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**The Tools of Engagement:  
Tactics and Strategies employed for the creation of alternative places, spaces, and  
modes of citizenship within the Montreal Graffiti Subculture**

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**A Thesis  
In  
The Department  
Of  
Sociology**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of Sociology at**

**Concordia University**

**Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**August 2010**

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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-71056-2  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-71056-2

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## **Abstract**

**The Tools of Engagement:  
Tactics and Strategies employed for the creation of alternative places, spaces, and modes  
of citizenship within the Montreal Graffiti Subculture**

**Kris Murray**

This thesis argues there are alternatives to how people share spaces and places, challenge the status quo, subvert dominant representations, truths, rules, and regulations imposed by the socio-economic power holders in contemporary urban society. Some people seek alternative ways of identifying themselves and relating to the city that they live in through transgressive behaviour like graffiti writing. Graffiti writing is understood as a subversive literary practice that parts the dominant order of representations and ideological dogmatism of the celebration of property to create alternative spaces in the everyday where individuals can express unique opinions, thoughts, and worldviews outside of the monological dictate of official facts or truths. In creating these utopian spaces, graffiti writers have contributed greatly to the politics of free speech and expression. The first chapter focuses on everyday tactics employed by graffiti writers in the creation of utopian or alternative spaces. The second chapter looks at alternative places where graffiti is practiced and some of the strategic moves made to gain a greater foothold in the historical project of the city. The third chapter examines alternative modes of citizenship by looking at graffiti as an act of citizenship and as part of the practice of being an active citizen. Ultimately it is argued that there is as much beauty as there is destruction in graffiti and that there are positive solutions or possibilities for writers to become active members of their communities.

## **Acknowledgements**

Over the course of this research I have had a great deal of help and assistance from family, friends, co-workers, colleagues, and of course from those in and around the subculture who were kind enough to take the time to either talk to me, guide me about, and correct me when I needed it. I am very thankful to my supervisor, Greg Nielsen, whose encouragement, guidance and support from the initial to the final level enabled me to develop an understanding and appreciation for the theory and subject matter of my work. Additionally, I would like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Beverley Best and Dr. Anthony Synnott, for their constant support and reminder to stay true to my work. I have learnt a great deal about research and the graffiti subculture from my professors, colleagues, friends, and of course from the help of those who have collaborated in this project. I would especially like to thank the local writers and artists involved: Akira, Bez, Fluke, Castro, HeR, Hest, Isa, Kaseko, KidPQ, Roadsworth, Orion, Produkt, Giver, Monk-e, Omen, Seaz, Asek, Senk, Stack, Turf1, Zilon, Vesk, and Zeck. I am humbled by the courtesy, hospitality, kindness, and trust that they have extended to me. I would also like to thank the owners of Yves Laroche Gallery for allowing me to cover events and offering their space for interviews when needed. Both Jean-Yves Duthel of the borough of Ville-Marie and Luc Robillard of the borough of Lachine were equally gracious in taking the time out of their busy schedules to talk and provide references. Finally there were the other writers, friends, and acquaintances that I chatted with and shared stories along the way that helped round out and fine tune this work. This research would not have been possible without the help and guidance of these individuals. I hope that I have been able to convey their words, stories, and contributions with the respect they deserve.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	vii
Glossary.....	ix
Introduction.....	1

### Chapter 1: Utopian Spaces and Tactics of the Everyday

Introduction.....	20
Utopian Spaces and Tactics in the Everyday.....	22
Graffiti Writing as Creating Utopian Spaces.....	28
Graffiti as Tactic.....	32
Heroes, myths, and alternative spaces in the Montreal graffiti community.....	49
Conclusion.....	65

### Chapter 2: Utopian Places Micro Strategy in the Montreal Graffiti Subculture

Introduction.....	69
Strategy, Knowledge, Place, and Power.....	70
Micro-strategy in the Montreal graffiti subculture.....	74
Official and Unofficial graffiti places.....	77

#### Unofficial Graffiti Places

Red Path.....	81
Turcot Yards.....	85
CBR (“Cybertron By the River”).....	90
The TA Wall.....	93
The TA Factory.....	98

#### Official Graffiti Places

Aerosol Funk, Under Pressure, Then and Now.....	104
Under Pressure (UP).....	106
Meeting of Styles (MOS).....	111
Official graffiti places as carnival.....	113
Permission and Commission walls.....	117
Conclusion.....	121

### Chapter 3: Citizenship Politics and Political Citizenship in the Montreal Graffiti Subculture

Introduction.....	125
Thinking about active and political citizenship.....	127
Graffiti writers and citizenship.....	131
Transcending the everyday through graffiti.....	134

Citizenship politics in graffiti: graffiti writers as participative citizens.....	139
Graffiti writers as political citizens: writing as a political act of citizenship.....	150
Conclusion.....	156
Conclusion.....	160
References.....	174



## List of Figures

- Figure 1.1 Tag by Asek, Plateau 2008
- Figure 1.2 Tags by Bank, Scan, AtoZ, etc., Plateau 2008
- Figure 1.3 Bez sign, Ville-St. Pierre 2007
- Figure 1.4 Bez sign, Lionel-Groulx area 2007
- Figure 1.5 Stare sign, Mont-Royal Street 2006
- Figure 1.6 Stare sign St. Laurent Street, July 2005
- Figure 1.7 Footprint, Parc Ave. Sept 2004 (Photo by Roadsworth)
- Figure 1.8 Pulse, Saint-Laurent Blvd. & Bernard Ave. July 2004 (Photo by Roadsworth)
- Figure 1.9 On Switch, Roadsworth Nov. 2004
- Figure 1.10 Monk-e, Turcot Yards Oct. 2008
- Figure 1.11 Monk-e, Turcot Yards Oct. 2008
- Figure 1.12 Spoke, alley off of Bishop Street 2007
- Figure 1.13 Sake, Stinky's Jan. 2006
- Figure 2.1 Redpath inner courtyard area (retrieved from <http://www.uer.ca/locations/viewgal.asp?picid=163618>)
- Figure 2.2 Turcot Yards, beneath the Expressway 2008
- Figure 2.3 Decay, Turcot Yards 2008
- Figure 2.4 Monk-e, Turcot Yards Jan. 2006
- Figure 2.5 Alveno blockbuster, Turcot train tunnel Nov. 2007
- Figure 2.6 Outside wall of Turcot train tunnel, Jan. 2006
- Figure 2.7 Inside walls of Turcot train tunnel, April 2009
- Figure 2.8 CBR, Jan. 2006
- Figure 2.9 CBR, Feb. 2010

Figure 2.10 CBR, (opposite end) 2008

Figure 2.11 Lower TA Wall, Nov. 2008

Figure 2.12 Upper TA Wall, May 2008

Figure 2.13 TA Wall, Nov. 2007: pieces by Zeus, Scan, and an old KOPS Crew blockbuster

Figure 2.14 TA Wall buffed, Nov. 2009

Figure 2.15 TA Factory, Nov. 2005

Figure 2.16 TA Factory 2nd floor, Nov. 2007

Figure 2.17 Turf-1 character TA Factory, 2006

Figure 2.18 Turf-1 character TA Factory, 2006

Figure 2.19 Produkt TA Factory, April 2006

Figure 2.20 Under Pressure event, Aug. 2007

Figure 2.21 Finished wall Under Pressure, 2007

Figure 2.22 Finished wall Under Pressure, 2008

Figure 2.23 Finished wall Meeting of Styles, 2006

Figure 2.24 Finished wall Meeting of Styles, 2007

Figure 2.25 Finished wall Meeting of Styles, 2008

Figure 2.26 Joe BG commemorative Piece, TA Wall Nov 2007

Figure 2.27 RIP Zuel Piece, TA Factory April 2006

Figure 2.28 Permission wall by TrifeLife crew, Plateau, 2005

Figure 3.1 Do It Jam, Lachine 2005

Figure 3.2 Ramp in Parc Lasalle skate park (Lachine), July 2005

## Glossary

- Tag:** The most basic and visible form of contemporary signature graffiti, the tag is a stylistic signature of the graffiti writer's name done in marker, spray paint, shoe polish, ink, or other medium.
- Throw-up:** "*Throwie*"; In terms of complexity and style, a throw-up generally falls between a tag and a piece. This type is no less cryptic than a tag but is much faster to execute than a piece while still retaining a high level of difficulty and area of coverage. Throw-ups consist of simple bubble style letters of a writer's name. Most writers have a tag and a throw-up they regularly get up with prior to and even concurrent with any piecing they may also do.
- Hollow:** An unfilled throw up, devoid of any fill-in color, appearing as a hollow outline.
- Straight letter:** "*Straights*", "*simples*"; A direct block letter, more readable and simpler style of graffiti. Straight letters can be read by anyone and usually contain only 2 colors. Straight letters are typically the type of graffiti that a writer practices prior to graduating to more complex and stylistic pieces.
- Piece:** '*to piece*' is also another verb that can be used to describe the act of writing graffiti. A piece is a large and labor-intensive graffiti painting that can incorporate a number of different effects including 3D lettering, arrows, clouds, bubbles, many colors and color transitions, characters, as well as additional and longer written messages. A shorthand term for masterpiece, a piece is considered by most writers to be the fullest and most beautiful work of graffiti that can be accomplished. The more stylish and 'wild' the lettering done the more respect a writer will receive from others in the community.
- Production:** A large multi-writer piece, usually, but not always incorporating a specific theme or topic, can involve other crew members or members from other crews or individuals. Seen normally at larger events namely because of the amount of equipment necessary to accomplish such an undertaking. Productions can also be smaller scale (2-3 writers) but no less labour intensive than an individual piece or larger production. Larger scale productions can be as large as a city block and several stories high involving the participation of a dozen or more individuals.

- Blockbuster:** Any large, block lettered graffiti done using paint rollers and canned paint. Typically the letters are on the side of a building or structure.
- Lean over:** Any type of graffiti done by leaning over the rooftop ledge of a building and applying a medium at the lip or wall space near the rooftop. These can be done using any medium, however, typically they are done using spray paint or by a paint roller.
- Stencil:** A template used to draw or paint identical lettering, characters, numbers, shapes, or patterns when used.
- Bomb:** the act of doing graffiti; “*to bomb*” or to go out “*bombing*” is to go and do graffiti. Typically associated with doing tags or throw-ups on the street level or in general, an area that has been “bombed” has been covered and marked with graffiti, most likely heavily with tags and/or throw-ups.
- Crew:** A group of writers or graffiti artists who form a group and collaborate to do graffiti. Most are friends or have friends in the crew they are a part of. Some crews are members of gangs or are associated with gangs but most crews are unaffiliated with gangs.
- Benching:** The act of sitting on a subway bench in order to observe passing graffiti. Often to find influences. The time spent photographing or watching graffiti on trains, more specifically passenger and freight trains. It can also mean to observe or acquire images of graffiti from any place.
- King:** The title given to high profile and prolific writers by others in the graffiti writing community as a sign of respect and status. ‘*King*’ is interchangeable with the French term ‘*Chef*’ locally in Montreal, Quebec.
- Toy:** The derogatory title given to younger writers or those who are judged as having no style by others in the graffiti community as a sign of disrespect and lack of status. Also a verb used as an insult to denote a lack of style and status. Used by writers as a popular cross out.
- Cross out:** The act of crossing out another graffiti writer by running a straight, squiggly line or an X through their tag, throw-up or piece. A cross out can also be done by disrespecting another writers graffiti with something of lower calibre such as a tag or throw up over a piece. To purposefully target a writer or a crew in a cross out is to start a ‘beef’ or instigate a dispute.

**Burner:** A considerably well done piece that has impressive style and form. Typically used as an adjective to indicate that a piece is 'hot' a piece can be a burner and be said to '*burn*' a particular spot ("That piece burns!") or be used to describe the action of heavily bombing an area ("We burned that spot!"). What constitutes a burner though depends largely on local definitions of what is 'good' graffiti so burners tend to vary

**Wildstyle:** A very intricate and complicated piece of graffiti using multiple techniques of style and letters (curves, arrows, bubbles, or other stylistic devices) that tend to overlap or are interwoven. Most are illegible to those unfamiliar with graffiti because of the complexity of the lettering and style. Developing this style of graffiti is considered to be one of the most difficult and greatest artistic challenges that a writer can accomplish.

“When people talk of the freedom of writing, speaking or thinking I cannot choose but laugh. No such thing ever existed. No such thing now exists; but I hope it will exist. But it must be hundreds of years after you and I shall write and speak no more.” –John Adams

“As a general rule, the freedom of any people can be judged by the volume of their laughter.”

–anonymous

## **Introduction**

“Jesus, you scared the shit out of me man!” I stood on the precipice of the entrance to the TA Factory looking back at a writer I had just stumbled upon while pushing through the patchwork of ply wood that was supposed to be a door. “Me too!” I replied masking my own waning fright. We exchanged hellos and why each of us was there: mine for photos and his being more obvious as he had a can of spray paint in his hand and was finishing a throw up just the right of the entrance along the stairs. He told me his name was GONER. I replied that I knew of his writing having seen his stuff up for some time now and fed him the typical blurb about my research asking if he would be interested in talking some time. Then came the usual question, “Are you a cop? ‘Cause if you are its entrapment...” Ah, one of the many joys of this type of fieldwork is constantly being asked if you’re a Nark or a cop or being mistaken for one. And not the first time for me either. The quick reply was “No, definitely not.” He seemed to trust me but still gave me a crooked stare for a couple of seconds. After chatting for a few minutes about graffiti his apprehension seemingly gave way. He passed me his e-mail address and told me to contact him and he would be glad to chat sometime in the future. After shaking hands he left along the ground floor tagging on his way out as I ventured inside to take some photos.

I first started looking at graffiti through a sociological lens in late 2003 when I needed to choose a topic of interest for my undergraduate field research course. I did not know much of anything about what graffiti was besides spray painted signatures done by individuals who lived in and around the city, most probably young kids who were rebellious, out to cause trouble, and generally claim areas for themselves and whatever gangs they were a part of. At the time I had no idea that the modern roots of the subculture had such a rich history reaching as far back as the 1960’s, from Philadelphia and New York, and having been diffused into Canadian major cities as early as the 1980’s. In Montreal signature graffiti and graffiti art began sometime in the early 1980’s, although at this time there were few individuals who did such activities. It was not until the mid 1990’s, around 1994 –named the ‘second wave’ of graffiti by many old-school writers in the subculture –that graffiti began to escalate to higher levels and many more individuals began to do graffiti in the city center and surrounding areas. As I only came into studying the subculture in 2003, nearly ten years later, and was an outsider with no knowledge of who did graffiti or why it was done, what it meant to those who did it and

the complex web of relationships between them, I had much to learn and understand before I could properly begin researching.

Taking pictures with my digital camera around where I lived at the time near the old port of Montreal in 'Griffin Town' at the bottom of Peel Street near the water, I went to the abandoned brewery factories, industrial areas and walked the streets snapping photos of every bit of graffiti I laid my eyes on. I began going out at night after finishing work (I am also employed full time as a manager of customer service and accounts receivable for an advertising firm) or classes taking the alleyways and off streets home again taking photos all along the way. I searched the internet and local cultural papers like The Mirror for upcoming Hip Hop events that might have graffiti going on as well and going to them in hopes of landing an interview with a writer or learning something new about what was going on in the subculture.

Making frequent trips to specific places where graffiti is practiced on a regular basis is one of the main components of my research for this thesis, which is at its heart an ethnographic analysis and investigation of the Montreal graffiti subculture. This research revolves around three central themes: where and how writers do graffiti, how they create alternative places and spaces in society that preserve subcultural and individual values and truths, and how both the practice of graffiti and the act of graffiti have different yet equally important implications for how these individuals identify with contemporary society. During the three years over which my research was conducted I spent a great deal of time walking these areas, streets in general, and other venues or shows involving graffiti. My walkabouts easily numbered in the dozens and my pictures in the thousands



all meticulously labelled by graffiti type, location, date and any other information I deemed relevant. These photographs have become more than just visual examples for my thesis, they are a way for me to map graffiti in Montreal, to observe it over time, and document alternative spaces and places created by the local graffiti subculture. Abandoned buildings, under highways, bridges, overpasses, and areas along train tracks in Montreal have provided a great deal of photographic data and have assisted my learning of the cryptic visual language of graffiti writing over the three years my research was conducted. These are what I have called unofficial graffiti places: locales that have been claimed by graffiti writers as semi-permanent locations where they can spend extended periods of time making more elaborate works without concern for being caught by local authorities. For the most part these places are not heavily policed; the local government turns a blind eye to places that are not as visible as those on main streets or in the central business and commercial areas of the city.

Montreal is a very active city in terms of graffiti and street art. Wherever you go you can see a tag, throw up, piece, stencil, or mural that has been done by a graffiti writer or street artist. There are a number of graffiti places, unofficial like those described above and official places that have been sanctioned by local governments such as the locations for annual hip hop events like Under Pressure and Meeting of Styles. There are also a number of permission, commission, and legal wall areas that have been negotiated between writers, businesses, and local governments where murals and advertisements carrying a graffiti aesthetic have been painted.

Then there are the streets. I have spent an equal amount of time walking the corridors of Montreal: it's streets, alleyways, rooftops, parking lots, and hidden areas following writers where they have tread and painted, where they have tagged and pieced in an attempt to put myself in their shoes to see the city how they might see it. Graffiti writers are notoriously untrusting of those outside of the subculture and very secretive about what they do namely because it is illegal. If caught by authorities they can be fined or arrested depending on the circumstances and where they are apprehended. For the most part they conceal their graffiti identities and confide only in close friends and fellow crew members or those who they deem trustworthy after careful consideration. They move through the city streets mainly at night under the cover of darkness, manoeuvring around the types of restrictions and obstacles that keep most people in public areas. These movements are tactical, almost military in form, as crews work together planning 'missions' to 'bomb' and 'destroy' locations in the city. Even those who work alone do so clandestinely with the utmost skill and technique. If possible they remain invisible leaving only the evidence of their tags, throw ups and pieces to identify them to those who see the graffiti they do. Not many are public about their graffiti identities. Those who are known in the public eye are mostly respected writers who have established themselves not only as 'Kings' of Montreal graffiti but also as successful artists who have been able to turn their stylistic talents with aerosol cans into part or full time employment or semi-professional art careers. These writers might still engage in street activities from time to time; however, the work that they do under legitimate terms is more than enough to keep them busy. Although they still find the time to visit popular graffiti locales to piece with fellow writers and crew members when not with their families or busy

completing commissioned work. As much as my walkabouts and constant presence in the field has assisted in my learning process in this research, the knowledge imparted upon me by my informants has been even more helpful over the last few years and still is as I continue my work in the subculture in the present.

My research question asks: what is the relationship between practices and acts within the graffiti subculture in the Montreal area? Specifically, how are acts of graffiti and graffiti in practice employed by graffiti writers in the creation of alternative places, spaces, and modes of citizenship? What do these spaces, places and modes of citizenship mean to the graffiti writers who help to create them? As a practice graffiti is understood as a subversive activity that creates alternative places and spaces in the city that distort and disrupt the spatial and temporal controls enforced by the socio-economic apparatus of the dominant order. As an act graffiti is understood as a rupture of the practices of the everyday: graffiti writers seek to fulfil their desires by acting outside of the norm, they make a political statement in the graffiti that they produce by challenging some of the fundamental and ideological everyday beliefs surrounding the importance of property. Using an ethnographic approach this research explores the Montreal graffiti subculture through extensive fieldwork and in-depth interviews with local writers and stakeholders to answer these questions.

The dominant or imposed socio-economic order (“the imposed system” or “the actual order of the everyday”) of the everyday is to be understood here as the culture of economic corporatism where governments are influenced by the decisions of corporate interests, where the celebration of property and capital are ritualized and where the

corporation has more rights and voice in the public sphere than the individual does.

These alternative places and spaces are special in that they provide graffiti writers and other like-minded street artists with a platform from which to manoeuvre around imposed legal regulations and restrictions associated with public and private places, engage in the non-localized claim to place and space to gain individual permanence in the historical project of the city, and transform the physical place of the city into spaces of dialogical meaning that bring justice to the notions of free speech, expression, and creativity that have otherwise become subsumed and censored by the prevailing private and public authorities. As a practice graffiti also offers writers the possibility of transcending into active and participative citizenship roles through their cooperation and involvement in creative projects with city governments.

My first two chapters will be dedicated to exploring how tactics, strategies, and utopian spaces and places can be applied to my research to deepen our understanding of the practices in the graffiti subculture of Montreal. Chapter 1 will focus on looking at the tactical nature of graffiti writing, and how graffiti writing can be understood as being an everyday activity practiced by some individuals in Montreal, or society in general. Within the context of de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, how can graffiti be understood as a tactic or tactical in nature? How do graffiti writers bend the rules and manoeuvre around the regulations and laws of the imposed order? How do these individuals create alternative spaces –utopian spaces –through their everyday graffiti practices, and what do these alternative spaces mean to those who create them?

In these chapters I develop a dialogical component of the value of utopian spaces and places from the perspective of the Russian culturalist Mikhail Bakhtin. In terms of Bakhtin's work, I ask how graffiti is a dialogical act and what its importance is to these utopian spaces? As well, how do graffiti writers relate to the author-hero relations that Bakhtin has explored in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and does it strengthen or weaken the power that these utopian spaces have in their function as alternative spaces of dialogue in the city? Chapter 2 will deal with micro-strategy in the subculture and the tensions and relations that revolve around how subcultural members have gained increasing presence in the urban project through both official and unofficial 'graffiti places'. What these places are, how they are important locales for how the subculture has incorporated itself into the historical project of the city, and how they provide the place proper by which subcultural members are able to more successfully develop utopian spaces will all be discussed. The importance of Bakhtin's carnival –particularly how graffiti can be considered to be contemporary form of the grotesque, and the quality of laughter that is contained in the practice and act of graffiti –will be related to the relevance of official and unofficial graffiti places.

Chapter 3 will explore how graffiti goes beyond tactics and strategies in the everyday and is in many ways a rupture of the norm. Particularly in this chapter I display how graffiti writers are more than simply vandals and how they have come to inhabit important social, economic, and political positions as participative and political citizens. Particularly I want to bridge the work of de Certeau to the work in contemporary citizenship studies by showing how elements of the micro-strategy in chapter 2, those associated with official graffiti places, have given graffiti writers the opportunity to

transcend their vandalistic tendencies and become active and participative citizens in creative urban projects. I will also show how tactics can only be used to bend the rules to a certain point. Bending the rules eventually leads to the breaking of those rules, and with that rupture the individual enters the realm of the political. Can graffiti be considered to be an act of citizenship? Or is it simply a tactic that certain individuals partake in their everyday to 'feel' just a little better about themselves by putting one over on the man? In the complexity of the urban system where the individual has become increasingly isolated and buried in the flashing images, discourse, and monotonous movements of operating in the everyday, we need to find new, alternative, and flexible understandings of what it is to be a political being.

Ultimately, de Certeau can help us bridge the gap in understanding the tactical and strategic nature of subcultural practices in the urban every day. Likewise, Bakhtin offers the theoretical tools to help deconstruct acts and tackle the issues that surround them including the dialogical nature of graffiti within and outside the subculture –double voiced dialogue –new understandings of author-hero relations, and contemporary forms of the grotesque and carnival. Applying these theoretical frameworks to study of subcultures can help explain what they are doing in relation to the larger framework of society.

This research involves looking at how graffiti and those who practice it are redefining how the individual can relate to place and space in the city and questions who has the right to have a voice and express it on their own terms apart from the censorship of any prevailing authority. This research also looks at how those who have taken it upon

themselves to pursue new avenues of identity formation outside of the generally accepted values and norms have had to endure circumstances –not only legally but morally and ethically –that have shaped them socially and culturally in ways other than the norm. Important here is the issue of voice, which not only includes the individual writer/artist's voice but other voices in society. There is a dialogue that has developed and gained increasing momentum over the last twenty or so years in Montreal surrounding graffiti, those who do it, and its effect on the city and its populace. This dialogue involves stakeholders from multiple areas –social, political, economic/commercial, environmental, and cultural. The presence of this dialogue points towards graffiti as being something larger and more complex than simply art or vandalism.

In this research I have not taken de Certeau or Bakhtin literally or handled their conceptual understandings and overview of everyday actions as being a complete manifesto of the relations between an imposed social and cultural order and its subjects. Rather, the application of their theoretical positions to a sociological inquiry has been carried out so that an understanding of subcultures and subcultural actors as tactical and strategic individuals can be possible. These positions also assist in exploring how individuals can engage in overt political acts in the everyday just as much as they can covertly manoeuvre around imposed rules and norms. In the case of my research it is to extract a deeper understanding of the graffiti subculture in Montreal, how some individuals who involve themselves in these illicit activities are creating new types of space, place, and modes of citizenship in urban environment. Of particular interest is what de Certeau calls 'utopian space', or alternative spaces of discourse, belief, and use of material consumer culture. This is akin to what Bakhtin explored in *Rabelais and His*

*World* when writing about popular medieval festive forms and carnival. Everyday acts can go beyond tactical manoeuvres; they can also rupture the practices of the everyday: they go beyond simply ‘bending the rules’ or ‘clever’ subversions of dominant linguistic and cultural forms. As a rupture graffiti can only be understood as an act, therefore, the use of Bakhtin’s work from *A Philosophy of the Act* can be utilized to elucidate the importance of graffiti as a rupturing mechanism of everyday practices and its importance as a political act.

Likewise, strategy is not only a top-down affair: there is also strategy at work from the bottom-up. Subcultures provide individuals an opportunity to partake in a collective outside of the majority; they provide alternative positions, languages, histories, and beliefs that allow members to acquire capital in ways outside of the normative framework. This capital can be either social or cultural, importantly though, it makes subcultures the sites of strategic movements where individuals can incorporate themselves and their worldviews into the historical project of the city. I call these subcultural strategic movements ‘micro-strategies’ in that they are strategic movements within the umbrella of the larger strategy of those who command the overwhelmingly powerful socio-economic positions in society –what de Certeau calls the ‘imposed order’. These micro-strategies are not aimed at toppling the imposed order, rather, they aim at preserving the subculture through time against the mechanisms of the strategy of the imposed order to incorporate, assimilate, or eradicate their activities, positions, beliefs, heroes, and stories.



In the graffiti subculture in Montreal, this micro-strategy is unique in that in their tactical activities of claiming space, graffiti writers are also claiming place. By claiming sites, or graffiti places', this subculture has anchored itself into the historical project of the city. These graffiti places can be argued as being utopian in that they are alternative places in the city that the subculture uses to extend the discursive and otherwise tactical nature of their creation of utopian spaces. They enhance the significance of graffiti spaces as alternative sources of history, culture, and identity. Another important aspect of these utopian places and spaces is that they are dialogical, individuals voice their concerns on issues of personal and group identification, of their emotive states (fears, loves, hates, tastes, etc.), and of their world views. These sites are infused with alternative dialogism: writers communicate thoughts and ideas outside of mainstream channels unsanctioned by the prevailing authorities that strive to limit and control the flows of communication between individuals in the city.

When speaking of utopias I am not aiming to construct some kind of imaginary or perfect world, or segments of an ideal realm governed by altruistic and selfless attitudes, or a place where political, social, and economic issues and problems are all solved under the banner of some superlative socialist commonwealth. What I am speaking about are alternative spatial and temporal possibilities that exist within the boundaries of contemporary urban systems. They are spaces and places where the normative framework is either reversed or ruptured. They are utopian places and spaces. Certainly they embody some sort of ideal –freedom of speech or creativity, equal rights or a criticism of the present social, economic, and political systems that influence to varying degrees the lives of everyday people –but they are not utopian in the sense of the word either in antiquity

or recent history. If utopias are about imagining the possibilities of alternative and ideal societies then utopian spaces and places are the temporal and spatial manifestations of that imagination. As reversals and clever subversions of the dominant forms of culture they are this imagination in practice. As ruptures from the norm, they are this imagination in action. I am asking the reader to imagine though when thinking of graffiti or think differently about it, at least in part, in an ideal sense choosing to focus on certain epistemological and theoretical points rather than its criminal or illegal components.

And I am speaking of selflessness on some level, although not in the tenets of socialism or the socialist dream. The utopian idea was originally a product of the changing socio-economic and political times of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when feudalism was in decline. The beginnings of capitalism in the new world of commerce and the doctrines of the Church were reshaping the moral and ethical attitudes as well as the priorities of everyday life. Thomas Moore is considered by many to be the first to speak of utopia, indeed he was the first to have written a book titled such, although others have argued that his vision of utopia was a just a rehashing of Plato's Republic. Importantly, Moore's work was a design of opposition and criticism of the social, economic, and political conditions of his time. His ideas were for the most part socialist in nature even though there was no actual apparatus in place that could see such a vision come into practical existence. *Utopia* (YEAR 1516??) was a work of fiction, but a work that was still very successful in its scathing assessment of the living conditions and the gaping divide between rich and poor in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It reversed the existent hierarchy in a representation of an alternative system where there was equal opportunity and access to

economic, political and social resources. It was for all intent purposes an ideal representation of an imperfect and corrupt world that Moore experienced in his lifetime.

Throughout the course of this research I have found it difficult to construct a definitive theoretical position concerning graffiti as a practice and as an act. It also forced me to adjust my strategy more than once and compelled me to explore new avenues of thought. Simply getting in took me some time and gaining the trust of those in the sub culture was not attained in a single outing or phone call. I imbedded myself, frequented the places and spaces that these individuals trod, familiarized myself with their language, made a habit to go to as many parties, shows, gallery openings and events in order to achieve this. My photographing of graffiti was not just for visual material and pretty pictures, it was a learning process by which I came to understand to a greater extent the cryptic language used by writers, their style and manner of writing, and their choices for spots to do graffiti. Photographing graffiti helped bring me closer to the subject of my inquiry –the photos became temporal and spatial markers of graffiti in the city and of the places I frequented. It also helped me catalogue and identify writers by location, date, style, and type of graffiti. Understanding graffiti is not something one can just learn overnight; it is a process, one of experience, and one that I am not afraid to say I am still going through. By making myself regularly seen and by reaching out to certain key members of the subculture I gained access to them as a reference to other writers they knew. In time some of the writers and artists extended their circle of trust to include me and after some time, about a year or so, I was a known face in a number of circles, known by a few of the larger crews and popular writers, and had gained a respectable level of access, and in some cases friends, in this subculture.

Previous research on this subculture has been largely descriptive and has focused on the gender, ethnicity, age, and class aspects of graffiti writers and artists, and its history (Castleman 1982, Gablik 1984, Cooper & Chalfant 1984, Lachmann 1988, Gadsby 1995, Ferrell 1996, Maxwell 1997, Gauthier 1998, Kephart 2001, Barthel 2002, MacDonald 2002, Halsey & Young 2006, MacGillivray & Curwen 2007). This past research has also helped to provide a great deal of operational definitions for the different types of graffiti and quality of that writing by writers. Gablik described the changing nature of graffiti writing moving from New York streets into galleries during the 1970's and early 1980's and captured that important transition and what that experience meant to some writers. Cooper and Chalfant looked at subway graffiti from the same time showcasing the artistic talent of many young New York writers. Their book was highly regarded as one of the first and most important referents to graffiti writing in New York and has been widely referred to as the 'Bible' of the modern graffiti movement by graffiti writers. Lachmann explored the complexities of graffiti writing mentorships in New York and the types of relationships between different generations of writers. Gadsby, Cooper and Castleman all helped to define the taxonomy of graffiti writing and the differences of style and form in graffiti. Ferrell's groundbreaking work on graffiti writing in Denver, Colorado captured the mindset of the writer as an individual driven to resist creatively and looked at the alternative methods cultural resistance. Gauthier's seminal work was one of the first on Montreal graffiti writers and was important to understanding the reasons behind why these individuals do graffiti. Kephart's work on L.A. gang graffiti was also influential to understanding the relation between gang violence and memorial pieces that, although largely a research focusing on preventing graffiti, was important because his work

attempted to bring more substance to the limited research that primarily utilizes empirical methodologies and typologies. Barthel's work on communities of creation and control in Ottawa was one of the first academic pieces on graffiti from this area and explained the tensions between the graffiti community, local government and law enforcement. Halsey & Young explored the haptic spaces that writers inhabit while doing graffiti through the works of Deleuze and Guattari and how writers are involved in the smoothing and striating of urban space in rhizomatic and dynamic ways. Finally MacGillivray & Curwen researched the importance of graffiti writing as a social literary practice and displayed how writing is an important binding element to certain youths involved in such activities.

In their work concerning creative projects in Toronto, John Grundy and Julie-Anne Boudreau (2008) bring to light the underdeveloped aspects of participative citizenship involving graffiti and street artists. Specifically to this research in the boroughs of Lachine, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, and Ville-Marie, where the local governments have provided subsidies for groups of graffiti writers to actively participate in economic and social programs aimed at improving city place and space, and social life<sup>1</sup>. Following Grundy and Boudreau, local writers and other creative individuals act as "docents" (2008: 354), or intermediaries, who encourage active participation from the attending public (mostly youth). They become stakeholders in the promotion of creative citizenship and culture, and of the positive economic and social gains that can be made from successful projects such as these.

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<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, other boroughs such as N.D.G. that are also developing programs using veteran graffiti writers as key members, however, for the purposes of this research I focused on the three described.

