London calling
Contemporary graffiti and street art in the UK’s capital
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Introduction

After New York City, London is perhaps the second most renowned epicenter in the world for graffiti and street art. Many factors explain this situation, including numerous art schools, galleries, museums, auction houses, and art critics; a large creative class of people who serve as a catalyst for this kind of work; a vibrant youth culture; and easy access to other international centers of graffiti and street art.

First, there are no fewer than seven major art schools in London that are well attended by local and international students: Courtauld Institute of Art, Goldsmiths, University of London, Royal Academy, Royal College of Art, Slade School of Fine Art, and University of the Arts London. The city has one of the largest concentrations of major galleries and museums, both private and public, in the art world. These include Tate Britain, Tate Modern, the National Gallery, Saatchi Gallery, and the Design Museum. Moreover, numerous advertising agencies, and interior design and architecture firms are also located in London.

Second, hand in hand with these elite institutions, is the fact that London has long had a strong creative class (e.g. Florida, 2014), and it would seem logical that professionals tied to the art, design, museum, and gallery world would also promote new developments in their field.

Third, since the 1950s, London has nurtured a vibrant youth and protest subculture (e.g. Hall & Jefferson, 1976/1993; Brake, 2013). This has been reflected in the growth of well-known and publicized deviant and/or counterculture groups, such as the Mods, Rockers, and Punks. These youth sub- and countercultural movements either developed in tandem or separately from those that emerged in other major urban centers, such as New York City or Paris (Skelton & Valentine, 1998). Other subcultural developments include a Do It Yourself movement, and Grime Culture, which have had various impacts on graffiti and street art in London.

Finally, in many respects, London is a gateway to the rest of Europe for American graffiti and street artists who wish to engage in their craft outside of North America. In fact, there are numerous stories of U.S. based graffiti/street artists who came to London and teamed up with London-based writers and artists as part of their journey to fame and/or notoriety. The city presents minimal barriers for American graffiti and street artists in terms of language and contacts. In fact, it has been and still is a fertile ground for this kind of activity. The brief review above
does not seek to suggest a causal theory of graffiti/street art in London, but to provide an outline of some of the contributing factors in explaining what occurs in this context.

**Contemporary places and spaces where graffiti and street art are located**

According to Schacter (2013),

> London is vast and each area has its own character and aesthetic in relation to graffiti; for example some districts in the 1990s had a really evil edge. The graffiti was raw – separate letters, ultra-legible, with double outlines so that it stood out even more. It was not about who was the most ‘up’ but about who was the most aggressive.

(p. 150)

More specifically, there are a handful of locations where there is a disproportionate amount of graffiti and street art. In these areas the councils (i.e. local government units) no longer remove this work because they feel overwhelmed by the sheer number and the perception that this work creates economic and cultural benefits. “One finds artists at work; fanatics on the hunt, serendipitous locals, and tourists using their phones to record pieces they have come across. Three principal locations in London are Camden, East London, and Leake Street in Waterloo” (www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart, downloaded April 19, 2015). There are logical reasons why these areas attract a disproportionate amount of graffiti and street art.

Camden is a magnet for street art for three primary reasons: “A community of counterculture artists and musicians, including punks and alternative rockers,” “[infrastructure:] It boasts a plethora of railway lines, bridges, canals, and old decaying buildings, prime street art estate. Street artists love these places because they can put their work up without being caught; and for the street artist it is morally acceptable to ‘brighten up’ a neglected building,” and “Camden likes to celebrate the street artist by ripping them off! Because street art, in itself or by design, often gives the finger to the man; so it’s no surprise to see market traders flogging the more notorious pieces reproduced on t-shirts and canvas for its counter-cultural clientele. Street art is welcome in Camden!” (www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/)

With respect to East London, graffiti and street art are concentrated around “the Boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets . . ., Shoreditch, Brick Lane and Spitalfields” (www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/). Starting in the 1990s, due to the abundance of vacant low-rise buildings, artists, designers, and musicians became attracted to West Hackney and Shoreditch. Included among the up and coming artists were Tracy Emin and Damien Hirst. Their presence in this area served as a catalyst for other like-minded individuals.

> “The integrity of the artistic community was and has been strengthened, like many artistic communities, by being juxtaposed with a community of considerable wealth, the City of London, to the south.” This, in turn, led to the establishment of graphic design studios, interior designers, architects offices, and galleries (www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/).

Many of the galleries and businesses in Shoreditch have seen the attraction of, and benefits to be gained from, showing and commissioning art on the outside of their buildings. This has helped cement Shoreditch’s place as the spiritual home of street art in London, and has attracted artists from all around the world, some of whom are invited, and some come of their own accord to put works up.

