Signature graffiti worldwide

By the early 1980s, as the New York Style infiltrated European graffiti scenes, an incredibly large network of writers was forming. Writers in a number of cities in England, Germany, France and Spain, which already had graffiti scenes unconnected to hip-hop, began to employ the American style. As London’s FADE 2 explains: ‘Graffiti in this country has come like a model, an airplane model. It’s come here already built. Graffiti in America has taken years to develop, all the styles like your wildstyle and bubble lettering. Over here we haven’t added anything to it apart from brushing up on a few techniques’ (Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987: p. 60). Indeed, in the early days many European writers were outright copying the graffiti they had encountered in films and photographs from the United States as a way to practice and develop their own techniques. While many were quick to incorporate the New York Style into their already existing practices, others acknowledged it simply as an alternative to their own approach. In England, for example, where many writers in places such as Bristol and London picked up on the New York Style, others, influenced by the punk rock scene, continued to write political graffiti, which led to a highly evolved graffiti scene specialising in stencils.

In 1987, Chalfant and Prigoff reported in Spraycan Art that writers in Paris painted primarily in vacant areas throughout the city (1987: p. 70). The aesthetics of graffiti writing as it existed in New York City did not grab hold of Parisian writers’ imaginations for many years; only a handful of active writers employed that style during the 1980s. However, by the end of the decade, ‘le graff s’est imposte comme LE phenomene culturel de la jeunesse’ (Lemoine and Terral, 2005: p. 38). Graffiti exploded in concurrence with the French rap music movement of the 1990s. A similar scenario occurred in Montréal.

While the city of Montréal was not devoid of graffiti prior to hip-hop’s invasion, it took until the 1990s for the scene to truly take form. Since the 1960s, Montréal had a history of socio-politically relevant graffiti, which appeared throughout the city’s centre and its boroughs. This non-stylised form of graffiti writing was executed by any number of non-affiliated youth, and addressed national and local politics, namely: Québécois nationalism; Bill 101; socio-economic issues; racism; and First Nations issues. It was only by the end of the 1980s that several small collectives of graffiti aficionados influenced by the New York graffiti style began to write signature graffiti.
According to Montréal-based film producer/director/writer Pablo Aravena, today Montréal is ‘one of the most painted cities in North America’ (Pablo Aravena quoted in Knelman, 2007, R1). The great number of legal walls throughout the city offer persuasive evidence for this claim, as do the immense popularity of Montréal-based international festivals, such as Under Pressure and the support of local contemporary galleries like the esteemed Yves Laroche Gallery. The signature graffiti movement is alive and well in the city, and writers are increasingly employed by businesses to render their logos. In conjunction with the active writing scene, a number of street artists take part in the creation of Montréal’s alternative cityscape. Aside from Montréal’s street art pioneer, Roadsworth, artists such as Stikki Peaches, MissMe and Whatisadam (WIA) typify the local scene.

The Montréal scene

Legibly written, politically motivated graffiti most often gives voice to issues relevant to the citizens of a particular place. In Montréal this mode of self-expression – albeit it being most often anonymous – has been popular since the 1960s. It is not surprising that in a city like Montréal where language politics reigns supreme as a cultural marker, the types of graffiti that initially dominated the cityscape in the 1960s were connected to issues of the protection and sovereignty of Québécois culture, including language, and therefore were political in nature. Slogans, calls to action, and the expression of disdain via legible phrases – written anonymously – prevailed as the graffiti of choice in a city that has long aimed to control the language used in public signage. The issues that resonated at the forefront of Montréal’s socio-political identity proved recurrently meaningful to those citizens who would take it upon themselves to publicly write unsigned slogans. First Nations, gender, nationhood, language and sovereignty issues spearheaded the political graffiti scene.

