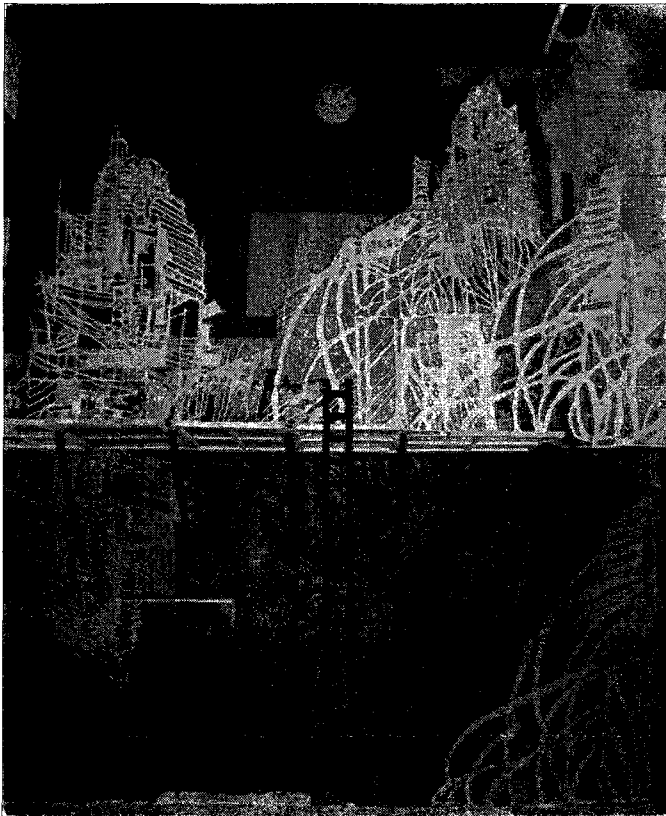


Figure 63. SWOON, from exhibition *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea*, Deitch Studios, New York City. Photo taken by the author, 2008.



Figure 64. BANKSY, *Cans Festival*, London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

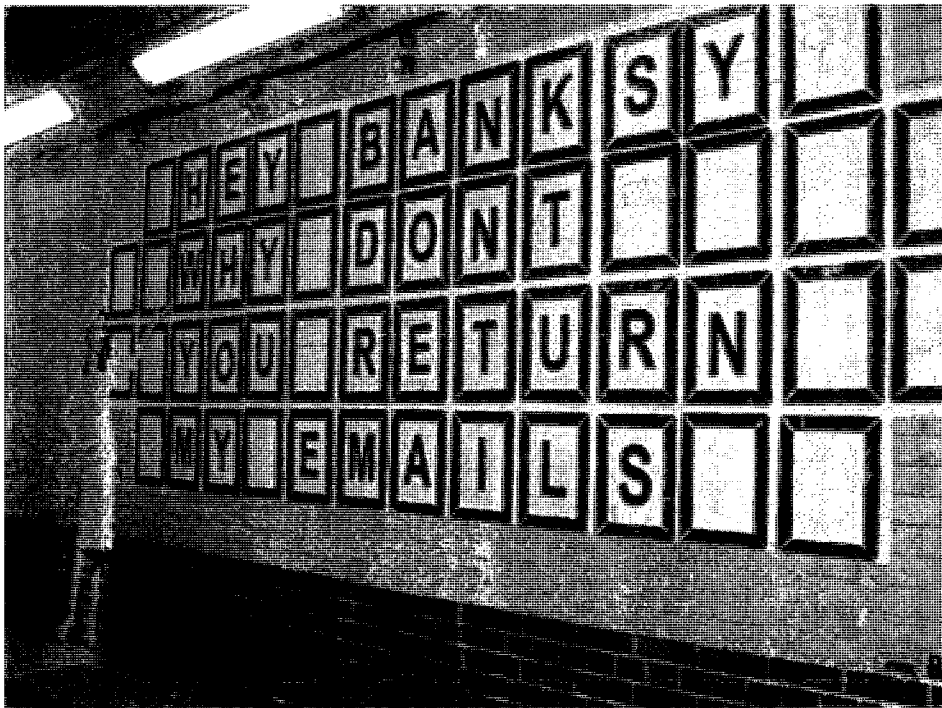


Figure 65. Reference to BANKSY, *Cans Festival*, London, England. Photo taken by the author, 2008.



Figure 66. Simons Fall 2008 catalogue. Photo taken by the author.

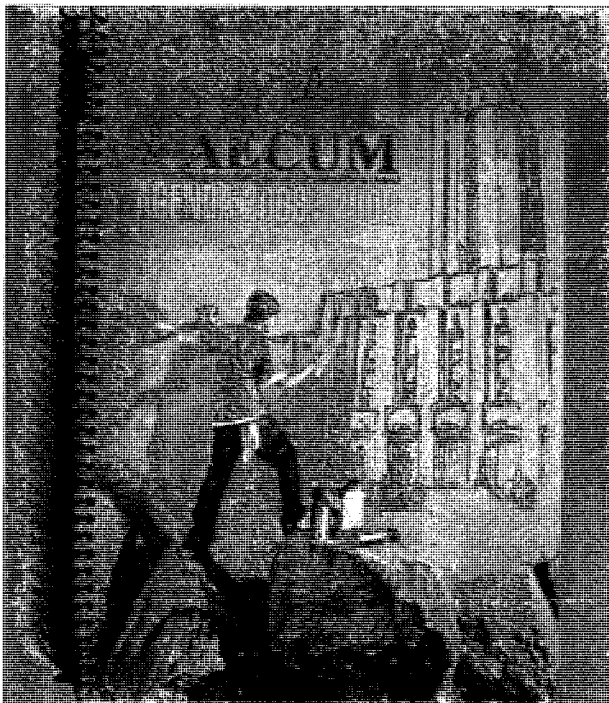


Figure 67. Université de Montréal's student agenda 2008-9. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 68. Example of PEZ's work, Barcelona, Spain. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

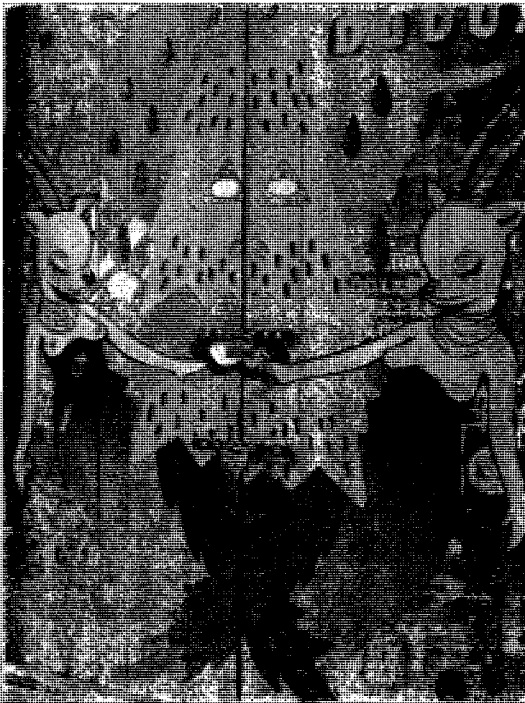


Figure 69. Example of MISS VAN's contemporary work, Barcelona, Spain. Photo taken by the author, 2008.

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Interviews

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- ROADSWORTH Interview with the author, October 12, 2007.
- SWOON Interview with the author, October 25, 2007.
- VEXTA Interview with the author, January 28, 2008.
- VEXTA Interview with the author, March 18, 2008