The will to quantify the creative potential of active citizenship –whether officially or unofficially channelled or produced –is a trend that has been picking up more speed in the last decade in Montreal (which has been witnessed already in New York and L.A.). This trend is perhaps necessary in the present socio-economic climate of urban projects, however, it is also indicative of the assimilative capacity of the imposed order in channelling the creative energy of those who would otherwise use it to resist and criticize its authority. This has the effect of neutralizing potential threats to its authority through the emplacement of a program that acculturates dissent through governmentality. As Gundry and Boudreau indicate of Toronto:

Discourses of ‘dependency’ are increasingly mobilized against artists seen as failing to sufficiently uphold the neoliberal virtues of productivity and transparency. In this way, the creative citizen is situated between contending neoliberal rationalities of creativity and innovation (which are linked to risk-taking behaviour) as well as those of calculation and risk reduction. As a heroic agent of innovation, this subject is incited to indulge her irrational and creative impulses, yet to render them amenable to external verification and risk-management in the form of impact assessments and performance monitoring. (2008: 358)

Although these things lend to the overall theme of my work they are not subjects that I have chosen to expand on in large part. Of the 21 informal interviews with local and established writers -19 male and 2 female – that I conducted between spring of 2007 and winter of 2008, I learned that Montreal graffiti writers tend to be mostly French speaking, young white males of lower to middle class descent. Most do not have an education that goes beyond high school or CEGEP and are not white collar workers; most are moderately educated, street smart individuals who work a variety of blue collar jobs. As well, the individuals I have interviewed were all over the age of 18 as I was not, for

ethical and legal reasons, able to interview minors who do graffiti. My informants were an eclectic mix of young and old, moderately to highly successful, creatively inclined, and able minded –there was no archetype according to class, age, gender, sex, or ethnicity, rather, if there was to be any categorization of type then it would be that they were all dedicated to the creative project that they felt they were all in some manner connected to either historically or presently. This dedication to the creative project of the city, and in their lives, seeing and understanding the city as something that they could change and be a part of through their actions and practices is what I have chosen to focus on in this research –the nature of their activities and how these activities related to the conceptualization of place and space in the city. How graffiti as an act and as a practice in these places and spaces has provided for new understandings of city space and the socio-economic as well as political relationships that have developed between members of the subculture and outside interests as a result of their continued practice of graffiti. Finally what implications that all of this has with regards to these individuals’ claims to free speech, freedom of creation, and expression, how these claims add to an on-going dialogue in the city concerning the rights in public and private place and space, and the tensions that exist between this and their want to pursue their own egoistic desires for personal fame are also things on which I have chosen to focus.

Ultimately I intend to show that the graffiti subculture represents a group of individuals who are more than just thoughtless vandals or mindless consumers. Graffiti writers represent thoughtful and creative component of contemporary urban society actively engaged in the public and private spheres. Caught in between their own desires for fame and recognition, their acts and practices indirectly make them answerable to the

unjust nature of the censorship of free speech, creativity, and expression by public and private authorities who impose controls over place and space in the city in the everyday.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Utopian spaces and tactics of the everyday**

#### **Introduction**

Graffiti writing as a visual phenomenon is witnessed by countless people in the city every day. It has aesthetic appeal with its artistic designs, style, and color, and provokes distaste because of the overt way it is often scrawled on public and private spaces. For the most part a considerable amount of the mainstream media attention that graffiti is given focuses on one of these two aspects of art or vandalism. Within the subculture, countless magazines, books, and documentaries focus not only on these two aspects, they also pay a great deal of attention to the clever and elusive manner in which graffiti writers go about doing graffiti. Their manoeuvrings around legal boundaries and restrictions surrounding public and private property is more than well documented by amateur film directors and writers alike. These depictions are, by and large, sensationalized and made spectacular by displaying the cunningness, dexterity, and extent to which these writers are willing to go in order to obtain a choice location or 'spot' to get up and be seen. They are also satirical and mocking of mainstream coverage of graffiti demonstrating how their stories, facts, and truths have equal if not more value to the construction and representation of the subculture. What these subcultural media forms do is bring to light a hitherto unknown or poorly understood aspect of graffiti writing, particularly the ways in which these writers subvert existing boundaries surrounding laws and regulations, language and discourse, in order to accomplish what they do. This chapter explores the ways in which graffiti writers manoeuvre around imposed restrictions and regulations in their subversive activities and how this creates alternative

spaces in the city where these individuals are able to realize and express unique opinions, worldviews, and thoughts apart from those disseminated by the dominant discourse and the imposed socio-economic system.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, these alternative, or utopian, spaces are explored through the theoretical concepts and positions provided by Michel de Certeau and Mikhail Bakhtin combined with ethnographic data obtained from interviews with local graffiti writers, street and gallery artists, and representatives in local government and community workshops. First a summary of the theoretical standpoints and concepts by de Certeau and Bakhtin are outlined, in particular de Certeau's understanding of tactics and utopian spaces, how consumers re-employ and appropriate dominant cultural representations and material culture, and what within utopian spaces – myths, legends, heroes, and stories – makes them important to tactical manoeuvres in the everyday life of graffiti writers. Bakhtin's concepts and ideas surrounding dialogical communication, carnival representations that invert existing hierarchies, the debasement of ideal cultural representations and public figures, billingsgate speech, the relationship between authors and the characters that they create are also comparatively outlined. This opens up into an exploratory discussion of treating graffiti as a tactic that writers perform in the everyday and how they re-employ both material culture and the dominant representations of language and discourse in these subversive activities. Finally, a look at the utopian spaces created by graffiti writers and what these spaces contain in terms of what Bakhtin and de Certeau have defined is compared and discussed. This chapter concludes with a short discussion as to how writers have emerged as both authors and heroes –urban story tellers –in these utopian spaces and inhabit dual roles adding to the idea of a multi-voiced city.

## **Utopian Spaces and Tactics in the Everyday**

In the 'Practice of Everyday Life' de Certeau explored how people (users) operate in the everyday, how they appropriate culture for their own purposes through clever operations that he termed 'tactics'. Tactics are a mode of resistance in everyday activities that operate within and against the objective structuring of 'strategy' by the actual order of things, or more generally, the governing imposed order. He defines 'tactic' as:

a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of the tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time –it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." (1984: xix)

He points to many everyday practices such as reading, talking, walking, shopping, general movement between places, even cooking as examples of tactics that are performed by individuals on a regular basis. These are "ways of operating" (1984: xix), clever tricks and ruses, getting away with things, manoeuvres, polymorphic simulations and mutations, and other subtle ways of appropriating the place of the dominant cultural order.

His focus on the tactical nature of everyday activities surrounds practices of consumption, particularly how 'users' appropriate culture to better suit their needs and desires in the everyday. He understands modes of operation as not being passive or guided by larger objective structures, that users are active participants in everyday life and are more creative and dynamic in their daily operations. Unable to fully detach

himself from the overly pervasive technocratic structure of the actual order of things, the individual is afforded a certain level of manipulation in the everyday. He attempts to 'outwit' the imposed system of the other he is imbedded in, he pulls tricks and clever ruses in an effort to 'put one over on the system' and in doing so he enjoys small victories and triumphs in a place that enforces spatial and temporal controls over his life through laws, norms, values, and institutional absolutes.

This tactical re-appropriation of culture by users, "this way of using imposed systems" in the everyday constitutes for de Certeau a mode of resistance, "to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for manoeuvres of unequal forces and for utopian points of interest" (1984; 18). It allows for an alternative discourse to exist alongside the larger imposed system. Tactics provide social actors with the capacity to part space and enjoy an alternative to the imposed norm where they can operate outside the official rules and regulations, and define their own heroes, criticizing or redefining those provided by the dominant order. It is a space where the individual can tell and construct his own myths and legends, stories, songs, miracles, and truths without negating dominant cultural models.

This is reminiscent of Bakhtin's description of popular festive forms in *Rabelais and His World* where the people also parted the space of the dominant order through a culture of folk carnival humour manifest in ritual feasts and other spectacles. Comic verbal compositions such as "carnival pageants, comic shows of the market place...parodies both oral and written" and "various genres of billingsgate...curses, oaths," and "popular blazons" (1984:5) were also popular ways of parting the space of

the dominant order. Importantly, although these popular festive forms inhabited only certain calendar periods they were part of a larger force of lived spectacle life that freed the people from the “religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism,...mysticism and piety” (1984:7) of the dominant order. In the same way that tactics are interwoven into the everyday operations of contemporary consumers and offer an alternative discourse to exist within the imposed system, the culture of folk carnival humour offered the common people a similar alternative where they could enjoy a type of communication not possible in the overly divided everyday life under “barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (1984:10). Within this culture the common people could define and criticize their own heroes, myths, and legends. The King could be crowned a fool, privileges, norms, and rank were suspended, and free laughter joined the people in ambivalent and universal belonging.

In the same vein for de Certeau these spaces are for the manoeuvring of unequal forces and where tactics of operations in the everyday exist. Spaces wherein movements occur, where consumers re-appropriate and an art of operating takes form through the metaphorization of the dominant order. By making it function in another register these clever tricks of diversion allow for one’s productivity to benefit oneself and not only the owner of production. In this context tactics constitute an ‘art of practice’ (1984) where the space of the other is manipulated or manoeuvred in practically every daily situation the individual is confronted. It is here that the child or student scribbles in his notebook, the pedestrian jay-walks, the absenteeism of the worker manifests, and ‘la perruque’ on the job takes form.

De Certeau pays particular attention to 'la perruque' ('the wig') that "is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (1984:25) in his discussion of these diversionary manipulations of imposed spaces. He argues that la perruque is an all pervasive tactic performed in the everyday that permeates every level of the economy and administration of the city and state from the factory to the commercial and governmental office. This is a tactic that:

diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* time in this way. With the complicity of other workers...he succeeds in "putting one over" on the established order on its home ground. (1984: 25-26)

The individual who practices la perruque or manipulates popular culture in such ways does not operate under the illusion that the imposed order will change any time soon. He exploits the order through his clever trickery, through his 'perruque', or, his art of practice.

'Utopian points of interest' involve the art of subverting the imposed order of discourse, re-employing the language and dominant culture of games, speaking (tales and stories), songs, myth, legend, religion, even the media to create alternative spaces where other possibilities can be actualized. In the case of games, stories and tales these possibilities exist as a repository of memory, or, "schemas of actions articulating replies with respect to circumstances", and where "moves, not truths are recounted" (1984:22-23). In the case of songs and miraculous tales of myth, legend and religion these

possibilities exist in a space where the recognition of the everyday constraints imposed by the dominant order can be realized. These utopian points of interest:

create another space...they tell a truth (the miraculous) which is not reducible to the particular beliefs that serve it as metaphors or symbols. They exist alongside the analysis of facts, as the equivalent of what the political ideology introduces into that analysis. (1984: 17)

These “living museums” of tactics protect “the weapons of the weak from the reality of the established order” (1984: 23) and provide an arsenal of encoded tactics for future generations to use and employ in their own design and according to the situations they will face in the everyday. Again, this is very similar to Bakhtin’s description of how popular festive forms functioned as repositories of memory, as ‘living museums’ that protected the weapons of the repressed from the realities of medieval rule. Tactical knowledge was encoded in ritualized feasts, comic plays and songs that debased the rule of the monarchy and the laws of the church rule and law. This was done in the ‘other’s’ field of vision and by subverting and re-employing dominant representations of language and culture. This art of subverting the imposed discourse in the everyday “characterize(s) a popular art of speaking...in the other’s field”, of re-employing, re-appropriating the imposed culture of the dominant order.

As a popular art of speaking, tactics make alternative or utopian spaces multi-voiced and dialogical. Every day users and consumers are engaged in polyphonic exchanges. The truth that they tell is shared and universal rather than omniscient and authoritative; it is composed of a multiplicity of authorial voices and world views that all engage in equally levelled dialogue with each other. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin explained how the relationships

between authors and heroes in literature changed when writers like Dostoevsky created independently thinking characters. The same notion can be applied when looking at the polyphony of utopian spaces. Individuals become authors in their own right capable of expressing their own world views, opinions, and thoughts simultaneously, struggling and contradicting one another in a free and heterogeneous mixture. De Certeau's user and consumers are Bakhtin's dialogic heroes who express independent ideas express their own standpoints, understandings, views, and hold an equal place in the story or the historical project. They are unfinalizable, capable of growing and evolving beyond the standards set by and the boundaries of the imposed order and as such are fully capable of giving rise to ideas that are fully true and valid.

An individual who inhabits and operates within utopian spaces is what Bakhtin called the "man in the man" or "the man in the idea...whose image is combined with the image of the fully valid idea." (1984:86) For Dostoevsky, the idea becomes the representation of the man "in him and through him" (1984: 87) yet belonging to no one as it could be spoken by any one person. In a truly polyphonic world, argues Bakhtin, the idea belongs to no one, it is:

...not a subjective individual-psychological formation with 'permanent resident rights' in a person's head; no the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective –the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion between consciousnesses. The idea is a live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses. In this sense the idea is similar to the word, with which it is dialogically united. Like the word, the idea wants to be heard, understood, and 'answered' by other voices from other positions. (1984: 88)



The idea is the hero who, in turn, is the author. They are interchangeable in utopian space and as such are no longer only the property of the objectified world of culture, or the imposed system, that asserts control over spatial and temporal relations in the everyday. Utopian spaces help to make individuals and the ideas they represent unfinalizable, ever-evolving, independent, and capable of generating higher levels of interpretation and dialogic communication.

Ultimately tactics constitute a 'popular' use of culture where a modification of its original use or understanding has been made by those subject to its ideological, political, economic, or social tenets. Tactics represent "innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game...the space instituted by others...the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have." (1984: 18) The alternative or utopian spaces that tactics create and inhabit preserve and recognize the truth the constraints of the everyday life imposed by those spatial and temporal controls. They invest the everyday with new possibilities and meaning, different forms of communication and expression..

### **Graffiti Writing as Creating Utopian Spaces**

Moving forward from this point of theoretical departure I propose that contemporary graffiti be considered as tactical in nature, or more specifically, that the act and practice of contemporary graffiti writing be considered a tactic. Contemporary graffiti writing has all the properties that de Certeau associates with the tactic in that it is a calculated action, it has no proper locus, the space it inhabits is the space of the 'other', or more generally here, the city. Graffiti is performed in the other's field of vision, the

optical gaze of those who make up the city's technocratic and legal apparatus. It is also a practice that involves the creation of 'utopian points of interest' through the re-employment of the dominant culture of myths, stories, language, and games. Writers re-employ dominant representations of cultural imagery and language and in doing so they form alternative models, forms, and styles that reflect the unfinalizable idea in action. Essentially, they are storytellers of this unfinalizable idea of truth, they are authors and at the same time heroes in these stories.

The space of alternative possibilities emerges through the actions of social actors in the everyday. It is a carnival space where the official and serious design of the imposed order is challenged, opposed, or debased in feats of mockery and insult. The commoner (here the writer) is positioned as the hero, the figure of importance over that of the royalty or the cleric, who gains the capacity to mock, slur, and debase those who regularly occupy a position above him (here the property owner, the policeman, the capitalist, the politician; essentially the figure of authority). And like laughter in the carnival the writer laughs at this authority, he laughs with his peers with every act of graffiti he does.

Laughter was "the expression of a new free and critical historical consciousness" (1984: 73) of the people in the Renaissance, a universalizing phenomenon that connected those who laughed at the world to it, that opposed and exposed the overly serious nature of everyday life under dogmatic and ecclesiastical conditions imposed by the dominant order. This idea of mocking, slurring, and debasing all things serious and official (here understood as property laws, the worship of property, official discourse in politics and the economy) relates to Bakhtin's descriptions of billingsgate speech and the grotesque in

popular festive folk, or carnival, culture. Billingsgate speech – curses, oaths, and insults – represent the voice of a select group of people initiated into frank, free, and open discussion – ‘free speakers.’ It is useful to quote Bakhtin at length here to display how graffiti can be seen as a contemporary form of this:

Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. There were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address, they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability. These elements of freedom, if present in sufficient numbers and with a precise intention, exercise a strong influence on the entire contents of speech, transferring it to another sphere beyond the limits of conventional language. Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally...[a]nd every age has its own type of words and expressions that are given as a signal to speak freely, to call things by their own names, without any mental restrictions and euphemisms. The use of these colloquialisms created the atmosphere of frankness, inspired certain attitudes a certain unofficial view of the world. These liberties were fully revealed in the festive square when all hierarchic barriers between men were lifted and a true familiar contact was established. Here all men became conscious participants in that one world of laughter. (1984: 187-188)

Unlike Bakhtin’s description of popular festive forms, writers neither laugh while doing graffiti nor is graffiti laughter. They do, however, ‘laugh’ at the system of authority in doing graffiti. It is a symbol of carnivalesque laughter in the contemporary urban setting. As well, there is no specific festive square where graffiti is typically practiced, rather as a practice it creates similar elements described in these festive milieus: free and liberated speech forms from the norm, hierarchies, and official prohibitions, the creation of an atmosphere of frankness, and the inspiration of attitudes and worldviews that do not follow official lines of discourse.

As an unofficial use of the elements of everyday speech, graffiti contains abuses, profanities, and improprieties, including insults, oaths, and curses. Billingsgate speech does not appear in every instance of graffiti; however, it is used popularly by writers. It is produced by only a select group of people that can be said to have been initiated into a frank, free, and open discussion who see themselves as free speakers. In this age, graffiti writers represent that group that refuses to conform to the normative conventions surrounding the respect of private property, the use of given names, of the use of public space and forums for free speech. They choose their own forums, names, and are frank and free in expressing themselves in a written medium. They challenge the black and white type-set of the dominant order with colourful, styled, cursive, and calligraphic forms. They are playful in this challenge but do so facetiously with the intention to insult and mock authority, to breach the norms of address, and to do so without any regard to conventional notions of civility or respectability. Graffiti is an abuse, a profanity, an impropriety, an insult, and a curse in this society that ritually worships and celebrates property in its various forms.

Tactics involve a bending of the rules, a clever subversion of official law or the spatial and temporal controls enforced by the dominant order in the everyday. Graffiti refigures, re-contextualizes, 'metaphorizes', and mutates official representations, language, and culture. Writers make urban place 'function in a different register': walls become something other than dividing structures that stop the movement of beings and forms; they become tapestries for the discourse of ideas, worldviews, art, a name. They become projections of the individual and communication. As an art of practice tactics create utopian spaces that re-territorialize the imposed system of the everyday. The

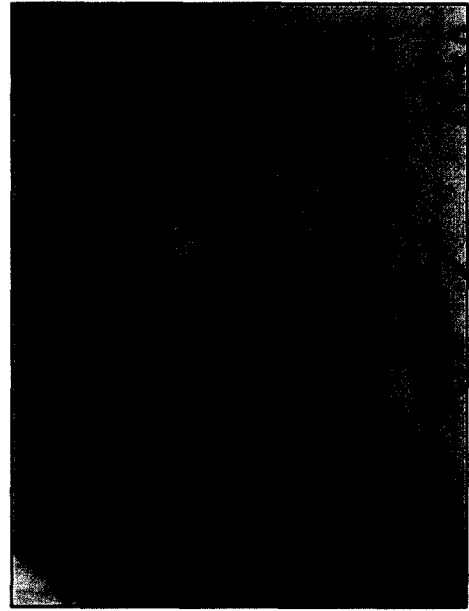
'miraculous' takes form in this space through the actions of writers. Dominant cultural representations are inverted, ideals are lowered or debased, and the individual can be a free authorial voice even while subject to the spatial and temporal controls of the dominant order of the everyday.

### **Graffiti as Tactic**

Graffiti is a popular art of writing that redesigns, modifies, and applies dominant representations of language and culture in ways different from their original form. Louise Gauthier's coining of the term "signature graffiti" (1998) furthers this point. Signature graffiti is based on the name of the individual, a nickname chosen (rather than ascribed) by himself or generated at some point with his peers. The signature has long been an important institution of individual identity, writing, and ownership in the west. It is a form of official address that when applied to legal documentation binds the individual by contract, ownership, or responsibility. Graffiti writers have modified and replaced the signature to represent an identity other than their given names, that when applied to physical places of the city unofficially binds them to the locales that they write upon. For the most part the writer is bound only temporarily as the graffiti will be buffed or done over by another writer, however, there are a number of tags, throw-ups, and pieces that remain in place as a result of a writer or crew's notoriety and fame or because it is located in a difficult to reach location. Though interestingly, the longer a writer's name remains attached to a particular location or if the location involved a high level of risk to the writer then that particular locale will become synonymous with that writer or crew name. In effect, he inscribes himself into the physical body of the city, as if it was a document, and acquires a binding, contractual, textual relationship with the particular locale he has

signed. It is an unofficial form of ownership until he is removed as a result of being buffed, crossed out, or done over.

Most commonly seen in the form of a tag, a writer's signature adorns walls, doors, mailboxes, trashcans, light poles, windows, traffic signs, buses, metros, and just about any surface a he can get to. The most basic of all signature graffiti, tags appear in the greatest of numbers. Easy to do and taking only a few seconds to complete, they are the fastest way for a writer to get up. In a single night a writer can put up dozens of tags with markers or a couple of cans of spray paint. Figure 1.1 displays a tag by the writer Asek done with a fat marker on a metal



**Figure 1.1 Tag by Asek, Plateau 2008**

door in the Plateau. Some writers will also leave multiple tags in an area to increase their visibility over other writers and to declare their dominance over a spot, as can be seen in figure 1.2 where the writer Bank has spray painted his name several times along the wall next to Scan and AtoZ seen on the window.

The socio-economics of commercialism, business, and advertising is the dominant cultural paradigm in the city. Corporate marketing slogans, billboards, ads, store front street signs, and flashing neon lights are the most visible representations of language in the city streets besides official signs detailing loitering, non-smoking, parking, driving, and other legal allowances for pedestrian or vehicular movement and activity. The overabundance of tags in and around city streets subverts this dominant linguistic

paradigm. Graffiti is stylized advertisement for the writer. It is repeatedly written in a variety of heavily trafficked areas such as roof tops, signs, mailboxes, windows, bus stops, and intersections in an attempt to antagonize and challenge the dominant paradigm.

Not only is the dominant cultural language subversively re-employed, so are the



materials, media, and places where writing is done. A spray can and marker replaces the pen or pencil, walls and various other public and private surfaces are written upon rather than paper or a canvass, it is done outdoors and under difficult conditions

**Figure 1.2 Tags by Bank, Scan, AtoZ, etc., Plateau 2008**

rather than the office or classroom, a clandestine act done in secret. Writers re-employ a number of materials in their graffiti activities meant for other purposes. Disposable latex gloves are used to keep from getting spray paint on their hands that could incriminate them if they are caught. Shoe polish, leather dyes, inks – including home-made inks – are used as filler for home-made markers that writers use to do tags. Paint rollers, typically used for wall surfaces, are used to prime surfaces for pieces or productions or to do blockbusters on the sides of buildings. Writers go onto the rooftops and use the rollers to create large letter blockbusters, also called ‘lean-overs’ on the upper portions of building walls or on large highway walls. Drill bits, rocks, diamond tipped etching pens, and acidic creams are used to create ‘scratchies’ on the windows of buses, metros, and

storefronts. Stickers are used get quick tags up on mailboxes, lamp posts, doorways, buses, metros, and other areas. Writers tend to obtain large rolls of these stickers either from the workplace or from the dumpsters of local print companies<sup>1</sup>. Postal stickers are also a favourite of writers. These stickers are prepared ahead of time, usually in large numbers, and are carried with the writer at all times so that when an opportunity arises they slap one onto whatever surface they can.

Markers are an important part of a writer's repertoire and arsenal. Indeed almost every writer or artist I interviewed had a marker (if not several) on them at all times in case the opportunity to tag presented itself. Many have spent a great deal of time creating custom markers and inks in their homes that they will later use to go out bombing. Home-made inks are made from a mix of dyes and other inks, boiled to perfection and then added to home-made markers. Markers can be made from a number of things, however, what suffices mostly is a mop<sup>2</sup> or a Pilot marker that is deconstructed then filled with another choice ink (home-made or not although most prefer a home-made concoction) then the tip is constructed of a material that will absorb the ink well, like the felt from a chalkboard eraser. Electrical tape is used to seal it up. The result is a very messy and thick marker that will leave a considerably lasting tag on any surface. These inks and markers tend to be carried in plastic bags tip up as they tend to leak. Over time if the

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about these types of materials see Paul 107's book *All City: A book about taking space* which is essentially an introductory text book on how to do graffiti, materials needed and how to make home-made markers and inks, general subcultural etiquette, along with a number of interviews with writers from Montreal, New York, and abroad.

<sup>2</sup> A mop is the container that shoe polish comes in. These make for handy markers and when they run out a writer can refill it with a home-made ink solution.



experimenting. Clearly invention is not entirely lost to the graffiti subculture, at least when it comes to the making of markers and inks.

Graffiti writers have taken materials originally intended for hardware or other work and re-employed them for their own purposes. Purposes that resemble 'la perruque' surrounding the gratuitous production of writing where the primary purpose of the individual is to, "signify his own capabilities through his *work*", and secondarily, "to confirm his solidarity with other (writers) or his family through *spending* time in this way." (1984: 25-26). On the one hand this re-employment has offered these individuals an alternate manner of producing something not for profit (in its original sense<sup>4</sup>) outside of the imposed model or system of production-labour-consumption, and on the other it has created an alternate space (through its practice and production) for like-minded individuals to form social bonds and relationships – 'crews' and 'families' – outside of the normative framework of the family structured by the state<sup>5</sup>.

For many writers graffiti has become a sort of job (some more than others) where they are out for hours at a time bombing. For others it is an obsession consuming their thoughts and most of their days, a compulsion they feed by constantly tagging or at the very least scribbling on scrap paper or in their piece books<sup>6</sup>. For those who are older and

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<sup>4</sup> The original sense that I speak of is graffiti, not the artistic murals that many graffiti writers and street artists paint in the city for businesses, at events such as *Under Pressure* and *Meeting of Styles* or in galleries that are inspired by the aesthetics of graffiti based street or hip hop culture in general.

<sup>5</sup> That is, a family composed of a parent or parents, and/or siblings, founded under a covenant of marriage condoned by the church or other religious community. These graffiti 'families' were/are not composed of blood related members but rather peers who share or shared at one point or another similar world views and opinions, and who had most likely met each other as a result of doing graffiti or had bonded closely through *doing graffiti together*.

<sup>6</sup> Almost every writer has a piece book, or a collection of them that they practice their graffiti in prior to going out and bombing or painting larger pieces and productions. In these books writers refine their

have jobs, doing graffiti becomes a second job. This idea of graffiti as being as rigorous and time consuming as a job points to this tactic as being more in tune with de Certeau's description of alternative spaces, an alternative job, and can be understood, in a more truer sense, as creating "a kind of perruque of writing itself." (1984: 28) The work of Lachmann (1988) adds to this in his study of New York graffiti where he looked at graffiti writing as a career. He was interested in looking at the generational patterns of learned techniques by novice writers from older mentors in the subculture. This is also still prevalent in the Montreal subculture evidenced by the testimonies of a number of my informants who admitted to having similar mentor-like relationships with an older more experienced writer who showed them the techniques of 'proper' writing and style and taught them the rules and values to abide by when doing graffiti. There were some who learnt the tricks of the trade on their own, however, even these self-taught writers had to pick up certain elements of writing graffiti from older writers or from video's and magazines featuring respected writers from other cities and countries. The concept of the career here can be extended beyond the novice-mentor relationship presented by Lachmann to making a 'perruque' of writing itself. The career of the writer becomes more about doing graffiti as a job and obtaining from that work a signification of his own abilities for himself rather than for any employer. Indeed, in doing their graffiti writing with such dedication and commitment they succeed on almost a daily basis on putting one over on the man on his home ground.

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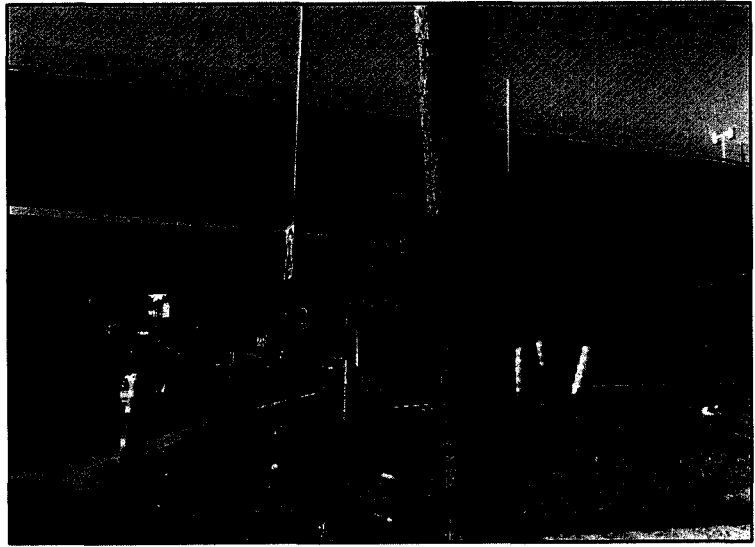
stylised tags and sharpen their techniques, they try out new styles and develop their skills as writers in these books. Many writers also exchange these books at graffiti jams or when they get together collecting tags or signatures from other writers they know or are a fan of. I have regularly seen young writers at graffiti jams going up to high profile writers to get their autograph by having them tag or sign their piece books.

The second point to be expanded on is that there is a strong sense of ‘family’ shared by many older graffiti writers who had been active in large crews and ‘familial’ collectives in the 1980’s and 1990’s such as those of CBF (Crayola Burn Factory) Crew, TA (Team Autobot) Crew, and KOPS Crew. As crews these writers had (and some still do) collaborated on many projects together, whether it was just painting on the streets, piecing, or doing larger scale mural projects. As ‘families’ they were part of large collectives of not only graffiti writers but also Dee-Jays, break dancers, and rappers. Skateboarding was also an activity shared by many members. These alternative families were more hip hop collectives in that they embodied all four of the major pillars of the hip hop subculture. Members would more than often be practitioners of more than one of these activities and therefore would tend to do more than just graffiti together bringing them closer together simply out of regularly being around each other. Many writers interviewed did discuss how being a part of such collectives was an important part of their graffiti identities and careers<sup>7</sup> but how crews of that nature had for the large part broken into smaller groups in the present. For now let us continue on speaking about the re-employment, or re-deployment, of culture by writers and how this lends to the subversive nature of graffiti as a tactic.

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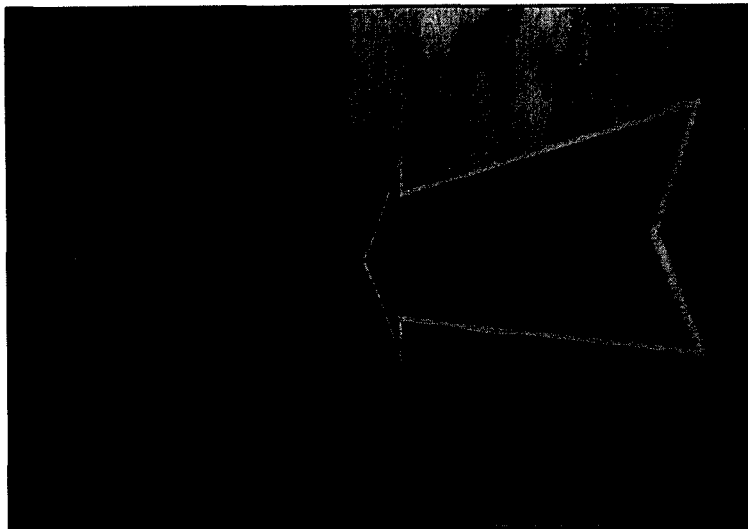
<sup>7</sup> Orion and Fluke had spoken about their tight TA crew family back in the 1990’s, Orion still had his ‘member’s card’ that he said all TA members had at that time and that many still keep on them today for memory’s sake. Fluke spoke about how TA members would congregate on a regular basis at a ‘spaghetti joint’ to discuss events and to generally hang out. Akira spoke highly of CBF saying that they were the original first family and hip hop collective before TA and KOPS. Produkt, Giver, and other writers also spoke about how KOPS crew put on regular shows (and still do) and was a collective of artists and like-minded hip hopsters.

Bez, a local writer of Montreal who has been doing graffiti for about ten years, spoke about how he locates and uses items in the streets even around the house. It is the art of re-employment and at the same time the fuel of that art: “I’m doing shit with what I’ve found, I’m a recycled guy... that



**Figure 1.3 Bez sign, Ville-St. Pierre 2007**

influences my work... “. Bez also engages in the clever manipulation of official language and signs by putting up ‘faux’ signs on poles and walls. I have come across two of these signs in my fieldwork –one at the Ville St-Pierre interchange of the highway 20



**Figure 1.4 Bez sign, Lionel-Groulx area 2007**

across from Tim Hortons (fig. 1.3) and another on a building near Lionel-Groulx metro station downtown (fig. 1.4). He mentioned that there are others he has put up around town as well. Both signs are fashioned from ply wood

painted lime green with a black or white outline bearing the inscription “AG Road<sup>8</sup>”. He drilled them in place – the first on a light pole and the latter on a boarded up window – to ensure that they would stay around for while. Again we can see the use of hardware materials for purposes other than what they were originally intended for. Both of these signs represent on the one hand a clever subversion of the dominant system of signs in the places that they exist, of the “official graffiti” (Hunt 1996) of legal road, traffic, and regulating signs that direct the flow and movement of people and vehicles. They interrupt this flow by making a claim to the space that official graffiti marks as the authority of the space in which objects and bodies move through.

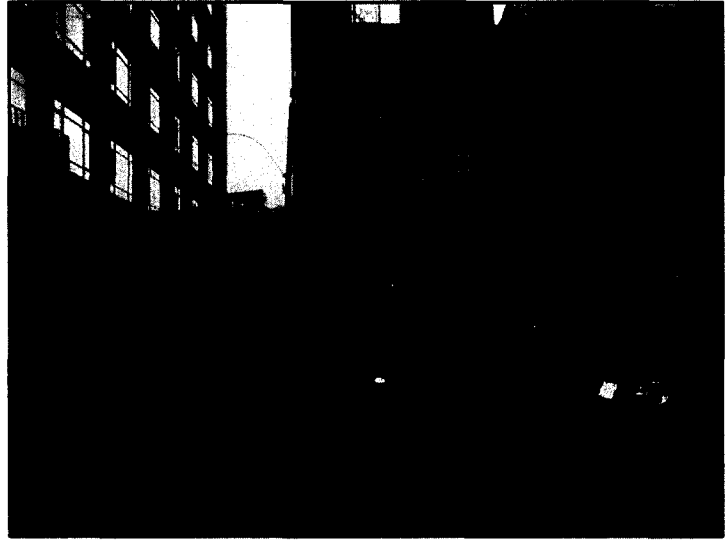
Another local writer by the name of Stare, whose moniker denotes a particular referent and clever play on the optical nature of western culture, is another writer who has re-employed space utilized by commercial and corporate signs. This is not his only mode of doing graffiti as I have seen his work in many different formats and a variety of locales, however, his clever and subversive use of this space merits attention. For a time in 2004-2006 Stare engaged in putting up fake store signs on abandoned or closed storefronts and buildings in the Plateau and the borough of Ville-Marie that for the most part went unnoticed to the general public. Figures 1.5 and 1.6 are of two signs that he put up on abandoned buildings/store fronts in these areas among others during this period.

