Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art

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From the city walls to ‘Clean Trains’

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Part III

Regional/municipal variations/differences of graffiti and street art

Jeffrey Ian Ross

Introduction

Graffiti and street art appear in different regions, countries, and cities. What does this mean? Not all graffiti and street art is the same, nor are the people who engage in this activity, the dynamics among them, their influences, subject matter, and places where they pursue their work. In short, considerable variability exists. In order to get as comprehensive a picture of graffiti and street art throughout the world as possible, it is important to review who the major players in the local graffiti and street art scene are or were. It is also useful to have a sense of the dominant images, symbols, and icons employed by the writers/artists. In many cases, each city has a set of particular norms that are shared among local graffiti/street artists. In the instances of variations from these norms, this section’s contributors speculate as to why these differences have developed.

Although graffiti/street art is a worldwide phenomenon, some regions and continents appear to play more prominent roles than others in terms of the proliferation of this particular art form/vandalism. The regions that the contributors see as being of great importance to the proliferation of graffiti/street art are North America, Western Europe, South America, Eastern Europe, and Australia/Oceana. In regions such as Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, however, graffiti/street art appears to be less prominent.

Although examining countries or regions as a whole is a worthwhile point of comparison, few scholars of graffiti/street art examine these activities on a country or regional basis, and most ethnographies of graffiti/street art look at the city as the unit of analysis. This is perhaps because of the primacy of ethnography as a research tool in this subject area. In general, it is very difficult to perform a competent ethnography on graffiti/street art in a region larger than a single city.

Overview of chapters

This part of the book consists of eleven detailed studies of graffiti and/or street art in major international cities and/or contexts. Similar to the work of Ferrell, Kramer, Macdonald, and
Jeffrey Ian Ross

Snyder, these chapters review the history, locations, major writers/artists/crews, content, and responses by various communities. These responses include but are not limited to artists, writers, galleries, the wider public (especially moral entrepreneurs actively working against the production of graffiti and street art), local/municipal politicians, departments of public works, law enforcement, criminal justice practitioners, the art world, and local businesses. With few exceptions, the city chapters will cover the time span of the 1980s to present. These chapters selectively integrate various social scientific theories and the authors’ own ethnographic research. The chapters do not focus on specific graffiti/street artists/crews or neighborhoods.

In “From the city walls to ‘Clean Trains’: graffiti and street art in New York City, 1969–1990,” Joe A. Austin argues that although graffiti and street art both have complex origins in multiple locations, New York City (NYC) was the key site for their emergence in the U.S., and as a “world city,” NYC was also an important springboard for the global spread of graffiti/street art after the mid-1980s. Graffiti art’s characteristic typographic conventions and forms of social production developed in the NYC subway yards during the early to mid-1970s, and were significantly influenced by city government suppression and removal strategies in the “war on graffiti.” As city efforts to keep graffiti art off of the subways became effective in the mid-1980s, artists turned to new spaces (streets, walls, and freight trains) and innovated new forms (stickers and “productions”). A growing graffiti media presence circulated the work worldwide, and important new centers of production appeared on the U.S. West Coast and in Europe. By the end of the 1990s, NYC had become a leading member in a global graffiti art network. The established example of graffiti art, as well as NYC’s post-WWII status as the “Art Capital of the World,” were important contexts for the emergence of street art in the city during the 1980s. Graffiti artists joined urban “outsider” artists and traditionally trained gallery artists in experimenting with new forms of “unauthorized” art in the city’s public spaces. By the turn of the century, graffiti/street art had become iconic elements in the struggles over NYC’s neoliberal development strategies (e.g. gentrification), while also gaining a level of legitimacy that renewed debates about the unsteady connections between political struggle and artistic production.

“‘Boost or blight?’ Graffiti writing and street art in the ‘new’ New Orleans,” by Doreen Piano, examines graffiti/street art’s role in the renewal of public culture in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, by examining how public space has been contested in the aftermath of disaster. The author investigates how the multiple responses to and uses of graffiti within New Orleans have been situated within larger debates over the city’s future. Through descriptive analysis, Piano illustrates how the street art/graffiti culture has become what Times-Picayune art critic Doug MacCash called “the most vital art movement of the past decade in New Orleans.” Additionally, Piano’s case study points to how social media has become an essential tool for graffiti writers/street artists to create informal networks and engage with global audiences.

Anna Wacławek’s chapter, “Pop culture and politics: graffiti and street art in Montréal,” traces the history of Montréal’s signature graffiti writing culture, which emerged in the early 1990s when a couple of French tourists introduced the city to tagging. A few years later, the “second wave” of the Montréal scene, characterized by painting in makeshift spaces physically and ideologically removed from the cityscape’s visual culture, was in full effect. Abandoned warehouses and factories, as well as highways and train yards were among the breeding grounds of local hand styles and letterforms. These sites became emblematic of what it meant to write graffiti in Montréal during this period; far removed from the city center, a subculture was brewing. These developments eventually led not only to the creation of “Under Pressure,” the largest international graffiti festival in North America, but also to the creation of numerous impressive commission, permission, and legal walls. As the subculture blossomed within the downtown core and in various other neighborhoods, participation grew and the city began enforcing stricter
penalties for graffiti writing. At the same time, street artists, whose practices are universally more tolerated and enjoyed by the general public than by municipal authorities, were transforming the local scene both visually and politically as Montréal residents began opening up the age-old debate of art vs. crime. In this chapter, the specificities of urban painting in Montréal are explored with regard to local politics, visual culture, and socio-cultural particularities as formative factors in the city’s distinct graffiti/street art scenes.

In Chile, unsanctioned open-air propaganda painting has been a political tool since the 1960s. Hip-hop graffiti writers, who emerged during the latter part of Chile’s military dictatorship (1973–1990) and whose work took off during the first decades of Chile’s interminable “transition” to a fully democratic system, had a different audience and objectives from political mural groups to the extent that both sides recognize that there was an “abyss” between their respective subcultures. Their only shared aim was to illegally appropriate prominent public spaces; their common enemy was government-backed erasures. The hub of activity was the capital, Santiago, through which the Mapocho River flows as a main artery. Rodney Palmer’s chapter, “The battle for public space along the Mapocho River, Santiago de Chile, 1964–2014,” gives an historical perspective to the left-wing protest murals, anarchic graffiti, and the fusion of the two impulses in the international twenty-first-century phenomenon of the “graffiti mural.” Palmer also addresses the censorship of all kinds of libertarian art and its impact on Chile’s chronically polarized socio-cultural front lines.

