Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art

Jeffrey Ian Ross

Straight from the underground

Publication details
Ronald Kramer
Published online on: 08 Mar 2016

How to cite :- Ronald Kramer. 08 Mar 2016, Straight from the underground from: Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art Routledge
Accessed on: 20 Aug 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
I can take two, three, four days, a week, or a month to do a piece on a wall. On the walls you get to do your piece a fairly nice size and then if you want to add background and characters and all that stuff you could. On the train, your piece was constricted because of the next guy’s piece. Now, the thing about walls is they became big murals. In the early to mid-1990s you had a lot of people going from one aesthetic to another.

(NIC ONE)²

Introduction

By the mid-1970s a particular form of graffiti, distinguished by its emphasis on highly stylizing an individual’s name, emerged as the dominant form of public writing in New York City. Referred to over the years as “subway art” (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984; Stewart, 1989), “spray can art” (Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987), and “hip-hop graffiti” (Phillips, 1999), this variant of graffiti has been analyzed by academic discourse in more ways than one. On the one hand, there is a tendency to situate what I will call “graffiti writing culture”³ as a small fragment within broader cultural formations, such as “hip-hop” (Hager, 1984; Rose, 1994; George, 1998; Chang, 2005) or gang culture (Phillips, 1999). On the other hand, some accounts treat graffiti writing culture as demanding study in its own right. In these cases, analysts have tended to focus on graffiti as it existed in New York City during the 1970s and 1980s (Lachmann, 1988; Austin, 2001; Miller, 2002) or on emergent graffiti writing cultures that, although in different geographic regions, took their inspiration from what was happening in New York City (Ferrell, 1993; Macdonald, 2001; Rahn, 2002).

Although this latter approach has innumerable strengths and has contributed greatly to our understanding, it tends to prioritize illegal graffiti. In doing so, it generates an image of graffiti writing culture that is no longer complete. Drawing from over five years of ethnographic fieldwork incorporating interviews, observations and document analysis, I explore the post-1989 era of graffiti, a time in which many graffiti writers not only turned to legal modes of graffiti production, but also sought social acceptance for their practice and creative outputs.
Graffiti as “generalized lawlessness” and an “art of rebellion”

Most accounts of graffiti tend to take its illegality for granted (Mailer, 1974; Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1987; Lachmann, 1988; Spitz, 1991; Ferrell, 1993; Austin, 2001). Of course, given that graffiti is often produced in direct violation of the law and accompanied by auxiliary criminal activities, such as the stealing of spray paint and breaking into train yards, this is not surprising. In many accounts, especially those with a tendency to romanticize the practice, the focus often turns towards how graffiti is over criminalized. Such criminalization is usually motivated by political and economic ends, and occurs by investing “graffiti” with negative meanings, and via the introduction of stricter legislation (see especially Castleman, 1982; Ferrell, 1993; Austin, 2001 on this point).

In other accounts, illegality functions as an essential element in theorizing graffiti writing culture. According to Nancy Macdonald (2001: 126), the illegality of graffiti constitutes “the subculture’s backbone” because it allows for the construction of a masculine identity or character. As she puts it, “This subculture must be acknowledged for what it is . . . an illegal confine where danger, opposition and the exclusion of women is used to nourish, amplify and salvage notions of masculinity” (Macdonald, 2001: 149).

For Janice Rahn (2002) illegality does not so much ensure a space in which a sense of masculinity can be developed, but one in which autonomy from dominant social groups can be found. Insofar as this autonomy is achieved through illegality, the latter becomes an ethic among graffiti writers and something that needs to be preserved.

The community’s ethics concerning graffiti’s illegal status ensures that it cannot be entirely co-opted. As it becomes popularized, writers seem to push their art back to the margins of a clearly distinguishable underground culture. Members are dedicated to their own code of ethics . . .

(Rahn, 2002: 162)

The illegality of graffiti often paves the way for further explorations of how graffiti writers violate the law in other respects. When, for example, Castleman explored graffiti writing culture in the early 1980s, theft was so common among writers that it could be said to constitute a “tradition” (1982: 46). On occasion, this proclivity for theft even led to the commission of burglary.

Another spectacular rack-up . . . was not the result of chance discovery . . . [T]hree writers carefully planned and executed a late-night robbery at a warehouse in the Bronx, getting away with more than 2000 cans of spray paint. Only Rustoleum and Red Devil paint, the brands most preferred by writers, were taken.

(Castleman, 1982: 47)

In Austin’s account the theft that constitutes a tradition for Castleman becomes a “virtue” that, if followed dutifully, establishes a writers “street cred” and commitment to the subculture’s “ethical code.” “Since the quantity of paint needed for a piece was beyond the economic means of most writers, necessity was made a virtue, and theft or swapping was considered the only ethical means of acquiring paint” (2001: 65).