(www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/)
Shoreditch is considered by some to be
dowdy, and despite the wealth, activity, and creativity, provides a smorgasbord of abandoned
buildings, railway lines and wasteland car parks, upon which artists feel more than happy
to mount their work . . . The streets are patrolled by bloggers, writers, and photographers,
who record, sort, categorize, and analyze the works on the internet, with the vigor and
detail of a gallery show handbook.

(www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/)

Shoreditch’s days may be numbered as a haven for graffiti and street art as the area may be
a victim of geography and economics. It is nestled beside London’s financial district, which is
slowly expanding and in need of new and close real estate. Although the financial crisis of 2007
has temporarily halted this expansion, when the economy improves, land and rental prices will
likely increase thus making it difficult for the artistic community to sustain itself. “Maybe . . .
the artists will shuffle, fearful and yet faithful, untidily, a bit more northwards and a bit more
eastwards, or maybe the scene will dissipate” (www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/).

Finally Leake Street and Leake Street Tunnel, Waterloo, in South London is another popular
spot for graffiti and street art. Here, a disused railway tunnel just behind Waterloo Train Station
is a popular place for graffiti and street art. Leake Street became a hive for street artists and
graffiti artists after Banksy organized a street art festival [called the “Cans Festival,” a play on

Shortly thereafter, local authorities designated the tunnel as a legal wall for graffiti and street
art (www.ravishlondon.com/londonstreetart/). This location is where some of the best
writers and artists in London frequent the walls, which are now painted every day. The
tunnel hosts the annual ‘Battle of Waterloo,’ organized by ‘Chrome & Black’ (the best
place in London for graffiti art resources), and many other graffiti jams. It has become one
of the last legal halls of fame in London, yet its future is uncertain.

(Epstein, 2014)

pressure for legal space to paint is so intense that most pieces in Leake Street usually only stay
for a week or two, often less, before another artist comes and paints over them” (p. 43).

The legal context

In 1971, the Criminal Damage Act was passed in the U.K. It made graffiti illegal: “One English
council, Harrogate Council, classes it as ‘somewhere between willful littering and vandalism’”
(Harrogate Borough Council, n.d.). Authorities can charge the artists/writers with criminal
damage or with being equipped to cause criminal damage. If convicted, the perpetrator typically
pays a fine and/or performs some sort of community service. When police officers encounter
someone who is doing illegal graffiti or street art, they can give them a fixed penalty notice
(a ticket), and the recipient has the right to contest this charge in court.

Despite the illegal nature of graffiti, not all U.K. councils follow the same policies in terms
of graffiti and street art enforcement and abatement. Some councils have spent very large sums
of money each year, cleaning graffiti. In 2002, the cost of cleaning graffiti in London alone was
estimated to be 100 million GBP (Anonymous, 2002). This included about 7 million GBP for
“scrubbing the walls of schools, hospitals and businesses,” and transport companies expending 6 million GBP “removing daubings from buses and trains” (Anonymous, 2002).

The policy of the London Borough of Hackney is that “we can’t make a decision as to whether something is art or graffiti. [We remove it as] the government judges us on the number of clean walls we have” (Daniell, 2011: p. 458). “Other councils ‘tolerate’ some graffiti” (p. 458). This kind of ambiguity regarding the place of graffiti and street art existed on the streets, too. According to Schacter, “Getting up illegally for the sake of getting up vs. getting up for the sake of drawing attention to your gallery show; a traditional graffiti letterform aesthetic vs. a pop art image-based aesthetic, often as a stencil or paste-up” (2013: p. 151). Typically graffiti that is sexist or racist is removed (Anonymous, 1986).

According to Epstein (2014),

The legal/tolerated halls of fame in London are a testing ground for graffiti writers. This is where they can invest time to develop their styles and techniques . . . These halls are the birthplaces of many, very adept and talented graffiti writers and artists. Sadly though, most of these spaces are not protected in the interests of the art, but being neglected by local councils, or eyed-up by greedy developers circling the skyline of London. Despite protests from local artists and residents, these important spaces are being redeveloped into sterilized play-spaces, privatized housing, and desolate car parks.

The existing scholarship

Although a handful of books that include numerous photographs of graffiti and street art in London have been published (e.g. Perry, 1976; Epstein, 2014), a sustained scholarship on this subject has not been produced. For example, a Home Office study of vandalism in estates (Wilson, 1978) touches on graffiti as vandalism but does not examine this activity in any great detail. Alternatively, Ekblom (1988a), in a report on graffiti in the London Underground, based on situational crime prevention techniques and other suggestions, identified a series of preventive measures that could be implemented to reduce the amount of this kind of activity.