“London calling: contemporary graffiti and street art in the UK’s Capital” by Jeffrey Ian Ross examines why London has become a magnet for graffiti and street art, and the people who engage in this kind of activity, and profit from it. Although graffiti and street art is found in most parts of London, the chapter outlines the three principal locations in the U.K. capital; Camden, East London and Leake Street in Waterloo. Additional factors such as the legal context, and how graffiti and street art is tolerated by some councils and not by others is discussed. The chapter continues by examining the paucity of existing scholarship on this topic including the 2002 report commissioned by the London Assembly. Notable London-based graffiti and street artists such as Solo One, Banksy, King Robbo, and EINE are described. The chapter finishes by providing a brief history of contemporary graffiti and street art in London, including the increasing acceptability and recognition of the importance of this type of vandalism and art for its’ aesthetic and economic benefits it provides.

Shifting over to the continent, the Parisian graffiti scene was born long before the contemporary graffiti crossed the Atlantic Ocean, coming from the United States. During the early 1930s, Brassai was already taking photos of the graffiti he saw all over the city to track the urban changes. May 1968 remains another key cultural moment in this history, when student protestors expressed their often surrealist demands in the form of graffiti (e.g. “Beneath the paving stones, the sea”). In the 1980s, hip-hop related graffiti arrived in Paris, also helped by some American writers, such as Jonone from the crew 156 All Starz, who fixed residence in the city. In “Graffiti and street art in Paris,” written by David Fieni, the author traces the origins of this contemporary work over the years, the locations where it has occurred and some well-known writers and artists, such as Bando, Blek le Rat, Mode 2, Invader, Skii, Ash.2, OENO, Miss.Tic, Dja’louz, Septik, El-Seed, l’Atlas, Monsieur Chat, Seth, Levalet, and Mygolo 2000. Fieni focuses his overview on three key relationships: that between the city of Paris itself and the outlying suburbs and housing estates; the fluid lines between the categories of graffiti and street art; and the way that the axes of illegality and aesthetics have intersected and informed the production of graffiti in the context of Paris.

In “From Marx to Merkel: political muralism and street art in Lisbon,” Ricardo Campos provides an analysis of the post-revolutionary period following the Carnation Revolution of
1974, when the walls of Lisbon became the repository for many political murals made by various political parties, particularly from the left wing. At the time, this was a socially accepted way of political communication. Therefore, Marxist and Maoist iconography was very present in the urban visualscape. These murals slowly vanished, giving way in the 1990s to American-inspired graffiti. Driven by a globalized hip-hop culture particularly present in the media, tags, throw-ups, and masterpieces gradually acquired a significant place in the metropolitan area of Lisbon. These visual expressions were present not only on city walls, but also on trains and subway carriages, following the most relevant North American graffiti tradition. The spread of legal and illegal graffiti in the 2000s slowly generated a public reaction of discomfort, particularly because of the street bombing in the central and historical quarters of Lisbon. Subsequently, a graffiti abatement program was established and an overall increased control over graffiti was put in action. It soon became apparent that graffiti/street art was now considered a kind of urban blight. In recent years, two phenomena are noteworthy. On the one hand, the non-sanctioned, unofficial political mural produced by graffiti writers and street artists has reemerged because of the severe economic and social crisis affecting Portugal, and, on the other hand, there has been official consecration and legitimation of many Portuguese street artists through promotion by public entities, cultural entrepreneurs, museums, and art dealers. This chapter seeks to provide a description of the historical evolution of these expressions in Lisbon, analyzing the social, cultural, and urban impact of these changes. The data presented is based on ethnographic research conducted by the author and on several projects carried out on this topic over the last decade.

Graffiti and street art have figured prominently in pre- and post-revolution Egypt. In “The field of graffiti and street art in post-January 2011 Egypt,” Mona Abaza describes and analyzes this expansion in terms of artistic networks mobilizing for complex projects, mediating events that prompted new cycles of graffiti, and changing techniques that made street art more democratic in the propagation of downloadable stencils and, at the same time, more refined. In 2012, several formally trained artists shifted the canvas of their work to prominent walls in Cairo, Alexandria, Mansoura, Luxor, and Ismailia, and this work came to be perceived as part of the broader public art movement, folding back into the significance of artistic networks and common points of entry for broad participation. The tension between “high” and “low” painting techniques and imagery — allegory and freehand painting versus tagging and stencils — remains an ongoing debate, though it productively enriched the range of styles seen in Egyptian street art and fostered the perception that fine art belonged to the Egyptian people rather than to the gallery elites. In keeping with the temporal horizons of revolution that shaped the post-January 25 street art, Abaza discusses several pivotal events that led to the rapid organization of work in response to state violence, martyrdom, and elections. She focuses specifically on the roles of two groups that have been underrepresented in the literature on Egyptian street art: the Ultras and women. The Ultras are a highly organized group of soccer/football fans that have engaged in revolutionary protests over the last three years, actions that are in keeping with their strident, pre-revolution stance against the police state. Their influence on the graffiti scene in Egypt is significant, though under-documented. In addition, Abaza analyzes the role of women as iconic representations and as artists. Representations of women are critical components of most Egyptian street art images, and they are often related to the specter of abuse and gendered violence. In reaction, female artists have been involved in generating new work and posing questions about “space claiming” and female representation, both of which have traditionally been biased toward masculinist markings of domains and themes. Women are now presenting alternative modes of space-claiming and thematizing, and Abaza explains the factors responsible for expanding the participation of women in street art. She concludes her contribution by addressing the recent criminalization of street art, punishable by fines and imprisonment, and the ways that the law...
has been applied selectively in order to target work that criticizes the military regime. The distinction between the broad criminalization afforded by legal changes and criminalized critique is significant, and can be traced through patterns of arrests and shifts in subject matter.