The question as to why writing evolved as a subculture in Montréal comparatively late, as compared to other major North American cities, is, according to Louise Gauthier, answered politically. The author stipulates that cultural distinctiveness and sovereignty are the main socio-political issues that shaped Montréal’s graffiti landscape and delayed the evolution of signature graffiti (Gauthier, 1998: p. 100). In the 1960s, as the concept of nationhood become more succinctly defined through language in Québec, among other factors, the shift to safeguard francophone culture became an aggressively political act. As the number of those in favour of separatism increased, partly as a reaction to Pierre-Elliott Trudeau’s (Canada’s charismatic Liberal Party Prime Minister from 1968 to 1979, and again from 1980 to 1984) institution of Canada’s bilingualism, debates surrounding Québec’s identity intensified to the point of violence. The radical political group, Front de liberation du Québec (FLQ), established in 1963 during a period of industrial modernisation, is best-known for the 1970 October Crisis, when the FLQ committed a series of terrorist acts that led Trudeau’s government to invoke the War Measures Act during peacetime. The aftermath of the October Crisis resulted, by the mid-1970s, in the Parti Québecois’ official call to strengthen Québec’s identity as culturally distinct. This era of political upheaval motivated much of the political graffiti that inundated the cityscape.

In the years that followed, numerous political events directly related to the issues of language laws as well as cultural distinctiveness for Québec’s francophone population resulted in many public declarations, which often took the form of graffiti. The Charte de la langue française (more popularly known in anglophone contexts as Bill 101), passed by the Québec National Assembly to address the perceived issue of deculturation, was one such provocateur that motivated Montréal citizens to make manifest their views by writing directly on city walls. Bill 101’s implementation in 1977 was followed by Bill 178 in 1988. Bill 178, or the ‘French only’
Bill, mandated that all public signage in Québec must be written in French only. This law provoked varied reactions, from fervent support to outright dismissal.

Other contentious socio-political issues were also debated in the public sphere through writing. Personal opinions both in favour of and in opposition to any given debate appeared on public walls throughout the city. Graffiti referring to First Nations peoples, gender and gay rights, religion, anarchy and revolution, for example, proliferated within the urban sphere. This myriad of impassioned debates notwithstanding, Québec’s contested sovereignty as well as the issue of language reigned as ongoing public dialogues for over a decade. Appearing in all manner of places, written in French, English or both, the often-anonymous graffiti specific to Montréal politics dominated the scene until, in the early 1990s, signature graffiti writing began transforming the visual language of the cityscape.

In the 1980s, Zilon was by all accounts the most recognised graffiti writer in Montréal, making work that hung in the balance between political and signature graffiti. Not firmly attached to either of these two traditions, his characteristically rendered images of faces are easily identified because of their style, which has enabled the artist’s work to be recognised without the writing of a name, or a written message. While signature graffiti did make an appearance in Montréal circa 1983–1984, with writers such as Akira and Flow (a.k.a. Checker T) getting their names up, the scene did not burgeon at that time in any sustained way.

Spurred on by trips to NYC, the culture of hip-hop, as well as tourism, the second wave of Montréal graffiti materialised in a more pronounced way in the early 1990s with writers like Flow, Timer, Stack and Sike at the helm, establishing crews. The DownTown Crew (DTC), Smashing All Toys (SAT) and The Hard Crew (THC) did graffiti in the city around 1994, and the practice of signature graffiti writing in Montréal became an ongoing part of the city’s landscape. Since writing already had an established international history by the time it boomed in Montréal, it therefore comes as no surprise that local styles developed swiftly, having a thirty-year history to build upon.

Over the years the Montréal graffiti scene has certainly produced its share of writing kings including Sake, who is respected by other writers for his focused work ethic and complete dedication to writing; Castro, whose work is highly visible when navigating the city; Stack, revered for his smooth style and skills, Seaz, member of TA and SAT crews, as well as a spokesperson and dedicated activist; Bez, who manipulates official city signage to create his own; Stare, who appropriates spaces of visual commerce (e.g. billboards, and/or storefront canopies/windows) to advertise his moniker as a sort of brand; Omen, who bridges traditional graffiti writing and street art with his own brand of unique aerosol portraiture; and many others such as Akira, Zek, Fluke and Monk-e.

The shift from political to signature graffiti is significant for numerous reasons, specifically in terms of message, composition, perpetrators and impetus – in other words, the divergent answers to the questions of who, what, when, where and why. While political graffiti is disseminated by males and females from potentially varied age groups, like many of the graffiti subcultures that subside internationally, Montréal’s early signature graffiti scene was largely composed of young men who quickly organised themselves into crews. Although writers hail from dissimilar neighbourhoods, and socio-economic as well as cultural backgrounds, their shared activity, writing graffiti, becomes a unifying, albeit competitive, venture.