Alongside the focus on graffiti writing’s illegal aspects, one is also likely to find the notion that it embodies a critical or oppositional stance towards the dominant society in which it is
located. Based on an analysis of the graffiti scene in Denver, Colorado during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ferrell (1993: 172) finds that “the politics of graffiti writing are those of anarchism.” As he ultimately concludes, graffiti “stands as a sort of decentralized and decentered insubordination, a mysterious resistance to conformity and control, a stylish counterpunch to the belly of authority” (1993: 197).4

More circumspect in his approach, Ivor Miller (2002) draws from research conducted on New York City’s graffiti writing culture during the 1970s and 1980s to argue that graffiti is an “intrinsically rebellious” public art that addresses “race” and class tensions. In relation to the former, Miller argues that graffiti constitutes a cultural response to “the imposition of the European colonial masters’ culture” upon those of non-European descent (2002: 33). In relation to class tensions, Miller claims that graffiti writers “combat the impositions of a consumer society by reshaping the alphabet to redefine their own identities and their environment” (2002: 85). Furthermore, insofar as graffiti writers make their art free to the public, Miller argues that writing culture defies a “system that put[s] a price tag on everything” (2002: 154).5

Following the “cultural turn,” Janice Rahn (2002) finds that graffiti is an “adolescent obsession” (2002: 210) that speaks less to class and/or “race” tensions than to regimes of “knowledge and power” (2002: 137). For Rahn, the specific power/knowledge regimes in question are those that surround “adulthood.” In this context, graffiti is said to afford adolescents an opportunity to express disdain for the normalization and disciplinary processes that can be associated with one’s teenage years and presuppose the transition to adulthood (Rahn, 2002: 143).

Finally, Nancy Macdonald (2001: 154) refrains from framing graffiti writing as resistance altogether. Instead, she finds it to represent a deliberate quest for social and cultural isolation. By creating a gulf between themselves and the broader society, graffiti writers can confound and frighten outsiders – a pastime from which they supposedly derive great pleasure. “The greatest satisfaction comes when graffiti does not just confound, it frightens. To many, graffiti is sinister and threatening, and this gives writers something of an upper hand” (2001: 158).

This brief analysis reveals the existence of a diversity of findings concerning the relationship between graffiti writing culture and the society in which it is embedded. Yet these differing interpretations all emphasize illegality and suggest that the relationship between graffiti writing culture and society is one marked by discordance. For the most part, graffiti writing culture is postulated as a critical force that challenges society.

In the post-1989 era, however, graffiti writing experienced a profound transformation in its norms and practices. Due to prolonged state opposition in New York City, graffiti writers were squeezed out of the subway system and went above ground. Those interested in painting elaborate graffiti works started seeking out permission from property owners to paint their walls. This occasionally led to opportunities to paint commissioned works for private and business clients (e.g. business owners requesting store fronts to be painted in graffiti style fonts).

To be sure, “commercial” and “legal graffiti” did exist prior to 1990, but it was much less common than it is today. After 1989, the production of legal graffiti quickly came to dominate the subculture. And, although some graffiti writers continue to paint illegally or work on both sides of the fence (MacDiarmid and Downing, 2012), the most prominent graffiti writers in the world focus overwhelmingly on legal work.

While it is difficult to quantify these changes, my fieldwork suggests that the “career” of the illegal graffiti writer, especially when compared to writers of earlier eras and those who paint with permission, is generally one of short duration. After a year or two, perhaps after as little as six months, the majority of those who paint illegally either retire or, if they are committed
to the aesthetics of graffiti, begin to pursue legal domains in which to paint. There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule, such as JA, DRO, and FEC, who are known for painting illegally for well over a decade. Nevertheless, beyond a small handful of writers, there are not too many in New York City that could be recognized for painting illegally for a prolonged period of time. In light of such transformations, the portrayal of graffiti writers as “outlaws” and “revolutionaries” may be historically accurate, but it only provides a partial image of contemporary graffiti writing culture.

The production of legal graffiti in New York City

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the location most favored by graffiti writers in New York City for plying their craft was the subway system. After numerous outbreaks of “moral panic,” new policies, and massive financial expenditures, the city officially declared that the subway was “graffiti free” in 1989 (Schmidlapp and Phase2, 1996: 112). This declaration, however, hardly constituted an accurate assessment of the aesthetic order of things. While the city was, and remains, preoccupied with keeping subway graffiti out of the public’s view, graffiti writers simply adapted to new conditions.