Also in the Middle East, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict has inspired considerable graffiti and street art. In “Wall talk: Palestinian graffiti,” Julie Peteet reviews the current state of graffiti from the Palestinian perspective. In the wake of the First Intifada (uprising) against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the author published an article on the then-ubiquitous graffiti dotting the built environment in Palestine. Graffiti continues to proliferate, as do large, colorful murals painted by Palestinians, as well as foreigners, including most famously, work by Banksy. In the aftermath of the Second Intifada, continuing occupation and dispossession, and most significantly, the construction of the 24-foot high cement wall that snakes through the West Bank, graffiti and murals convey a markedly different message. In the First Intifada, before the advent of cell phones and the Internet, graffiti was a means of circumventing Israeli censorship of Palestinian expression and communicating directives, as well as proclaiming opposition to the occupation. Most graffiti was written in Arabic and signed by various political parties. More recent graffiti is in languages other than Arabic, particularly English, and much of it is written by foreigners and is personal in its commentary. The West Bank wall serves as a canvas, a sort of international bulletin board, on which Palestinians and foreigners proclaim opposition to Israeli actions, solidarity with the Palestinians, and commentary on the wall. Political affiliations are less pronounced in their presence. With the Israeli policy of separation, the writing on the walls elicits little Israeli response, unlike in the First Intifada when jeeps rushed to blacken out graffiti or residents were compelled to paint over it.

Next, “Graffiti/street art in Tokyo and surrounding districts” (Chapter 26) by Hidetsugu Yamakoshi and Yasumasa Sekine, argue that this movement began during the 1970s, when Rocco Satoshi, one of the originators of street art in Japan, began to draw murals on the walls of Sakuragi-cho district in Yokohama (near Tokyo). During the 1980s, others imitated his style. In the 1990s, the first generation of Japanese graffiti writers travelled to the United States to learn about graffiti. Thereafter, graffiti writing spread among the youth who did their work on the walls of Sakuragi-cho, transforming this area into a “graffiti and street art sanctuary.”

From the 1990s through the 2000s, graffiti culture developed considerably in Japan. In 2005, the first large scale exhibition “X-Color/Graffiti in Japan” was held. As graffiti and street art proliferated, it sometimes caused conflicts between artists and the local governments. In the mid-1990s, for example, Junichirou Take, a well-known street artist, was arrested for protesting local government efforts to chase homeless people out from the Shinjuku station yard in Tokyo.

In order to deal with difficult situations like this, the Non-Profit Organization “KOMPOSITION” started to mediate between the local municipal administrations and the graffiti writers/street artists. However many writers/artists refuse to cooperate, because they want to draw freely and that the essence of graffiti/street art is about acting illegally. Under the strengthening tendency of “societies of control” in Deleuze’s sense, the battlefield of writers and street artists are marginalized and cornered spatially and temporally but it does not mean their activities are diminishing or inactive. They are continuously searching the edge of the governing system and there unchangingly working is the iron law that new creativities are born only in the liminal domain of predicament.

Next, in “Claiming spaces for urban art images in Beijing and Shanghai,” Minna Valjakka challenges the prevailing assumption that because contemporary graffiti/street art trends are global and transcultural, they are similar and homogenous around the globe. When Zhang Dali first brought graffiti to Beijing in the mid-1990s, he did not put up his name with alphabetic letters, but instead, by spraypainting an outline of his profile. Later, he modified his work by chiseling a
hole shaped like his profile into the walls of buildings slated to be demolished. Neither of Zhang’s markers fit into the common Euro-American understanding of graffiti as form of vandalism based on writing one’s name with spray paints or marker pens. Nonetheless, Zhang claims he is the first graffiti writer in Mainland China. Evidently, the notions of graffiti (tuya), graffiti art (tuya yishu), and street art (jietao yishu) vary greatly from one creator to the next, and do not always correspond to the Euro-American perceptions.

As John Clark (1998) has shown, the transfer of a visual system from one cultural area to another is essentially based on adaptation and cannot be regarded as mere imitation. When visual systems are transferred from one cultural area to another, the complex process depends on varying modes of transfer. Even the intentions of the visual system can be changed. Indeed, Valjakka illustrates how local creators in Beijing and Shanghai have challenged, adapted and modified the transcultural norms and features for their own, indigenous needs. In order to assist a more open minded study of this visual phenomenon in mainland China, Valjakka applies the broader concept of “urban art images” to denote creative action that leaves a visible imprint, even a short-lived one, on public urban space. Inspired by James Elkins’ (1999) suggestion of a trichotomy of an image, Valjakka regards urban art images as reproductions that can include writing (in any language), pictures and three-dimensional objects – or any combination of these – as the most appropriate approach to the complex scenes today. The reproductions can be legal or illegal, commissioned, or voluntarily made, resulting from private or collective actions. Valjakka’s contribution suggests that the close analysis of the urban art images in terms of Chineseness depends primarily on the nationality/ethnicity of the creator, the language, content, visual signifiers, and site-responsivity of the urban art image.

Finally, “Contesting transcultural trends: emerging self-identities and urban art images in Hong Kong,” also by Minna Valjakka, argues that the first known tags appeared in Hong Kong in the 1980s and were created by foreigners. Despite this early appearance, it was not until the late 1990s that the first local crews emerged. Hong Kong is known as a hectic business city, where new forms of visual arts around the globe intersect and mutate. The foreign creators of urban art images, whether they were living in or passing through the city, have left their marks on the walls and inspired collaborations with local creators. How have the locals shaped their own identity and self-expression as Hongkongese in this on-going transcultural interaction? How do the local creators interact with Mainland Chinese creators? What kind of visual signifiers of Hongkongness are employed in the urban art images? Based on extensive fieldwork periods in 2012–2013, thousands of photographs, and information derived from ongoing communication with over sixty creators, this chapter examines the main characteristics of the urban art scene in Hong Kong compared with mainland China. The main focus is on the question of Hongkongness, and how it is expressed in the perceptions of the creators and the urban art images.

