Part II

Theoretical explanations of graffiti and street art/causes of graffiti and street art

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Introduction

In the social sciences, we care about numerous processes. The most dominant questions revolve around the primordial who, what when, where, how, and why of activities deemed important and relevant. This is the perpetual causal question – the one in which many scholars invest numerous resources in their attempts to tease out the contributing variables/factors and to understand how numerous inputs interact with each other. The field of graffiti/street art is no different in this respect.

In the contemporary history of graffiti/street art, the reasons why individuals engage in this activity has been ascribed to numerous causes, including but not limited to disaffection felt by lower class and/or unemployed or underemployed Latino/Hispanic and African-American youth, gang members staking out their territory, art students trying out new techniques, artists/writers trying to make names for themselves, and hedonistic tendencies. Indeed, there is some truth to these claims, but rarely are these processes examined in a systematic fashion as could be provided by an objective scholarly approach.

Over the past three decades, a handful of scholars have conducted ethnographies, and these individuals have studied graffiti and street art practitioners in order to analyze their actions and motivations. The results have proven to be nuanced and sophisticated in their conclusions.

Overview of chapters

A total of six chapters are featured in Part II. This section of the book begins with Rafael Schacter’s “Graffiti and street art as ornament,” which selectively explores where graffiti/street art fits into art history and art theory. This chapter claims that graffiti and street art are a form of contemporary ornamentation. Corresponding with the two formal defining aspects of ornament—something attached to a surface and as something providing embellishment, Schacter argues that the power and messages embodied in graffiti and street art emerge, in a large part, as a result of this ornamental essence. Schacter further maintains that an entrenched relationship exists
between (architectural) ornamentation and (social) order. It is the fact that ornament creates order, rather than merely reflecting it, that gives graffiti and street art the capability to radically overturn the idea of the city, and to disturb and disavow the norms of contemporary city life.

In “Graffiti, street art and the divergent synthesis of place valorisation in contemporary urbanism,” Andrea Mubi Brighenti argues that over the last decade, street art has moved much closer to the core of the contemporary art system, at the same time that graffiti has received unprecedented attention from mainstream cultural institutions. Albeit to different extents and not without contradictory or even paradoxical outcomes, both graffiti and street art have been increasingly associated with thrilling lifestyles, urban creativity, fashionable outfits, and hip neighborhoods. A radical transformation has followed concerning the impact these practices have on the value attributed to certain urban places. Rather than the value-neutral (invisible) or value-detracting (supravisible) functionalities that existed previously, now graffiti – and even more pronouncedly street art – seems to be value-bestowing (visible) in its essence. Visibility means that these activities have turned into recognizable and much sought-for items in the urban landscape.

In this context, Brighenti examines recent graffiti and street art events in the context of urban transformation trends. Although such events have popped up almost everywhere in the world, especially in Western countries, the author uses examples from Italy, where in the last five years he has been collecting a series of detailed field observations. Brighenti grapples with the social and cultural significance of graffiti and street art in the changing cityscape and the unfolding urban process. By doing so, the author questions the economic process of place valorization in the current transformations of capitalism. Finally, the author places these concerns in the framework of the new political processes of disciplination and urban governance.

“Graffiti art and the city: from piece-making to place-making,” by Graeme Evans, suggests that a graffiti “art-vandalism” dialectic in cities contributes to the increasing emphasis on place-making. In particular, the trend towards embracing and valorizing different forms of graffiti as destination markers and public art, in both mainstream and off-beat locations – and as local and visitor attractions – is discussed. This visual culture forms part of the wider urban design impetus, resulting in the re-imaging of and new theoretical approaches to the post-industrial city. The place and role of graffiti artists is, however, ambiguous as an informal activity, which has developed as an oppositional and illegitimate practice. Evans presents examples of graffiti, and its celebration and controversy in place-making and creative city efforts, including its adoption in cultural tourism itineraries and city branding initiatives.

It has been over a decade since Nancy Macdonald’s groundbreaking ethnography The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York (2001). In this exploration of the dynamics of illegal graffiti, Macdonald focused largely on understanding the unmistakable male dominance of the subculture. Exploring the interplay between graffiti’s illegality and risk, she argued that graffiti is a resource that young men can use to construct masculine identity. In her contribution to this Handbook, “Something for the boys? Exploring the changing gender dynamics of the graffiti subculture,” Macdonald briefly summarizes the arguments she put forward in her book, and analyzes and integrates the scholarship on masculinities and crime/graffiti which has been published since 2001. Macdonald also reexamines the changing gender dynamics of the graffiti subculture since the proliferation of the “street/stencil graffiti” posts (ca. 2000). This alternative subcultural branch has now brought more women into the fold. Macdonald, thus, asks if her gender/masculinity thesis is still relevant, and where should future scholarship on this topic go?

In “The psychology behind graffiti involvement,” written by Myra F. Taylor, Julie Ann Pooley, and Georgia Carragher, we learn why adolescents and young adults who have become
marginalized from their mainstream peers or from society are motivated to join the graffiti subculture. The authors argue that through risk-taking, these youth can acquire peer recognition and subcultural respect via their graffiti involvement. The researchers strive to address the following question: What does the graffiti subculture provide that keeps young people involved in graffiti? The answer would seem to be that admittance into a small graffiti crew provides marginalized members with the social capital support resources that are missing from their daily lives. These support resources help the crew’s membership to bond together, and in doing so, facilitate both the individual member’s and the crew’s sense of place, belonging, community, and connection. However, as the graffitiists mature, they are faced with the life-course dilemma of whether to leave the graffiti culture and conform to society’s social mores, to remain a graffitiist, or to morph from a graffitiist into an urban artist. This chapter closes by revealing that the urban artist pathway back into mainstream inclusion is, in itself, not without controversy.