One of the earliest and most notable semi-systematic studies on graffiti in London was the 2002 report commissioned by the London Assembly, titled *Graffiti in London*. This investigation, chaired by Andrew Pelling (Conservative representative from Croydon Council), considered the causes and impact of graffiti. Divided into nine parts, the report examined the roles of parents, businesses, law enforcement, courts, and news media outlets on graffiti. In order to produce the report, the team gathered testimony from twenty-eight individuals, including graffiti writers/artists and representatives of government organizations. They also reviewed written evidence.

Much of the knowledge obtained was rudimentary by today’s scholarly standards, including the portrayal of the types of people who do graffiti and the dangers inherent in its commission. The 102-page report’s key findings were that magistrates (judges) are reluctant to deliver sentences that would act as a deterrent (p. 22). At that time, there was a belief that categorizing graffiti as a local offense would not assist in the proper government response. Proposals included a U.K. wide ban on the sale of spray paint to minors, acceptable behavior contracts, and the
enhanced use of CCTV. The report highlighted the development of the Local Government Act of 2000, which “provides local authorities with new powers to promote or improve the economic, social, and environmental well-being of their area” (p. 28). Most of the recommendations pointed towards greater cooperation among various entities both in the public and private sectors.

The report made thirty-three recommendations to be enacted by different bodies, including the mayor, London Assembly, and utility companies. The report emphasized the fact that at the time there were thirty-three boroughs in London and that there was considerable diversity in their approaches to graffiti, including expenditures. In other words, there was no consistent citywide method addressing graffiti.

Despite its presence, for reasons that are really unknown, few scholarly pieces on graffiti and street art in London have been written. Alvelos (2004) analyzed a series of case studies drawn from research that the author conducted between 1997 and 2001 on graffiti on the streets of London:

The cases studied challenge a prevailing socio-cultural myth – one that regards graffiti’s contemporary urban version as a subcultural form of expression, still autonomous, still rebellious, an outlaw enterprise still very much sheltered from outside influences or interference. The scenario is actually increasingly rare.

(p. 181)

He describes how some advertising campaigns, in their pre-launch phases, used graffiti (or more specifically street art) elements to pique passerby curiosity regarding new products and services, as in the release of certain musical CDs. “Graffiti was indeed the first stage in the promotional activities that anticipated the product’s actual launch. It was to act as a quasi-subliminal teaser, that rarely revealed the product in question” (p. 183). Alvelos also notes how graffiti has been adopted by other creatives in the promotion of various cultural products (i.e. plays, movies, books, magazines, websites, computer games, etc.) (p. 184).

Four years later, Dickens (2008) reviewed the Finders Keepers street art group, which during the 2000s was a rough assemblage of street artists who decided to hold an event where found objects would be re-crafted and displayed publicly in the Shoreditch neighborhood of London. When this “street theatre” like event ended, the people in attendance were allowed to take the objects with them when a whistle was blown. Other scholarship includes Schacter (2008) who examined the loose connections among graffiti artists, gallery owners, and the public. More specifically he was interested in how certain pieces of graffiti and street art in London achieved legitimacy and were eventually protected by the community.

In sum, a comprehensive history of graffiti and street art in London is largely unwritten. What we find instead is a preponderance of sections, in large format books, on the subject of graffiti and street art, which primarily include photographs with minimal textual discussion and/or analysis of the city’s graffiti/street art culture. Much of the written commentary that does exist, however, is superficial if not ephemeral, and this also applies to the handful of similar smaller books focusing exclusively on London (e.g. MacNaughton, 2006; 2007; 2009; Frank Steam, 2013). Also prominent are books offering guided walking tours of graffiti and street art in London or, more specifically, locations where Banksy’s art may be found (e.g. Bull, 2011). Another interesting book is The Lost Boyz: A Dark Side of Graffiti (2011), written by Rollins, which is a confessional-style autobiographical book done by a London-based graffiti writer during the 1980s. Again the insight about graffiti and street art in London is not comprehensive.
More common are news articles published in the mainstream papers. Additionally from 1992 to 2012, a U.K. magazine called *Graphotism*, that featured images of graffiti, was produced. It started in a London–based retail shop that sold different types of spray paint and markers (Keegan, 2012). Not only did it feature images and stories about graffiti in London, but it also included work in locations around the world.

**Method**

Beyond a traditional literature review, a variety of research methods are available to gain a better sense of the history and contemporary status of graffiti and street art in London. Although a deeper examination of this important subject matter is warranted through interviews with graffiti artists/writers, agents of social control, council politicians, municipal police, curators and art critics, shopkeepers and other property owners, as well as with residents who have lobbied for and against graffiti and street art in their neighborhoods, this additional research is not possible at this time. Given resource constraints, in addition to the scant scholarly literature sources, this current examination is limited to and drawn from online websites and newspaper articles. Numerous newspapers cover London. In order to construct as comprehensive a picture as possible of graffiti and street art in London, a search was done of all articles published in the *Times* between January 1, 1980 and December 31, 2014 that mentioned graffiti and/or street art.