In short, the politicised messages that for decades had become commonplace within the public sphere of Montréal declined in number and were largely replaced by the culture of self-representation through graffiti. This change essentially meant that graffiti in Montréal shifted from being primarily political in terms of message to being political in terms of the action of writing itself – an action that for the writers themselves is one of empowerment. In her study...
of Montréal graffiti, Louise Gauthier explains that although signature graffiti’s appearance in the city is part of the general trend of globalisation, it also responds to the need of young people to carve out an image of themselves, which, as subsequent anti-graffiti campaigns demonstrated, proved much more ‘dangerous’ than the protest phrases the city was accustomed to (Gauthier, 1998: p. 85).

The thriving scene expanded considerably through the congregation of writers in a handful of discrete places such as the Redpath Sugar Company factory in Pointe-Saint-Charles (known as The Point, Point-Saint-Charles is Le Sud-Ouest borough of Montréal), the nine million square feet that make up the city’s deserted Turcot train yards, and the TA (Team Autobot) wall founded by Seaz in 1995. Montréal’s abandoned buildings – especially large factories or warehouses such as the Redpath – provided writers with physical and psychological space, and thus these sites became pivotal in both building and sustaining a scene. From the mid-1990s until 1999 when it was slotted for redevelopment, Redpath was instrumental in the sustenance and development of Montréal’s graffiti scene. This setting continues to resonate as a cultural marker in the city’s writing history, and as a place of apprenticeship, development of personal style and stronghold of activity, proving the vibrancy of the local scene.

The massive, abandoned Turcot train yards (in west-end Montréal, bounded by the neighbourhood Nôtre-Dame-de-Grace (NDG), Highway 20 and the neighbourhood of St. Henri) later become another significant site for the culture of writing. An immense graffiti ‘museum’ which displays all writing elements from tags to large-scale pieces, the Turcot yards, like Redpath before it, is a sort of sacred site for writers in that its walls relay the history of the movement and evoke a collective consciousness. Additionally, a huge wall that runs under the Ville-Marie expressway (what Seaz named the TA Wall) was another site that quickly gained momentum when writers were expelled from Redpath. In Montréal, architectural structures such as the Redpath and the Turcot Yards are among the most culturally meaningful and venerated sites for writers. Not only places of congregation, these sites, partly because of their distance from the city’s core, also functioned as sorts of laboratories for graffiti production.

**The case of Roadsworth**

In 2001 the artist known as Roadsworth began spray-painting stencils on city roads. He fabricates his stencils with specific locations in mind, and employs simplicity of visual representation to create meaningful images. Roadsworth’s aim is not merely to use the street as a canvas, but to interweave and integrate his designs in and around the already existing road markings, which works to make people question the language of a city. By using the same paint colours as that of official infrastructural markers, Roadsworth’s work remains within the confines of the city’s language, but also breaks its visual monotony.

Roadsworth relies on the structure of the urban terrain as a necessary condition for the conception and production of his work. The artist’s road stencils are typically attachments to or alterations of road signage and other physical road features, such as crosswalks, parking spaces, sewer-hatches and parking metres. His work can thus be read as specific to the sites of the road that prescribe certain behaviours in the city: stop, turn, park, yield, cross and so on. By juxtaposing his stencilled creations next to road signs, the artist proposes a different interpretation of signs and symbols most pedestrians and drivers are accustomed to. Thus, the language of the city is an indispensable prerequisite for his practice, which folds the site into its significance so completely that experiencing the work and the site becomes one and the same.

Shortly after starting his work, he was arrested in 2004, and as a result local radio, television and newspapers engaged the public in debating this criminalisation of an art form. The public
conversation that followed Roadsworth’s arrest succinctly illustrates street art’s story in Montréal, a story that by all accounts involves three main players: individuals, institutions and the media. The Montréal street art scene did not spawn directly from an international graffiti connection, meaning that it is not made up of graffiti writers turned street artists as is sometimes the case internationally. In general, and unlike the local graffiti scene, it did not challenge the general public with overtly politicised messages, nor did it fight for credibility within the urban sphere. Instead, by the time street artists became active in Montréal, the international street art movement had already gained notoriety. Banksy and Shepard Fairey were more well-known; collectors, museums and galleries were interested in showcasing street work; and documentary films as well as the Internet had already informed the world of the phenomenon. In short, as opposed to the signature graffiti movement which revolutionised the city’s visual landscape, street art practices were somewhat more gently inserted into localised settings.