This section of the Handbook is rounded out with “Graffiti and the subculture career” by Gregory J. Snyder. Based on a decade of ethnographic research among graffiti writers in New York City, Snyder highlights the impact that this youth culture has had on the adult lives of its practitioners. This chapter features a descriptive account of the contemporary forms of graffiti writing, and shows that those who are successful graffiti writers are able to turn their subcultural capital into actual capital. Snyder maintains that graffiti writers, contrary to classic subculture theory, do indeed create subculture careers. These careers are facilitated by subculture media, which create a need for the documentation and dissemination of subcultural content. This, in turn, generates career opportunities within the subculture that can often be transferred into other careers, such as magazine editing, graphic design, fine art, tattooing, and youth marketing. This chapter addresses the classic subculture theory of the Birmingham School, as well as the contemporary genre known as post-subculture studies. Snyder also argues that graffiti is a subculture that requires further theoretical accounting, because rather than symbolic resistance, economic co-optation, or post-modern identity formation, graffiti writers use their graffiti experience to help make successful lives for themselves.

Omissions

A handful of appropriate subtopics did not make it into this section. One of them concerns the longstanding connection between graffiti and hip-hop music (e.g. Chang, 2007). Graffiti folklore is intricately intertwined with the narrative of hip hop, most popularly consisting of “four elements,” including DJing, emceeing (rapping), break dancing and the art of graffiti. What many observers of graffiti and street art do not realize is that this intertwining of activities is disputed (e.g. Just to Get a Rep). Graffiti, as a practice and an art form, was established long before hip-hop music emerged in the South Bronx, and many of its practitioners do not identify with the music or its subculture at all. Writers are a much more diverse set of people than most realize, and even though graffiti has been adopted as part of the hip hop culture and has grown aesthetically because of this association, it is not necessarily intricately linked with hip hop.

Another cause that was not directly addressed in this section is the relative contribution that gentrification has on graffiti and street art. In many urban neighborhoods, a dialectic exists between graffiti/street art and property development. Some observers have argued that gentrification can lead to graffiti/street art. Dilapidated and abandoned buildings waiting to be renovated, rehabilitated, or torn down are magnets for all sorts of activities, including temporary shelters for homeless people, drug sales, and use (e.g. shooting galleries, crack houses, etc.), and places where graffiti/street art are placed. Other scholars have suggested that graffiti/street art can be
an engine for tourism, helping improve the aesthetic quality of otherwise drab or dull parts of a city.

Although other causal dynamics could be examined, the chapters in this part of the *Handbook* should provide a well-rounded introduction to the complexity of causal explanations for graffiti/street art.

**Note**

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**References**


Graffiti and street art as ornament

Rafael Schacter

Introduction

In both the popular and media imagination, graffiti and street art have come to be related to a set of binary oppositions that serve to narrow rather than expand our comprehension of these complex forms. Broadly outlined through pairings which I shall here term ‘creativity vs criminality’ and/or ‘art vs vandalism’, these oppositions stifle debate over a pursuit which is, most likely, one of the most practiced forms of visual culture today. Moreover, they reduce topics of discussion to artless concerns over graffiti and street art’s legal permissibility rather than more pertinent questions regarding its basic materiality. While proponents of the form (from lay practitioners to design aficionados) may claim that graffiti and street art exist on the former side of these couplets, as truly inventive, regenerative, expressive acts, its opponents (from police authorities to property owners) place them firmly as examples of defacement, destruction, and disfigurement. Much effort has been spent on this debate, a debate which is unwinnable, subjective, and overwrought.

This chapter, however, will attempt to sidestep this clash and, instead, present an alternative perspective on the topic. Seeing both graffiti and street art as forms of contemporary (if insurgent) ornamentation, I will take very seriously the suggestion by architectural theorist Jonathan Hill (2006) that ‘[g]raffiti and sgraffito ornament a building’, that graffiti is, in its purely material state, an ‘additive rather than reductive’ practice (p. 176): As artefacts that are both adjunctive (a thing added) and decorative (a thing embellished), graffiti and street art will hence be explored through their status as quite classical, literal, rather than metaphorical, ornaments. Yet this designation as ornament will be seen to bestow as much power as peril upon them, as well as placing graffiti and street art within the wider debates (and wider anxieties) over ornament in the architectural canon as a whole. Examining these illicit objects through this lens I then hope to reveal an understanding of graffiti and street art that rejects the attempt to either promote them as ‘art’ or to demote them as ‘vandalism’. And rather it will be the material nature of these artefacts which will be explored here, the markedly ornamental characteristics graffiti and street possess which will come to provide us with a valuable insight into the idiosyncratic status of these visual forms.
Adjunctive and decorative

Be it an acid etching, a multi-coloured mural, a scratched insignia or a stencilled ideogram, the products of graffiti and street art exist within the dense medium of the street, amidst the dirt, the noise and the concrete of the city walls. They are not produced on a neutral surface (on a pristine canvas or from virgin clay), nor are they formed from scratch, or out of nothing. These images are not created within a separated studio space, nor are they constructed within the detached passive milieu of the gallery. These are visual forms that are engraved, embedded, embossed onto the very surface of the city and affixed onto previously constructed forms. Whether spray paint on the outer surface of a train, or a scratching incised into stone, both graffiti and street art can only ever function upon, within, attached, or fixed to a secondary surface.