The majority of these articles referred to arrests and sentencing of individuals who were caught engaging in graffiti and street art. Although other news sources were occasionally used, one might legitimately argue that a more detailed picture might have been obtained if the universe had been expanded to more newspapers, however resource constraints prevented the writer from doing so. In scouring the web, there are also many sites offering or providing tours of graffiti and street art in London. Run by enterprising individuals, these businesses allow tourists to see the famous pieces of London graffiti artists. Others provide lists of graffiti and street artists and feature some of their work. This work was also examined.

**Notable London-based graffiti and street artists**

Over the past four decades, a handful of iconic London-based graffiti and street artists have defined the body of work in this city. Almost every collection of photographs on graffiti and street art has a section featuring individuals who work in London. Although the criteria for inclusion are not articulated, the cast of characters includes, but is not limited to Solo One, Banksy, King Robbo, and EINE. Below is a brief review of these four individuals.

**Solo One**

Noteworthy among the contemporary street artists working in London has been Boyd Hill (aka Solo One). He began his career as a street artist in 1999 by placing his tag on post office labels and applying the stickers to all manner of surfaces throughout London (Alvelos, p. 187). “Recognizing the graffiti sticker trend’s potential as a marketing medium, Boxfresh [an urban underwear clothing brand], launched a series of stickers whose design resembled that of the Post office stickers use by Solo One” (p. 187). In 2001, Boxfresh signed a deal with Solo One to have his moniker appear on their stickers. In this manner, the act of vandalism had come full circle with the artist’s work now being co-opted by a mainstream capitalist organization (Schacter, 2013: p. 153).
Banksy

Originally from Bristol (located in Southwest England), the elusive Banksy started out doing graffiti and soon moved to street art, specializing in stencils. Not confined to Bristol, he extended his work to other locations both inside and outside the United Kingdom, such as the United States (e.g. New York City, New Orleans, Los Angeles, etc.) and other places around the world (e.g. Bethlehem, the West Bank, etc.) where his work has attracted a considerable amount of political controversy. The images of Banksy are synonymous with London. Over the years, he and/or the organization he created (Pest Control) have produced a number of books, such as \textit{Wall and Piece} (2006). He was also the director of the movie \textit{Exit Through the Gift Shop}. There appears to be as much interest in his elusiveness as in his work. There have been numerous Banksy sittings. Part of the importance of Banksy has forced North London council workers, who normally remove graffiti, to actually touch up ones that are attributed to him. According to \textit{The Times}, “A list of all the paintings on walls by Banksy has been given to Islington Council’s head of environment to stop them being painted over by cleanup teams. Some paintings are even being repaired after vandals have attacked them” (Anonymous, 2007). Banksy has also received his share of criticism. From 2009 to 2010, a very public and controversial dispute between Mike Robertson (aka King Robbo), a London-based graffiti writer, and he captured the attention of many keen graffiti/street art watchers (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012: pp. 51–52). The story eventually became the subject of a documentary, \textit{Graffiti Wars: Banksy vs Robbo} (2011). Until that point, Robbo claimed to have had a twenty-five-year career as a graffiti artist and had winded down his career, until one day he met Banksy in a bar and they had a physical altercation. This was soon followed by Banksy purposely painting over one of Robbo’s iconic pieces in Camden Town. Robbo started retaliating and altered some of Banksy’s pieces. During the movie, there are interviews with various public works officials and workers over how street art is somehow privileged and graffiti is not. During this time period, Both Banksy and Robbo had wide-ranging support from fans. Robbo then held an exhibition of his work at the Pure Evil Art Gallery in Shoreditch and received a major commission to do a large graffiti-style silhouette of actress Zoë Kravitz in Berlin, for the premiere of her movie \textit{Yelling to the Sky}. Shortly after the movie was shot, Robbo sustained a head injury and fell into a coma. Similar to Robbo’s arguments, Banksy has received his fair share of criticism from graffiti and street artists alike for lacking talent.

Not content with simply doing his work on the city streets, Banksy (with the assistance of collaborators) has managed to affix his work on the walls of major galleries (e.g. Tate Modern) and museums (e.g. British Museum). Called incursions, these have taken a considerable amount of planning and the involvement of confederates who are on the lookout when these installations occur. Banksy’s work, which is occasionally sold at auction, has fetched high prices. In one 2007 newspaper report, “A work by Banksy sold at auction for 288,000 GBP” (Collings, 2008).