Roadsworth is best known for his stencils in the Plateau and Mile End neighbourhoods of Montréal, applied directly onto roads using the same yellow and white paint used for official street marking. Some of his more popular works include: the fashioning of a zipper out of existing double lines on asphalt roadways, thus inviting city dwellers to undo their predetermined ideas about what does and does not belong in the public sphere; the alteration of pedestrian crossings into huge boot prints, which dwarf the surrounding area implying that the street ultimately belongs to pedestrians; and loudspeakers, inspired by prison speakers because they tell people what to do, much like advertising. These stencils, assumed by some Montréalers to have been commissioned by the city, brought ‘some life onto Montréal’s otherwise drab and potholed Plateau streets’ (Lejtenji, 2006), and were overwhelmingly well received by the neighbourhood’s residents.

On 29 November 2004, Roadsworth’s reign as Montréal’s best-known stencil artist became precarious when he was caught while stencilling one of his pieces. Suddenly, the subtle images that had ‘quietly aroused the imagination of passers-by’, thrust the artist into the limelight when media reports of his arrest became public (Boudreau, 2006). The official explanation for Roadsworth’s arrest was that his work represented a ‘breach of public security’ (Flannery, 2005). From a purely legal standpoint, his work has been argued to pose a safety hazard because his imagery is not found in the driver’s handbook, and could thus confuse drivers. The artist was charged with fifty-three counts of mischief, a $265,000 fine (CDN), and possible banishment from the city for three years. Following his arrest, disputes about the role of art in public spaces ensued with ‘intellectuals, city officials, lawyers, artists and art fans debating the rights and responsibilities – not to mention penalties – guerrilla street artists can expect’ (Lejtenyi, 2004). After a great deal of pressure from Montréal citizens, including an online letter-writing campaign to ‘save’ the artist organised by Chris Hand of Zeke’s Gallery, Roadsworth was finally offered a deal by the city on 17 January 2006, just minutes before his hearing. The artist accepted a conditional discharge – meaning no criminal record – and a massive reduction in the number of mischief charges from fifty-three to five. He was sentenced to serve eighteen months of probation during which he could not use stencils or spray-paint without the city’s approval. He also had to pay $250 and serve forty hours of artistically-motivated community service.

**The street art scene – individuals**

Like the culture of graffiti writing, when street art practices began appearing in Montréal’s cityscape, the international street art movement was in full effect. What remains unique about the Montréal street art scene, perhaps directly connected to its late emergence, is that official cultural channels, such as major art institutions, support it. The city-wide debate sparked by

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251
the Roadsworth affair encouraged others to participate in street art production. The scene itself is: largely localised within the Plateau Mont-Royal neighbourhood; supported by major institutions such as the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), summer festivals such as the Mural public art festival, and local galleries such as Station 16 and the Yves Laroche Gallery; and is characterised by the work of collectives, A'Shop and En Masse, as well as a handful of individual artists. In short, in distinct opposition to the local graffiti scene, the street art narrative in Montréal is one of cooperation between people, institutions and the media.

Having played an integral role in Roadworth’s criminal case, French and English television, radio and print media continues to support street art production. Conversely, the opposite continues to be the case for graffiti writing. Montréal street artists tend to favour working within a bohemian neighbourhood, the Plateau, known for its trendy shops, relaxed party atmosphere as well as musical, visual and performative artistic expression. It comes as no surprise then that both galleries dedicated to street art display are located in or adjacent to this neighbourhood, that the Mural public art festival takes place on St. Laurent boulevard, a street known locally as ‘The Main’, and that street artists disseminate the bulk of their works in the streets of a neighbourhood accessed daily by pedestrians.

Street artists MissMe, Stikki Peaches and WIA all work primarily with wheatpastes – (affixing artwork to surfaces with a mixture of flour and water) a preferred medium for artists operating outdoors in a city plagued by an unforgiving winter. Similarly, they all employ styles that reference music, film and North American material culture – in short, popular culture. Their work is therefore accessible not only by virtue of where it is displayed but also thanks to its often-recognizable iconography. Akin to street art practices worldwide, Montréal artists connect with their audiences through imagery that ignites a sense of familiarity, message and cleverness.