This sign in figure 1.5 reads “Stare, le letter du coin” (“Stare, the letter of the corner”) put up just the night before I took this picture. It absolutely amazed me because at the time I lived a block away on the corner of Henri-Julien Street and my balcony faces

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<sup>8</sup> Bez is a member of AG Crew (“All’s Good”)

Mont-Royal. I had been up late that night working on a paper and had most definitely been out on my balcony at a number of times but had not noticed this sign being put up. The only reason I did notice the next day as I was on the way to the gym was because something seemed off as I was looking about (something I tend to do very often in the last



**Figure 1.5 Stare sign, Mont-Royal Street 2006**

few years as I scan for new hits of graffiti). This writer had managed to put up this sign amid all the side walk traffic that was going about the night prior, and had done so without being noticed. He most certainly would have needed a ladder and probably a drill as hammering it in would no doubt attract attention. Perhaps he did it at a choice time early in the morning, however, even at the most early of hours there are people on Mont-Royal Street coming from bars and clubs or parties. That he managed to get this done displays his skill at manoeuvring around the flow of pedestrian traffic and avoiding detection by the police or those living across the street.

Figure 1.6 is another sign that he put up on St. Laurent Street a block away from Fougounes Electriques. This is another high traffic area and even more heavily policed. It reads: “Stare, Chaos visual organise gratuity!” (“Stare, free organized visual chaos!”). The Yellow lettering behind his moniker is NME, (New Millennium Elites) a crew that he is both part of and a founder. Again the accomplishment of this task displays his

daring, prowess and ability to move around imposed systems of regulation and control. His choice of using the format of these “faux” store signs to both get up and to cleverly



Figure 1.6 Stare sign St. Laurent Street July 2005

play on commercial representations displays his tactical and subversive character in the practice of his graffiti. The over corporatized visual space of the everyday has become so inundated in advertisement and the language of the

commodity that the regular passerby either does not take notice of subtle or satirical changes that are put in place by writers like Stare or if they do see the sign they may not realize that it is unofficial and think it belongs to the building.

Roadsworth, a stencil artist who in late 2001 began painting cyclist symbols on roads in the Plateau protesting the lack of bike paths and lanes in the city is another example of the clever subversion of official legal language and space. In this case this subversion developed “into increasingly symbolic displays of civic and environmental critique”<sup>9</sup>. Although not signature graffiti his work is considered to be ‘street art’ but still carries heavy subversive tones in the re-employment of the ‘official graffiti’ of the streets and roads that control and regulate the movement of bodies through the city. He was inspired by the amount of graffiti in Montreal but wanted to ‘get up’ and do something

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<sup>9</sup> Boudreau, Laura, Spacing. 2006.

more with the existing elements in city space, to change it in a subtle yet satirical sense.



**Figure 1.7 Footprint, Parc Ave. Sept. 2004 (Photo by Roadsworth)**

As the walls had already been saturated from years of graffiti he decided that the streets would become his canvass. For Roadsworth, what he was doing was "...in a sense... a dialogue, a response to a certain extent to all the imagery, you know advertising ... all the imagery that is allowed."

He sees the city as something that:

engenders a sort of predictable response...it's predictable in many ways and I think it's intentionally predictable for usability purposes. You know design and urban planners... for efficiency's sake...It's like a machine. I mean it's an exaggeration but to a certain extent it's not. Our cities reflect our industrial age mentality, the concept of factories...it seems if you look at cities, I mean I'm not an urban theorist, but the way they are designed is essentially to maximize, you know, profitability...I think a lot of our brains are conditioned to the way the space we live in... and the kind of... pathways you work on...so doing it on the ground was like trying to like disrupt that... like what do people make of that? Like "oh its graffiti but it's on the ground, its public, oh my god"... it's kind of a malfunction of the accepted...

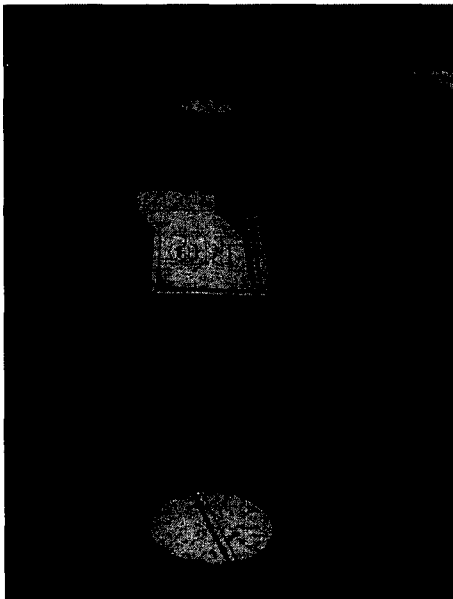
His wanton to create a certain satirical dialogue with others in the city led him to re-design or add in stencilled imagery on road lines, pedestrian cross walks, parking lots, and add animals, flowers, screws, cameras, and other sorts of images to many of the road, street, and occasionally wall surfaces in the Plateau. He turned crosswalks into giant footprints (fig. 1.7), rows of candles or outlined them with garlands of flowers or barbed wire, he made dividing lines on roads into heart beat pulses (fig. 1.8), zippers, and plugs;



he made parking lots into on/off switches (fig.1.9 ), placed thinking monkey's and watchful owls across lines of shadow from light poles, made can opener tops of man hole covers, and various other types of images all playing on the space that they inhabited. In doing this he aimed to disrupt the regulated code of the city streets not to cause harm, but



**Figure 1.8 Pulse, July 2004 (Photo by Roadsworth)**



**Figure 1.9 "On Switch", Roadsworth, Nov. 2004**

instead to play with the images, to re-employ them in such a way as to communicate something abstract and humorous rather than something regulative, cold, and calculative. His success, however, was somewhat short lived. He was apprehended by the police on November 29<sup>th</sup> 2005 stencilling on the street in the early hours of the morning. He was charged with 51 counts of mischief totalling over \$255,000 worth of damages. After his court hearing in early 2006, however, these charges were dropped and he was

given 40 hours of community service doing street art in the Plateau and the borough of Ville-Marie<sup>1011</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>Cooper, Reid. 2005, The Globe and Mail. Blackett, Mathew. 2006. Spacing.

In a manner that he likened to characters that roll up the street in old Loony-Toon cartoons, he said that he was:

Trying to suggest that the road is something other than asphalt...to reveal what is underneath the thing itself, or give it a new type of property...[to]...bring the focus to that area...to me it's a metaphor for denial, in a sense, cause we really don't pay attention to it, its ubiquitous, its everywhere, it covers more space in a city than anything... it counts for a lot of space...I think the road has a lot of... connotation ... its symbolic for a lot of things...it's this transitory space... you can't stop there, it's not a space you can loiter in or you'll be killed, it's like a dead zone... you can't sit down and have a picnic there or something, it's all about transition, and it's kind of...a metaphor the way I think our lives are, modern lives, were always moving , were always in transition...everything is about speed, going from point A to point B...

Bez, Stare, and Roadsworth all operate in this 'transitory space' as do a great deal of other graffiti writers and street artists. What these three show, is how this work subverts the language and space of the immediate area of which they place their graffiti, stencils, or signs as opposed to other more popular forms of signature graffiti that also embody this spatial-linguistic subversion but so directly. As Roadsworth most aptly put these writers bring a focus to these areas, they call out the imposed language and construct of space in the everyday. Generally speaking, this is what graffiti does, however, these three writers push it to the next level, they directly comment on the authoritarian and overly corporatized or militarized nature of city space, claiming it for their own or for a message they want to communicate to others in society.

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<sup>11</sup> Roadsworth's community work involved painting mural work for the dodge ball court at Lambert-Closse Elementary School in the Plateau. See Burnett, Richard. 2006, in Spacing for more details.

Castro, another local writer from Montreal, told me a story about how he and another writer named Mobber in 1999 had snuck into Peel Metro and had bombed the entire platform one night<sup>12</sup>:

...before the last metro, we went into the tunnel, hid into one of the catacombs, whatever, one of the side pieces...chilled there, drank a forty and ate a bit of chips... And then we waited for the service train to pass by. The service train is the yellow train that runs on gas...so we wait for that train to pass, as soon as it passes –and no one has done this before –like there was talk about this guy Psyche who went in the metro once, but he never did the whole platform, just a spot. So we go in there and... we don't know if we're going to go on the platform, if alarms are going to sound, we don't know if the light's are on...so were walking into the platform, being very careful... And there was no cameras back then –well there were cameras but they were only linked to the booth upstairs. There was no full like web that went to Berri. So we go in there, we kinda peek our head in –nothing. Lights are on everything is ok...[we] drop a can...(makes moves looking about wildly), oh shit! Hide for a bit, nothing's going on. And then we just started painting. And we brought so many fucking cans. And...we just went ape shit on Peel Metro. And it was such a good feeling to...that feeling of I'm doing this and so many...and no one can see me now but ...people are going to see this tomorrow ...tomorrow so many people are going to see that and wonder 'how the fuck did they do that?' for sure there's no way to get away with this. How do you do that? The whole platform from end to end every spot possible, you know...So we were there for a couple of hours having a great time. That's like a free game. Just bombing whatever, as big as we want, you know, and we know it's a spot a lot of people are going to be there.

They had not only manoeuvred their way into the metro to do their graffiti, but in Castro's telling of the story he talks about how it was “like a free game”. Indeed, the entire affair was akin to a game for him: the calculated actions involved getting into the metro, the eating of chips and having a forty in the access tunnel, the sneaking into the platform, and the casing out of the area prior to embarking on the campaign to paint the metro. To many others in society this would be a harrowing, stressful, and taxing affair

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<sup>12</sup> Although no longer online, a news report was made by CBC News on Oct. 25, 1999 regarding this incident.

but to Castro it was just another night out bombing only that in this case it was a planned mission.

The language of the subculture is full of tactical syntax bordering a military line of thought: ‘bombing’, to ‘bomb’ ‘missions’, ‘lookouts’, ‘burners’, ‘destroying’ an area, crew sub units as ‘chapters’, crews that ‘war’ or ‘battle’ over locales in the city...even in other areas of hip hop culture there are numerous examples, such as rappers or break dancers who ‘battle’ each other at free style events, for instance. Particularly, planned ‘missions’ were something that many writers spoke about in the interviews or generally at events and parties I attended during the course of my research. Castro spoke about his preference to go out alone on “persi missions” (personal missions) because he liked to take his time painting and didn’t always like to share the wall space with another writer. He spoke about a number of missions he had done and was planning to do in the near future. Although there are numerous instances when writers just spontaneously decide to go out and bomb there are also many planned missions that they do. Scan once told me at an art showing about his planned mission to do a rooftop near Concordia metro, Castro told me about his mission to paint the expressway pass-over in Lachine (which he completed – see the appendix for photos), Bez told me about his missions to go do his faux road (AG) signs, KidPQ told me about his night-time bombing missions armed with pockets full of markers, Roadsworth about his planned missions for the stencilling of roads and streets in the plateau, and a number of other references from other writers.

These are but several examples displaying how writers have re-employed the materials used in everyday work, how they subvert official space (legal and commercial), and language that directs the movements and flows of bodies in the place of the city.

These examples show that graffiti is about the clever manoeuvring around regulations and laws and of operating in the other's field of vision. Writers have a cat and mouse mentality that mocks the actual order of things but at the same time is presented with intelligent design. These qualities are inherent to making graffiti tactical in nature; they fuel the writer's desire to continue doing graffiti along with the egoistic desire for fame and to have a voice outside, or rather on the side, of everyday discourse.

### **Heroes, myths, and alternative spaces in the Montreal graffiti community**

Both de Certeau and Bakhtin view utopian spaces as popular ways of speaking where the repressed share and attach their own special meanings to the facts and truths that are presented to them by the socio-economic order of the everyday. They are spaces where those who feel constrained can employ their own shared beliefs and truths, name their own heroes, tell their own stories, and tales regardless of the reach and strength of the imposed order's ideological design. In short, they are repositories of memory where the recognition and truth of repression can be stored, shared, and passed on to others.

The story of how graffiti began in the lower class neighbourhoods of New York and Philadelphia in the 1960's and 1970's by a disenfranchised youth is an important historical marker for the graffiti community and serves as a unique utopian point of interest for many writers. It is a story of the repressed and forgotten lower classes of the poorest of neighbourhoods in American cities overrun by crime, drug use, unemployment, and homelessness. The youth who began doing graffiti at this time had no space of their own in these neighbourhoods and instead of falling into gangs and lives of crime and drugs, many decided to start doing graffiti. And in doing so they gained a

sense of self, an identity that they were denied due to their conditions of living. They had no space of their own so they took space; they had no heroes so they became their own. Surely, doing graffiti was a crime, however, it was a crime directed against the property of the city (particularly the trains), a symbolic move against those who had forgotten them and their communities as a result of policy and poor governance. As such, the stories of writers from this time, their exploits and adventures, their hardships and the challenges they faced, serve as a shared memory, a reservoir of myth, legend, and heroes for members of this subculture.

Writers in Montreal are also engaged in the creation of utopian spaces that reshape the facts and truths presented to them in the everyday. In fashioning their own myths, stories, heroes and legends they create an alternative repository of memory and schemas of action that exist outside of the norm. Signature graffiti, as it was earlier discussed, is an alternative form of writing in urban systems where the imposed language of the actual order is re-employed and designed to function in another register. It is a popular art of writing that subverts the official discourse and creates its own codified dialogue among practicing sub cultural members.

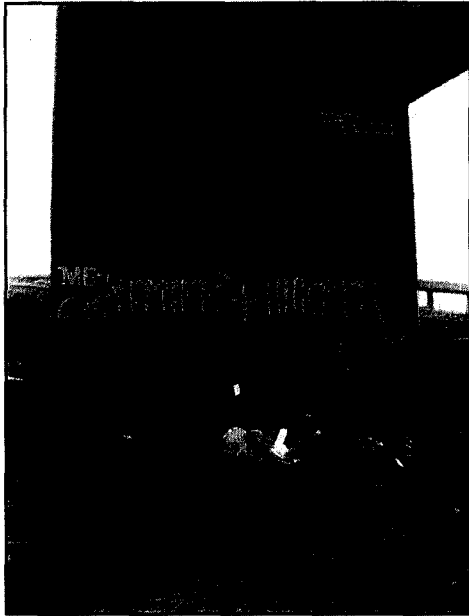
Of the 23 writers and artists interviewed for this research a majority either came from or were lower to middle class standing and had minimal to moderate levels of education (high school to collegial or CEGEP degrees); most were blue collar workers or self-employed artists – although some of the older writers are white-collar office workers – and do not own any property of their own (only one artist interviewed mentioned owned property). Within the context of the interviewees' responses there was definitely an issue with regards to their class in relation to the how they shaped their opinions of the

world around them. Graffiti writers in Montreal are not upper class, wealthy land owners who come from well-to-do back grounds, at least not those who were my informants for this research. The issue of feeling repressed by those who are the owners of capital, property, and the means of production – the rich and powerful of society – is a prevalent theme in their worldviews. The feeling of being repressed in the everyday to conform to the behaviours and regulations of school, work, and the general atmosphere is also something that many writers expressed.

I have chosen several photographs of pieces that I have come across in my field research that I believe exemplify how certain writers have created utopian spaces through their graffiti art. The first two are by Monk-e taken in 2008 in Turcot Yards just off of the Decarie expressway, the last is by a writer named Spoke taken in an alley way just off of St. Catherine's Street. Certainly there are others who have done such works in the city but these provide perhaps the best examples of what de Certeau and Bakhtin mean by the creation of alternative spaces where truths are proclaimed by individuals outside of the norm, where myths take form, projected through a popular practice of speaking (here art or writing).

The piece displayed in figure 1.10 is a mock album cover for "Mr. Stephen Harper and the Conservative Ganstaz", "featuring the hit singles 'Fuck Kyoto' and 'The Budget'". Done by Monk-e, it exemplifies the creation of a truth aside from the facts disseminated in the political ideologies of the every day and of this writer's opinion of the prime minster of Canada There are not many spaces where this kind of criticism with such extreme overtones is made. Certainly the local papers in Montreal have had a good number of caricatures of Mr. Harper concerning such issues as the federal budget and the

Kyoto accord (among others), however, these caricatures and criticisms are made in an



**Figure 1.10 Monk-e, Turcot Yards Oct. 2008**

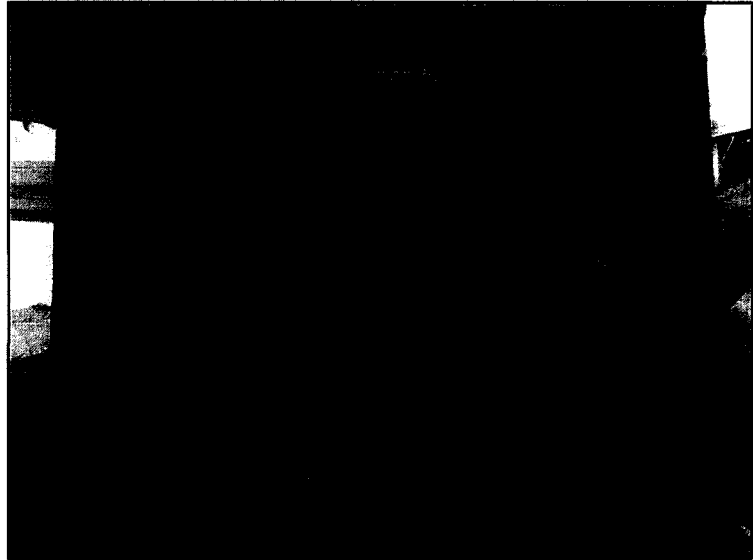
official manner by cartoonists and political scientists or pundits who have an official position as recognized critics. They are, in short, part of an official discourse. This piece shows how graffiti writers (at least this one) have created their own space where a particular truth –that of the incompetence of a leader to make the right decision and of the gangster-like persona that politicians represent –can be realized. Mr. Harper has effectively been debased, uncrowned, and turned into the fool. He is exposed as being corrupt and

criminal in the execution of his duties in office which lowers whatever kind of ideal character he is afforded by the media and official discourse. He has been brought down to the earth, to the lower-stratum of the commoner and as such disempowered and made the object of laughter rather than of political worship. Again, this truth exists alongside the official facts and discourse and is not an absolute and is not something that this writer believes will usurp the officially held position on such topics. But it is still here, his view of the situation, his addition to the space that he and others have created through their subversive activities as graffiti writers.

Another piece by Monk-e from Turcot yards I took in October of 2008 (Fig. 1.11) portrays a young man riding on the back of a pig spraying what seems to be an aerosol can over its head. The symbols used in this piece: a Nazi arm band on the pig, the bar



code on its thigh, the fire fighter boots the boy wears, the American Flag he holds, the deathly corporate looking men watching amid dollar signs, and the temple-like structure in the background offer insight to his worldview. We see the debasing of the American flag, the corporation, and religion. He relates these



**Figure 1.11 Monk-e, Turcot Yards Oct. 2008**

ideals to Nazism placing the image of the hero, the firefighter, since the events of 9/11 also seen as a martyr, upon a pig's back adorned with a swastika patch on one of its legs. The images of the deathly corporate figures and the temple looming in the background are suggestive of a culture of fascism in American corporatism and religion. This space purports a truth that can only be believed and not proven; it is a vision of faith rather than fact, an alternative to facts presented by those who operate the imposed order of the everyday. It exists because he believes it does, and as a truth it exists in a utopian space here but also nowhere, untouchable by the imposed order even if buffed or painted over.

A piece of graffiti that I photographed in 2007 (Fig. 1.12) by a writer by the name 'Spoke' is powerfully apposite in that it speaks directly to the mythic properties of graffiti

as well as the mythic character of writers themselves. The quote is from the writings of Gertrude M. Faulding<sup>13</sup> and reads in its entirety here in the photograph:

“He is trikey yet helpful; mocking yet friendly. ‘Lord’, he exclaims, ‘what fools these mortals be!’ –yet he is willing to go about business and watches amusedly from some twilt haunt”

The quote refers to the mythological fairy creature Puck of European lore who was a

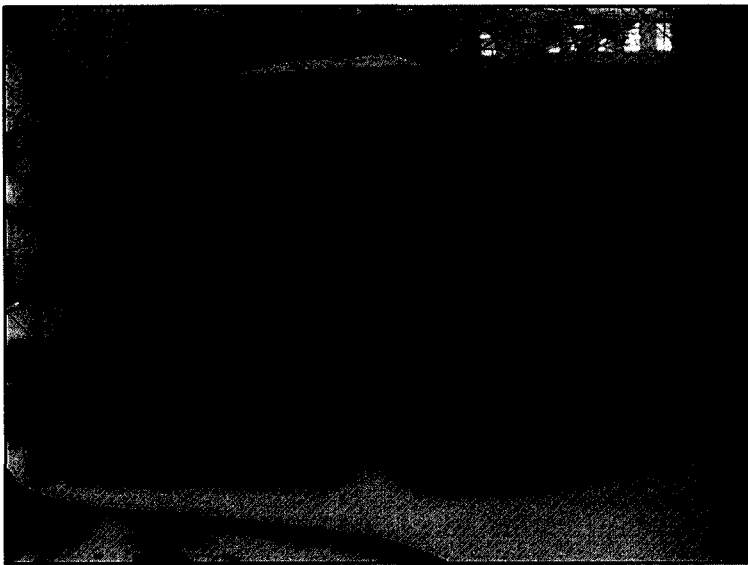


Figure 1.12 Spoke, alley off of Bishop Street 2007

mischievous shape shifter delighting in the trickery of human kind. Written about in various folk stories, tales, and poems, Puck was a witty and clever creature that would often use his shape shifting ability to lead travellers

astray in the woods. He has also been said to be a helpful sprite or fairy that would clean houses in exchange for such things as milk or brownies<sup>14</sup>.

Spoke seems to be making a direct reference of the graffiti writer as being a mischievous being like Puck, that he is ‘trikey, yet helpful’, he ‘tricks’ the imposed order

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<sup>13</sup>The full quote can be located on Gertrude’s web page <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/fau/fau01.htm> which is the only reference I was able to locate in searching this quote.

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.boldoutlaw.com/puckrobin/puckages.html>

and language of the everyday. The writer, like Puck, leads travellers astray with his clever subversions of space and place. Like the shape shifter, he blends in and disappears in the movements of the city, moving through shadows and is an unseen 'spirit' until he strikes the wall with his spray paint or marker. The writer also changes his form in his development of style in doing graffiti. Indeed, I have seen many writers 'change form' over the years. For instance, I did not even recognize Stare's piece at Meeting of Styles 2007. Omen had to show me his piece after our interview. I had remarked how I thought that he had all but disappeared as I had not seen anything recognizable by him in some time. Even after Omen showed me Stare's piece it took me five minutes of 'staring' at it until I could vaguely make out his letters. Many writers change their form over time going from one style to the next or playing in between several forms at once. Even the different types of graffiti – tag, throw-up, piece – all represent different forms of the graffiti writer in city. They are all the same individual but different representations, sizes, colors, and styles, and fonts.

Faulding notes in quoting the American poet Riley who wrote of seeing Puck (*"Oh, it was Puck! I saw him yesternight /Swung up betwixt a phlox-top and the rim/Of a low crescent moon that cradled him"*) that "What stronger proof need we that Puck is among us still?" Certainly Puck is still among us, moving stealthily through the urban forest of alley ways and roof tops, playing his trickery upon the walls and other surfaces of the city, cleverly inverting the official legal and commercial languages and discourses of the everyday, betwixt the shadows of day and night, playing amongst the city, the parlour of his delight.

Many of those I interviewed mentioned how graffiti offered for them a particular liberation from the pressures of the everyday and how it added to their lives by invigorating them with an energy and sense of worth. It offered them a space where they can trick the system and express themselves as they are rather than being what societal norms and values expect them to be. It provides a space where they can receive valorization from like-minded peers and from the act of doing graffiti. For instance, Asek mentioned how graffiti is

...a pleasant distraction you know... from everything else...from general everyday life...something exciting from an otherwise boring, bordering on redundant kind of life you know...a live feeling as opposed to this like (being dead) all the time, wake up go to work, come home, go to work...

HeR, an old school graffiti writer who used to be an active member of TA Crew in the 1990's but has since pulled out of the subculture to raise a family but still paints occasionally said:

...graffiti is a medium that helps your inner demons to come out; to escape from reality; to create something beautiful to you/others or to selfishly feed the ego. To me, it was a way of letting go the emptiness I felt or feel without any negativity and share each line my hands and eyes decided.

Monk-e added that for him graffiti is

...starting with nothing and have a conversation with people, and negotiate, because of our, of the actions, it's really like making your own path, graffiti is making your own path, finding your way how you can be functional in this society without falling down...without being forced to be repressed you know. It's using the system without being repressed by it.

Giver mentioned how graffiti is "The freedom of the voice of the people" and how "the act of doing graffiti, is the defiance of this attempt to mentally enslave you... and the masses. It shows that you've freed yourself from that, and acted in defiance for the name

of all humanity...” Castro echoed these sentiments of liberation in the act of graffiti and the sense of feeling victorious over the imposed system saying:

I guess if graffiti wasn't illegal I wouldn't be doing it... You feel like you're doing this, I'm not allowed to be doing this, but I'm doing it and I'm going to get away with it...because I'm that good at it (laughs). It's just that you feel...and so many people are going to see it and wonder, and...a big sense of fuck the system... graffiti does something to you, especially when you're doing a good spot, you realize that ...it's almost unexplainable the feeling you know...it's like adrenaline...the full work, the full, feeling of like being alive, which I would imagine is directly translated into freedom...

As well, Produkt said that

graffiti to me is...in its best state...a form in which someone attains a degree of personal liberation...through scrawling and scribbling on walls... from...kind of ...the fear and the weight that society kinda imposes upon you...it's just a way to get free, to feel in control of your life to a certain degree...to establish a kind of relationship with your identity...and to that sense I would say that what I do is definitely graffiti because that's the reason why I do it, to achieve that feeling...to feel like not powerful...to take some power back. And it's also something that exists outside the boundaries or normal societal expectations...so that there's no real boundary of what you can achieve in terms of personal revelations and...there's no rules that have been drawn about it...it's pretty much an open book...for me this may be taking it a little far, but for me it's the closest thing that I know in my life...to magic...it's kind of an in-between realm.

Not every writer interviewed mentioned how graffiti was liberating from the everyday; however, each mentioned how graffiti provides an alternative space where they can pursue their own path.

So what we take from these five writers is that graffiti is a distraction from the everyday monotonous activity of day-in day-out work-leisure, it makes them feel alive and invigorated, it helps them let go of an emptiness they feel, it fills something missing, it helps them find their own path without being weighed down by what society dictates as being the path to follow, that it is both the feeling and the voice of freedom, and an act of defiance against the discourse and control of the imposed system. Certainly for these

writers, graffiti offers a suspension from the spatial and temporal restrictions of the everyday, it's a space of freedom from the norm; a space where they can be who they want to be and where they feel protected in their quests to be who they want to be as individuals in the everyday.

Utopian spaces are also the spaces where myths and legends are created by the repressed, where they refashion their own heroes and legends, and can believe in an alternative where they are the victorious and powerful, and those who control most of their lives in the everyday have no power over them as individuals. In Montreal the graffiti subculture has its own heroes and legends, its own myths and tales that are shared by members of the community. These constitute an important part of what utopian spaces are in the graffiti subculture and that act as a repository of memories that members circulate and share with each other.

In a certain sense, every graffiti writer is a self-proclaimed hero. The tags, throw-ups, and pieces that they put up around the city are symbolic monikers of their heroic alter-egos. For those who decide that doing graffiti is going to be a long term ambition, they attempt to get up as much as possible so to be crowned 'Kings'<sup>15</sup> by their peers for their hard work, impressive skills and style, and overall dedication to doing graffiti and being involved in the subculture.

The dedication of writers to keeping their names 'repped' on the street and in the subculture translates into their unfinalizable character. They are constantly in a process of

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<sup>15</sup> The term 'King' is used in Montreal, however, there is also the term 'chef' that has been popularised as there is a great deal of French speaking Quebecoise writers. Loosely translated it means 'chief' which is used to denote a writer of high status in the community. Usually it is written in such phrases as "Le chefs," "Les vrais chefs," "Les grandes chefs" accompanying pieces and productions by crews of local writers.

continued development of their style and form, always practicing their technique and form, improving, detailing, and bettering the process of their doing graffiti. They are never truly “complete”, unfinalizable in their development as writers. As hero-authors – or author-heroes – they not only make claims to having a freedom of voice, action, and thought, they are that voice. Having both an authorial voice and being the hero means that they truly are the “man in the man” or the “man in the idea”. The tag, throw-up, or the piece is just the physical manifestation of these claims. It is the idea that the writer authors in the practice of his graffiti. It is the writer as hero, idea, and author simultaneously. Each writer fashions his heroic symbol in his own manner, having his own style, flow, and design that is specific to his voice. Each writer also adds to the idea of making a claim to freedom of voice, expression, action, and thought in their own way: some focus on a particular style or form (i.e.: wildstyle or tagging) while others focus on location, quantity, quality, etc. Importantly, each writer is unique in his contribution in form and style to the subculture further which adds to and defines the polyphonic quality of graffiti in Montreal and to the multi-voiced heterogeneity of the city. Every tag, throw-up, every piece is a unique voice in the subculture expressing a fully valid idea or worldview that is given equal opportunity and space to seen/heard, judged, and responded to by others in the community.

The writer Sake who has been a commanding force on almost every level of graffiti writing in the city for about the last 15 years is a prime example of a writer who has attained the status of King and is recognized by his peers for his extreme feats of graffiti. A writer who treats graffiti like a full time job, he has scrawled or painted his name in almost every corner of the city. His tags and throw-ups, and some pieces are

regarded with respect from all writers. He is a Montreal legend of bombing who has endured the years with his constant presence on the street due to his almost militant work ethic and commitment.

Having met him on several occasions throughout the last couple of years at a few events and his promise on all of those occasions to sit and talk with me about his graffiti and his involvement in the subculture, an official meeting between the two of us never took place. Sake is a 'purist'<sup>16</sup> and as such he has certain preconceptions and a general distrust of those who are outside the subculture and attempt to gain an understanding of graffiti from a position where writing is not practiced. As Damo, another purist I had the pleasure of meeting briefly originally at Meeting of styles 2007 and then again at the Halloween event 'Sweet Calaveras' at Yves Laroche Gallery the same year, had explained to me 'If you don't do it then you don't know it'<sup>17</sup>. I never got to speak to him directly about his history or on graffiti in general, however, I heard a great deal from the other writers and artists that I did get the opportunity to speak to.

When writers speak of dedication, Sake's name is usually one of the first they mention. As Orion explained: "...Sake is everywhere...he likes to go out own and bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb...as far as bombing goes man...Sake is a mad bomber dude, he is a maniac." But Sake is not just a hero for his non-stop devotion to his graffiti. There are

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<sup>16</sup> A purist is a writer who prefers to do illegal street graffiti as opposed to gallery shows or commercial work.

<sup>17</sup> Paraphrased because recording our conversation was not an option that I wanted to present to him as his level of distrust was also quite high and his views of those, like me, trying to get in to the subculture to understand it from a position of a non-practicing writer were also skewed. In my talking to him that night, however, he seemed to become more comfortable with me and thus was able to shed some light on the topic of being a purist. It was from him that I picked up the word actually.



stories that circulate around the community from those who have known him over the years that have trickled down and become told and retold by others. One such story was told to me from Orion during our interview:

O: “He’s an every city bomber. You could go down to the south shore and find him on a mail box. It’s unbelievable! I’ve been to some weird places and it’s like ‘What?’ And it’s never just there, it’s always up there. It’s always...and his whole thing of it is the danger of it, the fame of it...the out for fame bit, and he wants to put it somewhere where it’s going to be seen and no one’s going to cover it. You know the four pillars? You pass on the way to the Champlain Bridge, there’s four big silos there.”

I: The St. Henri Grain elevator. I have to go back there this year.

O: “Exactly, he’s got a letter on each, and last year, I believe it was last summer, if not then it was 2 summers ago, someone covered it.

I: What?

O: “Yeah someone went up and covered it and when I asked, I said ‘dude you got covered’ and he was like ‘I know, trust me you’re like the 12<sup>th</sup> person today to tell me’ and I’m like ‘so fuck, how pissed are you? Are you going to kill this guy?’ He goes ‘No. But I’m fucking pissed’ and I’m like ‘If you’re not mad then what do you mean?’ He’s like ‘I risked my life for that. And now I’m going to go risk my life to cover him back with my name.’ He re-did it...the next day, the next day.”

The grain elevator that Orion spoke of goes by the name “Stinky’s” (see fig. 1.13) by writers namely because of the smell that the place emits, that I have had the displeasure of breathing in a couple of times over the past few years having gone there to take photos and on occasion entered to explore. It is the abandoned remains of the Canada Malt Plant next to the Lachine canal that up until recently was a place where many writers went to paint before the city or property owners decided to board the location up and deny access to anyone looking to go and paint. In any case, what we hear in Orion’s telling of this story is that Sake had not only earned a large amount of respect from local writers for getting up on the ‘pillars’ but also his dedication for maintaining

the location and the risk to his health and life that he took in doing so as the structural integrity of the building is not exactly the most stable. And this is not the only story or mention of Sake, many other writers I interviewed all knew who he was, considered him a King of graffiti in Montreal, and had the utmost respect for his dedication to writing, the skill he displayed, and the risks he took.