In this manner, all of these works – and graffiti and street art as a whole – come to comply quite succinctly with the first part of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of ornament, functioning as an ‘accessory or adjunct’ – a secondary element on a primary surface, an auxiliary element on a customarily architectural surface. As ‘graffito’ (etymologically originating from the Italian graffito, a ‘little scratch’), these objects can only ever be apprehended in connection to what they are scratched upon, in connection to what they exist within. The ‘what’ of the image, as Hans Belting terms it (2005) – the graffiti or street art image itself – is hence ‘steered by the how in which it transmits its message’ (p. 304), through the how of their having been scored, stamped and situated onto the architectural body of the city.

Rather than describing a particular style or particular aesthetic, to ornament, as Grabar (1992) has suggested, must simply be understood as the ‘act of putting something on something else’, rather than describing the specific ‘nature of what is put’ (p. 22). And graffiti and street art can be seen as precise material examples of this. They are images placed upon supplementary surfaces.

Figure 11.1 Neko, Untitled (acid etching in process – etchings also visible in surround), Madrid, Spain, 2010 © the author
They are inscribings or engravings placed upon the architecture of the city, irrespective of their precise nature. And they are thus objects that cannot be understood outside of their necessarily additive status. Consequently, what I will first be arguing within this chapter is that both graffiti and street art must be understood to be fundamentally ornamental in their primary adjunctive, additional sense – as objects added to a surface, as supplements to a further medium; they are works which can only exist through the body of a secondary medium and are hence activated and enabled through the ‘how’ of the city itself.

Furthermore, be it concrete ‘scratchitti’ or a wheat pasted poster, futuristic wildstyle or a retro tag, these artefacts all function within the sphere of the decorative, within the realm of the beautiful or what David Brett (2005) has termed ‘visual pleasure’. Working through a physical sensuousness that can act as a marker of ‘social recognition, perceptual satisfaction, psychological reward [or] erotic delight’ (Brett 2005: 4), through a mode of material communication that can express both social and intimate themes, these artefacts engage the power of the visual to captivate and gratify their viewers and their makers in equal measure. Whether in their most overtly aggressive or ‘vandalistic’ form – such as the aforementioned acid etching – or in their most apparently amicable or ‘decorative’ state – such as an elaborate, colourful mural – all of these artefacts are created through a complex tradition of visual dexterity and physical skill. They are all objects that contain a quite defined notion of aesthetic value and beauty at their core, even if a naturally subjective notion of beauty. Formal qualities such as ‘order or unity, proportion, scale, contrast, balance and rhythm’ (Moughtin et al. 1999: 3) – elements understood as key principles of decorative production – are basic tenets in the production of all these designs, basic formulae from which they materialise. Even if elements established only so as to later defile – used to form a contrast to, rather than coherence with their architectural surroundings – the basic structure of all graffiti and street art can only become visible through working with

![Figure 11.2 3TTMan, Viva la Calle Libre, Madrid, Spain, 2010 © the author](image-url)
these underlying decorative principles. These are decorative criteria meant to make an object ‘selectable, meaningful, affective and complete’ (Brett 2005: 64). They are qualities meant to enliven, to enrich the objects on which they appeared. And what I will thus secondly argue within this essay is that all graffiti and street art are, in this exact manner, produced specifically to ‘decorate, adorn, embellish [and/or] beautify’ their surfaces, and hence all comply quite faithfully with the second half of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of ornamentation.

But how can we see the additive status of graffiti and street art (its status as a supplement to a surface) as well as its decorative position (its standing as an embellishment or beautification) working in practice? If we take as an example the commonplace practice of tagging – not only one of the most prominent examples of graffiti and street art but one often thought of as the least artistic and most vandalistic by non-practitioners – we can see how this practice is entirely homologous with calligraphy, one of the most classical forms of ornament. Emerging through both the formal as well as conceptual characteristics graffiti and calligraphic cultures embrace – through the clear attempt by both practices to supplement and embellish standardised typography, to amend and adorn it through their loops, serifs and cusps; emerging through the crucial elements of unity, proportion, scale, contrast, balance and rhythm that are paramount to the production of both scripts (and elements used to judge the perceived qualities of each example); emerging through the subcultural linguistic discourse each practice contains, the layered terminology and descriptive categories each utilise; emerging through to the legendary ancestors and masters that both groups reify – these two forms of ‘beautiful writing’ can in truth be seen to be fundamentally indistinguishable, only their legality and locality differentiating them.

Taking this line of reasoning further however, tagging can not only be seen to be ornamental through its status as an addition and adornment of our writing system: It can in fact be seen to be supplementing its material surroundings as much as the very letters which it transforms. It supplements and embellishes the wall and the word, the alphabet and the architecture. Tagging must therefore be seen as doubly ornamental, the ‘what’ of the image – the written name – guided by the ‘how’ of the city and the ‘how’ of the letter at the same time. Moreover, the very fact that tagging is often deemed (or derided) as incomprehensible can be seen to be the fate, almost the requirement of all calligraphy. Beautiful writing can be, as Grabar pronounces (1992), ‘meaningful in a different way from the one in which is it legible’ (p. 117). Viewers can be attracted not by what is literally read but rather by the sensory pleasure that visual complexity provides. The commonly pronounced indecipherability of tagging is thus, perhaps surprisingly, a direct link toward, rather than a barrier against, its ascription as calligraphy, and lack of comprehension no reason to dismiss its status as ornament. And as an indisputable accessory, as a clear embellishment to a base structure, tagging must therefore be understood as a fundamentally ornamental form.