King Robbo

For twenty years, Mike Robertson (aka King Robbo), described as “a founding father of London’s street art scene in the Eighties” (Freeman, 2014), had a prolific career as a one of London’s more prominent graffiti writers. During this time, he successfully kept his identity secret. He was known for creating iconic pieces that were placed on hard to reach places, including the sides of numerous canals in Camden. In 2009, despite apparently having been retired for close to a decade and working as a cobbler, he got involved in the famous battle with Banksy. This led to a resumption of his activities and eventually a handful of international commissions. The beef with Banksy was eventually settled amicably, but in April 2011, Robbo was found...
unconscious in front of his house on the street. He was placed in an induced coma, and he passed away in August 2014.

**EINE**

During the 1980s, Ben Flynn (aka EINE) became interested in hip-hop culture. He dropped out of school and started doing graffiti after seeing books on New York City subway art. EINE moved out of his parents’ house and eventually got a job working for an insurance company. During this twelve-year period of absolutely hating his job, he spent a considerable portion of his spare time doing graffiti on trains, being arrested multiple times, and being forced to pay numerous fines (Godwin, 2013). During this period, he chalked up “about twenty arrests and seven convictions for graffiti vandalism” (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012: p. 6). Shortly before news footage showing him and some friends painting a train hit the media, he quit his job and found another one managing a bar in Shoreditch, where he met other graffiti and street artists (Godwin, 2013). He transitioned to becoming Banksy’s printer, focusing on stencil and screen-printing techniques (Godwin, 2013). EINE is best known for his huge letters spray painted on shopkeepers’ doors.

Since then, EINE has achieved more mainstream respectability, so much so that in 2010, one of his paintings was acquired by Prime Minister David Cameron, as a present for his first visit to the American President Barack Obama. “Eine was now famous, his prices went up and at a show he held in San Francisco, every piece was sold” (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012: p. 7). In 2014, EINE, who has since relocated to San Francisco, was invited to paint a wall in Rikers Island jail and on West Broadway in New York City (Anonymous, 2014).

**A brief history of contemporary graffiti and street art in London**

No formal history of graffiti and street art in London exists. Regardless, graffiti and street art in London predate the importation of hip-hop culture from the United States (e.g. Fleming, 2001; Daniell, 2011). These creative endeavors seem to function as a regular pressure valve to the street politics of the past twenty years. From slogans supporting the outlawed Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorist organization to those specifically backing IRA hunger striker, Bobby Sands, a considerable amount of political graffiti is located on the streets, buildings, and canals around London. Not restricted to above ground locations, we have also seen some of this work in the London Tube/Underground (HMPS Department of Transportation, 1986). Perry Roger’s book *The Writing on the Wall: The Graffiti of London* (1976), illustrated with black-and-white photographs, for example, is one of the earliest books to document the numerous unauthorized written slogans that have been painted on London's walls. Another example of this kind of book was Jac Charoux’s book, *London Graffiti* (1980), which also contained both black and white photographs, but color ones too of pithy statements.

Most written accounts suggest that the origins of contemporary graffiti in London date back to the “New York City Rap Tour” which came to this city in 1982. Others note the influence of American books like Cooper and Chalfant’s *Subway Art* (1984), and Chalfant and Prigoff’s *Spraycan Art* (1987), and movies, such as *Wild Style* (1983), that were making their way around youth circles during this time (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012). As the popularity of graffiti increased, so did the number of individuals who wished to experiment by writing and painting on different surfaces, including the London Tube and various walls around the city.

By 1987, the London Transport, which is the former name of the organization for managing the London Underground (subway or tube), railways, and bus service estimated “that the cost of removing graffiti in 1986–1987 could amount to as much as £500,000” (Anonymous, 1987a).
Also in that year John Joporo, aged eleven, died as a result of being dragged underneath a London Tube train. It was alleged that he was trying to place his tag on a train (Anonymous, 1987b). In November 1987, a fire occurred in King’s Cross Underground that led to the death of thirty-one individuals. One of the popular theories was that a fireball was enhanced by the cyanide gas that is produced when anti-graffiti paint burns (Dawe, 1989).

In 1989, the federal government unveiled “Special Action Squad,” a plan to appoint a teacher at each public school who would be responsible for reducing vandalism, arson, and theft (Tytler, 1989). Although no fixed amount was estimated for graffiti, “The official cost of damage to schools is £49 million a year but local officers believe it is closer to £100 million” (Tytler, 1989). Also in 1989, the London Union of Youth Clubs convened a multipurpose “Graffiti Art” event at the South London Art Gallery. It was intended to “provide a more informed and positive response by the authorities and to limit the danger to those young people who risk death and criminalization in their attempts to express their creative illegality” (Holloway, 1989: p. 2). This event included a discussion among the artists, and “representatives of the police, British Railway Transport Police, and London Transport” (Coffield, 1991: p. 65).