Often the political becomes personal in portraits as in this case whereby the artist, herself a jazz singer, aims to highlight historical fact so as to illuminate contemporary present with her portrait series. MissMe’s series of jazz singers is one such powerful testament. She explains:

If music was a religion: these would be my saints. I, as a jazz trained singer, have a deep love for jazz music and its social and historical implications. That is why I have decided to draw them as classical orthodox style icons, as I like the contrast of that classical style and the streets I put them in. I believe most of these women (Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Josephine Baker) are either very little known or not known at all . . . (in terms of) their music or social battles (personal and political). Most kids our days, ignore all about the importance of Jazz musically as well (in today’s music). I always try to add meaningful details to my saints. For example: Nina Simone has the Black Power symbol on her necklace as she played a very important role in the Civil rights movement in the 1960s. As for my Saint Billie Holiday, she is holding a scroll with the first words of the Strange Fruit poem. She was the very first one to sing LIVE on radio that extremely powerful and political piece in 1939. Takes strength. Takes courage. Takes a political vision. She was not only that beautiful lady that sang the blues with a flower in her hair. Jazz, in these times, was the voice of an oppressed group of people and we often forget how unglamorous all of it really was.4

By layering her portraits with numerous levels of meaning, some of which speak directly to the artist’s own sense of self as part of a Jazz history, MissMe is able to translate these women’s stories both as they played out in history and as they resonate with young people today. What is more, with her portraits MissMe speaks to two of Montréal’s points of pride: its history of political activism and its endorsement of artistic expression. The portrayal of musical giants who
have battled for acceptance and persevered as instruments in the face of oppression resonates with a society fighting for recognition as a distinct voice. Moreover, the indubitable influence of these individuals in history speaks to Montréal’s own sense of joy at playing host and motherland to some of the world’s best-known talent.

Montréal has other unique examples of street art. ‘What if Art Ruled the World?’ is a tagline question posed by an artist recognised widely for his mash-ups of characters such as ‘BatBond’ – a tantalising fusion of Batman and James Bond – which suggests we all participate with our own reply. Stikki Peaches’ life-sized portraits of popular characters that are often narratives within narratives succeed in the public sphere because of their sleek reinterpretation of vigilante, rebellious, tough and seductive personalities. Known as an effervescent, sexy, cultural mecca, Montréal prides itself on its reputation as a lively, historically-rich metropolis. With his imagery, Stikki Peaches accesses the very essence of the city. Wheatpasted full-body interpretations of iconic male cinematic characters function, within the cityscape, as a counterbalance to MissMe’s typically female, musical saints. Whereas Stikki Peaches merges two characters as a playful amalgamation of pop culture references, the iconographical details in MissMe’s portraits serve to recount personal stories fraught with historical fact. Both artists’ focus on the real or imagined portrait succeeds within a mass-mediated world where the lines between fact and fiction are often blurred.

The trend of mashing-up cultural references is also employed by WIA, another artist who favours wheatpasting to produce images which allude both to the natural world (namely via the depiction of wild North American animals), and the popular (especially as experienced through material culture). Best-known for his psychedelic depictions of the famed Québec maple syrup can, WIA both extends a nod to Warhol’s legacy of animating material objects of mass production, and pays tribute to a symbol of local pride, which is available widely in tourist gift shops. Interested in depicting comic book inspired imagery that fuses human torsos with animal heads, and in creating unexpected narratives, WIA’s forte is in referencing Canadian or specifically Québécois cultural markers to entice nostalgia. His recent depictions of Montréal Canadian hockey players, for example, appeared on city streets during heated playoffs and appealed to Montréalers as a public show of support for the local team.

**The street art scene – collectives**

Officially launched in 2009, A’Shop is a production company and artist-run collective specialising in painting all manner of objects and diverse indoor/outdoor spaces, yet they are especially revered for their large-scale legal murals. Given the group’s wide range of expertise and multiple combined years of experience writing graffiti and painting murals, it is no surprise that they are sought after and their work is widely admired. Their most successful projects have included colourful murals spanning entire building facades whereby the narrative represented directly relates to the neighbourhood in which it appears. For example, their 2011 mural dubbed ‘Our Lady of Grace’ painted in Montréal’s NDG neighbourhood incorporates landmarks familiar to its residents framed within an elaborate art nouveau inspired natural setting. As participants in the 2013 Mural festival the collective painted a hip elderly lady positioned within the Plateau’s streets signalling that street art is a community affair – one that all ages can benefit from.