Not only tagging, however, but also all the artefacts which come under the umbrella of graffiti and street art must be seen as prime examples of ornamental forms. Whatever their shape or their size, they all function as the ‘applied decoration’ that Brett (2005) argues is at the essence of all ornament (p. 4). They all work through the basics of ‘form, line, tonality, material, disposition [and] colour’, they work through ‘asserting surface’, through enriching their recipients with a secondary potential of light and shade’ (Phillips 2003). Whatever their ‘meaning’ or even their intentions, they all function as intermediaries, as agents through which ‘messages, signs, symbols and even probably representations are transmitted […] in order to be most effectively communicated’ (Grabar 1992: 227). And this, therefore, is the key proposition that I want to make in this chapter: whether ‘constructive’ or ‘destructive’, graffiti and street art are both decorative and adjunctive, they are accessories to a primary surface, forms of embellishment upon a secondary plane and hence objects with a fundamentally ornamental status.
Figure 11.3 Nano4814, Untitled, Vigo, Spain, 2009 © the author
This understanding of graffiti and street art as ornament does a number of things. First, it helps to remove the practices from the tropes habitually brought up in their discussion – from the debates over creativity and criminality, of art and vandalism as mentioned above. Second, and perhaps more significantly, it can come to expose the source behind the corresponding potency and anxiety that graffiti and street art so commonly incorporate. And what I now want to move to argue is that it is the very ornamental condition of graffiti and street art that creates much of the fear (and passion) that they draw to the surface. Rather than it simply being due to their illegality, due to the campaigns and ‘wars’ against graffiti undertaken over the last thirty years, it is the fundamentally decorative and adjunctive status of graffiti and street art which I believe causes much of the friction and fervour which they so clearly elicit. And while today the epithet ‘mere’ has become as if almost affixed to the term ornament (perhaps as a way to diminish its potentiality), the strange power that it seems to contain, its capability, as with the iconoclasm which Bruno Latour and his colleagues has famously discussed (2002), to ‘return again, no matter how strongly one wants to get rid of them’ (p. 15), is something which now must be explored. So what is it that makes ornament so strangely irrepressible, which makes graffiti so tenacious even in the face of its common abhorrence? Why is ornament subject to as much condemnation as devotion, subject to, as Frank Lloyd Wright put it (2005 [1932]: 348), ‘ornamentia’ (the love of ornament) and ‘ornaphobia’ (the fear of it) in equal measure? And how did this seemingly innocuous artefact, this object that can take, in effect, practically any form (as long as both adjunctive and decorative), come to exist within this complex state?