Sake is not alone in being a local legend of graffiti. Writers such as Castro, Zek,

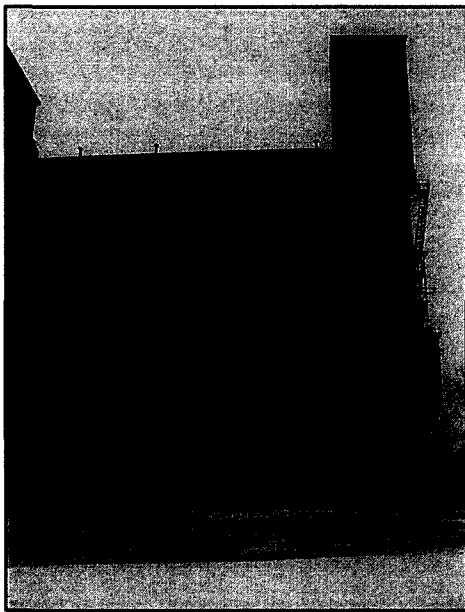


Figure 1.13 Sake, Stinky's Jan. 2006

Stack, Seaz, and Akira are also Kings of graffiti in Montreal for their dedication, skill, style, and involvement in the local subculture. Castro is noted for his extreme dedication to bombing and piecing, like Sake, although he is admittedly not an all-city writer, he does venture out to get choice spots along the Ville-Marie expressway and around the city. He also spoke about his groundbreaking bombing of Peel Metro, being the first to hit up the roof tops behind Music Plus and his dedication to maintaining

his spots, what he called 'regulating'. Zek is spoken of as one of the hardest working graffiti writers in Montreal by almost every writer I interviewed. His dedication to the subculture, helping to organize and run events, paint commission and permission walls all over the Plateau and inner city, and still keep repping his name on the streets has earned him the respect of a great many writers in the City and elsewhere. Stack is a graffiti writing veteran in Montreal, one of the first generation of writers in the city, who has been writing for the better part of the last 15 years as well and at one point, was one of

the heaviest bombers in the city. His can control skills, tight styles for piecing and getting up still to this day have earned him the position of hero and King in the sub culture. Akira is one of the first writers in Montreal and a founding member of CBF (Crayola Burn Factory), one of the first hip hop collective crews in the city going as far back as the mid 80's. Finally, Seaz is a writer who was a member of TA Crew, a founding member of SAT (Smashing All Toys) crew and is one of the founding members of Under Pressure<sup>18</sup>, the largest international graffiti event that has been taking place every summer in Montreal for the last 14 years. His status as a writer in his youth as well as today (he has recently come out of 'retirement' painting commission and permission walls in the Plateau and city) and his dedication to maintaining and organizing Under Pressure to give a place for writers local and abroad to congregate and paint for a weekend, for the hip hop community in general as Under Pressure is an event that involves break dancing, djaying, as well as a number of hip hop music events, has earned him the title of King in the Montreal subculture. He has also become the unofficial spokesperson for the sub culture in the last decade as a result of his position in organizing Under Pressure and his overall involvement in the subculture.

The crowning of these Kings of the Montreal graffiti community by their peers represents an important aspect of the carnival spirit in this subculture. The original prestige and authority commanded by this royal office has been debased and lowered to the level of the commoner. It is the ultimate reversal of hierarchy – the highest and the lowest – where the idea of Kingship is uncrowned and removed from its lofty position in

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<sup>18</sup> Along with FLOW, another King of the Montreal subculture, one of the earliest heavy bombers of the city, and a master of classic New York style and form in his piecing.

the dominant order and is taken over by, re-employed, by the masses (in this case the graffiti community) and in the spirit of all things tactical, given new meaning, function, and register. The writer is at once the fool who mocks and insults authority with his clever trickery and subversions. But he is also the King who is respected and revered by others in the community. This dual character, the fool and the King, which the writer personifies, is the ultimate exemplification of carnival in the contemporary urban setting in that the inversion of the dominant order of representations and hierarchy including its grotesque debasement is embodied in the writer himself.

At the heart of utopian spaces are also the stories of their clever tricks and ruses, dangerous feats that writers carry out in order to acquire spots, and the illegal manoeuvrings they do to get up. These stories are circulated within the subculture, shared by those who have been initiated and serve as repositories of memory or schemas of action concerning certain circumstances. Every writer shares stories with his closer peers about the graffiti they do, most are a part of those stories as writers tend to do graffiti with a crew composed of those close friends. Some of these stories become circulated in larger circles as a result of the danger, risk, or skill involved in a particular accomplishment. Take for example these two excerpts from my interviews with Orion and Castro:

O: "I'll tell you a story about his name on top of those elevators. One of the other writers who was up with him (Sake) the first time they did it, broke through the roof and was saved by his armpits...that tube is hollow, like..."

I: The other writer?

O: "Yeah, fall to your death type shit. It's insanity"

Castro in speaking of a 'mission' that he and a couple of friends went on in 1999:

...so were there about to do something and the cops (spotted) us, so obviously we try to find a way out and we see this trap door going down with access through, so we go down –pitch black. So we go down the stairs, we can't see anything, it's one of those winding stairs, with no border on it, no hand rail, so he goes around and....just (makes a downward motion with his hands) falls two stories...like in the in pitch black! And like imagine like falling and....dislocated both his shoulders, we had to go back up and then down the roof with the ladders with two dislocated shoulders. So... we were three on the roof so we both helped him...and he went down the ladder like this (makes the motion of moving down a ladder without hands and his arms dangling on his side)

These are but a few examples of such stories – there are many more – that express a collective and shared memory in the subculture about how they subvert the imposed order of laws and regulations, how they put one over on the man or the system, and how they create an alternative space where they are the victorious. These stories serve to position them as heroes in this alternative space. Every writer is a hero and an author, each has equal authorial voice in the telling and retelling of these stories. The more heroic the individual stands in relation to others in the subculture the more weight they carry, the more they are told and circulated.

## **Conclusion**

Graffiti writers are self-proclaimed heroic storytellers in the contemporary urban setting, who much like the mischievous creature Puck, work to subvert and distract the everyday person with their clever re-employment of the official language and discourse of the imposed order. They re-employ the materials of the means of production and other consumer goods in order to do their clever acts (such as markers, spray paint cans, inks, etc.), they make a 'perruque' of writing itself by treating what they do as job (for some it is a full time vocation like Zek, Fluke, and Monke-e), they playfully subvert the dominant representations in language and space in the everyday (such as Bez, Stare, and

Roadsworth), and they cleverly manoeuvre around the legal regulations and laws that seek to control our movements in the place of the city both spatially and temporally. They are in effect, tactical creatures, more so than the average worker who bends the rules to make the day's work go by with greater ease, more so than the politics of the ploys carried out in the re-employing and re-appropriating of the product system by consumers in the everyday. Graffiti writers have created and sustained utopian points of interest through the continuation of practicing their subversive art in the everyday. The spatial and temporal repression of the individual in the everyday is realized, stored, and passed on to successive generations seeking similar means of self expression.

Importantly, graffiti – or the practice of it – is not carnival. It is carnivalesque in that it shares similar characteristics of popular festive forms. It provides the function allowing individuals to part the space of the dominant order, to debase the ideals that it proclaims normative, to laugh in the face of that order, and to reverse existent hierarchies, it makes the King the fool. It is a practice that embraces life, love, and the lower stratum over that of law, order, and the controls of the everyday. Dialogically graffiti represents a group of initiated free speakers who use unofficial elements of everyday language and discourse to express their own ideals and worldviews without regard for the normative conventions surrounding civility, respectability, and public forums. The practice of graffiti debases and lowers the ideals associated with private and public property; it insults, slurs, and mocks the authority invested by the celebrants of this dominant ideology. This billingsgate speech quality is largely symbolic, much like the laughter that graffiti represents, in its mockery of all things proper and ideal. This metaphorized laughter joins writers together in unity in their collective subversive practice. Although it

is arguable whether they are truly united in that many contemporary writers either practice alone or in small crews unlike the larger family collectives dating back as far as the late 1980s until the early 90s. This laughter, however symbolic, is still a powerful and binding characteristic that gives graffiti a very human and earthly base further defining it as something apart from the overly serious and dogmatic nature of everyday life. Graffiti is something that connects those who practice it to the earth in the sense that they impart pieces of themselves unto the construct of the city they inhabit on a daily basis, the symbolic laughter seen in this chapter and the elements relating to the grotesque that will be displayed in chapter two only help to further this connection.

Ultimately, graffiti writers are both authors and the heroic or alternative representations that they create. Some writers become Kings as a result of their daring and risk taking, skill, style, or dedication to their graffiti based activities. This gives writers a double-voiced quality where they have voice as an author making claims to the value of alternative truths and discourse in society alongside that of the dominant or imposed discourse and facts they are subject to in the everyday. It also provides writers with the cultural materials necessary to construct their own myths, legends, stories, and fully valid ideas which together with these other dialogical and tactical elements makes this subculture one of the most vibrant and active social forces creating utopian spaces in the city today.

The next chapter will shift the focus from alternative spaces to alternative places in Montreal where graffiti is practiced by subcultural members and whose claim to these places provides a means to preserving identity and history. The ideas and theories by

Certeau and Bakhtin are again applied to help further elucidate the connection between these alternative places and the social actors who create and practice within them.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Utopian Places: Micro-Strategy in the Montreal Graffiti Subculture**

#### **Introduction**

The utopian points of interest discussed in the previous chapter involved the practices of graffiti writers framed as tactical manoeuvres in everyday space. Their re-appropriation and inversion of dominant cultural representations, it was argued, creates alternative spaces where fully valid ideas, thoughts, opinions, world views, and truths are realized. As reservoirs of collective subcultural memory and schemas of action these utopian spaces protect and preserve these tools of everyday subjects to freely express and voice themselves under an imposed system of behavioural norms, official discourse, as well as legal, temporal and spatial controls. In this vein, this chapter explores the significance of alternative, or utopian, places that sustain individual identities and subcultural histories over time for the Montreal graffiti subculture. A shift in the focus to specific locales where graffiti is practiced illuminates hitherto hidden aspects and tempers the theoretical concepts discussed in the previous chapter. How graffiti writers have claimed places – official and unofficial – throughout the city that have provided subcultural members with the means to maintain their identities and histories is important to an understanding of how the subculture has grown in complexity over the last 15 years. The places discussed in this chapter provide an alternative means of preserving the specific knowledge and cultural history associated with the local graffiti subculture. They are unique points of reference that members of the subculture use to position themselves in relation to the dominant system of representations and official historical record. And to reiterate, these places are explored using the theoretical concepts and positions provided

by de Certeau and Bakhtin, combined with ethnographic data obtained through interviews with writers, street artists, and representatives in local government and community workshops. Hence first, a short summary of the theoretical aspects of what de Certeau terms “strategy” in relation to systems of knowledge, language, and is outlined along with a short explanation of Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘stratification of language’. The discussion of Bakhtin’s ideas relating to carnival, billingsgate speech, dialogical communication, and the author-hero relationships will be pursued, however, they will now be applied to furthering our understandings of locations where graffiti is practiced rather than those spaces discussed earlier. As these concepts and ideas were explained in detail in the previous chapter, there is no need for review here. A brief explanation of how strategy is at work within the subculture, or what I have termed ‘micro-strategy’ – strategy at the level of subcultural movements – will be outlined including a description of both official and unofficial graffiti sites. Second, both the unofficial and official graffiti sites I have documented over the last three years will be used to reinforce this argument. To conclude, the chapter closes with a discussion of how these places have contributed to the graffiti subculture in Montreal as alternative locales of cultural production, knowledge, collective memory, and history.

### **Strategy, Knowledge, Place, and Power**

De Certeau explains strategy as a top-down form of objective structuring that organizes the temporal and spatial relations of a place through the manipulation of power relationships. This becomes possible only with the acquisition of an isolated locale with which a subject – here understood as an institution or formal organization – attains the

capacity to concretely define its boundaries and thereby establish its independence from similar entities surrounding it. With the making of a place that a subject can call 'its own' the relations between those who control the place can be managed with outside forces. He defines strategy as the:

calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. (1984:35-36)

The establishment of a locale from which to command and manage relations with outside forces is a rational direction that any military, scientific, or political entity – a city, state, or army – takes in order to gain control over space and time.

The acquisition of a physical locale that is separate from another has several "effects" which, de Certeau notes, provides for, "a triumph over space and time...a mastery of places through sight", and, "the power of knowledge...a specific type of knowledge, one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one's own place." (1984: 36) The ability of an entity to plan for future expansions and exploit the advantages or situations in its dominion provides a mastery over time. The capacity for an entity to turn forces both within and outside of its borders into objects that can be studied, classified, measured, and manipulated extends its ability to predict, and, in so doing, offers a panoptic means of including things into its field of vision. Finally, there is a power/knowledge that is derived from having the capacity to "provide oneself with one's own place." (1984: 36) That is, a power to produce an 'independent' or 'neutral'

base of knowledge –be it military, economic, or political –allowing for an entity to produce institutions and authorities of official knowledge. From those institutions and authorities the power to control the flow of that knowledge is acquired: “it makes this knowledge possible and at the same time determines its characteristics. It produces itself in and through this knowledge.” (1984: 36) The production of knowledge creates systems and totalizing discourses that maintain and enforce the control commanded by those who preside over these places. These three aspects –place, discourse, and systems –are held together through this design used to articulate and distribute the forces necessary for the perpetuation of this control.

The City of Montreal, understood in this context, provides an apposite model with which to apply de Certeau’s theoretical tenets. Within Montreal there are socio-economic forces powered through legal and scientific means of knowledge that enforce behavioural or normative practices over the citizenry. This ‘official strategy’ is composed of layers of spatial and temporal control managed through systems of law –written and practiced (juridical) –and dominant discourses surrounding the proper actions, and behaviours associated with locales such as work, school, home, shopping centres, roads, sidewalks, etc. The city is largely a socio-economic apparatus that favours the types of relations that involve corporate organizations, monetary, and capital gain. It is the place of scientific discourse and of practiced certainty. It is also the space of historical fact: of an official record that legitimates this extension of power over normative behaviours, practices, and languages of the population. Individuals speak and act in particular ways depending on the locales they are in; they remember the public and private figures, events, and things that are determined by the dominant discourse generated by institutions and disseminated

through the media. A perfect example of this is the official recognition of French as the primary language in the city; laws dictate that French be represented on all public and private signs in larger form over that of English. It is also the language primarily spoken by all representatives of the city, be they local government, law enforcement, or health care providers. Although there are many English speaking citizens, and indeed many other speakers from a wide variety of cultures, French is still the primary language. By enforcing this local government is able to define and control the terms in which any public communication is made, or in which any discussion or forum takes place. It is a strategic investment.

In short, strategy is about a system of management and control of the place an entity calls its own and that which it surrounds and encompasses. Foreign entities or those smaller domestic groups that may compete or threaten the territory it occupies (monopolises), disrupt or distort the official word of authority it holds over its place proper must be dealt with through reform/assimilation (legal, economic, or political) or by force.

A power over knowledge sustained and determined by a mastery over place is further defined through a mastery over language. The socio-economic apparatus of the city demands what Bakhtin referred to as “a professional stratification of language” (1981: 289) that provides the discursive structure for the official control of place where every day practices occur. The language of doctors, lawyers, politicians, bureaucrats, and scientists, among others –in short experts –legitimate the laws, norms, and official discourse emplaced by institutional authorities. Like the knowledge that is both the

product of and established place and one of its determinants, so too are professionally stratified languages: the power that legal, scientific, and official knowledge has over every day practices is given articulation through these languages, they help to define its characteristics. This is the static knowledge of scientific and legal fact that can, at most, be interpreted from different points of view; however, official offices retain the authority to determine the extent to which an interpretation can be applied.

### **Micro-strategy in the Montreal graffiti subculture**

As an objective structuring apparatus, strategy can be used to describe and analyze power relationships between entities that govern places. This might lead one to ask: what about subcultures that gain a place proper from which they are able to emanate an historical projection from and develop their own specific types of knowledge? Like the structuring power accorded to larger entities via strategy, these 'sub-entities' possess a limited form of control and manipulation thus allowing for the prediction of future expansions, the exploitation of certain advantages within the domain of the imposed order in which they exist, and the capacity to create and influence discourse within and outside their subculture. The graffiti subculture in Montreal is one such 'sub-entity' that has made claims to several physical locales in the city giving it these types of properties. These areas are not owned by writers, nor do they dictate the actions temporally or spatially of those who enter them, but they do offer the subculture a form of permanence through time that it is unable to achieve outside these areas in the city proper. These areas are still policed by the city of Montreal and its boroughs and those who are caught doing graffiti or graffiti art without official sanction are still subject to all the penalties

and fines in accordance with the law, however, for the most part they are policed lightly so writers are given an opportunity to practice graffiti over time. What I am implying is that by gaining more 'place' the graffiti subculture is able to build upon an historical trajectory –members are able to incorporate themselves into the historical project of the city. The preeminent presence of these writers and the graffiti they practice in these locales undermines the power of the city to control and/or maintain them. Although not necessarily intentional it is still a process at work that indirectly over time instils an area with a quasi-strategic value. It disrupts the local authority's ability to control that particular place and on the other it infuses the area with the representative qualities of graffiti. Over time it may become a referent when speaking about the subculture or a point of identification for subcultural members. Intentionality aside, these are strategic movements, however, rather than being a top-down affair as with the objective structuring of the city or state, this is a bottom-up form of strategy. It is a micro-strategy.

Micro-strategy is a sub-striate level of strategy that is at work within the larger context of the city proper as de Certeau understands it. It is the people in the everyday – groups, communities, and subcultures –that make claims to physical locales (places) in the city providing them with similar properties like those gained by entities in the larger context of strategy. Basically, those entities that own place and have control over the temporal and spatial relations of those who move through or inhabit that place. Micro-strategies have come into existence as a result of subcultures that have attempted to gain a place of their own and in doing so have disrupted the strategy of the imposed order and undermined its control over these areas. In certain respects they are tactical in form as they operate from the lower, common level and are subversive of existing hierarchies and

authority. Micro-strategies can never replace the strategy of the imposed order; they can only exist along side or subordinate to it. Those subcultures that operate at the level of micro-strategy can create their own set of rules for the places that they come to dominate for whatever duration. Again, these rules do not replace the law of the everyday; rather, they co-exist as alternative truths that subcultural members follow according to their own codified system of communication.

The dominant order stratifies language professionally, the graffiti subculture stratifies language stylistically emphasising form and ability to create aesthetically pleasing artistic displays. This stylistic stratification of language creates a discursive structure that legitimates the alternative truths, identities, historical referents, calligraphic forms, and worldviews expressed in the practice of graffiti. The language of writers, painters, and those of artistic inclination –creators –gives articulation to this unofficial system of knowledge and helps to define its characteristics. And just as strategy is tied intimately to a place that an entity can call its own, micro-strategy is also tied to a place, or in the context of Montreal, places that the community of graffiti writers can call their own, and that they can utilize as a collective referent. Although there are tactical elements at work within micro-strategy, what sets it apart is the element of a physical place: tactics exist in space only. The acquisition of place – or graffiti sites – provides the subculture with limited strategic movements and benefits similar to those enjoyed by larger entities.

In order to explain the elements of micro-strategy at work within the graffiti subculture in Montreal I have chosen to explore several unofficial and official graffiti places –namely, the old abandoned Redpath factory, the TA Wall and Factory underneath



the Ville-Marie Expressway, CBR ('Cybertron By the River' –also under the Expressway), and Turcot Yards for those unofficial places. The official graffiti places looked at will be the yearly international graffiti event Under Pressure, and the newer Meeting of Styles. I will also detail the significance of permission, commission, and legal wall areas in several boroughs on the island. Next, a short description of each area is given along with their significance to subcultural members. The process of micro-strategy is outlined and discussed.

### **Official and Unofficial graffiti places**

Graffiti places are sites where the practice of graffiti has a more permanent presence insofar as writers spend extended periods of time bombing or working on more elaborate pieces. Unofficial graffiti places are organized around abandoned or less-trafficked areas and are not sanctioned by city authorities; however, most activity is ignored so long as it stays confined to these areas and does not become too widespread. Official graffiti places are sanctioned either by the city or property owners (business or private), thereby allowing writers to do artistic works that have a graffiti or hip hop aesthetic. Both official and unofficial graffiti places offer the subculture a loosely connected power base of cultural power that have benefits much like what de Certeau has previously mentioned. A latent function of these places is that over time they become historical markers for members of a subculture. But they are difficult to sustain over long durations, especially unofficial graffiti places, since they are usually redeveloped amid the constant process of development in the city or closed off due to safety or security reasons.

Graffiti places are zones of re-appropriation where graffiti tends to ‘consume’ everything. Writers take over every surface possible claiming every space they can with their tags, throw-ups, pieces, and productions. Walls, pylons, windows, doors, rooftops, garbage cans, any equipment or objects therein. At the TA Wall and Factory I have witnessed how even construction vehicles become ‘vehicles’ for/of graffiti. The scaffolding used to repair and build new structures are used by writers to gain access to previously unreachable areas. Materials such as steel, wood, and brick placed on pallets are tagged, and construction storage and waste bins are similarly marked. Anything foreign that enters these graffiti places, particularly anything owned by the city, is assimilated into the landscape by writers<sup>1</sup>.

Unofficial graffiti places are areas that writers have claimed as popular locales to practice graffiti on a regular basis. These places are mostly abandoned areas, warehouses, old breweries, and factories, or areas not typically trafficked by a majority of people in the everyday. There are also the areas under and around the highway and rail systems. The unofficial graffiti sites I have chosen to focus on in this chapter are the TA Wall area and the neighbouring abandoned factory –dubbed the ‘TA Factory’, the abandoned remains of the Redpath Sugar Company, CBR, and Turcot Yards. There are also a number of rooftops and areas in the city (such as those behind Music Plus and above ‘Super Sex’ off of St. Catherine’s street), however, these places do not have the same impact in terms of micro-strategy as those mentioned above. Writers have appropriated the landscape for their own needs, in a very tactical sense, but the city or property owners still have the capacity to enforce legal protocol upon anyone in those areas. Writers can

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrell (1996) also points out how the graffiti writers similarly behaved in Denver.

be ticketed, held, arrested, or charged with trespassing on private property. Unofficial graffiti places offer the subculture a certain permanence, or at the very least a semi-permanence as long as they remain active locations, serving as epicentres of collective memory, historical and cultural production. Even when these locations are redeveloped or destroyed (i.e.: Redpath) they remain intact in the thoughts of those individuals who shared these places in doing graffiti and as such have a continued presence in the stories and shared memories between these individuals even years later.

Official graffiti places are those sanctioned sites where writers can hold events, and practice graffiti or hip hop inspired art. They are areas that are negotiated between spokespersons in the subculture and the city or private property owners. Sometimes the negotiations take place just between the writers doing the work and the property owner. Writers have the 'right' to be in these places and to undertake their artistic endeavours without the penalties that would normally befall them in areas deemed unofficial. With respects to official places, I first look at two events – Under Pressure and Meeting of Styles – and the locales in which they take place. Next, I look at commission, permission, and legal walls that writers have been able to paint on, again after negotiating with either the city or with private property owners or businesses. Since these places are sanctioned by the city and private property owners they offer the greatest level of capital for subcultural members to strategize their positions in relation the dominant order. They also offer writers the opportunity to interact with the public by voicing their choice of identity, worldviews, opinions, and concerns about politics, property, the economy, and other thoughts about what they do through the local media or at least with more attention from such outlets.

Both unofficial and official graffiti places contain what Bakhtin calls organic or living language, that is, “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values” (pp. 291-92) mainly conveyed through elaborate pieces writers spend extended periods of time creating<sup>2</sup>. Crews will often collaborate to create what is termed ‘productions’ that combine the talents of two or more writers infusing their world views, and conceptualizations into larger aesthetic works. These productions are usually several meters long or high with some productions taking up the entire side of a building or city block like those seen at Under Pressure or Meeting of Styles.

This organic and living language containing specific points of view, world views, unique meanings, objects, and values, produces a dynamic and multi-voiced knowledge that, like official systems, helps to define the characteristics of the subculture’s capacity – that is, the capacity of its members –to develop a structural base from which to engage in dialogically or economically with outside forces (in this case local authorities, governments, institutions, and businesses). This dynamic knowledge is unlike that produced by official systems in that it is polyphonic –it is characterized by the voices of many individuals and groups all interacting simultaneously, co-existing in the same environment. These voices cover a wide spectrum of thought and worldview, and they interact with each other constantly in a variety of linguistic and artistic forms and styles.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, all graffiti can be considered to be organic living language, however, in these places graffiti is the most dominantly represented form of language and writers have the greatest freedom to aesthetically manipulate their work thereby allowing for the possibility to create more meaningful imagery. In the city streets, rooftops, and alleyways the dominantly represented form of language is socio-economic and there is a need to do graffiti quickly due to the risk of being caught –which is why most street graffiti comes in the form of a tags or throw-ups.

## **Unofficial Graffiti Places**

### **Red Path**

In 1816 a young Scotsman by the name John Redpath immigrated to Canada. With hardly a penny in his pocket he disembarked in Quebec City and walked barefoot to Montreal, where he found work as a stonemason. Within four years of his arrival he had established a small construction company of his own, helping to build the Lachine Canal system among other important projects<sup>3</sup>. In 1854 John Redpath established the Canada Sugar Refining Company, the biggest complex of its kind ever built in Canada at its time. Located on the Lachine Canal this refinery was in the perfect position that, along with an economic boom during this period, would catapult the then small town of Montreal into the largest and most important economic and industrial city in the Country. For 126 years this refinery would stay in operation until in 1980 it was closed when operations were shifted to Toronto to deal with the competitive and changing market.

In conducting my interviews with graffiti writers there was a strong sense of Redpath being the beginning of something big in what has been called the ‘second wave’ of graffiti in the Montreal graffiti scene. It was the place that many of the oldest of writers had originally congregated and painted early in their careers. As Gauthier has noted, “In 1995 Flow began to paint there. Within a matter of a few weeks graffiti writers began to visit the site.” (1998: 222) Historically, they referred to Redpath when speaking about anything ‘old, school’ or where something had started. Redpath for many was a

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<sup>3</sup> In his book, “Redpath, the History of a Sugar House”, Richard Feltoe does a fantastic job of detailing the life of John Redpath and his early accomplishments. Redpath was commissioned to help build the Lachine canal, Notre Dame Church, the military fortifications on St-Helens Island, and the Rideau Canal. He also did a great deal of repair work on homes, chimney’s and other general contract work, including repair work on the Bank of Montreal, Molson Brewery, and Grand Masters Lodge.  
Figure 2.1 retrieved from <http://www.angelfire.com/rock/mtlgraffiti/445.html>

home away from home that they would go to paint during their weekday afternoons and on weekends: it was a place that many have considered to be the seed that started a movement of graffiti that would eventually spread into other pockets of the city.

There is an interesting correlation between the significance that Redpath Sugar had in being the seed of Montreal's population, economic and industrial boom in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in its standing as the first unofficial graffiti place in Montreal where many writers were able to form into a cohesive hip hop collective, hone their skills, and practice their styles. Like John Redpath himself who made an economic and industrial empire from nothing so did the early graffiti writers – like anything truly hip hop – help to build the foundations of the present graffiti subculture in Montreal from nothing but an abandoned building, a few cans of spray paint, and the need to express themselves in some other manner that they couldn't find elsewhere in their everyday. When writers were eventually pushed out of the Redpath area due to increased police presence and redevelopment after 1999 other areas were subsequently located and established as new graffiti places: of which the TA Wall, Factory, and CBR are looked at in this chapter.

My research was already done sometime after Redpath had come and gone. Hence I have only the testimonies of several writers as to the importance of this location as regards both the earliest days of their writing careers and the historical beginnings of the subculture in Montreal. Fluke reminisces about when he used to go to church across the street from Redpath as a child with his mother and sneak off to go see the pieces that had gone up the week before:

...I was around when Red Path was around...not a lot of writers... you know there's only a few that still talk about it today...I was like 8 years old, 9 years old or whatever, and I would ask my mom to go pee, and then I'd run off to Redpath. And I would come back an hour later when mass was over. You know I got to see Flow's pieces of the day, or the day after he had put it up...

And then when he remembered when it was closed off for redevelopment:

I'm telling you when I saw Redpath closed off, when it went down, I like, I felt it, I felt years of history just go like (makes deflating sound) and the same thing with Jenkins<sup>4</sup> and stuff. I understand the whole safety issue and stuff, and I respect that, and now that I'm on the more mature side of it, I'm getting older, I understand that the city needs to and all that... but fuck man...you can't blame a cat for getting sad over something like that...

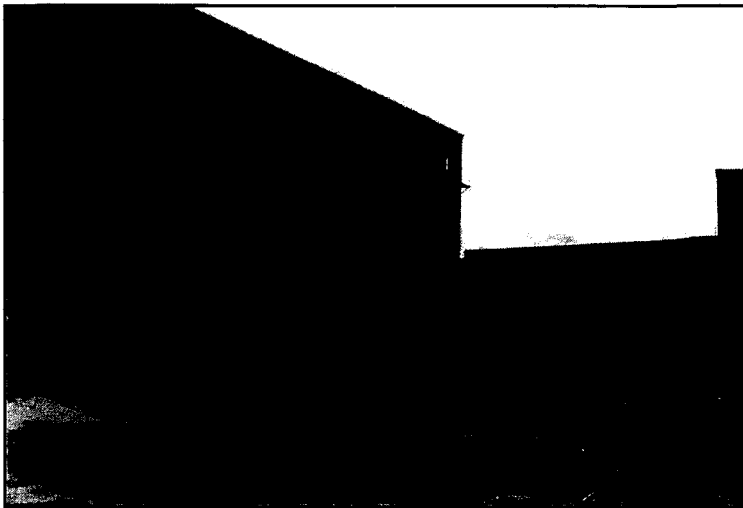
Kaseko explained that when the redevelopment for Redpath was being planned he, SEAZ, and Paul 107 had proposed to take some original bricks from the Redpath site and build an outdoor, open gallery that would serve partly as a legal wall and a museum of the sorts for the historical significance of Redpath both as the first sugar refinery in Canada and to the Montreal graffiti subculture:

The idea was that we wanted to give homage to Red Path...and give homage to kids to have a spot to paint 'cause Redpath was gone. And we actually wanted to take the old bricks from Redpath and rebuild the walls. A maze of walls with those bricks, and have pictures of Redpath, before graffiti when it was new, after graffiti...we really wanted to do something that was culturally-based, and red path is a big piece of heritage to Montreal, I think all of Pointe St. Charles and most of that area was built because Red Path was built there. And to us it was actually important... I remember when we heard that they were going to turn them into lofts; I remember when Sterling and I were like we're going to by a loft. "I think I'm going to get a job to get some cash to buy a loft there." To us it was really important. And we got doors closed on pretty much everything from Redpath, they didn't give a shit about us...Maybe our project wasn't so clear, but I don't think they ever really understood what was living at Red Path while this place was dead. It wasn't dead.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Jenkins' was the name of a large abandoned factory in Lachine that, after 2004, was demolished for future redevelopment. The Jenkins factory was also an important unofficial graffiti place writers and a site of historical significance until it was demolished.

Clearly, Redpath signified something more than just a spot to bomb or piece for these writers; it represented something much, much more to them. It was a place they cared



**Figure 2.1 Redpath inner courtyard area**

about, that mattered to them on a deeply personal level, and that had an historical meaning to the subculture that they were a part of. Indeed, some of Fluke's earliest childhood memories were associated with Redpath

graffiti. Kaseko, Seaz, and Paul 107 went as far as trying to take some of the physical remains of Redpath to build a memorial site in its name, they were so emotionally attached that they were even thinking of buying a loft or condo *just* to have some sort of lasting connection to it as a place.

The importance that Redpath holds for the subculture is intimately connected to the historical figures who painted there and who established a certain knowledge system of graffiti style and form in Montreal. Writers like Flow, Seaz, Kaseko, and Dyske (among others) were able to practice and hone their skills over time passing on their knowledge to the younger generation of writers who were up and coming. Younger writers like Fluke were able to go to this place and see styles and forms of graffiti develop over time, they were influenced by this development, and by those who established these styles and forms. For many early writers in Montreal and the immediate generations that followed Redpath was an important historical site that they had a deep



and memorable connection to with regards to the development of graffiti in their lives and to how they identified with the subculture in general.

The attempt by Seaz, Paul 107, and Kaseko to create the outdoor gallery constructed in part with segments of Redpath was a strategic move meant to re-instil the subculture with the memory of a particular place and time that they felt was an important juncture in the development of graffiti in Montreal. They were trying to create an historical referent that the subculture and public could link to a beginning of graffiti as a larger and more complex entity than it is normally credited for being. Although it was a failed attempt, it nevertheless exemplifies a micro-strategic manoeuvre: members of the subculture were trying to insert themselves into the historical project of the city through official channels. As unsuccessful as they were it was an important exercise in 'playing the game' with official channels, so to speak. This exercise would help to prepare these writers for their future involvements with these same official offices and channels when they put together Aerosol Funk, Under Pressure, and other assorted events and projects.

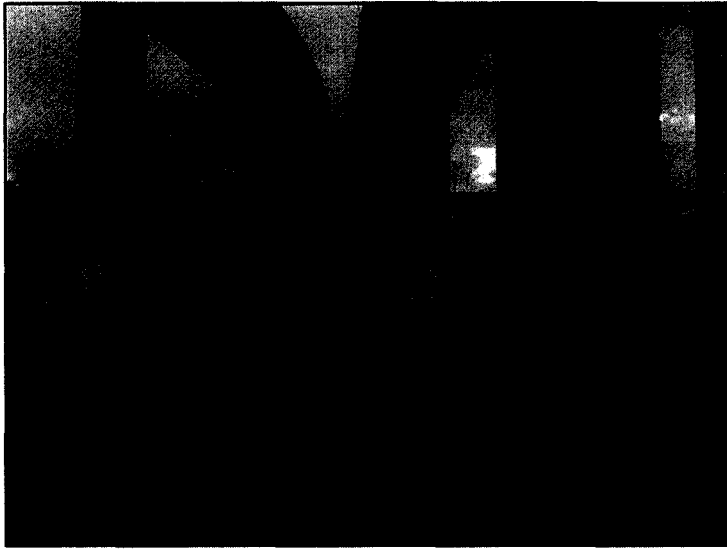
### **Turcot Yards**

According to urbanexploration.com<sup>5</sup> Turcot yards is "the biggest vacant area in North America (9 million square feet)". Built in 1860, Turcot was the main train yards for Grand Trunk Railway and housed holding facilities for a number of locomotives, as well as being the seat of administration and warehouse facilities that stored merchandise before being sent to the Old Port for further transportation. In 1967, the Turcot interchange highway system was constructed in lieu of the Expo to be held that year in Montreal, an impressive mega-project that at the time it was considered the epitome of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.uer.ca/locations/show.asp?locid=22283>

modern highway transportation and helped to establish Montreal as a world class city.