Less of a formal collective and more of an ongoing collaborative project, En Masse is the epitome of a collective artistic vision. Artists from diverse backgrounds have shared in the production of En Masse’s collaborative murals, which are easily identified as theirs in the cityscape by virtue of their distinct black and white colour-scheme, and intermingled, jumbled, ‘busy’
appearance. The palette being the only unifier in their productions, En Masse’s murals, which tend to cover every inch of available space, are extremely rich in narratives and intertwined representation.

Aside from combining the efforts of multiple individuals to produce a unified vision, A’Shop and En Masse share a dedication to facilitate community workshops and other pedagogical initiatives. Moreover, both collectives take on corporate and other commissioned projects, and both partner with the city of Montréal in the creation of community-building projects. In other words, these organisations are instrumental in fostering the city’s general admiration of street art.

**Institutions**

Yves Laroche’s founding vision since 1991 has involved a dedication to showcasing the avant-garde in contemporary art. While graffiti and street art are but two of the genres Laroche’s commercial gallery displays, the space is widely recognised as a proponent of alternative art production. This formal enterprise has recently gained competition in the form of a less formal commercial outfit, Station 16, and a pop-up graffiti gallery, Fresh Paint. Station 16, initially solely a silk-screen print shop, but later a point of display for local and international street art talent, officially opened its print gallery space in conjunction with the launch of the Mural festival in 2013. Situated on The Main, the storefront gallery is perfectly positioned to entice Plateau residents, many of them artistically-inclined young professionals, to purchase affordable limited-edition street art prints. Supportive of local talent, in its short time on the scene, Station 16 has proven a valuable contributor to the community and market for this type of artistic production in every respect. The gallery’s exhibition openings are routinely packed with local artists eager to support a growing scene already intertwined with international support. Furthermore, the relatively inexpensive prints allow younger audiences to collect art produced by emerging talent.

In contrast to both Station 16 and the Yves Laroche Gallery, Fresh Paint is a vastly different space in terms of function, display and impetus. The gallery opened up spontaneously in a temporarily abandoned space scheduled for refurbishment. Operated by the organisers of the Under Pressure festival, the haphazard space is quite literally taken over by art. As opposed to using traditionally formal display tactics, Fresh Paint employs a grittier, less stylised mode of display – one that mimics how graffiti or street art might exist on city streets. Its rotating exhibitions allow artists to cover any available space with their work, thus creating a wholly enveloping experience, where one can quite literally be surrounded by art on the floor, walls and ceiling.

Together, these exhibition spaces offer Montréalers the gamut of experiences relative to graffiti and street art indoors. Additionally, major institutions such as MMFA and Musee d’art contemporain de Montréal (MAC) have shown their support and advocacy for street art production. For example, En Masse was invited to paint the enormous closing room in the Big Bang!: Creativity is Given Carte Blanche exhibition at the MMFA (6 November 2011 – 22 January 2012), which allowed visitors to relax on bean bags and absorb the totality of the images. Later, the MMFA invited En Masse back to the museum to paint their newly renovated ‘family lounge’. Furthermore, MAC ex-director, Marc Mayer, was instrumental in publicly supporting Roadsworth during his criminal trial and appeared in a documentary film that chronicled the artist’s case in order to defend his cause.

**Festivals**

Montréal’s first graffiti writing convention, Aerosol Funk, was organised in 1996 by Seaz. He went on to become a spokesperson for graffiti in Montréal urging people not to associate it
with gang activity. Later that same year, Seaz teamed up with fellow writer Flow to produce the first national graffiti festival in Canada, Under Pressure (UP). Twenty-three graffiti writers participated in the event, which aimed to ‘contradict the negative reputation that graffiti was getting from the city, who was trying to scare the public using local media’. With participants from Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver, UP proved that the Montréal graffiti scene is part of a greater national and international movement, and almost twenty years later the festival is still going strong.

The perseverance and enthusiasm of Sterling Downey and other members of the graffiti-rooted graphic design company, Urban X-Pressions, who organised the event, eventually bore fruit as evidenced by the massive success of UP in the coming years. As an annual international festival, UP provides an arena that unites writers belonging to different crews from around the world, and gives them the ability to paint together in a decriminalised community setting. By creating an engaging atmosphere and mounting the exhibitions in accessible venues, UP organisers are working to expose the public to current graffiti trends, familiarising them with the skill and creativity involved in this public expression. Showcasing the work of innovative and talented writers in an urban setting, graffiti art becomes less alienating to the general populace and gains credibility and respect from those who perceive it simply as vandalism.