**Agency and unease**

Although architectural modernists – most famously epitomised by Adolf Loos (2002) – claimed that ornament was dangerous due to its ‘falsity’ (its failure to represent true order) or due to its defilement of the ‘pure’ (its failure to reconcile form and function), the true grounds for the perils and passions ornamentation invokes centres, in the view of the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998), on the notion of *artefactual agency* – the power of objects to act with as much intentionality as their human counterparts. While, as he says, the ‘most committed aesthetes are far from keen on riotous decoration’ (whether this be a decorated cigarette case or a graffiti covered city wall), it can be understood to have survived and prospered, ‘even in the face of aesthetic condemnation from on high, because it is *socially efficacious*’ (p. 82, emphasis added). As a ‘social technology’, surface decoration was believed by Gell to produce a vigorous ‘attachment between persons and things’ (p. 74), an attachment bound through the *social*, as much as the *physical* complexity of these artefacts. Art objects, and likewise ornamental artefacts, were thus understood to act as material indicators of their producer’s agency, ‘vehicles’ of their ‘personhood’ (p. 81). They were believed to behave in many quite logical ways as the person who formed them (as Gell explains through examples as diverse as anti-personnel mines and the oeuvre of Marcel Duchamp). As ‘fragments of primary intentional agents in their *secondary* artefactual form’ (p. 21), they could act as physical traces of persons, and as a method of binding disparate individuals through the transference or simple viewing of these highly dynamic, almost living objects. Actors were hence compelled to ‘load surfaces with decoration’ in order to ‘draw persons into worldly projects’ (p. 82). They were compelled to ornament, to embellish, in order to ‘mediate social agency back and forth within the social field’ (p. 81). Akin to Gottfried Semper’s suggestion that by ‘adorning anything, be it alive or inanimate, I bestow upon it the right of individual life’ (Semper in Collins 1998: 124), the agency of decorative technologies was grasped by Gell to emerge through the webs of relationality these forms create, through their ability to become part of the social field in ways very similar, if not identical, to human actors themselves.
Not only materialising through this indexical status however, the ability of the decorative was further understood to emerge through what Gell calls the ‘pleasurable frustration’ of our being trapped within a rhythmic, patterned surface (Gell 1998: 80). The animation of design functioned as a ‘mind trap’, a technology of enchantment which comes to obstruct our ability to intellectually reconstruct a pattern, leading us to be ‘held inside it, impaled, as it were, on its bristling hooks and spines’ (p. 76). Our captivation and fascination with decoration is thus understood to be formed through our inability to ‘mentally rehearse’ their productive origins, our inability to ‘follow the sequence of steps in the artist’s “performance”’ (p. 81). It is the commonly felt impossibility of untangling the maze that the image presents us with, the impossibility of comprehending how these works came into existence that enchants us. And this creates what Gell terms ‘unfinished business’, a ‘delay or lag, between transactions’ meaning the object is ‘never fully possessed’ but always ‘in the process of becoming possessed’ (pp. 80–81 my emphasis). It forms an uneven exchange in which the viewer is forever entangled in its materiality, not only meaning that it remains out of our grasp, but that it forms an inexhaustible bond between index and recipient, object and beholder. As Wigley continues (2001), just to ‘look at decoration is to be absorbed by it. Vision itself is swallowed by the sensuous surface’ (p. 132). Merely resting our eyes on these visual forms is hence a profound danger. We become captivated by the magical power of the image, entrapped in its physical form.
This Gellian way of comprehending patterned form can, I believe, start to explain the deeply phobic, deeply iconoclastic attitude so often displayed toward ornament. It can start to explain the iconoclastic attitude not only towards Art Nouveau and the decorative, rather than fine arts, but that displayed toward the graffiti and street art of today. It is the agency and animation of these images, the stigma of personhood and their status as in some way alive which produces this fear of the decorative, the relationship formed between object and viewer which generates the pollution which they are so often believed to contain. As previously discussed in Schacter (2008), the way both producers and consumers understand these images, the metaphors used as well as the reactions prompted, consistently return to the living qualities of these supposedly inanimate objects. They constantly return to the status of these objects as not merely likenesses, not merely representations, but as living relations, as offspring or replications of their selves. The personhood invested within these ornaments is what creates this (often unwanted) relation. Their ability to trap our eyes, to weave us into their histories, their ability to force us into an exchange and to undertake communion with them. And that the word ‘tacky’, as Gell continues, was chosen by ‘severe modernism to condemn the popular taste for riotous ornament’ (and is equally a term often placed before street art and graffiti itself) can hence be seen to be quite elucidating, ‘tactile adhesiveness’ being something which attacks the ‘body/world boundary’ (pp. 82–83), which contains a viscosity, an adhesion, literally attaching the material world to ourselves. Ornamentation, as Grabar continues (1992), cannot therefore simply be understood as a ‘category of forms or of techniques applied to some media’ but rather must be seen as an ‘unenunciated but almost necessary manner of compelling a relationship between objects or works of art and viewers and users’ (p. 230). It is the agency of the decorative which creates their fierce ability to attach. It is this agency that creates the fear that so clearly surrounds them. It is the ‘wanton subjectivism’ (Foster 2002: 17) of these artefacts, their personhood and literal vivacity which can thus be understood to stand at the centre of this ornaphobia. It is their inherent personhood that necessitates their removal from sight.

The unease and angst that emerges at the mere witnessing of graffiti and street art can hence be understood to emerge not simply through their contravention of legal codes. It can be understood to emerge through their providing evidence of an embedded form of sociality, expressing the evident ‘personhood’ of their producers, eliciting an evidentially animative quality. Through ‘tattooing walls’, as Jean Baudrillard remarked (1976/1993), graffiti ‘free[s] them from architecture and turn[s] them once again into living, social matter’ (p. 36); it turns each tag, each mural, each marking in the city into a material marker of an individual, a personhood revivifying a physical space. The very function of these decorative markings is to attract, is to entice us within their web. They are produced explicitly for this purpose, not only providing clear evidence of an individual (as clear with a graffiti-artist’s tag as a street-artist’s icon), but at the same time embedding a form of sociality within the wall they touch. They open a network between objects and persons, between writer and reader, producer and consumer of the work. And the decorative nature of ornament, the ‘what’ of the image, can thus be seen to be as powerful as it is pollutive (as following Mary Douglas 1966), to have an ability to attack and repel, to attract and disgust in quite equal measure. It can be seen to trap and captivate its recipients, to draw them into their visual and social world irrespective of their viewers’ desires.

The parerga and the quasidetached

Ornament’s anxiety-producing yet simultaneously attractive status can also be understood to emerge through its confusing position in physical terms (literally confusingly, from its Latin root confundere to ‘mingle together’), through its placement both attached and detached from the integrity
Figure 11.5 Graffiti as parerga, frame and content in the same moment: Vova Vorotniov, Spray as Index 1, Warsaw, Poland, 2011 © the author
of its ‘primary’ structure. As the archetypal *parergon* – a Greek term whose literal meaning is ‘beside’, or additional to the ‘work’ (famously illustrated by Kant by the frame of a painting, but also by clothing or architectural columns), and yet a term which Jacques Derrida (1987) has explained must always be understood through its *relation* rather than *separation* to the *ergon* – ornament is seen by Derrida to be ‘neither inside or outside, neither above nor below’ (p. 9) but to exist as both constitutive and peripheral in the same moment.