Omissions

Missing from this collection are analyses of a handful of cities with established graffiti/street art traditions. At the very least, this list includes cities such as Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Buenos Aires (e.g. Kane, 2009), Frankfurt, Johannesburg, Madrid, Melbourne (e.g. Young, 2010), Miami, Milan, Moscow (e.g. Bushnell, 1990), Perth, São Paulo, Sydney (e.g. Mcauliffe, 2012), and Toronto (Bowen, 1999). That being said, adding more cities raises the possibly unanswerable question of how many cities are necessary in order to provide a comprehensive treatment. Despite these omissions, the work contained here should give the reader an ample idea of the range of work and reactions to graffiti and street art in the localities reviewed in this section.
Notes

1 Special thanks to Stefano Bloch, Rachel Hildebrandt and Ronald Kramer for their comments.
2 An alternative unit of analysis could be “scenes” or intention (e.g. political, agnomen, art for art’s sake, etc.) as a valid basis of comparison.
3 The listing of citations in this section is meant to be illustrative and not comprehensive.

References

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From the city walls to ‘Clean Trains’
Graffiti in New York City, 1969–1990

Joe A. Austin

Introduction

In general, graffiti is an unauthorised text comprised of images and pictures inscribed, written, drawn and/or painted within easily visible, densely populated urban public spaces. This very broad categorisation is complicated by its multiple and contested points of production across time, incorporating the entire multi-millennial history of human cities. Have scholars of ‘graffiti’ been studying the same objects and practices? Art historian Jack Stewart pieced together an extensive classification of graffiti from prior academic studies and concluded that the New York City graffiti of the early 1970s, called *writing* by its early creators, was significantly different from any other type scholars have observed across human history, citing its repetition and ubiquity across urban space, the size of individual works and its aesthetic intentions (Stewart, 1989). Based on Stewart’s research on past scholarly categories of the ‘[human-made] scratchings on the wall’, and for the purposes of this chapter, I will adopt the term ‘graffiti art’ to describe this new phenomenon (Lefebvre, 1968; Kofman and Lebas, 1996; Austin, 2010). Although ‘graffiti art’ appeared first in Philadelphia sometime around the mid-1960s (Stewart, 1989; Powers, 1999), it was ‘from New York City’ (with much thanks to the city’s global media hub) that the wider world became aware of graffiti art and observed the first public and municipal actions taken in response as it developed over time.

The New York City graffiti art scene has reproduced itself for almost a half-century, and has served as the primary site for several of the existing book-length, English language academic histories and ethnographies on graffiti art (e.g. Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989; Austin, 2001; Macdonald, 2001; Miller, 2002; Snyder, 2009), as well as numerous participant and observer reports on its development across time (e.g. Fedorchak, 2005; Cooper, 2008; Felisbret, 2009; Farrell and Pape, 2010). In order to better understand some of the origins of modern day graffiti, this chapter covers the main developments within the New York City graffiti art scene from its beginnings in the late 1960s until the early ‘clean train era’ in the 1990s.
From graffiti to writing

New York City was by no means the first city on the planet to host a self-organized youth graffiti scene (Levitt, 1965, 1987; Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974; Cesaretti, 1975). There are reliable records of graffiti traditions among urban young people since at least the nineteenth century (Sheon, 1976). Even within New York City, there were local graffiti practices among young people well before its new forms appeared (Phase 2 and Schmidlapp, 1996; Austin, 2001) and these are important precursors since there is no evidence that graffiti art or artists migrated from Philly until after the scene was well established in NYC. Educator Hebert Kohl observed a thriving neighbourhood graffiti tradition in New York City’s Spanish Harlem during the mid-1960s that had existed long enough to produce ‘layers of graffiti’ in local alleyways (Hinton and Kohl, 1972). Almost all of the contenders for the title of the first graffiti artist in New York City cite a predecessor as their inspiration. Most origin stories of graffiti art in New York City (as narrated by early participants) begin in upper Manhattan or the Bronx in 1968 or 1969 (Phase 2 and Schmidlapp, 1996; Fedorchak, 2005; Felisbret, 2009), but each account also reflects experiences within a particular neighbourhood or city area. This geographic specificity suggests that the new graffiti in NYC had multiple, independent points of origin that coalesced into a common social phenomenon at some later point.

By 1970, a significant number of young people were writing ‘tags’, most using ink markers, in shared public spaces along their daily pathways as they travelled to their jobs, schools, shopping and socialising. Invariably this carried them across the city. New writers joined the practice through imitation and association, and a cross-borough peer network developed, along with an evolving set of shared norms (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2007). The new graffiti art was based on the repeated and stylised presentation of an invented name, something akin to both the signature and the advertising logo. Creativity in the design of the name was highly valued, as was its repetition and unexpected placements within urban space (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989). Three of the early artists’ norms remained relatively stable for the first two decades: A writer did not adopt the name of another writer without a significant distinguishing feature; a writer did not write over the name of another unless the underlying name was fully covered or as an intentionally provocative act; and all paint and markers had to be stolen (although these materials might be swapped or sold among graffiti artists after their initial shoplift). Since most of the early writers were junior high/middle school and high school students, their choice of surfaces were made with a youth audience in mind.

Buses and bus stops, stairwells, signs along the sidewalks, ice cream trucks and the inside surfaces of subway cars were early favourite spots (Ferrell and Weide, 2010). One of the goals of the activity was to have one’s name become famous but otherwise be disassociated with the individual who wrote it, a careful balance between visual ubiquity and personal anonymity (Austin, 2001; Shuterlan, 2004, Campos, 2012). Within the early peer culture of writers, of course, the individual sought respect, and a social hierarchy formed. Status could be negotiated around the social scenes at particular locations, most notably the Writers Corner at 188 St. and Audubon Avenue in Manhattan that was tended by STITCH 1, and a bit later, the Writers Benches at the 149th Street and Concourse subway station in the Bronx and the Atlantic Avenue station in Brooklyn (Miller, 2002). As the status system among the new graffiti artists formed and developed, on the lowest end were ‘toys’, the term attached to inexperienced or poorly-performing writers, who were assumed to lack talent or seriousness and devotion to the art. At the highest status positions were ‘kings’ whose ubiquity within a particular space (e.g. particular bus lines, subway lines, neighbourhoods) and distinctiveness in design and/or location were widely admired and whose valued contributions to writing had reached a broad consensus (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989).
Graffiti art, the public sphere, and the ‘war on graffiti’

In 1971, a New York Times journalist tracked down and interviewed TAKI 183, a prominent graffiti writer, for an article, which included a substantial photograph of his tag amidst a host of others on a neighbourhood door. TAKI 183 may not have been the first graffiti artist in the city, and was perhaps more noticeable to the public than most other writers because his job – a messenger – carried him to areas of the city where few other writers commonly travelled. He particularly concentrated his writing on buildings and walls that might be passed by the city’s media and advertising professionals. It worked. The early Times article initiated the graffiti artists’ long lasting attention to the news media’s pages, screens and cameras for evidence of their work, which suggested that city dwellers more generally, not just youth, were interested in the graffiti artists’ work as well. This development was a key turning point in most of the academic and vernacular histories of graffiti art, and many claim that the number of new writers exploded soon after (Castleman, 1982; Austin, 2001).