In 1991, The Times reported on the increased amount of graffiti in London including the underground (the subway system). In an article it mentioned how “Since 1987, five teenagers have been killed while daubing [s]logans on trains. Graffiti damage to London Underground property is estimated at £5 million a year” (Dynes, 1991). The article adds, “Chris Connell, the British transport police inspector who heads the ten-man anti-graffiti unit, says that the hard core of graffiti writers, believed to number some sixty individuals, ‘are highly organized, well equipped, and prepared to take terrible risks to get their tag displayed on London Underground trains.’” He adds,

> Catching them can take years. Each time a tag appears on a train or wall it is photographed and indexed, providing the police with a geographical range of the writer’s activities, and dossier of damage that frequently amounts to £50,000 by the time the case comes to court.

Nocturnal stake-outs are mounted, and occasionally the perpetrators are caught.

Other seemingly bizarre episodes occurred.

In March 1993, Declan Rooney, twenty, who along with other individuals was “involved in causing damage to London Underground trains estimated to have cost hundreds of thousands of pounds,” was, instead of being imprisoned, was simply fined £1,500, and was placed on probation for a year. The judge in handing down the sentence stated “You have already cost the community very dear. With court appearances, the investigation and the damage, you have cost literally hundreds of thousands of pounds. It is not in the public interest that the community should pay even more money by putting you in custody” (Hidalgo, 1993).

During the early 2000s there were numerous selected stories about graffiti appearing on London walls, statues, and public monuments before, during, and after public protests. By 2002 the cost to clean up graffiti in London was reported to be a hundred million pounds (Anonymous, 2002). In 2001, an unnamed fifteen-year-old youth was convicted of stabbing to death an eighteen-year-old member of a rival graffiti writing crew for having defaced his graffiti. This incident, among others, served to further demonize individuals who were engaging in graffiti (Anonymous, 2001).

In 2003 the Labour government, under the leadership of Tony Blair, attempted to “declare a war on graffiti and dog mess” (Charter, 2002). In their attempts to improve the quality of life for citizens of the U.K., they developed “A Partnership between the council, police, fire brigade and community groups [which] aims to stamp out anti-social behavior by pooling resources and through a hotline to report incidents” including graffiti (Charter, 2002). Also in 2003, the
Home office, in conjunction with Crimestoppers, through “The Name That Tag campaign” offered a £500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any of the twelve most prolific individuals whom they identified as engaging in a disproportionate amount of graffiti in the London Tube and on buildings (Bjortomt, 2003). No evaluations of the program could be found. Meanwhile the London Underground started to publicize the specialized cameras that it was using to catch graffiti writers in the Tube. According to the reports “They are triggered by motion and give vandals an audio warning that they have been photographed” (Anonymous, 2004). In May of that year, Mayor Ken Livingstone, with the assistance of the other “twenty-seven borough police commanders” announced that they would be recruiting shopkeepers to volunteer not to sell spray paint to teenagers. The plan was met with criticism as selling spray paint was not illegal (Anonymous, 2003).

In 2005, in a sort of twist of fate, local graffiti artists objected to an advertising campaign spearheaded by Saatchi & Saatchi, a well-known advertising company that involved illegal spray-painting in different communities in public spaces.

As part of a £20 million campaign for a new Brazilian spirit[,] they are spray-painting graffiti images on walls and buildings in the East End of London as a way to reach young consumers immune to conventional advertising. But the campaign appears to have backfired. Real street graffiti artist have begun taking ‘direct action’ against the interlopers.

(Malvern, 2005)

In 2006, “nine men from south London, aged between eighteen and twenty-five, were charged with conspiracy to commit criminal damage after a seven-month British Transport Police (BTP) investigation. It is alleged the men committed 120 graffiti offences over two years . . . Robert Lee, a south-London writer known as Ribz, was jailed for three and a half years in December last year despite having ‘retired’” (Addley, 2007).

By 2007, with the increasing acceptance of some graffiti and street artists, U.S.-based Shepard Fairey displayed his work at various London galleries, including a major exhibition called Nineteeneightyfouria at the StolenSpace gallery (Blackburn, 2007). Meanwhile periodic reports of deaths of young men doing graffiti were reported in the news. In January 2007, twenty-one-year-old Bradley Chapman (tag name Ozone) and nineteen-year-old Daniel Elgar were killed by a Tube train at Barking rail depot (Addley, 2007).

Continuing along this trend, in Spring 2008, the Tate Modern (one of the most respected museums of modern art in the world) held a “survey of street art,” with works placed on the exterior of this museum. The surfaces were “covered with six towering works of Street Art, all around fifteen metres high” (Lewis, 2008). This work was done by a group of well-known international artists, including fail, Blue, Nunca, Os Gemeos, and Sixeart. Noticeably absent was work by Banksy (Falconer, 2008) (www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/street-art) (www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7419861.stm). Questions arose about why Banksy’s work was not present, and when questioned, Cedar Lewisohn, the curator of the special exhibition, stated: “We wanted to bring international Street Artists to London, whose work the British public couldn’t normally see. Banksy’s work is very familiar to people in London.” A more nuanced response why Banksy was not presenting was given by a source close to Banksy. He originally said that he was never asked, then later stated that the reason why Banksy was not participating was because automobile manufacturer Nissan sponsored the exhibition, as if to imply that the introduction of commercialism was crass, and had somehow tarnished the show.