The natural site chosen for the erection of a temple is obviously not a parergon. Nor is an artificial site: Neither the square, nor the church, nor the museum, nor the other surrounding works. But drapery or the column, yes. Why? Not because they are easily detached; on the contrary, they are very difficult to detach. Without them, without their quasi-detachment, the lack within the work would appear or, what amounts to the same, would not appear. It is not simply their exteriority that constitutes them as parerga, but the internal structural link by which they are inseparable from a lack within the ergon. And this lack makes for the very unity of the ergon. Without it, the ergon would have no need of a parergon. The lack of the ergon is the lack of a parergon, of drapery or columns which nevertheless remain exterior to it.

(Derrida, 1979: 24)

It is ornament’s status of ‘quasi-detachment’, the inherent impossibility of disengagement or disconnection while appearing to be both engaged and connected, that makes the *parergon* so fascinating. It is ornament’s position as inseparable, rather than severable, that bring so much power. It is its quasi-detachment that means it acts not only as the supplement, the addition, but as that which exposes the lack within the interior, the surplus which reveals the inadequacy of the surface itself. Working in accordance with the general principle of supplementarity as explained by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, 1998 [1967]), ornament can be understood to expose the shortcomings of the whole as well as the natural deficiencies of its own form. It can expose the fact that its surface is both vulnerable and insufficient in the same moment.

This, then, is ornament’s inherent paradox, its status, as Mark Wigley (1992) has suggested, as something that ‘destabilises the very structure that it at once supplements and makes possible’ (p. 1014), something that disrupts what seemed to be the very clear distinction between **ergon** and **parergon**, between structure and ornament. Much like a tattoo then (an artefact seen as one of the primary, originary forms of ornamentation), we can see ornament as both on the body and yet external to it, integral to the structure while simultaneously extraneous. Yet, if it is separated or detached, the ornament, the tattoo no longer remains what we understand it to be; the structure, the body, must be destroyed. ‘Lodged on the border between inside and outside, the tattoo’, as Juliet Fleming notes (2001), ‘occupies the no-place of abjection’ (p. 84); like all ornament (and like, as she contends, medieval graffiti), it is a ‘creature of’, as it is a ‘disturbance to’, its very surface (p. 85); like all ornament it is a substance that is both in and out of place, included and excluded, within and without. It is a substance that can be defined, in fact, by the inherent difficulty of identifying its boundaries.13

From this perspective then, ornament can only ever be understood through the tense relationship to its ‘other’. It can only ever be seen as the ‘outsider that “always already” inhabits the inside as an intrinsic constituent’, the ‘subversive alien’, the ‘foreign body that already inhabits the interior and cannot be expelled without destroying its host’ (Wigley 1987: 160). Like the fetish, it is thus ‘first and foremost a question of place’, only existing ‘as such when it both occupies and veils a space not properly its own’ (Wigley 1992: 103). And the ornament hence ‘territorialises, unsettles, displaces and reaffirms’ its surroundings, it comes to both ‘fix and unsettle borders’, confounding ‘clear-cut boundaries among things and between persons and objects’.
(Spyer 1998: 2–3). As with frames and fetishes, tattoos and graffitos, it acts both as a part of the whole and apart from it, blurring the boundary between interior and exterior, licit and illicit, primary and secondary, inside and out. The ornament is thus a border rather than boundary — not ‘a limit’ but an edge, a site which does not simply delimit, but which is ‘porous and resistant’, which enables and constrains in the same moment (Sennett 2008). It is a material status that creates a friction, a danger that acts as an external threat to its own internal purity.

The deep-seated iconoclash we find present within the history of ornament, within the aesthetics of graffiti and street art, can thus be seen to emerge through its curious ability to destabilise the distinction between primary and secondary, ergon and parergon. The very bond made between structure and ornament, between wall and pigment creates the near impossibility of ever separating the two. Once applied to its surface (again, much like a tattoo) paint can only be removed through harming, disfiguring the primary surface itself, being blotted out entirely by anti-graffiti advocates and thus creating what has often been called accidental or abstract graffiti (the erased markings of graffiti which often occur in a different colour to the wall itself), as well as commonly returning to haunt their sites through the failure of the overpainting to entirely hide the original mark (in what are commonly termed graffiti ‘ghosts’, instances when the original marking bleeds through the paint which attempted to remove it). It is the ornament’s simultaneous fixity and flux that causes this (dis)comfort, this (dis)pleasure. Paint not only lies on the surface of the wall, it embeds itself deep within it and infuses into its surface. And each marking not only makes the innate porosity of the wall clear. It displays its primary lack, its double-bind as both perfectly in, and perfectly out of place, its ability to entirely transform the nature of the ergon, to allude toward another order existing within the city.

Every example of graffiti and street art can hence unveil the deep ‘lack’ of its surface; its lack of protection, its lack of pattern, its lack of personhood. Each example of graffiti and street art can come to function to disrupt the master/slave, structure/ornament dynamic of the urban realm. The bare wall thus begs to be etched upon. The bare surface calls out for its ornamentation, a horror vacui, or, as Gombrich notes (1984), an amor infiniti (p. 80), that only ornamentation will relieve. It reveals a cenophobia, a fear of the empty, that only decoration will alleviate. The ornament thus not only implies a constitutional deficiency within the ergon but at the same time in some way satisfies that lack, re-establishing a harmony within the whole. As Boris Groys notes (2010), every ‘act of aesthetisation’ is ‘always already a critique of the object of aesthetisation simply because this act calls attention to the object’s need for a supplement in order to look better than it actually is’ (p. 42). It makes clear that structure has failed, that it is alienating, vulnerable, and insufficient. It points toward the originary want that the supplement fills while destabilising the very notion of primary and secondary, supplement and structure, ornament and order. And, as Roland Barthes so beautifully outlined (1991 [1979]), what can be understood to ‘constitute’ graffiti is thus ‘neither the inscription nor its message but the wall, the background, the surface (the desktop); it is because the background exists fully, as an object which has already lived, that such writing always comes to it as an enigmatic surplus: What is in excess, supernumerary, out of place’ (p. 167). What can be understood to constitute graffiti is thus not the image itself, not the materials used, not its illicitness or transgression. It is the medium which is the key. It is its status as ornament which is crucial. And it is because they are parerga, because they confuse the dynamic between primary and secondary, that these artefacts contain so much inherent potential.