**Figure 2.2 Turcot Yards, beneath the Expressway 2008**

Today the Turcot interchange area is seen as an eyesore, a crumbling behemoth (the block lettering in figure 2.3 by the writer Decay is almost like a silent reminder of the dilapidated condition of the yards) that offers more threat to daily commuters coming to and

from the city, barely able to support the traffic generated by the local population<sup>6</sup>.

For several years the Turcot yards had also become a popular hot spot for graffiti writers since its closing and abandonment in 2002. Most graffiti activity was centred on the interchange just under the Decarie Auto route exit, the interior and exterior walls of the train tunnel, and surrounding area. Tags, throw-ups, and pieces also adorned the inside of the highway medians on the train tracks running all the way into the Lasalle area. Like the TA Wall this graffiti place has a wide spectrum of graffiti ranging from tags to finely executed artistic pieces. Having such a large and expansive area makes the yards difficult to police and secure, which likewise makes it easily accessible for writers and urban explorers alike.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Turcot interchange project was carried out in the anticipation of the millions of commuters that would be passing through Montreal for the upcoming expo '67. Today the interchange can barely handle the daily commute of Montreal and the surrounding area's 3.6 million population.

<sup>7</sup> As of July 2009 the Ministere de Transports du Quebec (MTQ) fenced off most major entry points to the yards and hired a private security firm to police the grounds 24 hours a day. The highway structure's

Monk-e called Turcot yards his “little museum”, a place where his works were given greater ‘respect’ than other places in the city where he gets crossed out or done over in shorter periods of time. Indeed, over the last few years many of his pieces were still up that I had seen in my fieldwork in this area. He also liked the large wall space available on the pylons because they served as canvasses for his larger more artistic works. There were easily a dozen or more pieces that he had put up over the years<sup>8</sup> that were up until the yards had been buffed, closed off, and more heavily

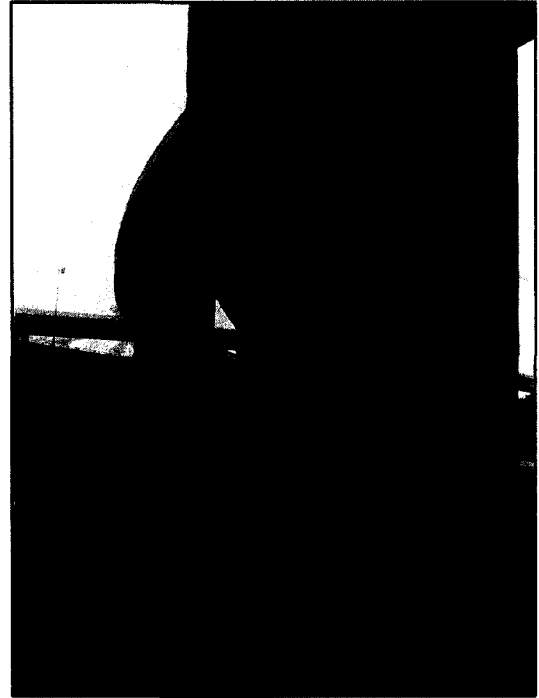


Figure 2.3 Decay, Turcot Yards 2008

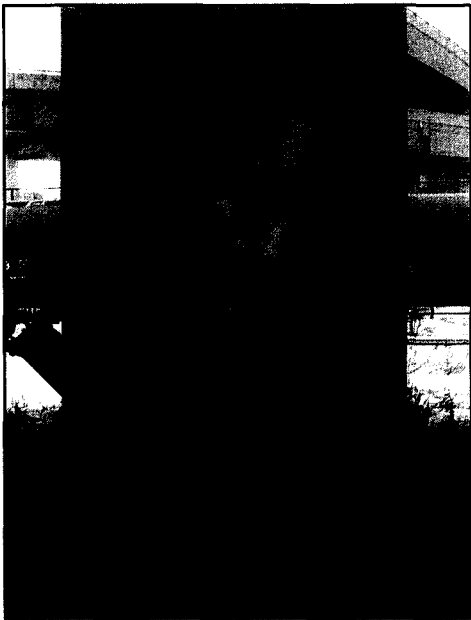
policed. Many others considered Turcot to be a location where they could commit themselves to larger (in the case of blockbusters or productions) or more intricate (in the case of piece work or artistic productions) projects.

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crumbling condition has made the area increasingly dangerous as large chunks of cement have been reported breaking off and falling into the yards below striking workers and other walking through. Several writers have mentioned being caught by security while painting and have since stopped going into Turcot (Particularly Monk-e told me that he had been caught twice in one day by the security patrols and had decided to stop piecing in this area). In August of 2009 I went to the yards to see for myself and sure enough the site has been closed off. In the last 4 years that I have frequented this location for photos never once have I been forced to leave because of security. In fact, a number of times I had bumped into CN workers or civil engineers who even then never approached me or asked me to leave. Presently, however, with the new fencing and warning signs put up by the MTQ I am less inclined to enter, and have not since.

<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 1 two pieces by Monk-e from Turcot Yards were used to position the argument concerning utopian spaces.

Figure 2.4 displays one of the finer artistic pieces in Turcot by Monk-e done in



**Figure 2.4 Monk-e, Turcot Yards Jan. 2006**

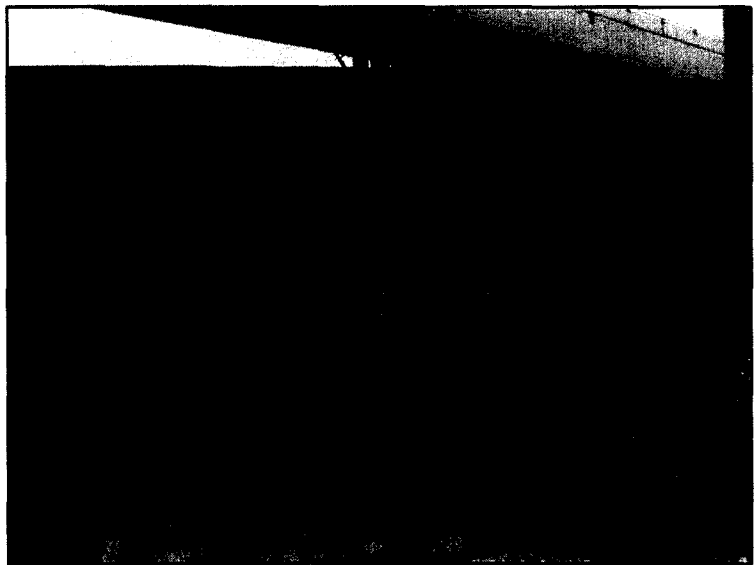
2005 which, although slightly crossed over by some tags more recently, was still there three years later.

A memorial piece for someone who was prevalent in his life, he chose to paint this woman because she was important to him, and he chose to paint her in Turcot because it was a place that he believed he could share his memories, thoughts, and worldviews conveyed through his pieces without being censored. Figure 2.5 is of a blockbuster by

Alveno, a regular of Turcot for several years who had in the last while along with his fellow crew

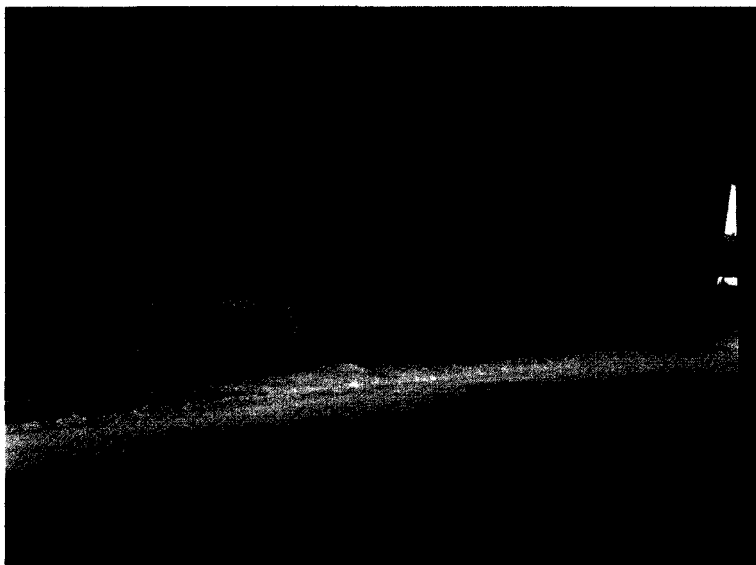
member Kode been very active in the area, on the side of the train tunnel enclosure.

Many writers used this train tunnel (both inside and outside walls) as well as the surrounding support pillars to paint and piece for a number of years before the yards were closed off by the Ministère de Transports du Québec (MTQ).



**Figure 2.5 Alveno blockbuster, Turcot train tunnel Nov. 2007**

The train tunnel and support pillars were sites of discursive action where writers



**Figure 2.6** Outside wall of Turcot train tunnel, Jan. 2006

on the one hand were making claims of self existence and on the other hand, making a claim to the place itself.

Writers transformed this once decrepit and abandoned area into a gallery of style and art where the opinions and worldviews of hundreds of

individuals were given the possibility of being heard or seen. This train tunnel is the only remaining vestige of the proof of graffiti in the area.

The outside of the tunnel has been all but buffed, however, as of October 2009 the inside tunnel walls still carry old and even some recent graffiti. As a place of collective memory, inscribed



**Figure 2.7** Inside walls of Turcot train tunnel, April 2009

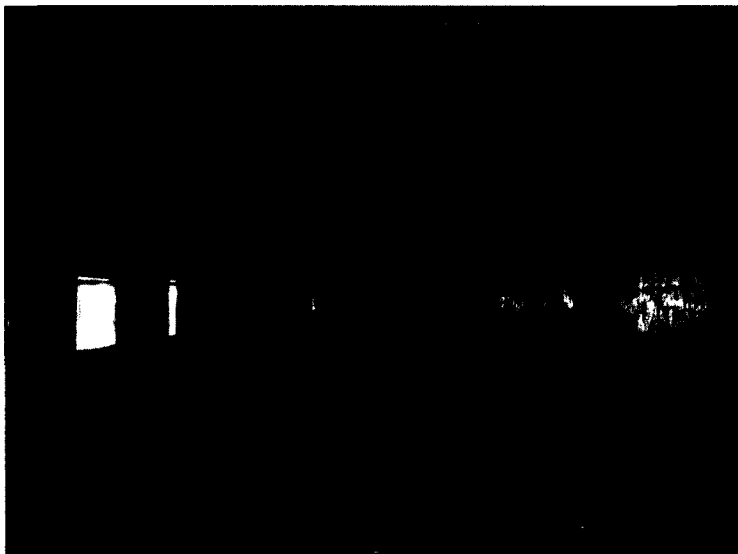
history, and living dialogue Turcot existed separately yet within the boundaries of the dominant discourse of the imposed system. Writers like Decay, Alveno, Kode, and Monk-e were not speaking directly to each other, however, countless voices spoke

through the graffiti that adorned the surfaces of the yards. They interacted perhaps only indirectly, through a proximity to each other and a common relation in style, form, and color, however, this is no less the heteroglot Bakhtin describes in the novel. These writers are representative of these conflicting voices within the field of a subcultural language. Even more so, the unique style that each writer brings into the subculture is representative of a distinct variety of the linguistic code specific to the graffiti subculture in Montreal. These 'characters' may not speak directly to each other but they do share common elements, they borrow from each other, supplement and contradict one another, and co-exist in a shared consciousness. They are all sharing some aspect of themselves, their thoughts, and their worldviews with others in a shared environment.

### **CBR ("Cybertron By the River")**

...CBR...that's TA's first bombing location. CBR, that's short for 'Cybertron By the River'. And ...the foundation of graffiti in Montreal is TA, and other crews, but...this is a TA spot, a very old TA spot....covered in tags you got pieces over tags throw ups over pieces... (Fluke)

I stumbled upon CBR in late January of 2006 while out taking photographs in the



Ville-Emard and St-Henri

Industrial park area

completely by chance as I was

photographing a long wall of

throw-ups and tags across the

street and had noticed what

looked like some graffiti just

under autoroute Jean-Lesage.

**Figure 2.8 CBR, Jan. 2006**



**Figure 2.9 CBR, Feb. 2010**

After dodging traffic and getting to the other side I found a hole in the fence leading to the underbelly of the ramp system along the waterway. Pushing into the area I discovered an enclosed site about a quarter mile deep drenched in a swath of graffiti. By most standards the quality in this area was not exactly the best in town –it was a messy display mostly of tags and throw-ups, and some straight letters all overlapping each other. Cross-outs were also abundant, most of which were simply a line slashing through the graffiti, a tag or crew name. Others were direct expletives like “Bitch!”, “Toy”, “Stop crossing!”, or “Pussy”. Some throw-ups and pieces stood out but for the most part it was a dirty and mad array of what seemed random hits lining the walls from end to end.

I would only find out about a year later that this was CBR when interviewing Fluke when at one point I decided to show him some random photographs I had taken over the years to get his thoughts and opinion. He recognized CBR right away. An out of the way and hidden spot, writers use this area to practice hand styles and improve their form before hitting the streets. This is a place that seems quite popular to writers in the area as evidenced by the amount of graffiti. Castro commented that he had painted in this location as far back as 1997 and that by the time of our interview he had been there three times that year already. He likes to paint at CBR but says, “That place has a shelf life of like two weeks.” It seems as if anything that goes up at CBR doesn’t have much time on

the wall, which makes this location so interesting because most graffiti places like the TA Wall and Factory, and Turcot all have copious amounts of graffiti but they also have finer pieces of work that are given a respectful shelf time. In this place it's quite literally a bomber's paradise –there are no rules, nothing lasts for more than 2 weeks, if that. As well, in comparison to other graffiti places that I have frequented that are all highly



**Figure 2.10 CBR, (opposite end) 2008**

vulnerable to the possibilities of redevelopment –evidenced by the rise and fall of Redpath as well as the upcoming plans for redevelopment that threaten the TA Wall, Factory, and Turcot yards. CBR is a place that doesn't seem to be going anywhere soon and has been a long standing bombing spot for the subculture for just as long as, if not longer, than these other graffiti places. There is evidence of the authorities attempting to block off the entrance with cement blocks and road medians, as well as repairing holes in the fence line, however, this has not deterred writers who have either made new holes in the fencing or figured ways around these obstructions. Chances are CBR will continue to thrive as a popular graffiti place for local writers for years to come.

Every old school writer I interviewed or spoke to during the course of this research commented on CBR as being an age-old bombing spot that they had at one time painted at. Its significance to the subculture is not just tied to its history as being an



original bombing spot for TA crew but for many writers, young and old, this is a spot where they come to practice, hang out with friends or fellow crew members or simply to see who's up and coming locally. Importantly, that older more respected writers like Castro still come to this place to get up also means it is an important place where writers are able to uniquely connect to the city: through the practice of doing graffiti writers are inscribing themselves onto the physical place of the city. They infuse themselves in to these locales but must return every so often so as to ensure that they leave a lasting mark for others to see.

### **The TA Wall**

The TA Wall is an unofficial graffiti place that has been active for the better part of the last 15 years and is easily one of the most popular for local writer's young and old alike. The wall originally began after Seaz (TA) had founded it back in the early 1990's:

When I founded the TA Wall, originally, and I was the first person to paint on it, I named it the TA Wall. Which is a surprise 15 years later, it still carries that name; it's an honour. But the funny thing is, unless you went under the highway no one knew about it. The only people who knew about it were the people who lived in the area, walked their dogs along the tracks, were there in the morning or at night, or the kids who played in the area. It wasn't fenced off, it was CN, CP property, (and) it was transport Quebec property with no fences, not preventing kids from getting in...We found a massive wall, we were like 'holy shit this can accommodate a whole bunch of us.'...and at the time we were getting pushed out of Red Path because the police started finding out about (it)...

The wall that Seaz founded was lower wall, about 6-7 feet in height, running beneath the Ville-Marie expressway just across from the Imperial Tobacco complex.<sup>9</sup> At this time he, his fellow crew members, and others were painting on just that one wall seen in figure

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<sup>9</sup> I have been told in passing that there were others who were painting on that wall area, however, none that really brought the level of piecing that he and others from TA started doing at about this time. SEAZ and TA Crew were the first writers to start using the TA Wall area as a permanent spot to do graffiti on a regular basis.

2.11 which is a large surface spanning some 100 meters or so. As they had been forced out of Redpath the discovery of the TA Wall in an off-public location offered for a nice



**Figure 2.11 Lower TA Wall, Nov. 2008**

transition for the  
continuance of their  
activities. It was also easily  
accessible being close to  
both Atwater and Lionel-  
Groulx Metros, accessible  
from either end from Greene  
Avenue or Avenue Rose-de-  
Lima, or from the train

tracks just above. As HeR noted the “TA Wall is the hottest spot for everyone to enjoy. It’s nice to have this easy to reach spot.”

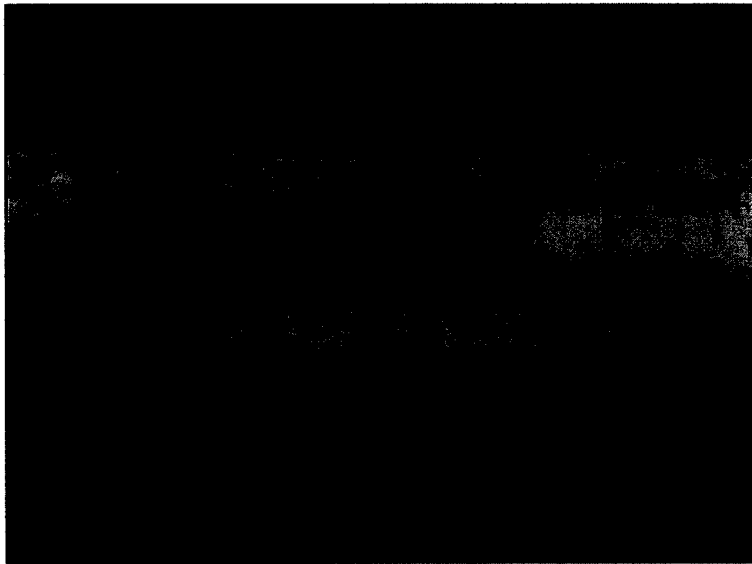
As the popularity of the TA Wall grew over the following years so did the graffiti in the area. At present the TA Wall area covers an impressive expanse stretching almost an entire kilometre from end to end. There is now an upper portion to the original wall that is even larger and



**Figure 2.12 Upper TA Wall, May 2008**

more impressive in size (Figs. 2.12 and 2.13) and coverage than the original wall below it (although the best pieces and productions are usually found on the lower wall). Graffiti covers every surface in this kilometre stretch including support pylons, pipes, junction boxes, the backs of business walls and even the medians at the very top of the train track area. It has become one of the premier graffiti places in the city hosting a large number of local writers and even many who stop off in the city just to visit.

The TA Wall provides writers a place to practice, develop, share, and learn unique styles and forms of graffiti. Relationships are built and maintained with other like indeed



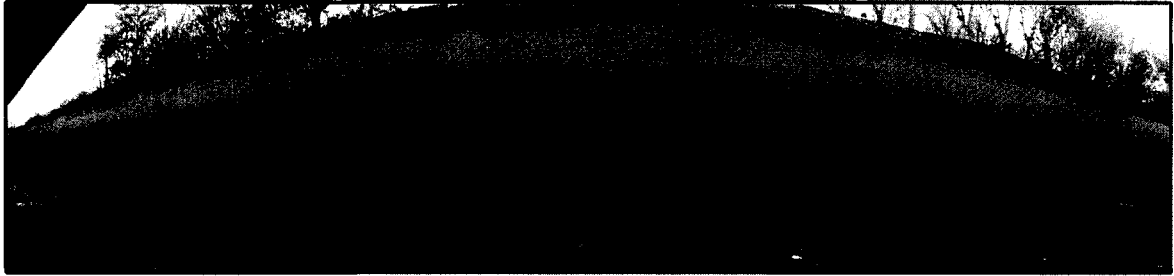
**Figure 2.13 TA Wall, Nov. 2007: pieces by Zeus, Scan, and an old KOPS Crew blockbuster**

writers while tensions may build with other competing for more space to get up. Having been an active location for the last fifteen years this place that writer's postulate as their own – even if unofficially – has also gained historical significance to the community of local

writers. Like Redpath, it has become an important point of reference that members use to identify with the Montreal graffiti community, themselves, and their relation to the movement of the subculture over time.

It should be noted, however, that as of September 2009 the entirety of the TA Wall area, both upper and lower walls and all the pylons, was buffed with grey paint,

presumably by the borough of Ville-Marie and/or the city of Westmount<sup>10</sup>. It seems that the city had taken a sudden strike at the graffiti community and was preparing for a large campaign to deter graffiti in this area. The buff was not only here but ran the entirety of



**Figure 2.14 TA Wall buffed, Nov. 2009**

the expressway including most of the Decarie Expressway too. I had never in the seven years of my following this place seen such a massive buff of an area by the city. The Upper wall was buffed first and writers had their say writing expletives and insults against the action and the police. Luxer wrote, “Buff me now! Useless Fucks”, while “Fuck the Buff” and “Fuck the Police” were quite popular among other writers. Others commented on the waste of money and time or lack of taste: “Beau pillage de fonds publics” (“Nice waste of public funds”), and another wrote: “You suck, let this grey city have color on our walls, let us have art”. When the lower wall was buffed it provoked a larger response, perhaps because of the significance of the lower wall being the first painted on in the area. Writers reclaimed the spot almost immediately and made their voices clear when they wrote “fuck buffing” and “fuck the buff” including threats and insults to the police all over the grey paint besides the obscene amount of tags, throw ups and pieces. Many writers took the time to write extended messages such as this one by an unknown writer next to his piece:

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<sup>10</sup> Both the borough of Ville-Marie and the City of Westmount share overlapping responsibility for the area directly beneath the Ville-Marie Expressway (I am unsure if CN shares any further responsibility for the area since pulling out any rail tracks and activity some time ago).

Ne venez pas dire que nous utilisons l'argent des taxes quand c'est votre choix non judicieux qui fait en sorte que vous utilisiez cet argent pour effacer l'embellissement d'un endroit mort de la ville<sup>11</sup>.

If there was any question as to the discursive significance of this area this small period of exchange between the city and the writers displays that this site is important to the writing community and stores a great deal of tactical power for writers. They were empowered by this site to voice back, directly, to those who had decided to buff the area, and they fought physically to continue painting the walls, fighting for their right to this place and to its history.

Throughout the next several months the city maintained the buff as best as it could against the onslaught of tags, throwies, and pieces. Every time the wall was buffed, within a couple of days there was graffiti back up on it. But by March 2010 the lower wall had been all but reclaimed and the upper wall area was gaining more color by the day. Clearly tension over control of this place is an ongoing battle even 15 years later, although the reasons behind the city's move to buff the area is questionable since the campaign was halted soon after its start and there was no accompanying campaign on the city streets at that time. The city, though, was able to strip this place of its power, even if only temporarily, by nullifying the graffiti reducing its once vibrant walls into nothing but grey cement, as unimpressive as the next slab under the highway. Writers, however, didn't give up. They kept coming and coming and coming, until the city eventually gave up. The buff campaign halted in late November and has not continued since, however, construction crews came in as of May 2010 to begin long awaited repairs to the expressway. The construction crews and accompanying private security has made

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<sup>11</sup>Loosely translated it says "Do not just say that we use tax money when it is your unsound choice to use that money to clear the beautification of a dead city."

painting on the upper wall area difficult to impossible or just plain unappealing to writers lately. The lower wall area and accompanying factory are still quite active though. It seems the graffiti community had won this battle however; future battles may become more difficult as this area is being encroached by condominium development projects. It may only be a matter of time until the factory and wall area becomes threatened. For now, though, it remains an active graffiti site.



**Figure 2.15 TA Factory, Nov. 2005**

### **The TA Factory**

Next to the Ville-Marie expressway (and the original TA Wall) across from the Imperial Tobacco building stands the condemned remains of an old factory that has become an important part of the TA Wall area and has even been named as an adjunct to the location itself by writers. My attempts to obtain historical information regarding this building have been largely unsuccessful, however, due to its popularity as a graffiti place there are a fair number of Google image results of which several have linked websites

claiming it to be the remains of the George W. Reed factory or the Babcock & Wilcox Boiler factory dating back over a century. Neither of these claims were substantiated with any kind of supporting evidence so I have come to refer to it by the name it has been

given by local writers: the TA Factory. This re-appropriation by graffiti writers for the purposes of their writing, much like that of the TA Wall, Turcot, and Redpath, is a claim to place



Figure 2.16 TA Factory 2nd floor, Nov. 2007

in the city outside of the regular channels. They serve as alternatives to those public locations provided by the city –parks, shopping centres, or other places of amusement or entertainment, or legal walls such as those in Lachine, NDG and Ville-Marie. These locales, like the factory, are in a sense utopian like in the same way as those discussed in the first chapter: they are alternative places of movement and operation in the everyday where the creative potential of the individual can be realized through unconventional practice, where alternative truths can be shared and made universal by multiple authorial voices. Like the utopian space that the tactic inhabits, the utopian sites of micro-strategy also re-appropriate, and re-employ places of the dominant order making them function in a different register. They are the places where the subversive art of tactic is practiced and produced, where individuals obtain a more organic connection to urban place and space than those that are designed and maintained by the socio-economic order of the city.

Like Monk-e who stated that Turcot was his “little museum”, all of these unofficial graffiti places can be deemed ‘living museums’ –here the tangible as opposed to the intangible of utopian spaces –that again “protect the weapons of the weak from the reality of the established order” (1984:23). They are repositories of graffiti and knowledge of subversive practices, of shared memory, and identity. These locations house enormous amounts of graffiti by hundreds of writers –they are time capsules of style and form, of writers who have come and gone, and of those who have passed through the city and left their mark. Palimpsests of graffiti accumulated over the years testify to the raw and ever changing environments that these museums represent.

For some it also provides an environment where they can incorporate some aspect



of the setting into their work organically fusing their graffiti into the place it is done. Again, this invokes the idea of these places being unofficial museums – these locales don’t just house graffiti; they house aspects of the individuals themselves. The writer Turf-1 is just such an individual who has used the TA Factory in this fashion. Figures 2.16 and 2.17 are from 2006 on one of my many trips into the factory displaying two of his trademarked style

**Figure 2.17 Turf-1 character TA Factory, 2006**

characters. His placing of these characters in the factory is an exercise of subversion that he believes allows him to insert part of himself into the work and surrounding place. He says that:

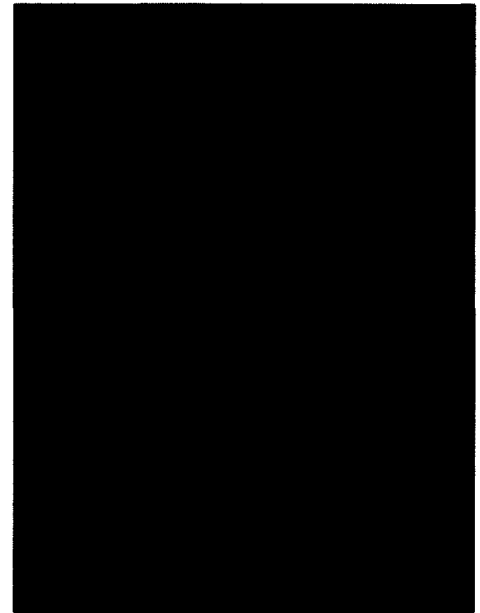


I like to play with... architecture... I like to play with the soul of the object...I don't like to deface people's property...I like to play with old places that have a history of their own, like if possible decaying and like creating characters that interact with those spaces and inspiring myself by those spaces by what's there and creating something there that has kind of a connection

In his playing with architecture there is energy that he believes connects him to the place where he puts his characters. And like the history that this factory has already been a part of, his work also becomes a part this continued historical project. These two characters that Turf-1 put up over 3 years ago were still there until recently, intermixed and part of the living and organic flow of changing shapes, letters, colors, and styles. Although he understands that his work will not remain in place forever, as others will eventually do something over it, and even if

not the building will eventually decay, be redeveloped or demolished completely, it offers him a form of semi-permanence in the history of this place.

Produkt, another graffiti writer/street artist who has used the TA Wall and Factory, among other places of the city (particularly doors) to incorporate something of his creative self into the surrounding environment also sees a certain chaos that comes as a result of the overlapping layers of spray painted graffiti, letters, characters, and names. Like a palimpsest of voices all talking simultaneously, he imagines the cacophony is broken with the characters that he paints. Like Turf-1, he does not consider himself so



**Figure 2.18 Turf-1 character TA Factory, 2006**

much an individual trying to claim space/place as much as he is trying to collaborate with it, to incorporate himself or some aspect of his personal character into it and make it something more than it is. He says that:

...it's not a possessive thing...I think one of the main differences between me and the more dominant forms of graffiti is that I'm not trying to dominate or destroy the space so much as kind of collaborate with it, enhance it, like, open up the chaos. To the viewer you know...the chaos is the path left from so many cans, and so much stains, and broken things and garbage and colors...and when you have so many layers and layers and layers of tags... and words...you get this build up....I find (a) really intense aesthetic beauty (in it) because it renders every marking relevant...every marking is like the hand of a destroyer...and the most beautiful and the most mundane things coexist...like completely randomly. Like every door you look at has its own life because of graffiti. The stains, the rust, and the graffiti. Just things that you can't generally do on your own...It's like the whole image is the context...



**Figure 2.19 Produkt TA Factory, April 2006**

This aspect of collaboration is important to understanding how writers make a claim to internal place system of the city. Through collaboration these particular writers infuse aspects of their own selves, thoughts, world views into these places. It's through this collaboration that they manifest this organic connection and claim to these places unlike that of those entities that govern, rule, dominate, and manage them.

Utopian places –especially unofficial places –might be won by writers, that is, they may be claimed for a period of time, but they are never kept. The claim to these places is as ephemeral as the graffiti produced by these writers. Like Redpath, CBR, the TA Wall,

Factory, and Turcot yards are semi-permanent places that will be redeveloped in the near future<sup>12</sup>. Gauthier called these areas “non-spaces”, sites that were forgotten and left to deteriorate that can be re-appropriated and made to function in a different register (1998):

Through their work, writers (temporarily) give new life to abandoned spaces and “non-sites” –place between “meaningful” spaces that people usually do not use or are wary of exploring...By claiming abandoned areas and “non-sites” as spaces worthy of being used, writers pay tribute to them and bestow value upon them. And by giving surrounding areas new life, writers also reinvent themselves. (1998: 222-223)

In this chapter we have seen these places being made to function as locales of discursive or dialogical action<sup>13</sup>. These abandoned ‘non-spaces’ are re-infused with meaning from graffiti writers and given new purpose. Writers not only channel their voices through these places, they channel a part of their spirit into these sites. They infuse themselves into the walls with every tag and piece, and become a part of the changing physical realms that these sites inhabit with every visit, every spray can they leave behind and every footstep they make.

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<sup>12</sup> Both the TA Factory and the area of the TA Wall may become inaccessible in the next few years as the factory is set for redevelopment into condos and the Ville-Marie Expressway will be redeveloped to join in with the new Turcot exchange project.

<sup>13</sup> At the time of her doctoral thesis in 1998 Louise Gauthier only mentioned Redpath as one of these ‘non-spaces’ in Montreal. Since then many more of these non-spaces of graffiti have been appropriated by writers such as those in this thesis. Although she mentions Redpath a few times in her dissertation, she did not fully explore the relevance of this location to the writers that she had interviewed. Her discussion of ‘non-spaces’ lacked context and could have been more poignant if she had exemplified her argument with more references to the active graffiti places at that time, particularly the TA Wall and CBR. It should be noted, however, that her work was a dissertation on the writers themselves, profiling their characters and histories, rather than the places and spaces they painted, therefore this lack of substance was episodic at best. Her work still stands as an impressive description and analysis of the Montreal graffiti subculture at that time.

## **Official Graffiti Places**

### **Aerosol Funk, Under Pressure, Then and Now**

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1996 11 local writers<sup>14</sup> organized Aerosol Funk, the first ever graffiti convention in Montreal held at a loft space in an old industrial complex in St. Henri that had been converted into an artist's cooperative in the 1980's<sup>15</sup>. This event was significant for the Montreal based subculture because it introduced the general public to certain components of hip hop culture and allowed those in attendance to meet writers close up, thus humanizing graffiti which, until then, had been framed by the media and arguably more generally understood as a destructive form of vandalism. Gauthier notes that, "this event (held) an important place in the history of the signature graffiti writing community because it was the first time a group of graffiti writers officially and legally came together to produce work." (1998: 212) This was an event funded by the writers who had to bring their own paint and materials. The writers interacted with local youth and others who attended the event by signing sketchbooks, handing out stickers, creating original t-shirt designs, and answering general questions about graffiti writing throughout the event. Graffiti writing done by anyone other than the attending participants was prohibited -"please do not tag the area" signs were posted so as to stem the amount of errant tags and such by those attending the event. This was the first event in Montreal that took graffiti writing from the street into a public arena and gallery style venue. In this

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<sup>14</sup> The eleven writers were Seaz, Flow, Timer, Kaseko, Stack, Cesk, Diske, Serch, Simo, Zek, and Ha.