They did so in three main ways. First, some remained committed to the subway. Second, a portion of writers went “above ground” and started focusing their energy on buildings, highway embankments, signs, storefront gates, freight trains, and anything else they could possibly write on. Third, some writers started seeking out legal avenues in which to pursue their craft. This third adaptation is an important, albeit often overlooked, development within graffiti writing culture. It could easily be said that enough graffiti writers have crossed the line that distinguishes illegal from legal graffiti, such that it is possible to categorize “legal graffiti artists” as a distinct coterie within graffiti writing culture. To put it another way, if during the 1970s and 1980s graffiti writers painted subway trains and, at best, occasionally ventured out to produce legal graffiti, since 1989 a portion of writers have focused exclusively on the production of legal graffiti. This shift in the “mode of production” seems to have paved the way for the development of a new ideological standpoint among those who produce graffiti with permission.

The vast majority of legal graffiti in New York City is found on the exterior sidewalls of small businesses, large factory walls in the outer boroughs, schoolyard walls, and sometimes on vans and trucks. In order to produce legal graffiti murals, graffiti writers must seek out and obtain written consent from property owners. For the most part, writers simply ask property owners if they will grant permission to paint murals on their wall space. These negotiations are often facilitated by the graffiti writers leaving business cards and, sometimes, portfolios of their work with property owners.

Most legal graffiti writers do not seek financial rewards from property owners and most will paint for free provided they are able to retain control over the creative process. The shunning of material rewards does not necessarily reflect the belief that to exchange creative services for money somehow compromises the artist and renders what they produce “inauthentic.” Rather, money is shunned because graffiti writers ultimately seek a Hegelian mutual recognition from their peers, most of whom will view the work on the Internet or perhaps in magazines after it has been documented (cf. Halsey and Young, 2006: 279–280 and Snyder, 2009 who report similar findings). In this context, it is not money that is necessary, but wall space, which affords the opportunity to paint on a large scale.

A single artist or many artists working in collaboration may produce legal works of graffiti. Occasionally, graffiti writers acquire permission to paint on surfaces that can accommodate up
to, if not in excess of, twenty artists. But more often than not, murals are painted by three to five artists. The amount of time spent working on a mural varies. Not taking into account weather conditions, artists capable of painting fast can cover relatively large walls in a single day; but sometimes walls take months to complete due to the detailed work involved. Generally speaking, however, most large-scale murals are completed over the course of two to four days.

Most works of legal graffiti contain “pieces,” which emphasize through highly stylized lettering the “tag” names of artists, and a “background,” which usually takes the form of some kind of visual scenery. A work that incorporates pieces and a background is referred to as a “production” (Snyder, 2009). Prior to and during painting the artists working on a mural will discuss it in great detail. The themes and concepts to be explored in the background, the composition and location of “pieces,” the size of imagery and letters, the colors to be used, the style in which things are to be painted (“photo-real” versus “illustrative,” for example), will all be discussed at length. Graffiti writers will also work out who is doing what and when. Occasionally, detailed sketches are produced in advance and then reproduced on the wall. More often than not, however, the artists will be accustomed to working as a group and will develop a set of creative ideas during the painting process.

The seriousness with which graffiti writers approach their aesthetic production is further reflected in the concern they display with the materials they use. Much in the same way a “fine artist” primes a canvas, legal graffiti writers will use regular household paint to roll or “buff” the surfaces on which they will be producing murals. They may spend anywhere from 20 to 100 dollars on the paint required to prepare a wall in this manner. Some, in order to make the process of priming walls much more time efficient and less labor-intensive, have invested several hundred dollars in air compressors and spray guns.

Graffiti writers, however, are most fussy when it comes to the aerosol spray paint cans that they use. Since the early 1990s, graffiti writers in European cities have worked with spray paint manufacturers to create an aerosol that can be specifically designed to meet their needs. In fact, it could easily be said that there now exists something of a “graffiti industry.” Aside from the well over 1,500 colors supplied by new companies, the most important development in terms of aerosol paint was the introduction of low-pressure cans. These aerosol cans release paint at a much slower and “softer” rate, which allows graffiti writers to shade in ways almost impossible with the technology that was available during the 1970s and 1980s. But it is not only the cans that have advanced. There is also an extensive market for the caps that dispense the paint from the spray can when depressed. Caps allow a writer to vary the width of spray. By the mid-1990s, technology along these lines had advanced so far that a writer could make lines the width of a pencil to lines three inches thick.