In 2009, as previously mentioned, the clash between Banksy and Robbo reached a crescendo with both individuals defacing each other’s work. As written, the conflict ended in a mutual truce.
In 2010, as selected pieces of graffiti and street gained a growing acceptance among some members of the public, it was not uncommon that situations like this would occur. Banksy biographer, Ellsworth-Jones describes a community meeting he attended in Hackney, where the residents were debating the merits of maintaining a huge painting of a rabbit by Roa, a Belgian street artist, that was affixed to the side of a wall of a recording studio (2012: pp. 5–6).

In 2011, Daniel Halpin (aka Tox), “known as the ‘king of taggers,’ was convicted of seven charges of criminal damage, and jailed for twenty-seven months. Halpin, twenty-eight, had spent ten years travelling the country painting his tag, . . . on trains, bridges, tunnels, stations” (Gillespie, 2013). Halpin was arrested as part of “BTP Operation Misfit, which claimed to have identified their tags . . .” He “claimed he was the victim of imitators, . . . [and] . . . had ‘retired’ in 2005 after a career defacing buses, trains, bridges, and walls earned him a string of asbos, which he largely ignored, and community service orders” (Davies, 2011). At his trial, testimony was given by retired and well-respected graffiti artists regarding their opinions and the authenticity of Halpin’s tags (Davies, 2011).

Starting in 2011, with increasing public acceptance of graffiti and street art, newspaper articles started to suggest that graffiti and street art had become pretty mainstream. Jonathan Jones, writing in The Guardian (2011), opined,

Street art is so much part of the establishment that when David Cameron spoke about this summer’s riots, he was photographed in front of a bright and bulbous Oxfordshire graffiti painting . . . The efforts of and all the would-be Banksys’ have so deeply inscribed the ‘coolness’ of street art into the middle-class mind.

(Jones, 2011)

He adds,

Maybe there was a time when painting a wittingly satirical or cheekily rude picture or comment on a wall was genuinely disruptive and shocking. That time is gone. Councils still do their bit to keep street art alive, and so confirming that it has edge. But basically it has been absorbed so deep into the mainstream that old folk who once rallied at graffiti in their town are now more likely to have a Banksy book on their shelves.

(Jones, 2011)

Despite this trend, just before the 2012 Summer Olympics, the city of London and other governmental agencies (e.g. Hackney and Tower Hamlet councils) started to “clean up the city” by removing (painting over) certain graffiti- and street art-laden walls. There were also allegations during this time that there was an enhanced crack down on graffiti and street artists with suspects being routinely stopped, questioned, and in some cases, arrested (Allen, 2012; Jones, 2012). Frequent newspaper stories, like the one written by Jones, suggested,

This week a graffiti painter – who claims he only works on legally sanctioned projects – was among several individuals banned from Olympic venues and London public transport, in a preemptive police strike against supposed threats to public order on the eve of the London Olympiad.

(Jones, 2012)

Alternatively, in June 2012, two months before the start of the Olympics, Shepard Fairey was invited to create a mural, “his largest ever . . . a 138 ft. stencil encouraging free speech, at the London Pleasure Gardens” (Curtis, 2012).

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In a semi-ironic twist of fate, shortly after the Olympics ended, some communities actively recruited graffiti and street artists to resume their work. Near the Olympics site, there was a flurry of commissioned graffiti activity. Much to the chagrin of local graffiti artists, like Sweet Tooth, the Legacy List Charity commissioned four pieces of work from international graffiti artists. A representative of the organization claimed, “We unashamedly wanted to showcase the best international artists and transform this part of the canal into a destination for street art” (Wainwright, 2013).

Beginning in 2013, news reports started surfacing about the death of graffiti. One article reported, “Painting names on buildings, trains, and buses used to be the preserve of teenagers, working at night and dodging security guards and police to daub their ‘tags.’ However, increased security . . . has led to a marked decline. According to figures from the British Transport Police . . . graffiti incidents fell by 63 percent between 2007 and this year [2013]” (Gillespie, 2013). The story mentioned an elusive study by Defra, the environment ministry, which claimed “a drop in graffiti.” The article quotes Keegan Webb, “founder of The London Vandal, a graffiti blog and online shop, [who] said those who wanted to create graffiti in its ‘true’ form, without permission or special arrangements, now had to travel abroad” (Gillespie, 2013). As a result, there is more emphasis on galleries as places where graffiti artists may have their work displayed.