<sup>15</sup> Louise Gauthier, 1998.

space, however, the illegal and mischievous nature of graffiti as a street crime had been removed, it had lost its illicit/subversive strength, but something else was at work here.

By coming together and gaining this place by themselves, they had been able to gain a foothold into a world marked by a dominant discourse, and, in doing so, entered into a new relationship with the socio-economic and legal system that had for so long tried to deter their activities. Not only were they able to show that they could also acquire a place of their own through their own actions but, moreover, that they were able to maintain and control the area through the authority they possessed from the streets as respected Kings and high profile writers.

The success of this event would set the stage for another event that year, namely Under Pressure, that, in time, would along with related events and ventures, become the largest outdoor graffiti convention in North America. This event would transform perceptions of graffiti in Montreal and enable the subculture and its members to engage in public and private spheres from a more legitimate platform. The legitimacy of Aerosol Funk as an event stems from two criteria. First, it had a physical location accessible to the general public, a place proper to itself that it was able to call its own through legal right. Second, its organizers – most of whom were graffiti writers – were able to control and regulate the place through the authority that they had been invested with by their collective painting histories (and other activities) in the subculture. For the most part they had the respect of other writers who, in tacit recognition, did not bomb the area or cause trouble in front of the news cameras and attending crowd. In sum, public and private

spheres acknowledged the subculture based on these merits and, for the first time (in Montreal at least), listened to what they had to say.

### **Under Pressure (UP)**

On August 10<sup>th</sup> 1996 the first Under Pressure graffiti convention took place in an open lot on the corner of Boulevard Mont-Royal and Henri-Julien. Once again organized by local writers, this event involved 21 writers<sup>16</sup> from four major Canadian cities (Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa<sup>17</sup>). Local djays and break dancers also participated in the event, making it a well rounded hip hop convention. This was also an historic and significant event for the Montreal subculture as it was the first ever National graffiti event of its kind in Canada. Unlike Aerosol Funk's aim of introducing the public to hip hop culture, graffiti writing and its practitioners, the organizers of UP wanted to address specific societal issues in Montreal. More to the point, the goal was to

both raise awareness on issues of poverty, racism, and violence among inner city youth and demonstrate a different way to address the graffiti question. Indeed, Under Pressure was a disciplined, non-violent demonstration against processes of repression, elimination, and criminalization. (Gauthier, 1998: 216)

The choice to name the event Under Pressure was a clever play on the warning label printed on cans of spray paint ('contents under pressure') that at the same time referred to the "uncertainty, urgency, and risk" (1998: 216) that writers experience when doing their illegal and sometimes dangerous activities. It also referred to the tensions that many of the organizers felt existed at the time in Montreal: uncertain economic conditions (chronic unemployment and a high frequency of minimum wage paying jobs), the

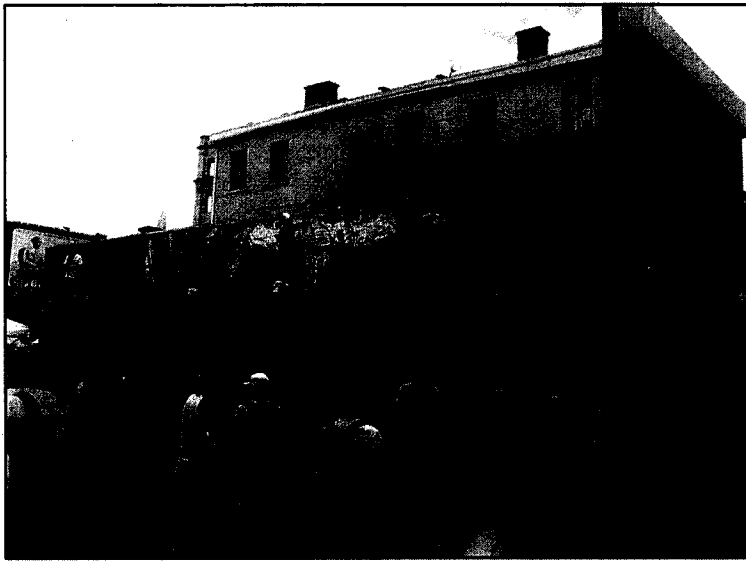
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<sup>16</sup> The participating writers were Insight, Alone, Other, Cole, Case, Diske, Flow, Seaz, Duro 3, Chrome, Swep, Dstrbo, Spek, Stak, Serch, Res, Gen One, Kaseko, Simo, Fiuser, and Zek.

<sup>17</sup> Louise Gauthier, 1998.

political strain that followed only a year after a major referendum, a questionable, unresponsive and repressive judicial system, as well as linguistic and cultural misunderstandings stemming from the English-French divide.

What is important to note, is that this event brought writers together from four major Canadian cities in a public venue which displayed that graffiti was not just a



**Figure 2.20 Under Pressure event, Aug. 2007**

localised issue, it was a cultural phenomenon much larger than just Montreal. Writers were also able to begin building meaningful networks between these cities, effectively increasing the scope of their vision outside of their local

environments by sharing them with other like-minded individuals and groups. The success of this event would lead to UP being held the next year and the year after that.

Fourteen years later, Under Pressure is still taking place, having since found a permanent location on Bullion Street in and around Foufounes Electricques since 1999. The event now involves over a hundred graffiti writers each year, dozens of skateboarders, break dancers and djays, which takes place over the course of several days, supplemented with music venues hosting rap and hip hop groups from across the United States and Canada. It is seen as the largest international hip hop and graffiti event in

North America, attracting writers from all over the world. Although still organized by local writers the event now has major corporate sponsors, however, as Seaz – one of the founding members of UP and organizers since 1996 – explains, the goal of the event has never been to make a profit, rather it has been to continue the tradition of



**Figure 2.21 Finished wall, Under Pressure 2007**

raising awareness of social issues and the graffiti subculture as well as maintaining close ties to those in the community which presently stretches across the globe<sup>18</sup>:

We were able to put up a hundred writers 12 years running pretty much<sup>19</sup>. Some of the same people come back, but the point is that they are invested in it, it's their event. It's not about changing it every year...if Kemt wants to get up years in a row...he's investing...he promotes it back in Boston. It's like he's a part of the family. Under Pressure is a family organization with a community around it. All the DJ's, 40 DJ's who play every year, they don't get paid. But these are all guys...the relationships you have to understand...guys like A-track...was 11 when I first met him...these are people who are friends and family to me who are like...we grew up in the street together...like Jordan Dare...I've known him since 1994...but that's

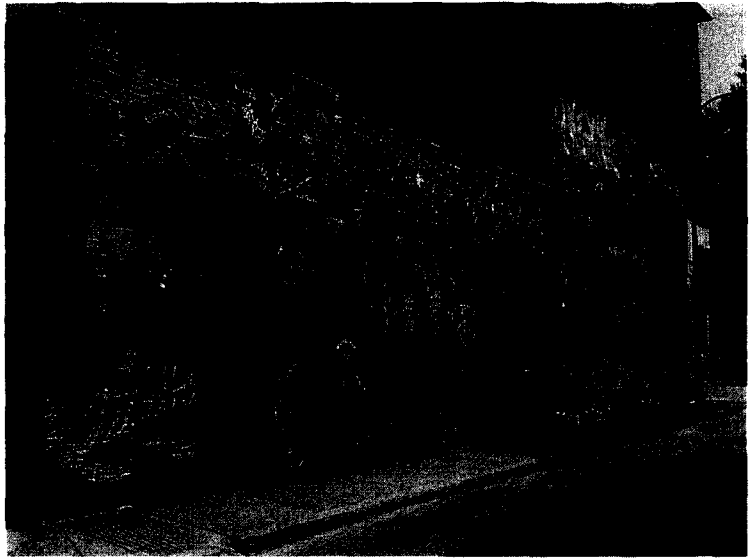
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<sup>18</sup> Although Under Pressure has had the support from sponsors over the years, putting together the event has grown difficult as costs have increased. 2009 was a particularly hard year for the organizers as they have fallen in debt and had to rely on the support of donations from the public in order to generate enough money to cover the cost of putting the event on. Several fund raisers were held and an internet pay pal account was set up to accept donations., including a facebook page dedicated to raising awareness of the need for donations. Even though enough funds were raised to put Under Pressure on for 2009 the organizers were still in debt. 2010 will prove to be another difficult year, however, the dedication of the organizers and volunteers and the donations from the community will most likely make Under Pressure happen again for years to come.

<sup>19</sup> This excerpt was from my interview with Seaz in January of 2008 so at this time the event had been running for 12 consecutive years (that following August would be its 13<sup>th</sup>). 2009 will mark Under Pressure's 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



The strength of the event's continued success clearly comes from the individuals who organize and contribute to it on a yearly basis. This event, however, has become more than just these individuals: it has created a legitimate platform from which writers can engage the public, provide an alternative



discourse against the negative

**Figure 2.22 Finished wall Under Pressure, 2008**

framing in the media, and raise awareness about social, economic, and political issues. Importantly, these benefits are in large part tied to the establishment of UP at a more permanent locale. It is a place where they manage the graffiti on a yearly basis –what goes up during Under Pressure stays up until the next event a year later –the respect that the event carries in the subculture protects the pieces. No one crosses them out<sup>20</sup>. A year later the organizers and volunteers paint over the previous year's graffiti in preparation for the graffiti to be done that year. The relationships that Seaz, Flow, and other writers have created with local businesses and the city of Montreal (now the Borough of Ville-Marie respectively) contributed greatly to the increase in commission and permission walls in the city – today there are easily over a hundred of these walls in a number of boroughs in and around the city. The continued success of UP effectively paved the way

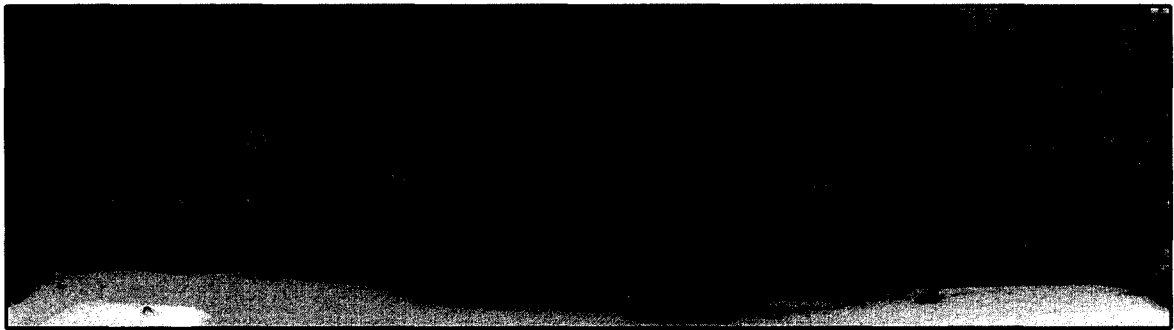
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<sup>20</sup> The day after UP 2009 several pieces were crossed out by someone tagging 'Jesus' (of which included pieces by OMEN and STRIKER). I spoke with STRIKER about this at MOS 2009 a couple of weeks later and he was at a loss as to who it may have been. Regardless, the crossing out of pieces at UP, MOS, or similar events is a rare occurrence.

for other events to take place in other parts of the city such as Lachine, NDG, and Outremont, including the recent Meeting of Styles that is the second largest international graffiti and hip hop event in North America.

### **Meeting of Styles (MOS)**

The original name of this event was “Wall Street Meeting” organised by Manuel Gerullis from Wiesbaden, Germany. In the early 1990s the abandoned slaughter house district in Wiesbaden became a popular painting spot. By the mid 1990s the city wanted to demolish the area for reconstruction so writers organized events to bring attention to the value this area had to the subculture and urban street culture in general. From 1997 to 2001 a number of events were held attracting over 25,000 spectators, however, this did not sway the local government from developing the area. In 2001 the city of Wiesbaden decided to destroy the grounds on which the event had previously taken place for a parking lot. Unhappy with the ignorance of the city council to the cultural importance of this place (and the events held there) Gerullis was inspired to take the event outside of the city limits<sup>21</sup>. Starting in 2002 ‘Meeting of Styles’ was created to spread the message of freedom of speech and creativity and from “order, control, and profit” of an uncaring



**Figure 2.23 Finished wall Meeting of Styles, 2006**

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<sup>21</sup> Information provided by the official website for Wall Street Meeting: <http://wallstreetmeeting.de>

will see this work and perhaps see the benefit having a mural on their walls too and as Seaz says they approach the writers and start to build lasting relationships that eventually turn into contract and paid work. These murals normally enjoy a long shelf life being recognized as permission work; however, not even these walls are untouchable. Cross outs do occur. Works done by respected Kings of the community or crews though do remain largely untouched as many local writers respect their work and style.

Commission walls are walls that the owner of a property or the proprietor of a business allows writers to paint on. Much like permission walls, these murals almost always reflect something about the business or building that they are done on. The difference between permission and commission walls is that the latter are paid works, normally negotiated by the writers doing the artistic work. They are as a result, however, of previous work the writer has accomplished and that is recognized by the surrounding community –be it business or private property owners. When starting out, these writers may negotiate as individuals, however, in time the writers can form a business as an individual or as a collective (as in their crew of writers). Prices for these walls could go for anything from a hundred to several thousand dollars. If these walls are done by respected writers who have paid their dues on the streets the murals remain mostly untouched. If they are done by someone who has not earned the street cred or if they have beef then there is a higher probability that their work will be crossed out or disrespected. Most other writers respect the contracts that others get and support their work, some even hope to do such work for themselves in the future. Examples of Commissioned works can be seen all over the city one only has to take a look at St. Laurent Street or throughout the Plateau, and borough of Ville-Marie.

system. Presently Meeting of Styles is held yearly in almost a dozen cities worldwide in a number of countries<sup>22</sup>. It is said to be the most successful international hip hop event in the world, coordinated in each city by organisers who manage their own budgets, volunteers, and arrangements for music, break dancing, and graffiti writing venues.

Since 2006, Montreal has been the site for a Meeting of Styles graffiti and hip hop jam organized by local writers<sup>23</sup>. This event has been described by those I interviewed as less formal than UP that attracts writers from many countries across the globe but is also one where many local writers



come together to paint, hang out, bbq, and drink<sup>24</sup>. Many of those who have painted at both events mention how they feel more comfortable at MOS. Regardless of these differences most writers respect the efforts and dedication of the organizers. Indeed, many writers would like to paint at one of these events if they had the skills and ability to do so.

**Figure 2.24 Finished wall Meeting of Styles, 2007**

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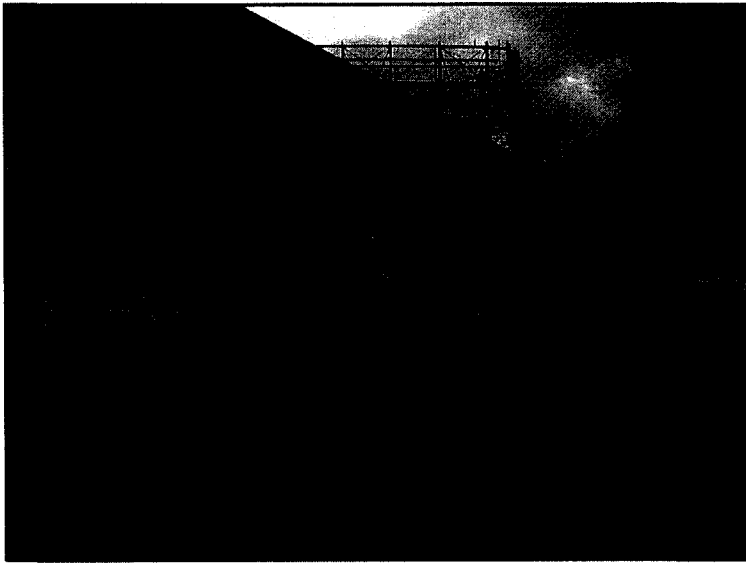
<sup>22</sup> Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, USA, Netherlands, England, Finland, Denmark, France, Canada, Belarus, Mexico, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Russia, and Brazil. Major cities and towns in all of these countries have hosted Meeting of Styles events over the last 6 years.

<sup>23</sup> In 2006 local writers Senk, Zek, and Criz156, who had just recently moved to Montreal got in contact with the MOS international crew and organized the first Montreal Meeting of Styles.

<sup>24</sup> Although it should be noted that for 2008 MOS there was quite the mix of local and non-local writers ranging from Bacon from Toronto, Norm from San Francisco, several writers from New York, and one from South America, not including those from various areas in Montreal.

In 2009 Montreal MOS hosted the NY based Crew TC5 (The Cool 5) for their 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as well as having other crews from the NY area, Europe, North, and South America. Several adjunct events were scheduled including an art show for TC5.

In 2006, one of the main locations for the event was on Bleury and St Catherine's Street. In 2008, MOS also had an open gallery day event on St Catherine's Street across



the street from Foufounes in the fenced off parking lot. What is more, organizers were able to acquire a more permanent venue in the Cote Saint Paul area owing to the fact that the location on Bleury has since been rezoned

**Figure 2.25 Finished wall Meeting of Styles, 2008**

for a building project. The

location in Cote Saint Paul area, negotiated by organisers and the property owners, is a massive industrial building on Cabot Street just next to St. Remi Street that will serve as a permanent location for the event to take place in the years to come. And with much thanks to the property owners for the location provided, MOS 2008 was by far the most impressive and largest Montreal MOS event yet rivalling the yearly draw of writers and artists that UP has garnered over the years. And this was accomplished in its third year running.

### **Official graffiti places as carnival**

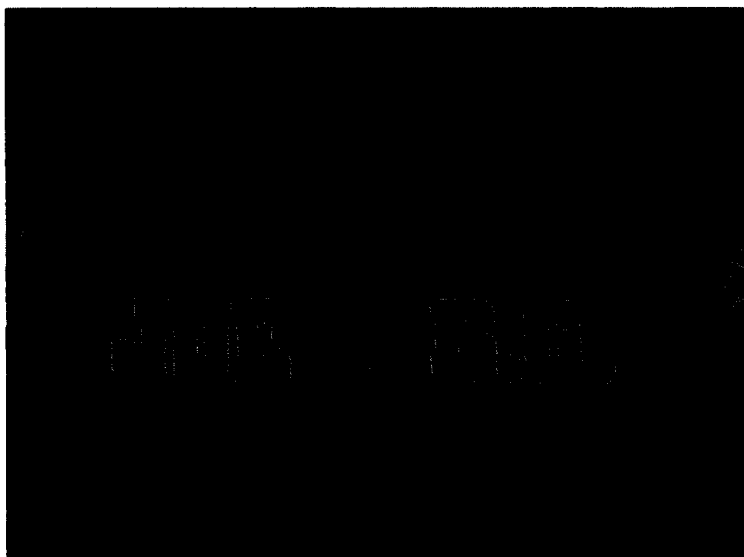
Both Under Pressure and Meeting of Styles share many similarities of carnival as Bakhtin described in his writings on popular festive forms. Both are held in what could be considered festive square type locations: they are public areas where the community of writers – both local and from afar – congregate along with other members of the hip hop

community and interested parties to celebrate art and music. In other words, they are conventions that condone the creativity of free and frank speakers where the space of the dominant order has been parted, even if with permission. Both of these event are not official festivals either. Although Under Pressure has been organized as a 'low brow' event having a yearly occurrence, it is not mentioned in any official brochures or travel catalogues the city produces (such as with the Jazz fest, Beer fest, or even the Gay Pride parade). Neither is Meeting of Styles recognized as such. Organizers must manage and seek funding themselves relying on volunteers, donated equipment and work space. Although the organizers take it seriously, the events are about creativity, community, and collaboration rather than profit (we see these characteristics in official festivals too, however, here it is in an unofficial form). More importantly these events take place only for a few days each year but they are nevertheless part of a larger subcultural force that permeates everyday life, which is practiced by many, offering an alternative to other officially recognized events and festivals. UP and MOS promote community values, collaboration between participants, and the expansion of the creative consciousness.

These locales are where free and frank speech takes place, where a form of billingsgate speech, grotesque abasement, and symbolic laughter can be practiced. Granted they are not as abusive or cursive in these venues as they would be on the streets, rooftops, and alleyways, or other unofficial locales of writing such as CBR or the TA Wall, however, it is an extension of the these characteristics discussed in chapter one. For instance, at MOS 2009 Heresy painted a piece of Jean Charest as a vampire wearing a shark cloak as a comment on how he views this local politician as a less than honest and fiendish public office holder. The crew K6A put together a production that involved

images of war, riot police, and a flaming Molotov cocktail as a comment on the politics of war and the police state in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Under Pressure has also had its fair share of themed productions and pieces relating to political, economic, social, historical, and even commemorative pieces for those of the community that have passed on. For instance in 2004 a writer had as the background to his piece the phrase: “trust no one –Bush” stencilled repetitively. Not every writer goes a step beyond just writing their name, however, there are those who have chosen to make a statement of a truth they believe to be important, and wish to communicate through their graffiti.

Commemorative pieces represent an important component to the collective memory of the Montreal graffiti subculture principally because they celebrate the importance of an individual or place to the local hip hop community. They are



**Figure 2.26 Joe BG commemorative Piece, TA Wall Nov 2007**

remembered through an alternative form and channel rather than that of a newspaper, popular magazine, or an officially recognized ritual such as a funeral. Instead they are represented or referred to by those who knew them or identified with them.

Writers in the community tag RIPs and add shout outs on their pieces to pay homage and respect to those who have passed. Commemorative pieces, then, are a method of preserving historical icons in the subculture and transmit the importance of particular

places and people to others in the community. For instance, in 2007 the death of the local rapper Joe BG in a house fire prompted a number of commemorative murals, tags, and pieces. He was commemorated not only through RIP tags, a large mural piece was done at the TA Wall and a finely crafted RIP piece was done at Under Pressure as well. I have come across several other

RIPs in the last few years of research for Zuel, Trop, and Avers, as well as the old Jenkins Factory in Lachine that writers decided to commemorate as an important graffiti place in the years following its



**Figure 2.27 RIP Zuel Piece, TA Factory April 2006**

demolition. There are many others too, whether for a fellow writer, family member,

This again displays how these places provide for alternative truths and knowledge to be shared and universalized, how they are places where writers can congregate to debase and lower the official truths that they are subjected to in the everyday, and where they can laugh –even if only symbolically – at this system in a sanctioned public locale. The pieces that they paint do not debase the property (like those discussed in chapter one), however, some do make critiques that subvert ideological forms, symbols, and icons and in the case of commemorative pieces replace those ideals and icons with others that the writing community consider to be of equal or even greater importance for their contributions to the subculture.



## **Permission and Commission walls**

The popularity of these types of walls came about in large part because of the efforts of individual writers and crews who sought out property and business owners. By offering their services as artists to paint walls of their establishments they helped these owners deal with the problem their walls getting tagged by random writers in the area. Permission and commission walls are in essence legal walls –they are places where graffiti writers have been given permission to do artistic works by the owners of the property on which they are done. Unlike legal walls that the city has provided young graffiti writers to paint as a way to promote graffiti art instead of the illegal variety, permission and commission walls have been up until recently entirely writer based<sup>25</sup>.

Permission walls are created when an owner of a property or a proprietor of business permits a writer or a crew to paint their wall or walls. Usually the writers are local and know the proprietors: the former approach them and offer their services as artists to do the walls. These walls gained increased popularity in early to mid 90s after writers in crews like CBF, TA, and KOPS sought out contracts and permission from local businesses and property owners. These contacts were, for the most part, founded on their already knowing the property owners in most cases, however, at times when the young writer garnered enough courage to go and ask the property owner they got a wall to paint on. As Seaz described the mind-set of a writer, much like he had thought when he and his crew members were establishing themselves in the 90s:

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<sup>25</sup> The recent involvement of the borough of Ville-Marie in providing assistance to Graff-X is the one example I have been come across in my research. It can be imagined that the success of this project will encourage other boroughs to adopt similar programs in their strategies aimed at lessening graffiti.

‘well hell I’ve been doing this so long now I want to take more time to do things, I’m getting bored with running around only having 4 hours of paint time...I’m just gonna ask somebody... I’m not gonna run, I’m just gonna go and... there’s this coffee shop I drink at all the time, there’s a wall in the back, it’s already got tones of throw ups on it, I’m friends with the property owner, I’m like ‘hey if you ever , instead of keep cleaning that, if you want I’ll paint a mural on that, just let me do whatever the hell I want on that, it won’t be something offensive or generate negative attention, if you want just give me a wall and I’ll make sure no one ever tags on it again.’ Ok paint for me guys, here’s a permission wall. But it’s because I know the owner or I become friends with the owner. At 22 I know that that person is already going to say yes to me. So I’m not going to get discouraged. Then you build up a self esteem, you build up a reputation. And 2 or three walls in the Plateau...other business owners see you doing that approach you and hey.... That’s how we built all of our business, Urban Expressions. Don’t’ forget, graffiti writers, what do they do? They go and buy paint and go and paint for free, illegally, knowing that it will be removed tomorrow, or the next day, or on a train that they will paint over it. So it’s not about profit, it’s about expression –for the sake of personal interests. So it’s not about contracts, it’s a permission thing.

There is no monetary gain in permission walls; if anything they may get their paint paid for by the proprietor. These walls usually have murals done on them, sometimes reflecting something of the business or building. Or sometimes the writer is



Figure 2.28 Permission wall by TrifeLife crew, Plateau 2005

given the choice what to paint, respecting racial, ethnic, and gender lines, not being racist, demeaning, or insulting. These permission walls can provide spaces for writers to do more than just tagging and throw ups: it gives them a chance to

advertise their capabilities as artists using a graffiti or hip hop aesthetic. Other proprietors

Permission and commission walls have become hugely popular in Montreal over the past decade with many writers finding part time to full time employment doing artistic works throughout the city. Although writers, even in the later years of their careers and even though they have established themselves doing respected murals and other works for businesses and private collectors, still do illegal works on the street because of the need to retain 'street cred' and not appear to be a 'sell out' to others in the community (the tensions that exist as a result of this in-between-ness will be discussed further in chapter 3). Writers such as Zek, Fluke, Kaseko, Omen, and Akira<sup>26</sup> are several individuals I have interviewed who are prime examples of writers who have bridged the gap between the street and private work doing graffiti or hip hop based art.

It is important to note that in relation to graffiti places, permission and commissioned works allow graffiti writers to insert themselves into the historical project of the city in that the work that they have accomplished becomes a part of the surrounding urban environment. It beautifies city space, and since their work remains up for extended periods of time they gain recognition for their artistic capabilities as artists rather than vandals. This is also a shift in how the subculture is perceived by the public. Indeed, many commissioned walls from as early as the mid 1990s are still present in parts of the city today. These walls are not places in the same respect as those previously discussed; however, they provide writers many of the same benefits as those attained through the gaining of place: namely the capacity to engage with the public and private

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<sup>26</sup> Zek is a member of a number of crews, of which TrifeLife, that he does mural work with on a regular basis, Fluke is part of TA, however, represents himself as an artist, Kaseko is a graphic designer who has taken his artistic talents from graffiti and elsewhere and opened his own internet webpage design business, Omen has done a number of works for businesses in Montreal who along with Akira and Fluke have become successful artists selling private works to collectors and galleries. Indeed these writers have made a successful leap into the art realm selling canvassed artworks from their street work.

spheres from a more legitimate platform and the development of an historical trajectory that has provided the basis for the subculture to make a claim to being a genuine cultural entity and not just a group of unruly vandals. Permission and Commission walls also help writers build lasting and meaningful relationships with local governments, proprietors, and others in their communities.

## **Conclusion**

Unofficial graffiti places are more than just abandoned or unused areas of the city. They are rich in social meaning and are sites of cultural production. They are dialogical, invested with the voices of multiple authors and artists, each unique in form and style. They are historical referents for individuals who build identities through personal investment into the social construction of these places. Official graffiti places are also much more than just locales where writers have been sanctioned publicly or privately to conduct graffiti art. They legitimate graffiti as an art form to the majority of the public who are unable to fully appreciate the artistic qualities of street based graffiti or that practiced in unofficial places such as the TA Wall. The dedication and investment of these writers to the cultural production of graffiti on a regular, if not every day, basis has transformed these places into subcultural sites of meaning and history. As regards official graffiti sites, the level of open negotiation that takes places between members of the subculture and those working in the city, law enforcement, businesses, and other private property holders is a major determinant legitimating graffiti as a mode of expression.

Official graffiti places are a little different but no less utopian than the unofficial ones. They are areas in which writers and others in the subculture have been able to

obtain as a result of their manoeuvring within the laws and legal infrastructure of the city and through relationships with its officials and surrounding businesses. They are openly sanctioned places where writers are able to practice graffiti inspired art and congregate for events on a yearly basis. But they are contained, unlike unofficial graffiti places that have the capacity to spread outwards. However it could be argued that unofficial places are contained as well, but instead of having concrete boundaries enacted by laws and agreements between the city and those who run the events, they are bound by the environment that they are a part of. For instance, the TA Wall is bound by 2 exits that under the expressway, abandoned buildings are enclosed graffiti areas, CBR is enclosed as well, however, graffiti can still spread more freely than say UP or MOS.

The most important aspect of these places is that they offer the graffiti subculture a basis from which to attach an historical trajectory from, a physical locale that extends their permanence over time. They are reservoirs of collective memory that members both add to and draw upon on a regular basis. The subculture is able to thrive and command action, movement, and to better position itself in relation to the dominant order. They remember figures of their subculture by creating graffiti memorials in these places; they produce their versions of the world through color and style, and speak freely through their graffiti. These places are also locales where alternative truths and knowledge can be shared by subcultural members. Through symbolic forms of laughter, the debasement of ideological forms, icons, and official truths, subcultural members have constructed a sort of carnivalesque web of loosely connected locales that provide alternative avenues of self expression and creativity.

A fundamental tension exists between the strategy of the city to impose order over those who exist within its borders, including the graffiti subculture (or subcultures in general), that generate micro-strategies in an attempt to build their own history through their own means. One way this is done through the gaining of physical locales –official and unofficial in the city –by acquiring place. These places, though, are only semi-permanent locales that the city through re-territorialization (reconstruction, re-development, gentrification, etc.). This is evidenced by the rise and fall of Red Path: during the 1990’s this locale served as important meeting area for writers to paint and hang out together, where a great deal of graffiti was done, and was a place that the subculture came to recognize as having historical significance. But it was taken back, redeveloped into lofts and condos. As well, Turcot yards, the TA Wall, and factory are soon to be redeveloped. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the TA wall area just survived a recent buffing campaign in late 2009. The original MOS area on Bleury and St. Catherine’s has been slated for redevelopment so it no longer will be held at that locale. But new areas are always being located and incorporated, both officially and unofficially –for instance the new MOS area on Cabot Street that writers were able to work out with a local businessman.

Micro-strategies also have to be adaptive; it is not enough just to have “place” to extend power. So writers have learned to ‘play the game’ so to speak by making relationships with local governments and businesses in order to gain official places like MOS and UP. They have learned the laws so as to know the extent of their rights in these situations. Perhaps the city has learnt that it cannot just buff graffiti out –it is far too

costly and resource intensive<sup>27</sup>. Instead graffiti cooperatives and projects are developed where they enlist the services of older writers looking to do more than just street work to work with local youth in teaching them the ups and downs, in and outs of doing graffiti to stem the amount of new kids coming into the subculture. They have started mural programs that both act to deter tagging on city and business walls and beautify the city with a hip hop aesthetic. This is in a sense a form of absorption of a subversive subculture into the capitalistic fold. It does not remove the entirety of the subversive practice but it does change the trajectory of its movement, it fractures the subculture from only being on the street and illegal into new parts: illegal and street vs. legal and city which brings writers more into the public eye.

The next chapter will move this discussion of alternative places and spaces forward by addressing the political dimensions of graffiti writing. In looking at this question the third chapter will deal specifically with elements of participative and political citizenship through graffiti writing and street art. Graffiti has offered some writers in Montreal the opportunity to become more involved in community projects as participative citizens. At the same time, graffiti remains a very individual and political act meant to antagonize and disrupt the socio-economic habitus of the everyday. In exploring these political dimensions the limits of both types of graffiti –official and unofficial –as well as the tensions that each bring to the public and subcultural communities will be discussed.

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<sup>27</sup> NDG, the largest and most populated borough in Montreal, spent upwards of \$700,000 to remove graffiti in 2009. The borough of Ville-Marie spent close to 1 million dollars in 2009 for programs to remove and deter graffiti in the city.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Citizenship Politics and Political Citizenship in the Montreal Graffiti Subculture**

#### **Introduction**

The first two chapters examined how graffiti writers and street artists have a different type of gaze of place and space in the city: how their tactical maneuvers create alternate –or utopian –possibilities that redefine the imposed socio-economic order of the everyday and subvert material culture and discourse. It was further shown how they have developed a micro-strategy through the claiming of both official and unofficial places that have given them the opportunity to insert themselves into the historical project of the city. In this chapter it will be argued that graffiti writers are emergent political beings who are both participative and political citizens. Graffiti offers some writers the opportunity to explore alternative routes to becoming more involved in community affairs and politically active in society. First, a general definition of citizenship will be taken from the recent work by Isin, Dyers, Turner, and White (2009). Several different forms of contemporary citizenship that manifest in everyday city life will be described – specifically, active citizenship, participative citizenship, and creative citizenship – displaying the need to think more critically about how individuals contribute to larger societal project. Second, framing graffiti as an element of citizenship politics means understanding it as an act as well as a practice. Bakhtin offers theoretical insight here for understanding graffiti as an act of rupture and how it has helped writers attain a level of transcendence over the constraints of the everyday. This will be explored through Bakhtin’s theoretical design and through the testimonies of some local writers. The final sections of this chapter will be devoted to exploring graffiti writers as both participative



and political citizens who challenge contemporary understandings of how individuals can become involved in their community. As participative citizens some graffiti writers have become increasingly involved in community and city affairs through their work inhabiting roles that put them in positions where they interact with local youth, business and property owners, city officials and community administrators. Through government and commercial channels they have been able to position themselves as participative members of society through their graffiti-based activities: they procure contracts with local businesses and property owners to paint murals and artistic works on walls and they work with community organizers and city officials to put on workshops and other related events for local youth. On the other hand, as political citizens, graffiti writers invoke the spirit of a political voice through creative acts that disrupt the habitus of the everyday. They use graffiti as a way to speak back to and lash out at the imposed order, to reclaim a sense of self-identity, and to strategize for a better position within its boundaries both historically and economically. They 'break the law' by painting illegally on city surfaces, they 'vandalize' property, they trespass, and openly engage in tactics of resistance against the imposed order that seeks to control them through the strategic movements and the apparatus of the law.