By 1972, graffiti art was perhaps better described as a citywide youth subculture than a peer network, with specific centers of production and recognisable stylistics developing within the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn. The ink marker was increasingly supplemented by the spray paint can as the artists’ works increased in size. The artists began to collectively map out and explore the Metro Transit Authority’s (MTA) extensive subway car storage system to gain access to the exterior surfaces of the cars during the late evening hours and weekends. The works on the outside of the subways were larger and more aesthetically elaborate as the artists gained control of their painting technique and their collective work developed new motifs and typographies (Stewart, 1989). While New Yorkers might have been able to mostly ignore the tags on the walls and the buses, the increasing size of the works on the outside of the subway trains were unavoidable, visible on the elevated lines from a distance and often covering over the windows and making it difficult for riders to see out and inside the cars (Farrell and Pape, 2010). The surfaces of the subway system – mostly underground, mostly late at night – became hotly contested spaces for both the MTA and the graffiti artists, with the City of New York and the MTA declaring ‘war on graffiti’ within six months after the TAKI article in the Times. Both municipal organisations now sought out and competed for the attentions if not the approval of the subway riders, the various media that observed and represented the city, and with varying degrees of awareness, a wider national and global audience (Austin, 2001; Greenberg, 2008).

The subway era

The New York City subway system – the major transportation artery of the city- covered more than 750 miles and flowed through multiple lines into four city boroughs, transporting almost four million people a day through a city with a residential population of more than seven million during the first two decades of graffiti art history. The circulation of the trains was an ideal broadcast system for the large, mural-sized works that graffiti artists painted on the trains. The trains circulated new and existing works among the artists, and were also frequently addressed to the city at large, as well as any camera that turned that way. Several of the key and most prolific writers have claimed that they were both talking to other New Yorkers, as well as talking as New Yorkers promoting their hometown. Graffiti art thus developed as a movement in dialogue with the real and imagined City, and many of its most ferocious critics (e.g. Mayor John Lindsay, Mayor Ed Koch, sociologists Nathan Glazer, the Times editorial staff) were most appalled by the way they understood graffiti art to be representing the city (Brooks, 1997; Austin, 2001; Greenberg, 2008).
As the art developed in size and sophistication on the outside of the subway cars, the artists developed a vocabulary to classify their works, distinguishing the smaller ‘tag’ from the larger ‘piece’, and then further classifying pieces by the spaces they covered on the sides of a standard train car (e.g. ‘window down’, ‘ends’, ‘whole car’), as well as the lettering style (e.g. inflated ‘softie’ letters, sharp-edged ‘3-D’) and motif (e.g. ‘clouds’, ‘shines’). Aesthetic innovation continued to progress as writers learned from each other and gained experience controlling the paint spray and also experimenting with replacing the original paint nozzles (‘caps’) with those from other products, like spray starch or oven cleaner, to create new effects (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989). With each innovation, the standards for fame within the subculture rose, and mastery of a substantial body of subcultural knowledge was necessary to successfully compete at the highest levels (Becker, 1982; Austin, 2001; Campos, 2012).

Organizational innovations developed alongside increasing size and aesthetic sophistication of the works. New York City graffiti art appeared during the apex of territorial street gangs (youth subcultures enforcing exclusive claims to some social and criminal resources within a bounded neighbourhood ‘turf’; see, e.g. Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974; Hazlehurst and Hazlehurst, 1998), and some of the first writers’ organisations were borrowed from the street gang model, with the EX-VANDALS and THE EBONY DUKES among the most well-known. These early graffiti gangs were noticeably more efficient in covering the city with their individual and collective names, but their successes also attracted the attention of territorial gangs, and most artists were not looking for a life of fighting; many had explicitly taken up graffiti art as an alternative to the local territorial gang (Hager, 1984; Stewart, 1989). These early writing gangs dissolved into smaller ‘crews’, usually ten members or less, and this remains the basic productive organisation for most graffiti artists to this day. Individual graffiti art works commonly incorporate the artist’s crews’ initials (usually two or three letters) into the work or are placed nearby. In the 1970s, The Fabulous Partners (TFP), Three Yard Boys (3YB), Independents (INDS) and The Crazy 5 (TC5) were among many famous crews (Chalfant and Cooper, 1984; Fedorchak, 2005).

Crews served a multitude of functions, including friendship, protection and back-ups during fights, lookouts for cops, art teachers and art critics. Like a winning sports team, a crew gained fame from the collective glow of its members. A novice might be brought into a crew in any number of ways, e.g., as a kind of apprentice or protégé to a more experienced writer, or introduced through a social connection with one of the members or for having established a bit of fame as an individual prior to joining the crew. In this capacity, the novice received advanced instruction in the locations of the car storage lots, the various entrances and exits (often holes cut into surrounding fences), how to navigate the electrified ‘third rail’ that powered the trains, how to steal paint, visual design elements, and how to manipulate the can and the paint spray successfully (Becker, 1982; Castleman, 1982; Austin, 2001; Bengtsen, 2014). Although the artists’ status system made ‘biting’ another writer’s style (appropriating without permission) a constant point of contention (sometimes addressed through fighting), the competition among artists was balanced against the common endeavour in advancing the art and outfoxing the authorities. Cooperation, technique sharing and constructive criticism were more common than fisticuffs, particularly in the first several years as the writers’ culture was taking shape (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989).