But it is not just increased security and heavy penalties that are curbing the illegal graffiti artists; many of the early exponents have grown older and moved on. The younger generation . . . appears to have been lured away by computer games and iPads, which may not offer as much creativity but do not carry the threat of arrest either.

The article, which quotes graffiti artist Solo One, states,

graffiti was not declining but moving in different areas. It has changed “there is clearly in creativity [among young people] because they are mainly locked into online gaming,” he added. It was really popular in the 1980s, when people were doing it as teenagers, but we are a lot more controlled now. If you look at estates [Britain’s term for public housing] in the 1990s, they look like something out of Hungary. Many of the people who used to do it went on to careers in graphic design or music that still incorporated elements of it, but in terms of rebellious culture there is not as much of that, because we have been so tamed as a society.

As part of the general public backlash, in 2013 Blakewill and Harris published Wanksey: Interpreting a Graffiti Virtuoso (Blakewill & Harris, 2013). The book, primarily consisting of color photographs, accompanied by short descriptive text, attempted to disparage and ridicule graffiti they encountered on the streets by suggesting that this kind of work is rudimentary.

Backing up these contextual factors, in April 2014, Yougov, a worldwide internet-based market research company, released the results of a recent poll it conducted, the results of which did not surprise most Londoners and indicated that, “The British public has . . . come a long way in their view of graffiti . . . a resounding three-to-one margin (66 percent to 22 percent), people now think graffiti can be considered as ‘art.’ ” The accompanying post on the website stated: “In a separate question, only a third (34 percent) say ‘all graffiti is vandalism’ while the majority (58 percent) accept that ‘some graffiti is acceptable.’ ” When specifically focusing on London, the author points out that “People in London, are almost split on graffiti (23 percent
like it and 28 percent dislike it), while people elsewhere in Britain are much more likely to have a negative opinion of it” (Jordon, 2014).

Finally, in December 2014, the Graffiti Sessions, a three-day event, sponsored by the Graffiti Dialogues Network at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London), the UCL Urban Laboratory, and Southbank Centre, occurred. Its purpose was to “identify new horizons for future city strategies on graffiti and street arts and opportunities and challenges for evolving creative practice, towards places that are both safe and sociable.” It also aimed to confront “deep-rooted preconceptions and speculation that have until now limited the progress of both policy and practice related to street art and graffiti.” The format included “talks, workshops, and panel debates,” featuring well-known and respected scholars, activists, and graffiti writers and street artists (http://graffitisessions.com/about). In many respects, this event both confirmed and symbolized the academic respectability of the study of graffiti and street art in London and elsewhere, and reinforced that this topic and practice had finally achieved a semi-respectability as an art form and as a method of political communication that can no longer be ignored.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades, the volume and creativeness of graffiti and street art in London have been simply amazing, but for reasons that are not clear, the scholarly coverage and analysis of this subject matter is highly selective and in need of further research. This chapter has attempted, in a small way, to shed some light into the history and main individuals, locations, and themes connected to graffiti and street art in London, in order to spur other researchers to do a more intense study of this rich but fading and often ephemeral urban visual content.

Notes

1 Special thanks to Christopher Brees-Rostveit for research assistance, and Rachel Hildebrandt, Ronald Kramer and Aaron Z. Winter for comments.
2 For purposes of clarification, this chapter focuses on graffiti and street art in Greater London. This encompasses the City of London, Inner London (consisting of 12 boroughs), and Outer London (comprised of 20 boroughs) (London Government Act, 1963).
3 The report writers extrapolated that at the time, the boroughs spent close to 7 million GBP combating graffiti.
4 A similar, but less intensive review of articles published on the British Broadcasting Website was also conducted.
5 Table of London based graffiti and street artists included in international anthologies:

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The only available documentation of this event I could find was on the French-language Wikipedia page which states that it was part of a world tour (Paris, Lyon, Belfort, Mulhouse, Strasbourg, London, Los Angeles) organized by radio Europe 1 in 1982 and presented for the first time a non-American audience of graffiti ARTISTS, the DJ scratching, the break dancers, the rappers, and Double Dutch. Participants included: Phase 2, Futura 2000, Dondi, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster D.ST the Rock Steady Crew, Rammellzee, Buffalo Girls, and their manager Kool Lady Blue, promoter of the project with Bernard Zekri, a journalist for the magazine Actuel and Jean Karakos, leader of the label Celluloid. Entertainment was provided by Alain Maneval.


London is also the home of active knitting graffiti/yarn bombing practitioners (Greenwall, 2012), and of Paul Moose, who engages in negative graffiti by cleaning dirty, sooty, and grimy walls to make attractive images.

References