**Ornament and order**

The uproar graffiti and street art so often arouses is not simply due to their illegality, to their status as a material form which contravenes the laws of public space. It is, I contend, their
Figure 11.6 Remed, Untitled, Leon, Spain, 2011 © the author
fundamentally ornamental nature that causes much of the anxiety which surrounds it, their ornamental nature that is at the root of the iconoclash in which they exist. The decorative and thus agentic nature of graffiti and street art (the adjunctive, and thus parergonic status), act as the causal factors, provoking the fear of these urban ornaments, their tactile adhesiveness and lack of fixity provoking unease. And while of course I would not contest the fact that some amount of fear is generated by the basic illegality of many of these ornaments (due, most likely, to their recurrent linkage to more violent or invasive crimes by the now widely discredited Broken Windows theory of Wilson and Kelling 1982), this simply does not explain why other illicit aspects of our visual environment (such as bill posters, or the vast amount of public advertising hoardings which are illegally erected) do themselves not generate the level of fear and loathing graffiti and street art are subject to. It is the tension between the ornament and the architecture which bestows the concomitant vitality and vilification upon graffiti and street art. It is its decorative, sticky agency which grants it the power to both bind and repulse.

For all these reasons then, ornament, as Wigley has argued (1988), has always been ‘conceived of as potentially dangerous’, as ‘potentially chaotic’ by those who design our built environments, something which must be made ‘servile to structure precisely because [it] lies in the dangerous realm of representation and can mislead us, take us away from the natural presence of harmony and order’ (p. 52). Architects have thus habitually attempted to ‘tame ornament’, to make it ‘represent’ and ‘articulate structure’ (p. 52), to prevent it from running wild: They have used it to reaffirm rather than interrogate, to placate rather than activate. And this, I believe, leads us to the critical point, to the punch-line of this piece. Ornament, as earlier mentioned, is never merely ‘mere’. Rather it is its ability to produce social as much as structural formations which is so significant. It is the power of ornament to not simply reflect but to create order which we must now take into consideration. Whether taking on harshly repressive configurations then (such as the Haussmannisation of Paris or within Jeremy Bentham’s infamous panoptican), or richly emancipative ones (such as within Yona Friedman’s Ville Spatiale or Ebenezer Howard’s garden-city), the material body of the city has always been able to effect the material body of the person in very real ways. And this is what makes ornament such a crucial issue. This is what makes it something not only good to think with, but something that in fact affects the very way we think in itself. Our built environment must be seen to not simply ‘involve argument’ but to be, at its core, ‘about argument’ (Fleming 1998: 147), to have the capacity to both ‘enable and constrain’ it, to mould both ‘the production and reception of social discourse’ (p. 148). And the insurgent ornamentation of our urban realms, the grassroots ornamentation of the city ‘coming from outside the official institutionalised domain of urban planning and urban politics’ can then come to embody, as Groth and Corijn (2005) suggest, a ‘different notion of “urbanity” from that which is evident in planned developments’ (p. 506). Graffiti and street art is such a non-institutional practice. It is a practice questioning, subverting the conventions, codes and “laws” of architecture’ (Hill 1998: 36), a practice, like all illegal architecture, as Hill terms it, which emerges through the ‘public domain of the street rather than the private realm of a familiar building site’ (p. 11). It is a practice in which pleasure can be ‘derived from the misuse of form’ (p. 48), an ‘insurgent architecture’ that can create ‘alternative visions as to what might be possible’ (Harvey 2000: 237), that can act as a ‘critique of structure’ from within structure, that can act as an ‘interrogation of structure’ (p. 52) from within the physicality of structure itself.

Not only coming to create a form of voluptuousness in the midst of cultural aridity, fashioning a form of embellishment which can counterpoint a dominant set of signs, graffiti and street art can be seen to have the ability to construct a new sense of order within the city, to be able to physically score an idea, a concept of civility onto its material surface. It not only confronts us, provokes equal fear and adulation, but evidences and engenders a way of thinking...
about the city contrary to the norm, not simply containing a ‘second-order significance as a mere reflection of some other more important determinant’ but having clearly ‘agentive and transformative’ abilities (Pinney 2002: 134–35). As ornament, graffiti and street art remodel our physical environment. They reconstruct an understanding of the world itself. And just as tattooing can work, as Alfred Gell has again shown (1993), as an influential form of bodily practice, as a mode of ‘honourable degradation’ (p. 207), so too these ornaments which tattoo the skin of the city can work as an influential form of social practice, a means of re-forming the city, re-negotiating the symbolic and formal expressions of built form, re-framing the very meaning of the space they inhabit. Their supplemental nature can expose the immanent tensions within our metropolitan environments, the double-bind encased within the concrete walls of the city. It can expose the various conflicts around notions of public and private space, of use-value and commercial rights. Their status as embellishment signalling a life, a personhood, a social relation within the stone. Revealing a human touch within our increasingly depersonalised, increasingly reconstructed urban landscape. Its ornamental logic demonstrating the shortcomings of structure, while, at the same time, in some way completing it.