Who became a graffiti artist in New York City? There is some consensus on broad generalities, and some reliable individual and small group case studies, but otherwise we have only anecdotes and partial perspectives. We know that individual writers wrote for varying lengths of time and with differing commitments (not always continuous), and the names and identities of most ‘toys’ (low-status novices, the vast majority of artists) are not part of the scene’s long-
term collective memory; artists recalling ‘the early days’ are much more likely to report on those who (eventually) gained fame or were part of an important crew, and these ‘famous’ individuals form the basis for their memories of ‘writers’ in a general sense. It appears that most of the early graffiti writers were from working class origins, with the majority (but by no means all) of them being kids of colour, and that most of them were young men, aged about twelve to eighteen years. We cannot be certain of how many young people were actively writing at any one time, but it appears that their numbers grew rapidly until about 1973, and after that time may have stabilised at a significantly lower number. Young women participated in the early years, including several key figures (e.g. Barbara 62, Eva 62, Charmin 65, Lady Heart, Stoney, Z-73). Stewart identifies 123 females among the more than 2900 graffiti names in his appendices, with estimates of around 5–10 per cent of all graffiti artists being women. Many of these young females did not follow when the graffiti scene moved almost exclusively onto the subway trains after about 1973, and it appears that the subway scene did not encourage or support their participation, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Lady Pink). Several observers note 1973–1974 as a transition period when some of the ‘first generation’ of artists retired and many of the less-committed novices left the scene (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989).

The 1973 repainting and the origins of the throw-up

Although the Times article that solidified the fame of TAKI 183 in graffiti art history had been relatively amused and sympathetic in tone, the MTA and NYC Mayor John Lindsay, then running for presidential nomination, were not pleased. Subsequent reporting on graffiti in the Times described it as a ‘plague’ on the city, and tended towards a demonization of the artists that attempted to incite a moral panic. The city government called for a ‘war on graffiti’. While the general phenomenon of these ‘wars’ is covered in a separate chapter in this handbook, the topic is important in the history of New York City because the early attempts to ‘wipe out’ graffiti became historic opportunities for innovation and expansion within the graffiti art world. Initially only garnering a reprimand from a municipal judge, the city and the MTA police force collaborated on new punishments, including ‘Saturday train cleaning duty’. These collectivised punishments had the ironic effect of bringing writers together from all over the city, creating social spaces for new graffiti art collaborations as well as exchanges of technique and other useful knowledge. Piecemeal attempts to paint over the works had proven inadequate – the ‘work ethic’ of graffiti artists was no match for the MTA before the system’s technological improvements in the early 1980s. With no real understanding of the subculture and its collective motivations, the MTA attempted, during the last few months of 1973, to rapidly repaint the entire fleet of more than 7000 cars, assuming this massive undertaking to obliterate the existing history of graffiti art would demoralise the artists and discourage new artists from beginning. There are some suggestions that the repainting may have depressed the overall number of graffiti artists, although equally viable alternative explanations for the drop have been proposed. Of particular note, MCing, DJing and breakdancing coalesced into a new Bronx party culture around this time (later called hip-hop), and provided another, less criminalising and more social, creative gathering for youthful energies (Hager, 1984; see below).

The repainting effort solved the subculture’s problem of space, since the outside of the trains had been saturated. An earlier ‘spatial fix’, the ‘cloud’ motif which both covered over any underlying works and served as a ‘background’ for a new writer’s work, became less acceptable as the scale of the art works on the trains moved towards the ‘whole car’. The MTA’s 1973 repainting effort supplied more than 14,000 new ‘blank’ surfaces (two ‘whole cars’ per individual subway car) and this opportunity allowed writers to jump the usual scale of their work, with
whole-car works becoming increasingly common. Writers also took the MTA’s repainting as a direct challenge to their work ethic, and immediately set about retaking the trains. In this effort, a new form was developed and perfected, the ‘throw-up’, a quickly-executed two-letter abbreviation of the writers name usually in a lighter coloured ‘bubble letter’ style, outlined in a darker colour. An accomplished graffiti artist could produce a creditable throw-up in less than thirty seconds, and thus could write their name hundreds of times in a short evening’s endeavour. Masters of this form, such as IN, are reputed to have created more than 10,000 works in less than four years (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989; Austin, 2001).

The golden age of graffiti art on the subways

The period from about 1975 until about 1982 is considered by many to be the ‘golden age’ of graffiti art on the subways of New York City. By the mid-1970s, a significant number of talented writers had mastered their skills and formed productive crews, something akin to rock and roll’s ‘super groups’. The whole car masterpiece emerged as the favoured format for the best work, and linked, multiple-car works appeared more frequently. Some artists took an abstract turn in their typographic stylistics, and many of the most impressive works were no longer readable to the untrained eye. At the same time, other writers built on earlier figurative drawing to develop fully rendered characters. Advertising, psychedelia, album cover art as well as superhero and countercultural comic books were common cultural materials of urban youth cultures of these times, and it was from these sorts of resources that graffiti artists borrowed, and then reassembled them into the subcultural productions of the early New York graffiti art scene (Chalfant and Cooper, 1984; Austin, 2001; Campos, 2012). New York subway graffiti during this period could be understood as a running comment on what was culturally important among a segment of the city’s youths.

Graffiti art aesthetics in some ways divided into multiple trends. Tagging and ‘getting up’ continued as a saturation technique. Some artists perfected the throw-up as a massive saturation/coverage genre at a larger scale. Some artists focused on large or whole-car works with stylised but readable letters and ‘characters’ from commercial popular culture. Others crushed, twisted and distorted the alphabet into complicated but beautiful swirls of interconnected visual fragments and patterns. While the ‘readable’ styles could and did directly address the general population, and the complicated stylistics of the unreadable pieces seem to be more directed towards the internal hierarchy of the subculture, most artists claimed an intention to beautify a dilapidated and troubled city for the benefit of all citizens. Distinctions can be justifiably drawn between differing genres and styles, but most writers practiced the entire range – tagging, throw-ups, readable pieces, ‘character’ drawing and ‘wild style’ alphabets – and often during the same evenings work.