By 2001, this hip-hop festival had grown to be one of the largest events of its kind in North America featuring over one hundred graffiti writers from all corners of the globe, thirty DJs and MCs, numerous breakdancing crews and most importantly an estimated five thousand spectators (Lamarche, 2002).

Festivals like this offer important opportunities for artists and audiences alike. In the safety of daylight, spectators have the rare opportunity to witness the creation of graffiti pieces and admire the hardship of working with spray paint as a medium. The writers themselves are able to pick up pointers from their international compatriots, and feed off each other’s expertise. The event generates a definite sense of community among writers; however, graffiti’s competitive drive does not cease to exist as these artists continue to compete for fame.

The Mural public art festival had its first edition in 2013 – again, a late inauguration for a festival that celebrates local and international street art production, yet it has already made a huge impact on audiences. Organised by LNDMRK, a local marketing and creative solutions company that liaises between artists and businesses, this festival is ideally situated on The Main to benefit from maximum pedestrian interaction. Organised to coincide with The Main’s annual street sale, whereby the street is closed off to vehicle traffic to create a party atmosphere allowing vendors, bars and eateries to operate directly on the street, the timing of the festival is highly effective and creates hype. In fact, the 800,000 visitors to Mural in 2013 have secured LNDMRK a Grand Prix du tourisme québécois. In 2014, twenty additional murals were added to the twenty painted in 2013 by local and international artists, making St. Laurent boulevard a veritable street art gallery.

Conclusion

Montréal has reacted – and continues to react – to international graffiti and street art practices in a way that echoes what is going on globally. While criminal charges for individuals convicted of vandalism associated with graffiti have severely intensified, street art practices are generally more accepted and even supported by cultural institutions and the media. Moreover, as is often the case elsewhere, the work of street artists is routinely criticised by graffiti writers. Although writers are active all over the city and street artists tend to localize their practices within trendy,
bohemian, pedestrian-heavy areas, graffiti writers continue to do what they do best, which is disrupt the cleaner, more institutionalised, more conformist iconography of street artists in diverse locales including abandoned post-industrial sites and other venues of decay. While writers are not exactly competing for space with street artists, they do continually re-assert their displeasure with street art’s popularity by covering over their work with new layers of paint. That is to say, Montréal’s writing culture is not affected by street art’s popularity in the sense that writers continue to do what they’ve always done: to get their names up, anywhere and everywhere, without permission and without compromise.

Reflecting on the future of the Montréal urban art scene, local artist Omen argued that its fate will follow that of every alternate culture in any give city, with the outcome of ‘corporate sponsorship and branding towards youth culture’. He continues:

there are a lot of writers here that are still doing the true culture of graffiti: live in the streets and not on the web. They are the real “artists”. This is not a Montréal Phenomenon. It is universal. The galleries will get the walls for the street artists and the writers will take them. And the world turns.

The fact that Montréal’s graffiti scene developed comparatively late has had no effect on the skills its constituents display or its permeation throughout the cityscape. Alive and well, Montréal’s graffiti scene (although considerably more active in the warmer summer months) continues both to signal its presence throughout the metropolis and its arteries, and to push the boundaries of execution and visual disruption.

Notes
1 ‘Graffiti has imposed itself as the cultural phenomenon for youths’ (My translation).
2 Under Pressure is both a bi-yearly magazine and the name of an international graffiti convention, www.underpressure.ca.
3 See www.yveslaroche.com. The urban gallery thrives on the showcasing of work by established and emerging underground and cutting edge graffiti, tattoo, comic, pop, illustration and surrealist artists.
4 Personal correspondence by email, 29 September 2013.
5 Urban X – Pressions: Visual Chaos from Grafic Dictators. Web Page. Available: www.urbanxpressions.com. Urbanx-pressions invited graffiti writers from across Canada, as well as popular DJs such as Kid Koala and DJ A-Track, in the hopes of creating a kind of graffiti convention for writers and for the general public.
6 Personal correspondence by email, 9 April 2014.

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