On one level graffiti is tactical and strategic; writers are engaged in subversive practices that undermine the authority of the imposed system. On another level graffiti engenders a culture of politics where the individual can become more of a participative citizen through creative community projects or become a political citizen through acts that rupture the normative framework on which the everyday is fundamentally based on. How do writers further micro-strategize through participative relations with business and

property owners as well as local governments? And how does graffiti writing move beyond subversive tactics and rupture the everyday through illegal and antagonistic acts?

### **Thinking about active and political citizenship**

Citizenship has generally been understood as the legal status an individual receives as being born or accepted into the borders of a nation-state which includes the protection of that state and the right to vote, and/or hold political office in that state. Critical citizenship studies have posited that there is a strong relation between practices, the articulation of claims, and the formation of subjectivities which has had the effect of producing a great deal of studies focused on “routines, rituals, customs, norms, and habits of the everyday through which subjects become citizens” and “has demonstrated effectively that virtues are cultivated, that citizenship is not inherited but learned, and that cultivating citizenship requires establishing supportive and relatively enduring practices and institutions.” (Isin, 2009: 17 quoting Allman and Beaty 2002)

Active citizenship is generally understood as a form of civil citizenship involving the participation of the individual in regular everyday activities within the legal boundaries provided by the nation-state that accord him with certain rights and responsibilities. He is given the protection of the nation-state both in health and as a legal subject, and the right to pursue any avenue of economic, social, or political office. In turn he has the responsibility to participate in political process: to vote, pay taxes, uphold and obey the law, and generally to be a ‘good citizen.’ As an active citizen the individual participates more in the legal sense of things. As a participating citizen he is understood as being involved on a level above that of the regular civility expected of the politics of citizenship. Turner and Hamilton point out that a participative citizen is someone who has

a strong sense of belonging to a community (or city), “with a special emphasis upon the communalized political city, a strongly dominant public commitment...and a recognition of duties as a normal means of claiming rights” (1994:159). According to this definition being a participative citizen entails the claim to responsibilities and rights in the legal sense, but it also means to be involved in the community and to have a strong commitment to public activity. A participative citizen is someone who seeks out something more interactive with the place and community that he is a part of, he seeks inclusion on a higher level than what his legal standing as a citizen offers.

In recent years it has been put forth that there is much more at work within the context of how citizens define who they are and how the struggles that they go through in trying to define themselves in relation to the states, cities, and environments they live in as well as in the claims they make to having rights beyond the regular every day practices of civility and citizenship. Following Isin, Nyers, and Turner it is here established that instead of attempting to define citizenship we should instead elucidate what it is about:

Citizenship is about political subjectivity. Not one or the other but both: political and subjectivity. Citizenship enables political subjectivity. Citizenship opens politics as a practice of contestation (agon) through which subjects become political. Understanding citizenship as political subjectivity requires political, sociological and critical imagination. (2008:1)

As Isin notes, “we know virtually nothing about how subjects become claimants when they are least expected or anticipated to do so. Granted, for subjects to become claimants they must have been embodying certain practices.” (2008: 17) He points to the feminist and civil rights movements as examples of cultivated practices of cultural resistance, but notes that these movements transformed individuals into claimants of rights in relatively short periods of time. Citizenship politics and political citizenship share a fundamental

similarity of being cultivated in enduring practices and institutions, however, where the former is based solely in practiced everyday behaviour, the latter is found in acts that rupture behavioural norms and challenge existing modes of everyday practices.

Citizenship politics is located in the routinized and the regular; it is the product of a long history of bureaucratic and legal reform that has carved into the individual the 'proper' and normative frame of behaviour. Political citizenship on the other hand is located in the heroic and courageous, it is formed out of the acts of individuals and groups who sometimes find themselves in extreme and/or violent conditions that force them to make a decision to either follow the rules or break them. Political citizenship in its essence is an act that challenges the existing habitus and forces cognition from others to explore the reasoning behind such acts. In exploring the reasoning behind these acts, why these acts occur and why certain individuals and groups commit such acts, we start to question rights and responsibilities, rights in place and space, and why these things are what they are.

Isin puts forth three principles in his investigation of acts of citizenship that are the basic requirements for an act to be considered of the citizenship variety. The first being that we must "interpret them through their grounds and consequences, which includes subjects becoming activist citizens through scenes created." (2008: 38) That is, we must situate acts in the context in which they occur –it is not enough to situate them objectively. Acts create actors who create scenes where things happen. The subjective standpoint of the actor must also be understood in order to fully articulate and grasp the reasoning behind such acts and the effects that these actions have on the surrounding environment including those other individuals who become involved in such scenes. The

second states “that acts produce actors that become answerable to justice against injustice.” (2008: 39) This is an important stipulation because the actors who create these scenes do not necessarily have to have a purpose or motive aimed at addressing a particular injustice –their actions can make them answerable after the fact. The interpretation of their actions by others who become involved in the scenes they create develop this orientation, they do not “need to originate in the name of anything” (2008: 39) at all. The third recognizes “that acts of citizenship do not need to be founded in law or enacted in the name of the law.” (2008: 38-39) Indeed, acts of citizenship can break the law, they can challenge the authority, and they can challenge normative behaviours, beliefs, and every day practices in relation to the law. In doing this acts of citizenship point out the inadequacies of the prevailing imposed order and how the system of law may be more unjust than just. In breaking the law, acts of citizenship have the capacity to force cognition from others concerning social, political, or economic injustices suffered by an individual or group of people by such an inadequate system or body of law that would otherwise go unnoticed if left to the routinized behavioural management at the core of everyday practices.

Isin and others point to the need to re-think citizenship studies. To go beyond the study of practices of citizenship, they provide the grounds for subjectivities and claims, and think about how acts produce creative ruptures in the habitus of the everyday and produce social transformation. Creative acts, following White, are those encounters between persons or between persons and things where “in the encounter one exercises a degree of choice over whether to act one way and not the other” (2008: 54) and where a leap of faith is taken “that allows us to explore forms of expression whose outcomes are

not always already calculated in advance... where the answer to the question of action is not already assumed... one must pose the question, and in response, one must leap with uncertainty.”<sup>1</sup> (2008:54) Importantly, White points to creative acts as being “‘openings’ where citizens break or destabilize the bonds of habitual activity, and, in doing so, unleash a creative energy” (2008: 53) breathing new life into an otherwise static lived experience. He adds that this new and creative mode of thought and expression can, and would most likely become, habituated over time as well. White’s creative act of citizenship is an interesting point of departure with concern to thinking how acts have the capacity to rupture the everyday.

### **Graffiti writers and citizenship**

How can graffiti, or the practices and acts of those responsible for graffiti, help us to further elucidate what citizenship *means* to some rather than simply defining it as Isin says? Graffiti writers are tactical and strategic in their illicit and clandestine practices; however, they also inhabit political roles that make them more than just subjects as de Certeau sees the consuming public. As political beings graffiti writers break the habitus of the everyday, they challenge generally held notions of authority, law, property, and behavior in public space –in effect, *they rupture the everyday*. Particularly I want to show how de Certeau lacks the language necessary to explain how tactics in practice become ruptures, how the bending of rules eventually leads to those rules being broken, and with that break writers enter a new realm –that of the political. As well, I want to explore how practices tied to ‘micro-strategy’ (as described in the previous chapter) can lead the individual to a more fulfilling career of graffiti based art as a participative citizen. This

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<sup>1</sup> White builds this idea of creative acts from the reading of Bergson’s writings on creative emotions that break habitual actions of individuals who blindly follow social obligations. He contended that an emotional upheaval could disrupt the habitual nature of the everyday individual.

lack of a language capable of engendering the type of political discussion surrounding graffiti does not take away from Certeau's work, rather, it provides us with the opportunity to relate and link his work on tactics and strategies in the practices of the everyday to new understandings of participative and political citizenship. It also provides us the chance to extend the discussion surrounding strategic practices of graffiti writers in the Montreal subculture beyond place and into a political realm.

For Certeau, subjects –or consumers –engaged in everyday practices are active citizens who at any given point in the day bend the rules and cleverly maneuver around existing laws and normative behaviors in an effort to claim small victories over their every day lived experiences. Through tactical practices they achieve a certain sense of control and independence from the imposed system that governs and guides them spatially and temporally. Graffiti writers have been shown to be tactical in nature; where the practice of graffiti writing provides for these types of small victories in the everyday for those who pursue such activities. At its essence, however, graffiti is vandalism of private and public property and is considered to be an illegal and criminal act. It is an act that ruptures the everyday as much as it manipulates and subverts the imposed norm. Although Certeau mentions graffiti in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he only speaks of it in reference to “trees of gestures” that transform and displace “the analytical, coherent proper meanings of urbanism” (1984: 102) –he utilizes graffiti as a metaphorical example:

we could mention the fleeting images, yellowish-green and metallic blue calligraphies that howl without voices emblazon themselves on the subterranean passages of the city, “embroideries” composed of letters and numbers, perfect gestures of violence painted with a pistol, Shivas made of written characters, dancing graphics whose fleeting apparitions are accompanied by the rumble of subway trains: New York graffiti. (1984: 102)

Certainly his work was not dedicated to this subculture; he was looking more at a more general idea of everyday practiced resistance. Therefore, in addressing graffiti as a rebellious component of the individual's need to vocalize, express, and recreate space in a new and more identifiable form under the imposed order he is making more of a passing reference than a major argumentative point.

As an act graffiti produces political citizens who through their actions call out the inadequacies of the imposed order, give voice to the voiceless (or silenced), and create possibilities for alternative discourses surrounding place, space, and the rights that the citizenry has in public and private situations. The act of graffiti also opens the writer up to the possibility of transcending to a state of higher awareness of self and his or her relation to society. Each act of graffiti in practice can be understood as bringing the individual to a more cognizant level of being, what Bakhtin called *event being* (1993). If an act of graffiti can be considered to be a political act of citizenship then how is it similar or dissimilar to those acts of citizenship seen in the related literature? Is the graffiti covered in this research an interesting example of this or not and why? If it could be understood as being an act that brings the individual to a higher cognizant state of self awareness in the everyday then to what degree is this happening with those I have interviewed? How do the writer's I have interviewed understand their actions as bringing them closer to understanding themselves in the everyday and how does this make them more or less answerable for their actions? In the complexity of the urban system where the individual has become increasingly isolated and buried in the flashing images, discourse, and monotonous movements of operating in the everyday, we need to find new, alternative, and flexible understandings of what it is to be a political being.



Graffiti writers are both participative and political citizens; some even inhabit both realms concurrently, as practicing members of participatory events and projects and as clandestine rule-breakers who commit acts of vandalism on private and public property. In looking at practice and citizenship I am interested in exploring how some writers have become participative citizens in their communities through their graffiti based activities. How has their involvement in graffiti offered them the opportunity to be a productive and participative member in their community and how is that active participation linked to the concept of micro-strategy in chapter two? In looking at acts and citizenship I am interested in exploring how graffiti writers become claimants of rights through their acts of graffiti and to how these acts rupture everyday norms and values surrounding place and space in the city. These ideas of participative and political citizenship are also intertwined with a transcendence that is obtained through acts of graffiti and the practicing of graffiti based/inspired art. It is a quality that the discussion of graffiti as tactic and strategy is unable to fully articulate namely because it positions the individual as a subject of the imposed system. Transcendence involves the subject *moving beyond tactics and strategies* and becoming a participative or political being, one who realizes their capacity to effect change, to have a voice, to be a part of or to oppose the system rather than being subject to its everyday machinations.

### **Transcending the Everyday through Graffiti**

Not every writer I spoke to understood graffiti or the act of their doing graffiti as a political action. Some never even spoke about the overtly political essence of graffiti, rather, like Zek, Fluke, and Monk-e for instance, they spoke about how graffiti had become more of a vocation for them, a career job that they could do to support their life

style or family<sup>2</sup>. Writers and artists like Hest, Giver, Zilon, and Kaseko, also saw the value of graffiti and art as a way of attaining some sort of transcendence from the everyday, how each act of painting a piece, or the practice of piecing, somehow brought them closer to understanding something of themselves as social or political beings.

The invocation of the term transcendence differs from how tactics provided a mild release from the everyday, a sense of freedom from imposed spatial and temporal controls by putting one over on the man, or a clever subversion of the dominant system of language. Here the use of transcendence is more about attaining a greater understanding of the self in relation to society, in relation to the places and spaces that are created by individual acts and practices of graffiti writers.

This transcendental quality is not entirely political but it does open the individual up to the possibilities of becoming politicized in the everyday through their actions. It is at this juncture that the writer realizes his potential to be a participative citizen in the community. Particularly, there is a point that the writer reaches where he comes to understand a degree of answerability for his actions and how those actions lend to a greater dialogue concerning rights in place and space in the city. And it is this transcendental quality that leads us into the discussion of rupture or the rupturing of the everyday practices that Certeau was concerned with. Finally, it is at this juncture that he realizes the potential that graffiti has to rupture the practices of the everyday and provide him with a political voice in that same community.

Giver explained how graffiti has provided him with a greater sense of self and has given him this voice:

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<sup>22</sup> Zek has been independently working his art as career since 2006, Fluke for several years, and Monk-e has been supporting himself with his art as a career for about 4 years.

Transcending that aspect of...consciousness...that's a level of it but beyond that there's like other evolutions or spheres...it's like you're born, you rely on your mother to live and then you get bigger and you recognize other people in your family, you're a family centric being, and then all of a sudden there's other families around you, friends, and you're a socio-centric being, and then all of a sudden...you're in a job...you're...a city wide being, municipal being, then you become a political figure and you're sort of a national being and then from a national being you can become an international consciousness. And then there's global-collective-world consciousness. And graffiti exists on each of those levels...and at some point you transcend the self and no longer an ego-centric, socio-centric being where you no longer only identify with your peers and yourself...at some point you shed your ego...and that's where I think that's the next level of graffiti ... you shed the name you're just the voice of the people.

For Hest, transcendence is something linked to his evolution in the everyday and intimately related to the graffiti and graffiti-art that he produces:

...you need to evolve, on an everyday basis...and also...for the reflection for the things that you have for your life...for your dreams, your expectation...8 Steps to Infinity was for us, was trying bring something new, different...original and with meaning...with the poems, the words taking from the poems...and with the visual explaining something. The whole story wall by wall...starting from the dark to evolve to the light, there was a lot of philosophy behind it.

Doing graffiti and art are things that allow him to reflect and weigh upon who he is as an individual, the trajectory that he is taking in his life, and a way to express aspects of his inner self that he is otherwise unable to articulate in his day-to-day activities. The project he mentions here, *8 Steps to Infinity*, was a commissioned mural project where he teamed with Turfl and a local hip hop artist named Lou Piensa in the summer of 2001<sup>3</sup>.

According to creativecity.ca *8 steps to Infinity* involved:

8 murals done over 8 weeks in the Plateau neighbourhood...Alchemy is the theme of the project, with words and images used to convey hope through the transformation of the negative to the positive. This theme will be developed

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<sup>3</sup> Guest writers Monk-e and Dyske were also involved in several of the murals.

through an 8 stanza poem which will serve as the uniting thread for the murals. The last mural will be the largest, and will be painted as a collaboration between all the artists involved in the project.

Projects like 8 steps to infinity not only had a participative element but the seeds of a political one as well. Hest Speaks about how graffiti has helped him realize his creative potential and voice within himself:

[I] never did graffiti to make money, to be famous, but to be free. And to live in my imagination, cause as Einstein said, Imagination is greater than intelligence...and for me imagination is the kind of solution for all of our problems in the world. I mean so we talk more about it...but the thing is I am still trying to preserve the graffiti that I love and the one that gives me the opportunity to be free and to have a voice...

Zilon, one of the earliest graffiti writers from Montreal<sup>4</sup> who now is a regularly featured artist at Yves-Laroche Gallery in Old Montreal, explained that:

I want to approach pureness somewhere. Painting and whatnot, is not pure for me...it is something you add up, you add, you add over it, if you don't like, you add over it...a drawing, if you don't like it, you rip it up.

Kaseko reached a point where he had to make a choice: to pursue graffiti on the streets or to continue on to another trajectory where he could start developing his talents into something more. Making this choice put him in a difficult position but it also led him to question who he was as a person and the value in what he was trying to accomplish:

And it's hard too, 'cause at one point you have to keep doing graffiti, or stop, or change it. And that defines who you are again. There are people who are

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<sup>4</sup> Zilon spoke about having done 'street art' –the term he preferred to call graffiti and related street writings, drawings, and characters –since the 1980s and 90s. His signature faces and name were some of the earliest in Montreal along with Akira and others. He believes that he was one of the first who came out doing something more aesthetic –beyond the simple derogatory or politically based scrawling. At that time he said he “was doing a lot of painting...I was learning, I was finding my identity...I started to do performance art.” He broke his arm doing a show and when his arm came back into use he started drawing “I did a couple of lines, and I felt like it was a sort of revelation, falling in love, I felt that this was...I found my identity...when my right hand came back, I started to do those drawing with marker...like a couple of lines...minimal...my uncle from his garage gave me some spray paint, I started to do spray paint in the back courtyard of some schools of Laval...” And from there he took his painting to the city, did live painting and performances at various bars, including Foufounes Electriques, and eventually adopted the name Zilon.

still bombing at 35 and in that mentality...they love graffiti and that's not wrong. But at some point graffiti catches up with you and pushes you, questions who you are and how you see the world.

In the last chapter Kaseko, Seaz, and others were so emotionally moved by the redevelopment of Redpath that they actively pursued its preservation and the possibility of an outdoor museum made from materials from the site itself. What these quotes display is the development in these writers of an understanding of the self outside of the self, the wanton of creating something meaningful and different through their graffiti, and the realization that they have a voice that can become manifest through their actions. There is no definitive belief that they can change the opinions of others, however, they are sure to the belief that what they are doing connects them to others and to the greater socio-political dialogue of society, and that what they are doing has or is changing them, developing a heightened or extended awareness of themselves and their surroundings.

It is also the realization that with their maturity they have become increasingly invested in everyday life. Many of the writers I interviewed had come to a decisive point in their careers when they have to move on from doing illegal street work, or at the very least, curtail their street activities, as they are more liable to legal troubles, some have families and have kids to think about, full time jobs, careers, etc. Their increased investment has forced them to consider the ramifications of their actions, to be answerable for their actions, to answer for the transgressions that they do. For those who find themselves highly invested in the promise of being able to make a career out of the artistic skills and network connections that they have acquired on the streets is something that they cannot resist.

## **Citizenship politics in graffiti: graffiti writers as participative citizens**

Of the graffiti writers that I interviewed almost all of them had been involved in community events as participants<sup>5</sup>, and more than half of them had been involved in events as either a volunteer or in some organizational role<sup>6</sup>. As well, these individuals were involved in a number of community or city projects producing murals and putting on workshops aimed at teaching local youth artistic techniques in style and form, the ‘proper’ way of doing graffiti on the streets if it is something that they are already doing or plan on doing at one point, and the consequences of doing illegal street graffiti and art. There are a number of high schools and community centers across the island that have murals done on the outside walls that local writers have participated in doing with the students and local youth over the last 15 years<sup>7</sup>. For most being a participant in city based projects was more financially oriented in that the local boroughs had hired them to fulfill such duties<sup>8</sup>, however, being involved in these roles allowed them to enter into new networks with community organizers, the youth in these communities, writers, and artists that became a secondary benefit beyond the pay check. Importantly it should be noted of

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<sup>5</sup> Akira, Bez, Fluke, HeR, Hest, Isa, Kaseko, Roadsworth, Orion, Produkt, Giver, Monk-e, Omen, Seaz, Asek, Senk, Stack, Turfl, Vesk, and Zeck.

<sup>6</sup> Of particular note are Hest, Seaz, Senk, Fluke, and Zeck. These writers have had deeply involved roles as organizers and major participants in many of the large ticket events, gallery shows, and community or city projects. Hest and Zeck were also employed as social workers with the City of Montreal around 2001 and helped young would-be graffiti writers learn about graffiti, how to do it better, and understand the possible consequences of their actions.

<sup>7</sup> Writers tend to proclaim that they were the first to do something or do graffiti at a particularly popular spot. Interestingly, Akira mentioned how he and fellow crew members of CBF were one of the first to do such a project for Westmount High School in 1995. Seaz also mentioned how he others in TA were the first to start permission walls in the downtown area around the same time. It is safe to say that both CBF and TA crews who were current with each other were most likely both involved in some of the first projects in communities with schools, local businesses and borough governments at about this time in Montreal.

<sup>8</sup> Hest noted how he had been paid upwards towards \$2000 a month plus materials when working in the Plateau on the Terminus 1525 project “8 Steps to Infinity” in 2001, Stack had mentioned being paid for his participation in another city graffiti project in 2005. The Terminus 1525 project was also in collaboration with the Canada Arts Council so there was a good deal of funding from the federal government as well as the private sector.

the intermediary role that some private and many public benefactors have played in assisting many writers enter into their participatory roles –such as Café Graffiti, Yves Laroche Gallery<sup>9</sup>, and the public affairs offices of a number of the city’s boroughs. There have certainly been others; however, from the period that my research was done, these were the most significant. As well, this is not to dismiss the intermediary roles that writers themselves have come to inhabit such as those behind Under Pressure, Meeting of Styles, Le Kop Shop<sup>10</sup>, and their involvement in a myriad of projects and events over the years that have lent to the long term goal of increasing awareness of what hip hop culture is, including graffiti as one of its central pillars.

Many of those who participate in these events and projects are also still active on the streets; however, there are some who admitted a conflict of interest when doing street work at the same time as doing officially sanctioned workshops and murals involving local youth. As Stack mentioned when working for a graffiti project in 2005 for the City of Montreal:

S: ...it was kind of a interesting thing, cause I couldn’t do illegal graffiti while I worked with them...because how could I tell a kid not to do that there and then have him say ‘hey I just saw you do that on the corner there, last night...

I: So you found yourself more answerable, more accountable to the kids?

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<sup>9</sup> Yves Laroche Gallery is located in Old Montreal. It has been showcasing work by established and emerging underground and cutting edge graffiti, tattoo, comic, pop, illustration and surrealist artists since its inception in 1991. I interviewed several artists who have had their work on display at this gallery including Zilon, Omen, Turf-1, Bez, and Zek. A number of other graffiti writers have had their art work showcased at Yves Laroche and several events surrounding the subculture have been held during the time of my research.

<sup>10</sup> Le Kop Shop was a urban gallery space in the Plateau that was set up by several members of the KOPS Crew in 2006. It has since closed after some complications with a new location , but when it was open it offered a small space where the work by local and international graffiti and underground artists were shown and sold. Again many writers and artists –local and abroad –were shown. Of note to this research were Omen, Zek, and members from AG Crew.

S: Yeah, I didn't tell them don't go do illegal graffiti, just telling them not to go write on someone's house...or like that, I mean I believe in that...

Fluke who works as the second artistic director for Café Graffiti, a youth and community drop in centre in the borough of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, spoke about how he never tells kids to do graffiti, that he never imposes his ideas upon them, rather it is something that must come to them or they to it as an interest and from that point he can speak to them about style and technique, or the politics in and outside the subculture:

You can't preach graff to kids. And I don't. I don't ever tell a kid like, you know...more than anything I preach against graffiti for kids. Because my number one rule, my attitude towards this is that you can't give graffiti, you can't impose the hip hop culture on children or on even adults. If you are mixed and you are inspired by the culture...if you're walking down your street and you see a piece and something tingles in your finger or like your mind like zones in on this one particular piece of graffiti and due to that you want to start doing graffiti, to me that's as authentic as it gets. Because my piece came and got you and got you to ask questions about it. If you started doing graffiti because it's cool you're gonna stop writing in two years.

Even more, in his position at Café Graffiti along with several other writers –Zeck, Arpi, Monk-e, Otak, Strike, Axe, Heresy, and Rodz One<sup>11</sup> –Fluke has been involved in a number of private and public mural projects, workshops, and installations<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the mission of Café Graffiti is to provide an alternative place where local youth can meet together, dialogue, or seek advice. The Café recognizes that many local youth have an interest in art yet they have no real direction so it serves as a place where they can pursue and practice their talents<sup>13</sup>. Café Graffiti acts as an intermediary for talented writers in

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<sup>11</sup> There are many other writers and artists that do work with the Cafe, however, these are the most notable listed on the web site and from what I have learned through my interviews.

<sup>12</sup> Clients for Café Graffiti that these writers have worked for include Oakley Canada, Coke, Bell Canada, Balen Blanc (Palais des Congres de Montreal); Labatt, Bud Light, arena de Gatineau; Labatt, biere Brahma; local movies, commercials and films (back grounds); GYM, le Groupe Yvon Michel; FrancoFolies de Montreal; Johnson and Johnson, bureaux de Montreal; the Olympic Stadium, Ubisoft, Cirque de Soliel, and Music Plus.

<sup>13</sup> Café Graffiti's founder, Raymond Viger, and its administrative team also design specialized workshops that revolve around the other elements of Hip Hop –break dancing, rapping or MC'ing, and DJ'ing –to get



setting up commissioned works to do murals and other forms of installations for local businesses and companies in Montreal. In doing so the café's administrative team aims to instill values of responsibility and accountability as well as show them an alternative route to possible success through their art. Writers such as Fluke, Monk-e, Zek, Strike, and Axe who do contracts through Café Graffiti act as role models for local youth who respect them for their history in the subculture and by displaying their autonomy as full time artists who are now supporting themselves full time (or most of the time) through their commissioned art works. Café Graffiti also acts as a gallery displaying the art works by these artists and others on canvasses and various other media. If the works sell the artists give a percentage of the sale to the café and make some money themselves. The selling of their art is another aspect of showing local youth what they can achieve through hard work besides what they accomplish as street writers as well as legitimating graffiti inspired art to the public.

Raymond Viger has been operating Café Graffiti since 1997 providing local youth a positive outlet to nurture their talents as artists and to help them realize their own responsibility and accountability for their actions and their lives. It is work that has not only helped to change the lives of many kids in the area but also his own:

Working with these kids has helped me a lot. I've discovered I'm a very sensitive. I need to work with people to nourish that sensitivity. It's a kind of flower I have inside. Each time I help people, I water my own flower. At the same time, I help other people plant seeds their own gardens.<sup>14</sup>

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local youth involved instead of possibly getting into trouble on the streets. The café also promotes other artistic activities such as painting and sculpting. Local youth come to the café to practice and participate in these workshops or simply to hang out and talk with others and the staff.

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.montrealgazette.com:80/PAGES/981126/2052311.html> quote as presented in the article and interview by Monique Dykstra of the Montreal Gazette.

The work that Raymond and his administrative team at Café Graffiti do is itself a long term participatory project in citizenship where they have invested themselves heavily into community in helping local youth, curb vandalism, drug use, and crime, and to present a more positive side of hip hop culture both as a creative enterprise and a mode of expression. The youth that have come out of this participatory project give back to this project by lending their artistic talents to helping the next wayward generation in need of a helping hand. The writers that I have spoken to that work with the Café on a regular basis are just as much involved in this project as Raymond is; indeed he considers them just as much a part of the team in the projects and events that they assist with.

There are a number of examples of other such participative projects and events that have taken place over the last decade across the island of Montreal both organized and supported by borough governments as well as those organized by members of the sub cultural community. Sponsorship of these events by private businesses and corporations including interests in the art community are also commonplace. During the course of this research I had the opportunity to attend several events that were part of larger projects in the boroughs of Lachine, N.D.G., and Ville-Marie. I also had the chance to speak to Luc Robillard, the Lachine borough Project graffiti and Youth coordinator, and Jean-Yves Duthel, the head of Public Relations for the borough of Ville-Marie about their respective strategies in dealing with graffiti in their areas and their outreach programs to develop more positive approaches to working with young writers instead of persecuting them.

Both Duthel and Robillard spoke about how their boroughs have come to understand the need to have graffiti writers who have acquired a name for themselves on the streets and who have talent on their teams or involved in their projects if they are

going to be successful. Both boroughs mentioned having budgets available for the removal of graffiti on private and public property, prevention, workshops to put out a message of responsibility and accountability, and deterrence through police force. This seemed to be the general structure of any boroughs budget with some boroughs putting more emphasis on one aspect than then other depending on the severity of the problem in their area. Duthel, however, admitted that he didn't see the point of trying to use the police in an enforcement role to deter graffiti namely because graffiti writers don't pay their tickets or respond well to enforcement on a grand scale. He mentioned that there had been an excess of 150 tickets issued out for the year of 2007 in the borough of Ville-Marie for graffiti offenses, none of which had been paid. Robillard also recognized that too much dependence on police enforcement or removal only adds to the problem:

We know that only repression or removal got us where we are now so we tend to focus equally on getting in touch with the writers and working *with* them instead of oppressing them. We do think that repression is still very important too since doing graffiti is illegal and offenders must be responsible for their action. But as the team goes, we try to make them take notice of their action and get the writers to take the legal path more quickly. The lifespan of a graffiti writer is often 2 to 4 years after that they stop or turn legal. We try to help that transition go faster. For the other writers that keep going illegal, that is where the importance of repression works best.

Even when offences are followed up with or criminal charges are made, such as the case against Roadsworth in 2005-2006 (see chapter 1) the charges are usually dropped in favor of lesser punishment usually involving community service<sup>15</sup>. In fact, several boroughs are now punishing graffiti offenses with fines and community service (cleaning the graffiti that they have done and more for more

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Roadsworth also received a large amount of public support from local residents in the Plateau as well. The overwhelming response from the public in the form of e-mails and a letter campaign also played an important part in the decision to give a lesser sentence. See Reid Cooper's 2005 article in *The Globe* and mail for more details.

harsher sentences). It is hoped that this form of punishment, besides the humility factor, forces the writer to become aware of the effect and damage to property and the community that they have done through their actions.

Writers such as Sniper, Bez, Senk, Monk-e, Fluke, Turf-1, and Zek have all been



**Figure 3.1 Do It Jam, Lachine 2005**

involved in Lachine events such as the Do It Jam of 2005 as well as many other writers local and abroad. This event consisted of a daylong graffiti painting spectacle on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Notre-Dame Boulevard and a rap show in the afternoon. The event was

funded and approved by the city, however, the directing and managing was all done by local writers –most notably Senk and Sniper of AG Crew. The borough of Lachine has also sponsored graffiti events in the Parc Lasalle skate-park where a day event is made of skate boarding, music, and graffiti painted on make-shift plywood walls and on the skate ramps<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The borough of Lachine in 2006 had events running throughout the year involving young and veteran graffiti writers sponsored and commissioned by both private and public interests and associates. Of particular note were events held at local schools Lakeside Academy, Ecole secondaire Dalbe-Viau, College Sainte-Anne, and Ecole primaire Paul-Jarry. Other parc events were held in Saint-Louis, parc Kirkland, Parc de skate Grovehill, and parc Carignan. Still other events were held at the Lachine library, Arena Martin-Lapoint, the Lachine Museum, and the chalet du parc in Duffcourt where a legal wall was set up that year for local youth to paint without provocation or offense which has been largely successful and where yearly graffiti events are now held.

The borough of Ville-Marie has changed its tune regarding how it handles graffiti writers over the last few years, Jean-Yves told me. Prior to 2007 it was mainly a strategy of deterrence and removal; however, this was not curbing the amount of graffiti nor solving any of the complaints they were receiving from property and business owners in the borough. His new strategy is one that he called a 'smoothed' approach that focuses less on suppressing graffiti and more on embracing the more artistic side of the



**Figure 3.2 Ramp in Parc Lasalle skate park (Lachine), July 2005**

phenomenon.

Much like the boroughs of Lachine, N.D.G., and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, the borough of Ville-Marie has recruited veteran graffiti writers to assist in the development of

commissioned mural

program, for community based events aimed at educating kids about the consequences of doing graffiti, and the reduction of racist, sexist, or gang related types of graffiti. He believes that nine out of ten times a graffiti writer either is or holds the potential to be a truly great artist and that graffiti is part of Montreal city as much as it is in Berlin, New York, or other major cities across the globe. Graffiti needs to be given its space and understood, not vilified and criminalized in its entirety and that by strategizing how to share city space with these potential artists this can be achieved and the city can be beautified at the same time.

One such writer that the borough of Ville-Marie has recruited is David Proulx, also known as 'Rank 1'. Duthel explained that he had met Proulx one summer day in 2007 while taking a walk with the mayor and as it happened he and several friends were painting a wall. He could have reported them; however, instead he gave them his card and told them to call him to develop something greater. They spoke shortly thereafter and he ended up offering Proulx and his friends the opportunity to do a commissioned job to paint a skate park off of Deslormiers Street for \$200 each. He said that if they did a good job he would set him and his friends up to do some walls (murals) for the borough. The work was indeed satisfactory and so Duthel convinced Proulx and his friends to start a business that the borough would endorse. The borough agreed to pay their rent for the first two years of business and get them jobs besides what they procured. Proulx was named the Director and the company 'Graff-X'. In exchange Proulx and his team had to agree to do community work, to educate the youth on the realities and consequences of doing graffiti, continue to get private contracts, hold public events where they connect with the local youth to show them that there are alternatives and possibilities that they can take advantage of using their artistic talents to create, beautify city space, and perhaps build a career through their art<sup>17</sup>. Graff-X must also do interviews set up through the borough office as a matter of publicity (this also legitimizes this avenue of graffiti art to the public). This is a creative project that encourages the active participation of graffiti

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<sup>17</sup> A number of articles have been written concerning Graff-X and the issue of graffiti in the city. This short list clearly shows how the borough of Ville-Marie is attempting to capitalise on having Proulx and his team doing commissioned work under the borough's guidance.