The buff

The infrastructural problems of New York City during the mid-1970s were a world event, as a global financial hub teetered on municipal bankruptcy. Several scholars have argued that the attempts to resolve the city’s financial problems were a key event in the rise of neoliberalism and an early rehearsal for austerity within the welfare states of the developed world that would become more common in the next century (Harvey, 2007; Greenberg, 2008). City services were cut back and unemployment among young people soared above 75 per cent. High crime rates inspired popular films like Death Wish (1974), Taxi Driver (1976), The Warriors (1979) and
Escape from New York (1981), which imagined the city falling into a lawless social chaos. Despite these frugal times, the MTA, undeterred by their failures in their war on graffiti thus far, developed a ‘car wash’ for trains that sprayed paint solvents. Dubbed ‘the Buff’ by the artists, the project was a disaster in several ways. A number of workers died or were injured by exposure to the solvents, which were blown into the air and nearby public areas (Chidakel, 1977; ‘Fume Fears Halts Graffiti Work’, 1977; ‘Graffiti Solvent’, 1977; Dwyer, 1989). The Buff did not always effectively remove the paint, and often simply smeared and degraded the images, so the exteriors had neither the ‘authorised’ visual organisation that the MTA intended nor the ‘unauthorised’ visual dynamics of the writer’s works, but a dull smudge that could only attest to the struggle for visual dominance. Writers quickly determined that some brands of spray paint were more resistant to the Buff solvents than others, and shifted their preferences accordingly. The solvent also corroded the electrical wiring in the cars, leading to even more frequent train failures and evacuations in a system that was being threatened by a shutdown by the National Transportation Association. Although the Buff did not completely remove the writers’ works, it did spoil them, and this, in turn, opened up more space for new works. While the Buff introduced an unpredictable randomness into the writer’s collective judgments of the merits of works – the MTA made no distinction between an outstanding and innovative whole-car masterpiece and a novice’s tag – it also facilitated a continual supply of new available surfaces. As the work became more ephemeral, it also became more sophisticated and spectacular, and more photographers and videographers turned to document the works (Chalfant and Cooper, 1984; Austin, 2001).

As New York City began to slowly regain some of its financial stability in the late 1970s, the subway system continued to decline. Removal of graffiti art from the cars was posed as a major test for the MTA (and the city government) to demonstrate that it could rehabilitate the city’s image and effectively govern. Sociologist Nathan Glazer admitted that graffiti artists’ crime was ‘relatively trivial’, but opined that their ‘aggregate effects on the environment of millions of people are massive’ (Glazer, 1979). For Glazer, graffiti was a main culprit in the city’s image problem. Building on these and other neoconservative ideas from criminology and social policy (Feiner and Klein, 1982; Wilson and Kelling, 1982), Koch and the MTA used their access to news media to publicly justify a huge expense to address a minor surface problem on the nation’s largest subway system during a period when the entire system was near collapse. The New York Times seemed particular eager to help in this public relations effort (New York Times Editorial Staff, 1980, 1981a, 1981b). As part of an overall rehabilitation of the crumbling subway system, the MTA rebuilt and significantly enhanced the fences around the subway car storage yards, using razor wire extensively to make cutting or crossing the fences difficult and dangerous; the perimetres of many of the storage yards came to resemble medium security prisons (Stewart, 1989; Austin, 2001). New trains were purchased and added to the fleet (replacing some trains that were more than fifty years old) and a ‘clean car’ program was implemented incrementally across the system, which held any newly-painted train out of circulation until it had been ‘cleaned’. The MTA adopted the language of counterinsurgency and approached the task with a new seriousness bolstered by a substantial increase in the ‘vandal squad’ of the Transit Police and maintenance crews in the yards, and a commitment to withhold any ‘clean’ train from circulation in the system until new graffiti was removed, even if that meant a less reliable transportation schedule. By 1984, the MTA was noticeably removing the art works from the subways faster than the artists were replacing them (Austin, 2001; Cavalieri, 2011). Over the next few years, entire subway lines were rendered ‘graffiti free’, although the MTA’s claims of complete control over the visual order of the trains were, and are, somewhat overstated.
In the gallery

During the first two decades of the New York City graffiti art’s existence, there were at least two major eras in the attempts to divert graffiti writers to work as mainstream gallery artists and commercial graphic designers. In the first era, Hugo Martinez, a sociology student, organised United Graffiti Artists (UGA) in 1972 with the goal of rechannelling the writers’ talents toward a standard art career, and had significant successes, including a show favourably reviewed by renowned New York Times art critic Peter Schjeldahl, several purchases by collectors, and invitations to exhibit at galleries and museums in other cities. During the ‘crisis’ of New York City, the group failed to maintain its prominence and develop an identifiable art market trend, although many of the artists continued to produce works on canvas (Schjeldahl, 1973; Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989).

A second ‘wave’ of interest in graffiti art emerged in the early 1980s from the art markets. This move towards the galleries was part of a wider phenomenon of cultural revival taking place in New York City during the late 1970s and early 1980s as the city’s financial outlook improved. The East Village scene coincided and sometimes intersected with the emergence of punk rock, but for graffiti art it was more often with ‘hip-hop’ music and dance that had been developing in the Bronx during the previous eight years. A few artists were represented by well-established galleries and were heavily promoted, with a significant ‘Post-Graffiti’ exhibition in 1983 (Hager, 1986; Thompson, 2009). Although some artists sold paintings on canvas for art world prices during this period, others felt that the commercial art world’s values, including its aesthetic judgments, were far below those upheld within the artists’ own self-managed art world. Many left in disgust at the exploitation and disrespect shown to the artists. It should be noted that there is no evidence that the move towards the galleries in the 1970s or the 1980s significantly diminished the illegal works on the trains; most of those that participated in UGA and the 1980s gallery scene were also illegally painting trains at night (Chalfant and Cooper, 1984; Hager, 1984; Austin, 2001).