For a variety of reasons, such as new anti-theft technologies, these products cannot be stolen and therefore cost money. A good quality can of aerosol spray paint costs approximately eight US dollars. Any given cap costs about fifty cents and, given that some caps clog fairly easily, it is not unlikely that an artist will need to use three to four caps per can. This means that every high quality can of spray paint used comes at a cost of approximately ten dollars. In light of this booming graffiti industry, the American paint brands that Castleman’s graffiti heroes held in high esteem, and which presently cost less than half as much as the new paints available, have been disavowed by legal graffiti writers. Today’s legal graffiti artists not only refrain from stealing their paint, they also insist on spending more than twice as much in order to work with the best materials.

To be sure, all these costs add up. A legal graffiti writer is not unlikely to use at least five cans of paint in order to produce a decent “piece.” The amount of paint required for the
“background” of a legal mural, although it varies depending on the kind of detail involved, will require at least another five to ten cans of spray paint. Thus, a work of legal graffiti that includes five pieces and a background involves an expenditure of several gallons of house paint and at least thirty cans of spray paint. In short, stealing relatively cheap American brands of spray paint and then illegally painting subway trains is no longer the only method that is available and perceived as acceptable for the production of graffiti. A portion of today’s graffiti writers actively seek permission from property owners in order to spend close to, if not more than, 350 dollars on murals that will appear on walls and other publicly visible surfaces that they do not own, and from which they will not derive any direct material advantages.

"Conventional" lives, “conventional” values

Contrary to popular (and academic) belief, much contemporary graffiti is not produced by “youth.” To be sure – and this consistent with the findings of Snyder (2009) – many of the legal graffiti writers that I have met over the years did start their “careers” during their teenage years by painting illegally. However, as they began to reach their twenties and as the trains were no longer viable as surfaces to paint, they transitioned to legal graffiti work. Once they had made this transition, they tended to remain on the permissible side of the border that divides legal from illegal graffiti. It would seem that with the occupying of a financially rewarding position within the economic structure, mortgage payments, family, and other responsibilities, illegal graffiti quickly comes to be seen as an unnecessary risk to one’s career and lifestyle.

Legal graffiti writers range in ages from twelve to fifty years. Although the majority of graffiti writers are men, they come from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds. They display great occupational diversity and may work as graduate students, corporate employees, teachers, fine artists, professional graphic designers, or pursue creative careers, such as interior design. Ironically perhaps, I met several writers in New York who work for the Metropolitan Transport Authority (MTA) or other city agencies. A handful even work in various branches of law enforcement. Many of the older graffiti writers that I have met are in stable family environments, often raising children with their partners.

This relatively “conventional” material existence is often accompanied by an embracing of hegemonic values and a desire to participate in society. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this is by directing attention towards some of the moments during interviews where it was particularly evident and, to be frank, somewhat surprising.

Opposing vandalism, concern over the aesthetics of space, and “public art”

I asked my interviewees to reflect on some of the contemporary forms of illegal graffiti, such as scratchiti and etch bombing. I was expecting to hear a variety of rationalizations for such practices. However, most of my respondents voiced a strong opposition to “graffiti vandalism” and displayed a tendency to sympathize with the owners of private property. BEEN3 and EMA acknowledged the clarity of the laws in New York City regarding illegal graffiti writing and their overall legitimacy.

The vandalism, if you get caught, you got caught man. Don’t bitch and moan about it . . . You got caught doing something you weren’t supposed to do – you painted somebody’s property. (BEEN3)
[It’s] against the law to write on someone’s door. You don’t ask for permission so you have to deal with the consequences. And that’s something I’m really surprised with graffiti writers sometimes because they don’t accept that. (EMA)

SONIC articulated an ethic of graffiti writing which involves showing respect for some forms of private property. He stated,

[You] have the new guys that are out there and they don’t know what they’re doing. They’re writing on people’s garages, they’re writing on people’s cars and vans and they’re writing on people’s gates. I don’t appreciate that. If you’re gonna get into graffiti, you better learn the rules of graffiti . . . (SONIC)

Related to this ethic, writers also displayed a genuine concern for the appearance of their neighborhoods. This was often accompanied by efforts to work in ways that benefit the city and the public square. In talking about legal walls, BEEN3 said,

[With] the walls, we are not doing anything illegal. We are asking for permission. We are paying for all our own supplies, which is helping the city because we are paying taxes on it of course. Everything they [the city] need is being done: They don’t have to pay to maintain it because we’re maintaining it. They don’t have to worry about cleaning it anymore. And a couple of other things: It makes the neighborhood look better than just having it destroyed.