<http://www.lametropole.com/article/affaires/affaires/labont%C3%A9-et-graff-x-sous-enqu%C3%AAt>

<http://www.mcgilldaily.com/articles/24678>

<http://fr.canoe.ca/infos/quebeccanada/archives/2009/10/20091021-061400.html>

<http://ruefrontenac.com/nouvelles-generales/politiquemunicipale/12430-graff-x-michel-petit>

writers and puts them in touch with local businesses and property owners forming a working relationship.

In 2007 Graff-X produced 18 commissioned murals. In 2008, at the time of my interview with Mr. Duthel, they had produced 21 and more were in negotiation. The borough of Ville-Marie instituted new laws in 2007 that made property owners responsible for the litter and graffiti on and around their establishments. If an owner does not clean the graffiti they are fined<sup>18</sup> (fines range from \$600 to \$1000)<sup>19</sup>, however, if they opt to have Graff-X or any other independent graffiti writers do a mural on their property then they are guaranteed that there will be no more tagging or throw-ups and if there are then the writer will most likely return to touch up the mural. The borough brokers with the SDC (Société Développement Commerciale) to acquire jobs for Graff-X to complete for local businesses and property owners in the community. It is Duthel's hope that the support he and the borough office is lending to Proulx and his team will develop into a bustling enterprise that will reduce the amount of graffiti in the area, inspire more writers and potential artists to put their talents to better use and perhaps make a career out of it, and beautify the city in general.

This discussion also relates to that of micro-strategy in chapter two except here we speak of the micro-strategy not in terms of place as Certeau has helped us to define. Here it is a departure into everyday practices of the individual writer in becoming involved in community projects and workshops with local youth –a micro-strategy reinforced through temporal relations. As participative citizens they follow the rules set

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<sup>18</sup> Many property owners are unhappy with this new law and have been outspoken about their discontent. The Gazette and other local papers have had many editorials and story pieces concerning property owners who feel that it is not their responsibility to clean up litter or graffiti that they do not make themselves. Many also do not want any kind of graffiti on their establishment.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/montreal/story/2007/04/13/qc-litterbylaw20070413.html>

and attempt to ‘make a difference’ in the sense of ‘reaching out’ to younger writers, displaying how their artistic talents could be developed in a more legitimate field, that writing on the street is not the only alternative, that recognition can come not only from one’s peers on the street but also from other groups/spheres/fields such as the artistic and business communities. Isin calls these types of individuals “active citizens”, those who “follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created.” (2008: 38) He contends that these citizens are not ‘creative’ in their endeavors in that they are not “writing the script and creating the scene” (2008: 38.) like ‘activist citizens’ namely because they are following the pre-scripted scene created by the imposed order, they are not creating anything, rather they are merely going with the flow. Isin’s categorization here is valid; however, it is necessary to re-qualify his use of the term ‘creative’ to fit the context of this research. When Isin invokes this idea of creativity he is implying that through their actions, individuals are creating new scenes: new situations, spaces of discourse, conversation, and possibilities where, among other things, a claim to rights can emerge. Graffiti writers and artists, although they are already following a script in being actively engaged in creative urban projects, display that however this script might be written, it does not always have to be read the same way. What I mean by this is that through their creative use of city space they have transformed the manner in which this space is typically understood, viewed, and read. Therefore, graffiti writers, even as participative citizens are capable of creating new scenes through a modification of that already created script –it’s just *read* differently.



## **Graffiti writers as political citizens: writing as a political act of citizenship**

The act of graffiti calls out the inadequacies and absurdity of the imposed order of things: that the walls built aren't so strong, that the fences can't keep everyone out, and that not everyone is content with this way of life. It points to what is missing in our daily lives, it screams out at the silence of the everyday person amid the cacophony of noise. As Jean-Yves Duthel told me "we live in a culture of silence in Montreal". He was speaking to the silence that falls on issues surrounding the inadequacies of communication between government and police, and of the silence surrounding issues of cultural and social misunderstanding. This idea of living in a 'culture of silence' in Montreal, however, can be extended to the everyday silence of the individual's voice in the public sphere: the voice of the individual is not as sacred as that of the corporation or property holder. Our society is one that celebrates property and the ownership of capital. Those who are without property or capital have limited space where their voices will be heard.

Indeed many of those I interviewed spoke of graffiti as one of the last true vessels of free speech and expression. As Castro explained, graffiti is:

...one of the last things that...it's the ultimate free speech...but it's at the detriment of someone else's property...and it just shows urban life, it shows creativity, it shows...how people don't have to have that...materialistic mentality all the time you know...I love money I want to make some of course. But there's a part of me that needs to express itself and in a way that art...doing it on canvasses won't do it for me...I want people to see it right way...to get up and people see you right away...so why is it important? That's a...great question. It's another one of those things that's hard to answer because you don't even know why you do it. Most of the time you're just doing it because it's in you and you have an urge to do it...for me it's important because it's where my valorization as a human comes from you know. Its...I'm a funny guy, I have friends...I'm not a loser or anything. But at the same time I need that extra...you feel exclusive, because...you feel like

you know something nobody knows about...I mean its right in your face, everybody sees it but most people don't understand it.

Giver called graffiti "the freedom of the voice of the people" that poses a threat to those who maintain and control the imposed order because it gives "the normal, everyday human being the power with the least amount of money with the most amount of effect to touch the most amount of people for the least amount of money. And it can't be controlled." These sentiments were shared by many of the other writers I interviewed, perhaps not so succinctly stated, however, they all felt that graffiti was an alternative voice in society or a tool to manifest the silenced voice of those who saw no other avenue to express their individuality, misgivings, and discontent with the state of everyday life.

As activist, or political, citizens graffiti writers are *script writers*, creating new scenes through writing them, painting them, choosing new color schemes, cursive and calligraphic forms, and re-constituting the prevailing urban landscape in a new register where the types of possibilities for a claim to rights can emerge. Following Isin then, graffiti writers neither arrive at a scene nor do they flee from it, but actually engage in its creation, and with the creative act of graffiti the writer makes himself the agent responsible for that scene (2008: 27). Indeed, writers even leave behind a lasting image of their act, of themselves, for others to see who is responsible which adds an additional level of answerability to the act.

The notion of answerability in graffiti at first seems somewhat misplaced in this context. How can a graffiti writer be answerable for his act of vandalism if he does so clandestinely and in the shadows of the night? It has to be understood that when we are speaking of answerability here, we are not speaking of the manner in which the individual who commits an act of graffiti is answerable to himself on a personal level or

to the rest of society in a legal sense. It is in the context of how Bakhtin described answerability (1993) as being measured against the individual's unique moment in time and to the historical project to which it is a part of. What he called the "two faced Janus" where an individual's act "looks in two opposite directions: it looks to the objective unity of a domain of culture and at the never-repeatable uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life" (1993: 2).

As an emotional-volitional act, graffiti is a uniquely once-occurring deed in the event-being of the individual or community. There is absolutely no act of graffiti that is the same, each is truly distinctive to the individual who does it in that particular instance of time and space. Although a writers tag or throw-up is repeatedly similar in appearance –some remarkably so –each is made with unique strokes, on different surfaces, and under circumstance that are specific to that individual temporally and spatially.

In the larger context of things, the domain of culture, the actions of graffiti writers promotes both ethical and moral debates as to the rights that individuals and groups have in public and private space such as free speech, exclusion, and marginalization. As marginalized artists, writers are becoming increasingly visible in public, through events, festivals, art shows and commissioned work which has lent to an increased legitimacy of their graffiti and the work they produce that contains this type of aesthetic. Graffiti invokes, too, the need to discuss how public and private space is viewed and understood by those who inhabit it. Who has rights in these places? Who has the power to decide what is said or written? How it is said or written? Who is to be included or excluded and why? Is there any dialogue in public or private space anymore –that is 'free' dialogue, the

kind that is not contained within linguistic or cultural boundaries<sup>20</sup>? Or is it just monological corporatized (privatized) messages geared for consumption? Graffiti invokes these questions surrounding such injustices and it does so in a 'non-permissive' manner. It puts itself in your face without your permission, without your consent –which is the case with many other advertisements and messages that the individual is confronted with daily. When an advertisement is put before an individual it is expected and recognized as having a place in the socio-economic order of capitalism, however, when the same is done with graffiti it is seen as outside of the norm, outside of the recognized rights that revolve around place, space, and individuality.

Writers break the habitus of these ideological and cultural conditionings with their acts of disruption. In the city where over sensory exposure leads the individual to become indifferent –blasé –it is no wonder that an equally over sensory activity has emerged that calls out the social tragedies of modern urban life. We are inundated with visual and audio stimuli both within and outside of our homes. When Simmel wrote *Metropolis* (1903), he argued that the noise, smells, and people were bad enough to force you into a blasé state of remission, to force a disconnection from the urban environment and people. Add to that the visual and audio assault of present television and internet technologies, innovations of media transportation, and the proliferation of moving images and sounds – an assault indeed. From this comes a mode of identification, communication, resistance, a tactical act –graffiti –that is in its purest of forms an illegal act that breaks the law. It does not originate in the name of anything except itself (or the in the name of those who

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<sup>20</sup> Such as those in the work place, church, school, or any major institution. Dialogue in these places is limited and governed in most part by a specific topical frame and related vocabulary.

commit these acts) but from it has spawned a public dialogue concerning place and space, corporatization, identity, art, and rights.

Where others look at private property, even a wall, and see just that, the graffiti writer does not. He sees something else all together. The graffiti writer through purposeful action, makes an emotional-volitional act of thinking against the norm, the moral function of their 'ought' mechanism is somehow different. They refuse to keep to themselves; they break the norm, the habitus, and the disattenable character of contemporary urban life. Roads are meant for cars to be driven on and for transportation, buses are what you travel in –if you want to do anything in the bus then keep it to yourself (ipod, reading, etc.) But writers put something in your face; they force you to think, to ask questions and to dialogue. As Zilon remarked about some graffiti he had seen some time ago:

There're some other people who really put like writings on the wall...that make you think about something. One time I saw a line saying 'silence ont tue': "silence, were killing." And it was during the Bosnia thing. It could be written today, it's the same thing with Afghanistan. It makes you think about something. You won't probably see that on the front page of a newspaper. That's why I find that graffiti has that power.

Through their actions they force cognition of the blasé public, of those who would travel conduits to get from one consumption palace or production center to the next, from one news story, action film, or video game to the next. As disobedient rule breakers, writers display their disapproval of the existing imposed order and habitus; they act out in such a way as to rupture the normative framework of the everyday. Roadsworth disagrees with the 'autocentricity' of western culture, he felt that public space was being misused, so he attacked it and made it function in a different register:

The walls are saturated already if you want to be noticed...and I was surprised that nobody had already done that...not like nobody has ever painted the ground...I personally have my views on public space and the road and how space is used...so it was kind of an obvious...plus there are the lines I like the idea of...taking free existing elements like street lines or whatever, and tweaking them...[it's] about disrupting the typical...language...

Both Produkt and Giver spoke about how one of their central aims was to shake the mundane of the everyday from the average individual walking the streets, to rupture their protective little bubbles and force some sort of emotional or mental transaction to take place. Roadsworth's subversion of existing lines, symbols, and shadows forced those who walk with their heads down staring at the ground to stop and ask what they were looking at: it forced them at the very least to dialogue with themselves. They might have even started to question what these spaces should or could ultimately be used for if not only to get from one distraction to the next. He said he liked to see people:

imagining...you know people coming and seeing something and being confused...scratching their chin or whatever... your affecting ...making people scratch...I mean I like it when ... I think there's a lot of mystery in the world...or at least, I think there is a lot of mystery but we don't get the sense of that... at least I don't... the feeling of just looking at people and knowing that... a lot of people tend to go through the motions and don't question things and don't feel the sense of a sort of mystery...and that's something I wanted to illicit somehow.

Produkt understands graffiti as existing in a kind of 'in-between realm' and that what he does is:

a rupture between worlds...you have this world that is a buttoned down world of expectations, and like 'quoted' reality. And then you have underneath that...the world that has always existed, the timeless world of the earth...and it's like you're getting in touch with the eternal time, the time that has always just run through...and that's...it's like your achieving a rupture between two worlds...that influences my work...which is if anything a rupture between two worlds. It's about achieving a certain reality that could only exist unto itself...it's trying to...theoretically at its best it's trying to...create a wider

scope of reality in someone's imagination when they look at it....stretch their boundaries of perception.

Indeed these writers through the design of their graffiti and stencil art have *creatively broken the distraction* that some people have under the spectacle of the everyday. For these writers, acts of graffiti have been those creative acts of citizenship, those necessary moments of emotional upheaval that allowed them to break not only their static and habitual modes of everyday behavioral activity but those of others. Following White, acts of graffiti are those encounters between persons and things where that 'leap of faith' is taken and different forms of expression are discovered that provide for a destabilization of those habitual bonds of the everyday.

This breaking of the rules displays their unhappiness with the current system, the celebration of property, and how the imposed system and dominant discourse favors a corporate voice over that of the individual or local community. Certainly the individual is heard, however, corporate investment the public sphere seems to carry more importance than that of the individual. What is the individual to do or react? These individuals have found new and creative ways to criticize the imposed order, the celebration of property, the concept of identity, and the aesthetics of public space. They use their graffiti as a way to antagonize the current social, economic, and political regime.

## **Conclusion**

In thinking about citizenship it is important that we broaden our definitions of the participative and the political to include those who are involved in illicit activities like graffiti writing and street art. Although graffiti is in essence vandalism, not all graffiti writers and street artists are mindless vandals incapable of recognizing the damage to public and private property that results from the illicit activities of those in the subculture,

including their own contributions. Some writers and street artists have no regard for the damage they do to public and private property. As it has been seen in this chapter though, some writers have been able to hone their artistic skills and acquire meaningful work in both the private and public spheres. Working with local governments, organizations, and business owners writers have contributed to the beautification of the city through their murals, pieces, and productions. They have also been able to reach out to local communities providing guidance to younger writers looking to make a name for themselves or who have aspirations to become successful or celebrated writers and artists one day. The writers mentioned in this chapter were all able to participate in their local communities as a result of their deep dedication over the years to their graffiti based activities and art.

As citizens, writers invoke their political voice as individuals who claim a right to be defined under their own terms and as a group who are making a claim to their unhappiness with the state of affairs of the society that they are a part of. Ultimately graffiti is an act of political citizenship: it is illegal, antagonistic, it tests the boundaries of right and wrong, and forces cognition of rights, particularly the right to have rights in the city. Perhaps more than the individual who acts, that is, does graffiti –the individual is the act. The graffiti writer becomes the embodiment of a stylistic metamorphosis of the space in which he finds himself through his practiced actions. More than his productions that create the possibilities for a rupture of everyday practices of others or as a rupture of his everyday practices through his own actions, *he is the rupture* –through his the embodiment of the act he becomes the rupture. His transformation of self transcends the physical and the material. It transforms the space that he writes upon into something



other than a wall, a door, or a highway pylon. It turns this space into a momentary individual utterance, into a claim for space, into a request for recognition, or an apathetic response of the disenfranchised individual from an urban experience that has increasingly become more distant and alienated from. He is a transformative manifestation of a fragmentary sub cultural consciousness that continually responds to the temporal and spatial interstitial strategies of the city. The graffiti writer *smooths* space and is a *smoothing machine*. He destroys, recreates, and re-designates. He is the 'urban Shiva', the Lord of dead space who gives function, life, and personality to that which is functionless, lifeless, blank, and impersonal.

Importantly, that these ethical and moral arguments are still present means that this is an unfinished politics. Although these questions arise in cultural areas outside of graffiti, it is the constant presence of graffiti that has created an increased awareness of this topic in the city. It is here that I posit answerability has taken a new turn, it has become consummated at a higher level than before with and within this phenomenon. It is truly the two-faced Janus here and now, it faces both the direction of the once-occurring event-Being of the individual (the world of life) and the direction of the historical event Being of culture and society, (the domain of culture, of norms and values). It does not stand in opposition to these worlds, it does not exclude one world over the other; rather it *joins* the two in an ethical and moral plane of unity. Graffiti writing exists as a once-occurring event, non-reproducible, unique in form and to the individual whose activity it is the product of. At the same time it becomes part of the historical event-Being of the domain of culture. It faces in both directions simultaneously, stares them down at every moment the writer tags, does a throw up or a piece. It

consummates the individual on the level of moral and ethical answerability as well as being a process where the individual can achieve a level of awareness beyond his own self. This characteristic of answerability in graffiti means that it can no longer simply be categorized as just vandalism or art; it is much more than that now. It invokes larger questions and issues than itself that present new and challenging avenues of self reflection and understanding.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps in the same vein that Bakhtin was trying to recast the utterance or laughter, one of the primary goals of this work has been to conceive graffiti as a considerably more complex organism than how it appears or is construed. Mainstream media and popular culture tend to depict it as either vandalism or art and in doing so have framed graffiti writing as “single minded, single-voiced vehicle for expression.” (Bakhtin, 1993:355) As it has been shown throughout this work, however, that although it may be both of these things graffiti writing is also multi-voiced and heterogeneous. It confronts multiple dialogues both inside and outside of the subculture. It is a living utterance, organic and fluid it can react and adapt to changing circumstances and obstacles. A graffiti writer is a voice among other voices, his graffiti an utterance interwoven in the social consciousness that surrounds it.

Grffiti connects writers to the city, to its streets and back alleys. The very practice of doing graffiti gives them a view of the city that other people cannot have in their routinized behaviours and movements from one consumption center to the next or from workplace to home. Writers also expose themselves in the clandestine activities that they do, they put themselves at risk both physically and legally by doing graffiti. Hanging off of rooftop ledges, entering abandoned or condemned areas, climbing up eroded ladders and back alley fire escapes are all risk taking behaviours. They play with chance on a daily basis practicing graffiti mocking, slurring, and debasing official rules and regulations surrounding private property and official discourse. They laugh symbolically at the system, they challenge its authority by mocking it, and they debase it with their free

and liberated billingsgate speech. And in doing so they are more connected to that system than those who do not.

The abusive and profane elements of graffiti that represent the nonconformist and subversive free speaking writer are in danger of being diluted by corporate interests willing to use anything popular to sell products and services. Companies have disempowered graffiti by using it in advertising campaigns making it mainstream and popular outside of the boundaries of the subculture. In doing this corporations seem to turn the tables on writers making their graffiti function in a different register, a counter mutation of their subversive reconfiguration of dominant representational forms. This counter mutation is a way of absorbing the subversive spirit of graffiti by making it a component of the product being sold rather than the product being poached by the writer to serve as a means to make more graffiti (as described in chapter 1 with the use of various products to create markers and inks). This corporatization of graffiti is again juxtaposed against the subversive use of signs by writers themselves like Bez, Stare, and others who place their crew and/or individual pieces on rooftop locations vying for space with other billboards and store signs.

For a little while Roadsworth also brought attention to these transitory spaces except that his focus was not on walls but on the streets themselves. Although Bez may play with the space of official signs and Stare with corporatized space, Roadsworth was more proactive and direct in his subversive manoeuvres. His clever play with the street or road space was very visible to the public eye as opposed to Bez's and Stare's inserted signs. You really have to look for what Bez and Stare do, but with Roadsworth you couldn't miss it. Although still a very subversive manoeuvre the strength of what he was

doing was in its visibility. It registered with local people who travelled through those spaces. It struck them as relevant and made them question what that space was for and why his actions were considered harmful and dangerous. Importantly, his arrest and subsequent court hearings brought people together and made them think about issues of city planning, the negative impact of cars on human health and the environment in the city, the need for more pedestrian, bike, and green spaces, and the freedom of creative expression.

Along with writers like Monk-e and Spoke, Bez, Stare, Zek, and Roadsworth (among others) are prime examples of individuals creating utopian spaces in the everyday where alternate truths can be realized alongside of official facts and discourse. Bez displays the absurdities behind official signs that people don't even really pay attention to anymore with his clever pinning of AG road signs in major traffic areas. Stare counters the spectacle of corporate language in store signs by emulating them not only in some of his pieces but also in where he places them in opposition to billboards as well as in his moniker name itself. People stare at billboards and advertisements all day and then see some of his pieces or mock store signs and have a hard time distinguishing the two in some cases (if they even realize what he has done in the first place). Roadsworth made people question the use of city space itself and through his clever subversion of official spaces pushed them to think about the relevance of how these spaces were being used and how they might better serve the human population in more productive and healthier ways. Monk-e expresses his worldviews and beliefs in more artistic ways through his pieces and murals and in doing so offers alternative opinions and truths in free and public forums.

For these writers, and many others, graffiti liberates them from the pressures of everyday conformity in both behaviour and thought. It gives them a creative outlet to channel their worldviews and beliefs, fears, knowledge, and interests. It represents a form of free speech and creativity, it invigorates them with energy and life that they find is wasted in the machinations of everyday labour. It gives them a way to be who they *want to be* rather than who they *have to be*. In many cases this relationship between the writer and his or her moniker, the alter-ego, becomes obsessive for a certain period –for some indefinitely –of their graffiti career. It could last a few weeks or months, maybe even years. For most writers, this obsession is almost inexplicable, they cannot put it directly into words but they feel a sense of freedom is gained in doing graffiti.

This obsession also fulfils the necessary function of sustaining the writers name on the streets and is the passionate element of a writer`s dedication to constantly be innovative in form and style. It fuels the stories that surround the risks that writers take doing graffiti and supports the decisions that peers make in naming dedicated and talented writers as Kings. As evidenced by the stories and respect that surround writers like Sake, Castro, Akira, and Zek the obsession and dedication of a writer to his craft is just as important as his talent with a can to create unique styles and form in lettering as well as with the space that he or she paints.

Graffiti places, especially those unofficial ones, are places where writers can find a belonging and where they can transcend the everyday gloriously. And it is this transcendental quality that for some makes doing it a spiritual practice. Hest, Giver, Produkt, Turfl, and Monk-e all recognize this spirituality as it is (or for what it is): a journey of discovering the self, of realizing one`s potential, and where one belongs.

Others are consumed by the act and relentlessly apply themselves to doing graffiti like Sake, Castro, and KidPQ. It is an addiction to self fulfilment, self preservation, the feeding of one's ego, and to the validation of the self. It is a transcendence achieved through transgression, or at the very least seeded in transgressive behaviour. Still others like Zek, Omen, Akira, Fluke, Zilon, and Kaseko have been able to develop the skills acquired through their practice of graffiti over the years into viable career options in advertising, community art (murals), web design, and entertainment. This is not to say that those who are consumed by the act of graffiti or those who have made careers out of graffiti inspired art are incapable or will not achieve any transcendence from the everyday, however, it does show the complexity of character in the contemporary graffiti subculture. Certainly they are not all just vandals or artists; they are also entrepreneurs, career-minded artists, philosophers, and activists.

Although graffiti places provide alternative locales for individuals to participate in creative projects of collective memory they are not permanent. Unofficial graffiti places are usually abandoned commercial or industrial buildings or located in and around major highway or transportation systems. As such they are threatened by re-development by private corporations and public projects such as the case with Redpath, Turcot yards, the TA Wall, and TA Factory. Subcultural members are constantly challenged to seek out and claim new areas while trying to hold onto the old ones. Although Turcot Yards is no longer an accessible locale due to the increased security established by the MTQ, the TA Wall is a recent example of writers fighting for a place that they believe to be important to the history of the subculture and to their subversive practices. The buffing campaign carried out by The City of Montreal in late 2009 was unsuccessful in deterring graffiti

writers from practicing at that area and as of recent seems to have been reclaimed as a popular writing spot. If the city presses forward and enforces its buffing with a police or security presence like that at Turcot, however, it can be imagined that writers would not be so keen to continue fighting or that place. If they wanted to they would have to seek out more official assistance –legal or political –to continue that battle. However, these attempts are not always, if ever, successful as evidenced by the efforts of Kaseko, Seaz and Paul 107 with Redpath.

Official graffiti places are no less threatened by private or public developers. Writers have had to fight for the locations of Under Pressure and more recently Meeting Of Styles over the years. Writers have learned, however, that using official channels such as those in the legal, media, economic, and political realms have been useful in assisting their endeavours to have these places serve as legitimate and legal areas for annual graffiti and hip hop jams. Seaz and his team at Urban Expressions have spent the last 15 years building relationships as spokespersons for the subculture with local businesses and public offices as well as media representatives putting on Under Pressure every summer. They have had to deal with pressures from borough governments and local media that are not always on their side. As well they have set precedents in law and commerce with their professional handlings of Under Pressure as a legitimate enterprise. Senk, Sniper, Criz156, and others have done the same with Meeting of Styles in the last few years in Montreal. They have not only negotiated a permanent location for the graffiti aspect of the event on Cabot Street but they have made business relationships with other local venues through promotion and merchandising. The more involved that these writers are with local government and businesses the more difficult it becomes to control these



events and have them reflect the community that they represent. Seaz has commented that it is difficult to fund Under Pressure every year and fears that his non-compromising stance with possible sponsors might leave the event so far in debt that he will not be able to continue it. It has also become increasingly more complex in operation and as a result more taxing on his personal life. Although Under pressure has continued for the last 15 years under his direction it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain both spatially and economically. Meeting of Styles is still young in comparison and will most likely continue to be a major event in Montreal, however, like the recent fate of Under Pressure, it can be imagined that it will come under the scrutiny of local government representatives and more monetarily strained the larger it becomes.

Graffiti writers and those associated in the subculture are actively engaged, inserting themselves into the city's history, stories, language, and discourse of dominant order. They are creating histories of their own, sub-histories, of their particular subculture that stands in contrast and opposition to the history of the dominant order. The more that graffiti writers and artists work with the system the closer their historical project comes into line with that of the city. This could be assimilation, however, this is the double-bind of graffiti as strategy: on the one hand the practice of graffiti in official and sanctioned places can offer the subculture a route to legitimate operation under a commercial or artistic banner. On the other hand it also removes the raw nature of the act of graffiti and makes it an aesthetic that can be employed and controlled by the dominant system, i.e. made into a commercial commodity. Therefore, it can be imagined that regardless of the benefits gained through the acquiring of official graffiti places, unofficial places will

continue to be claimed in those abandoned 'non-spaces' of the city by writers in their efforts to build their own historical trajectory under their own terms.

As discussed previously, individuals bend the rules and manoeuvre around imposed restrictions in every day practice. Tactical movements are unconscious as is the poaching of the dominant system of representations and consumer goods. Graffiti writers are poachers who manipulate and subvert the dominant order of representations on a daily basis. And for the most part, like any other person in society who manoeuvres about their daily life through tactical behaviours, they are not entirely aware of their poaching. It is simply something they do because it helps them deal with everyday life. Strategy, therefore, cannot be a totalizing force dominating all aspects of everyday life. Rather, it is dialectically connected with tactics where the two are juxtaposed to each other, supplementing and contradicting one another, both constantly struggling and evolving in a shared environment. Official and unofficial discourses, professionally stratified, and popular languages are engaged in similar relationships.

As a form of symbolic laughter and billingsgate speech graffiti is probably the best example of 'carnavalesque' culture in contemporary society. It makes the dominant representational order register in a different function; it re-employs space, language, and material culture (as noted with Bez, Stare, and Roadsworth). Bakhtin's carnival is revolution itself. (See pp. Xviii in Rabelais) Indeed, Holquist remarks how Bakhtin's voice was a reminder to "others how necessary to the pursuit of liberty is the courage to laugh" (pp. xxiii). Graffiti writers also remind us that the voices of the people are important too. They remind us that if free speech and expression are going to survive that

we need to have the courage to not just bend the rules on a daily basis but to break them and challenge the status quo. They remind us that not everything is as picture perfect as we would like to imagine. Graffiti counters our less than perfect ideal of society and that makes us shifty, uneasy, and increasingly threatened. It is everywhere a commuter takes a bus or a metro or walks the city streets. It is on businesses, homes, street corners, always, and rooftops. What it threatens is the ideal put forth by the dominant socio-economic system we live in that advertises an image of urban perfection with neatly arranged homes, and businesses on clean streets, green spaces, and happy consumers. Montreal city, however, is not a perfect urban paradise; people are not always satisfied, the streets are not always clean or safe, homes are not always secure or affordable, and everyday life is not always the ideal picture we are all presented with and expect. Graffiti calls out these inadequacies; it shakes the individual out of their mundane thoughts and movements and makes them question things like who in society has the right to do such things, and raises questions concerning creativity, and expression and how we should be dealing with these kinds of infractions.

As discussed in chapter three, the courage to have a voice, to laugh, and even break the rules is the precursor to the individual becoming an emergent political being. It is this courage that fuels the writer to break the rules, to rupture the habitus of the everyday, and challenge legal norms. It is also this courage that leads the graffiti writer down the path towards becoming more involved in community projects, to reaching out to local youth, and contributing to the public sphere. In Montreal writers become participating citizens through the involvement in creative projects either with the assistance of local government or through their own networks. I have attended a number

of events over the course of my research in several boroughs where these types of projects were being pursued. In their participative roles writers are not producing graffiti –they are not graffiti writers –rather they are engaged in creating murals, paintings, and other creative works that involve an artistic aesthetic influenced by graffiti. As docents they encourage the participation from attending local youth and spectators and become invested stakeholders in the success of such projects. The participation of writers at these events also helps to dispel any misconceptions as these individuals being gangbangers, dangerous, or a threat to society. By interacting with the local youth and community writers help to humanize graffiti and give spectators an alternative view on the subculture that they, for the most part, understand as being largely associated with vandalism.

The commission and permission walls discussed in chapter 2 allow writers to insert themselves into the historical project of the city and gain a form of permanence both as individuals and as a subculture. In doing permission walls writers also engage in negotiations with property owners to produce artistic murals that both beautify the space in which they are done and legitimate the graffiti writers as talented and capable artists. Negotiating with property owners means that the writers are engaging with other stakeholders and get further invested in seeking positive solutions for community problems like graffiti, drugs, and violence. Writers then can be understood as participating not only in the historical project of the city but in the economic and social relations associated with commercial businesses and property owners, local governments, and community organizations.

As discussed in chapter three, writers for the most part enjoyed their participative roles in these events and projects particularly for the chance to be a part of something more organized and official than their street activities. They did, however, voice their concerns over the agendas of the sponsoring organizations and governments involved in these endeavors stating that they felt that the city or sponsor was attempting to control or gain a greater foothold into the subculture through their participation. They felt that the city was somehow trying to change what graffiti was –an illegal street based art and movement –into a legal, publicly or privately managed business or organization. Many mentioned that they felt that those at the organizational level had no idea what graffiti was and that they were for better lack of words “lost”, as Stack mentioned. Others such as Zek, Seaz, Hest, and Senk remarked how the city or sponsors had a difficult time understanding the relation between murals and piecing to tags and throw-ups, and that ultimately this disconnect would be something they would just have to live with.

Graffiti also offers the individual the ‘Marcusian’ opportunity to channel back into the creative and erotic energies that have been redirected into media and technology through a direct, physical, and haptic (rather than optical) relation to the urban environment. This re-sublimation through transgression is also a re-inscription of the writer’s body; each act liberates him from his inscription by the laws and practices of the everyday. Each stencil, each tag and piece ‘re-writes’ him a little more, a sort of inscribing of the self (or re-inscribing), that brings him a step closer to the truly sublime. Graffiti offers an awareness of the self within the urban system that approaches a transcendence of our nature as urban subjects or an awareness of the self as a frail and insignificant part of the urban system. Graffiti writers approach the rupture of the idea of

the self as just being a number in the technocratic order of things. In doing graffiti each act has the potential to bringing the individual closer to a participative or political self in society, not an active citizen here –but an actively cognizant being, rather than just a subject of the dominant order. The moral and ethical arguments raised in the third chapter point to the need to recast our notions of what constitutes a political being in the contemporary urban setting. That an individual can be a productive and active citizen while at the same time act out in ways that exclude them from popular understandings of responsible citizenry means that there is a need to better understand the relationship between the individual and the urban environment he lives in.

This work has expanded upon previous research models by addressing the use of place and space in the city by graffiti writers for more than just individual gain. It has also addressed issues of political and participative citizenship surrounding graffiti writing and art that have not been examined previously. The socio-economic and cultural conditions of Montreal are unique and have afforded for these developments. Importantly, each city has its own characteristics and distinctive qualities that enable similar subcultural constructs to emerge and where they do not different and equally important constructs develop. These types of subcultural developments that reach into citizenship politics and socio-economic affairs are significant, however, at the same time underdeveloped and in need of further attention. Comparative research between major Canadian cities such as Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary could bring to light tensions, similarities and differences how Canadian cities deal with transgressive subcultural subversion and how subcultures vie for space and place in the everyday. Issues revolving around urban space and security can also be

expanded, particularly, the privatization and militarization of city space by public and corporate stake holders and how this intersects with the local graffiti subculture in Montreal and in other cities abroad. Future research can also centre on the legitimating factors behind the move from the street to the gallery for many writers in Montreal, particularly in looking at Yves Laroche gallery and other galleries that have been opened by local graffiti writers<sup>1</sup>.

I opened up this discussion with a quote by John Adams in the introduction. He believed that free speech, thinking, and writing were non-existent in his life and would remain as such until centuries beyond his time. There are many forms of free speech, expression, and thinking that exist in society today such as those found on the internet (blogging, forums, video uploading and sharing, radio broadcasts and podcasts) as well as underground presses and independent radio and television broadcasts. Although these are free forms of expression and creativity there is still a governing body –be it legal or administrative –that has the power to censor these outlets. Graffiti writers, however, answer to no administrative or governing body, rather they work to subvert the authority of the system over their lives, they challenge that authority and force it to mobilize and in doing so expose the absurdity of its laws and fundamental ideologies. Importantly, graffiti writers show us that it is still possible to construct our own notions of self, to believe in facts that we hold to be true, and to have views of the world that are not in line with official or popular sources. They have also shown us that there is as much beauty as

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Snyder's, *Graffiti Lives*, (2009) on New York based graffiti writers making this jump from illegal to legit art and business is a prime example of the potential this topic has for expansion and research.

there is destruction in graffiti and that there are positive solutions and possibilities for writers to become active members of their communities.



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