On the screens and in the pages: mediation and new forms of graffiti art

Alongside the East Village art scene and the emergence of hip-hop were movies, documentary films, and books on hip-hop that appeared in the first half of the 1980s. As hip-hop moved downtown and began to attract significant local and then national music and dance audiences, graffiti art became associated with this new performance culture, although writing predated hip-hop and had developed independently. Although some graffiti artists were hip-hop fans, dancers and musical artists (and vice versa), these crossovers were by no means the majority. The contemporary presumption that graffiti art is the ‘fourth element’ of hip-hop is operative only after the early 1980s; for more than a decade, graffiti art developed with only marginal affiliation to MCing, DJing, and breakdancing (Phase 2 and Schmiddlapp, 1996; Austin, 2001).

Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper’s collection of photographs of the artists’ works on the trains, Subway Art, was published in 1984, and the book sold well across the nation. Subway Art has since become the global ‘old school bible’ of graffiti style and its narration is frequently the ‘history’ that most contemporary graffiti artists know of the first fifteen years of the art. Subway Art was preceded by a popular movie, Wild Style (1983), which wrapped scenarios and characters from hip-hop, the East Village scene, and punk rock around a romantic drama involving two of the major graffiti artists of the era, LADY PINK and LEE. Wild Style was among the first of several commercial films attempting to promote and exploit hip-hop, and its distribution in
other nations was another of the global introductions of the new graffiti art. Chalfant and filmmaker Tony Silver also released their documentary *Style Wars* (1983) during this period, which featured not only photographs of the trains with a hip-hop soundtrack, but also extensive interviews with the artists, their parents, MTA officials, but also footage of the writers painting. The documentary travelled on the film festival circuits and was broadcast on PBS in the US and several stations in Europe. Between *Wild Style*, *Style Wars* and *Subway Art* (and several other hip-hop themed films), New York City graffiti art opened up to the rest of the world, and new scenes began to emerge in cities across the planet. Ironically, just as these developments were bringing global admiration and imitation to the cultural productions of New York City’s youth, Mayor Edward Koch and the MTA’s war on graffiti was nearing its endgame (*Wild Style*, 1983; *Style Wars*, 1983; *Beat Street*, 1984; Chalfant and Cooper, 1984; Gablik, 1984; Hager, 1984; George *et al.*, 1985; Hager, 1986; Butterfield, 1988; Austin, 2001).

As writers came to understand the MTA’s new effectiveness in removing their works from the trains, a number of new developments began. As the trains became less reliable as a way of circulating works and the MTA became more determined to capture and prosecute writers for serious federal and state property crimes, some writers moved onto the streets and began to paint the roll-down gates of businesses, alley and parking lot walls, handball courts and the areas under public infrastructure, like bridges, and in abandoned buildings. By the late 1980s, there was more graffiti art visible within New York City public spaces than perhaps ever before, as writers were pushed off the trains and into the streets.

**After the subways**

On the streets, new graffiti formats appeared. Tags and throw-ups increasingly became the dominant forms, in part because the city streets were more open-range and visible to passers-by and authorities, and thus the several hours that the subway yards had afforded to produce works were reduced significantly, often to a matter of minutes. In line with quicker works, writers began to develop stickers with their tags (US Postal Service mailing labels were favoured), which allowed a writer to walk around the city and discretely slap up sticker tags in broad daylight. Some of the new street writers also began to interact with the emerging street artists and put up wheat-pasted Xerox posters. COST and REVS were key innovators in this form (Cooper, 2010). They were also part of a move towards ‘roller tags’ in which writers would use paint roller brushes with long handles to recreate huge linear works on the sides of buildings. Some areas of the city were more graffiti-friendly than others, and some crews began to work as advertisers and muralists, creating massive ‘legal walls’.

Others pressed forward in the ‘war’ and painted ‘clean trains’, videotaping their exploits and then circulating the footage (see Greg Snyder’s chapter in this Handbook), even though the painted subway train may not have ever left its storage yard before being ‘cleaned’. Noting that subways were not the only trains available, some turned towards freight trains, which have since maintained a significant following in the US (Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987; Videograf, 1989–1994; Ferrell, 1998; Austin, 2001; Gastman *et al.*, 2006; Felisbret, 2009; Gastman and Neelon, 2010).

**Conclusion: globalisation and street art**

The major new developments after the subway trains were retaken by the MTA in New York City were the globalisation of graffiti art and the tentative (in the 1990s) alliances between individual graffiti artists and artists working in the emerging forms of street art. As mentioned above, graffiti art had already spread outwards from Philadelphia and New York City, and new
and innovative scenes had appeared in San Francisco, Los Angeles and in several European cities by 1985. These local scenes have continued to proliferate, and with the advent of the World Wide Web, formed a network allowing graffiti artists to view works and communicate with fellow artists across the planet. Styles and innovations are no longer place-based; a Boston graffiti artist’s work could reflect influences from artists living in Mumbai. Although street art has important early connections to New York City, this movement developed in a much more geographically dispersed way (Schwartzman, 1985). Street art opened a new career path for some graffiti artists, and several of the graffiti artists after 1990 moved quickly to producing paste-ups, glyphs, murals and ‘legal walls’ and gallery works that broadened and moved away from the imagery and main foci of graffiti art (Bengtsen, 2014). For many scholars, critics and artists, graffiti art has become a subgenre of street art.

Despite the remarkably rapid globalisation of graffiti art, New York City retains an iconic aura as the original spot of this long-lived art movement, which began before 1970. In this global context, New York City also enjoys a major reputation among those trying to control the illegal aspects of the art, although its anti-graffiti efforts are often covered under a broader umbrella of ‘broken windows’ policing (Vuchic and Bata, 1989; Kelling and Coles, 1996). By the 1990s, there was a noticeable flow of graffiti artists from all over the planet traveling to New York City to record themselves illegally painting ‘clean’ trains (Kirkpatrick, 1996; ‘The Invasion of the Euro-Taggers’, 1997). New York City anti-graffiti policing officials and advisors consulted with the anti-graffiti officials of other major cities. The long-standing tensions between graffiti art and its foes in the 1990s can perhaps best be encapsulated in the ‘raids’ made by the New York City police on several fine arts galleries in the city, where graffiti and street artists held (legal) shows to gain the attentions of an international art market (Siegal, 2000). The dialectic between artistic innovation, the claiming of a ‘right to the city’, and the dogged policing of its illegality continue to inform, and perhaps raise the prices and the costs, of graffiti art.

References