Notes
1 Sections of this chapter are taken from my monograph Ornament & Order: Graffiti, Street Art and the Parergon (2014).
2 In very general terms, graffiti will here be understood as a practice of image making (often thought to focus on text over image – these being the chosen pseudonyms of their producers), created using spray cans, markers or various other tools of inscription, and undertaken illicitly within our urban environments. It is a very baggy, promiscuous term however, one with as many meanings as practitioners. Yet what will be crucial in the utilisation of the expression here however is that the
labelling of an image as graffiti is inextricably dependent on its site of application, this being the public space of the city itself. So called ‘graffiti’ on canvas, for example, will thus be considered as spray can art, calligraphic art, whatever art its medium obtains, but will not work within the designation graffiti itself. And only images found in the public realm, in the unbound space of the commons, will thus here be classed within the term graffiti.

Likewise, and again in very general terms, street art will here be understood as a practice of image making (often thought to focus on image over text – these being the iconic symbols of their producers), created using either spray cans, stencils, posters, or a number of further techniques of composition, and undertaken illicitly within our urban environments. It is a very baggy, promiscuous term however, one with as many meanings as practitioners. Yet what will again be crucial in the utilisation of the expression is that the labelling of an image as street art is inextricably dependent on its site of application, this being the public space of the city itself. As such, ‘street art’ on canvas, for example, will be considered as stencil art, poster art, whatever art its medium obtains, but will not (unsurprisingly considering its very name), work within the designation street art itself. And only images found in the public realm, in the unbound space of the commons, will thus here be classed within the term street art.

A design produced onto glass with the use of an acid solution or paint stripper.

A design, often a tag, scratched into a surface.

A multi-coloured, large-scale graffiti design based on the producers chosen name, often so complexly designed to be illegible to non-practitioners.

Not in the purely scopophilic sense meant by Laura Mulvey (1975), however.

This negative appreciation of tagging could be argued to be due in main to the innate lack of curatorial delimitation within graffiti and street art; the sheer fact that the work of the neophyte and the expert is equivalently available to public results in a difficulty distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ work, the viewer simply overwhelmed with quantity and thus being unable to define quality. The specialist, as in any aesthetic discourse of course, is able to filter out works almost immediately, however.

Grabar’s beautiful description of calligraphy (1992) can in fact be seen as an almost perfect elucidation of tagging: ‘Letters can be modified, extended, looped, shortened, thickened; dots and diacritical marks float around letters rather than help fix their specificity . . . while ‘correct’ orthography is frequently violated for the sake of the composition’ (p. 106). There cannot be a more consummate portrayal of the richness of tagging than this.

This connection between ornament and graffiti is also supported by a number of other theorists. While I have earlier noted Jonathan Hill’s argument, the architect Robert Venturi and Ben-Amos (2004) has also suggested that ‘graffiti on ordinary – or, let’s say, ‘generic’ buildings – can be richly decorative . . . We finished a campus center at Princeton, the Frist Campus Center, and on the walls inside we have what we call ‘ornamental graffiti’. These are sayings by famous Princeton graduates – John Adams, Woodrow Wilson, people like that. That’s a form of graffiti that’s valid. There’s a tradition of classical buildings having words on their façades’. While Venturi does not explain exactly why this ‘ornamental graffiti’ is more ‘valid’ than more commonplace graffiti (and perhaps he would backtrack from these comments if pressed), the linkage between decoration, ornamentation and graffiti is made quite clear. In more overtly supportive terms, the renowned British artist Tom Phillips has claimed (in his ‘treatise’ on the subject), that the ‘often ephemeral’ work of ‘graffiti artists’ must be considered as quintessentially ornamental; ‘The use of calligraphy in ornament is as old as writing itself and the graffiti artists of the late twentieth century especially in New York brought calligraphic expression to a new height comparable with the best of Islamic letter-based art or mediaeval illumination’. Phillips provocative hypothesis (perhaps unsurprising from an artist who has often worked within the public sphere) will be, I hope, fully born out within this chapter.

As Brett has argued (2005), ‘the impulse to decorate and to find sensuous pleasure in materials cannot be denied; IT WILL BREAK OUT, COME WHAT MAY’ (p. 208).

A quote recently found in the film Kings and Toys by British graffiti writer Prime underscores this fact again: Discussing his many tags, he suggests that ‘it’s almost like I have agents working for me and I put them in different places round the city, and they stand there and pose for me, and everyone walks by and says “yeah, that’s me, that’s Prime”.’

The similarity between these two ornamental forms is further reinforced by the extremely high proportion of graffiti artists who have gone on to become professional tattoo artists.

One could also suggest that it is the non-instrumental, aneconomic nature of these works that cause discomfort, going so clearly against the neo-liberal understanding of the city as a location for consumption.
On the occasions that graffiti and street art does become venerated on a more popular level, however, I would argue this often has much to do with perceptions of wider market value than any aesthetic value per se.

References


Graffiti and street art as ornament