If the words of other graffiti writers are anything to go by, it would seem that the general public does indeed appreciate the work. Although, admittedly, I have heard one or two stories in which some members of the public do not appreciate legal graffiti art, legal graffiti writers overwhelmingly report positive feedback from the public. They say,

We have never had a bad comment from the general public ever. In fact, we were doing a wall with a big demon on it and he’s coming out of the ground. We didn’t realize it, but this was across the street from a church. We were doing the wall and we turn around and a nun comes walking across the street. Me and MUSE are just like, “oh man, she’s just gonna lay into us.” She came over and said, “I see your guys work around. I love it. Could I have one of your cards in case we ever need anything done?” So that’s the type of thing we get from the public. (DEMER)

I have had mostly really beautiful encounters with the public in New York City and all over the world. People are often very thankful for the work we do. They offer food, music, drinks . . . (CERN)

You know, I’ve never had so much flattery in my life. I don’t consider myself a talented guy or anything like that. I just do what I like to do. And the response I’ve gotten has been really, really positive. (JUSE ONE)

In some of the above quotes we have seen how writers acknowledge the legitimacy of law and display a genuine concern for the aesthetics of shared public spaces. This embracing of established social institutions and respect for public space only became clearer when I asked about the MTA’s Art for Transit program, which, by working with artists, seeks to beautify an otherwise fairly bleak subway environment. After approximately twenty years of fighting
subway graffiti and removing any type of unauthorized public art – for example, the MTA routinely erased Keith Haring’s now famed chalk drawings – the MTA now invites artists into the subway system on a regular basis.

In asking graffiti writers about the *Art for Transit* program, I was expecting to hear anger and resentment directed against the MTA for their willingness, after a long history of animosity towards graffiti writing, to work with more conventional artists. However, all of the writers I interviewed voiced support for public arts projects and some of them expressed an active desire to participate in such projects. They have said,

*The Arts for Transit program is cool. I wish they would try to find a balance with [graffiti] writers . . . I hope the generations that take control of these institutions aren’t so closed minded.* (CERN)

*I myself can adapt to different mediums. I could deal with something like [the Arts for Transit] program, especially if there is a little money involved or some exposure. It’s just another outlet.* (PART)

**The desire for social acceptance: a new argot, cultural inclusion, selling one’s “skillset”**

That many writers have begun to see themselves (and their art form) as legitimate participants within the public square can be seen in changes in their vocabulary and when asked what kind of place in society they would like to see writing culture occupy. In the 1970s and 1980s writers would describe their painting expeditions as “bombing,” “hitting,” or “killing.” In the 1990s, with the transition to legal walls, writers now got together to “paint.” If the previous vocabulary suggested aggressive or antagonistic action, the new vocabulary was suggestive of a peaceful and harmless process. As previously noted, the final works became known as “productions.” While writers have a long tradition of working together, the notion of “production” is important insofar as it acknowledges that creating graffiti is now dependent on successful co-operation with people from outside the writing community, such as property owners.

When asked about the kind of place in society they would like to see writing culture occupy, writers are consistent in emphasizing the importance of seeing it acknowledged by mainstream society. From here it often follows that writing culture should be actively incorporated by social institutions, such as schools and cultural arenas. Graffiti writers told me,

*I’d like to see it everywhere. I teach. Graffiti helps me with the kids. The minute they know I paint, it’s like ‘oh, can you do my name?’ I tell them, ‘no, but *you* can do *your* name and I can just help you along with it.’ And now these kids are more into learning because I’m one of them now. It’s like, ‘oh, he writes. He’s not a regular teacher. Look at the work he does.’ I bring my portfolio into work all the time. They love it . . . Museums. More where they’re teaching you about the culture, where it started, how it started, things that it has gone through, the political aspects – everything.* (BEEN3)

*I’d like to see it in schools so kids could actually learn about graffiti. Because once they learn about it in schools, then they’re not going to want to go outside and vandalize because they know what it is. If you learn it in school you would want to do it in the positive form.* (SONIC)
I’d like to see it occupy a space in fine arts. Graffiti to move into fine arts, absolutely, because it is that. I’d also like to see it grow in public art realms. There are those traditional mural companies that think painting with brushes is the only way of creating murals. And by now we’ve got a 30-year old tradition of painting murals around the world too with spray paint. (LADY PINK)

Finally, utilizing the increasing use of graffiti within advertising as a pretext, I have often asked graffiti writers to reflect on the nexus firmly solidified during the early to mid-1990s between the aesthetics associated with graffiti writing culture and the sphere of commodity exchange. While several scholars, most notably Hebdige (1979: 92–99; but see also Spitz, 1991: 34), have suggested that the absorption of emergent cultural forms by the realm of commercial exchange signifies the dissolution of their critical potential, my fieldwork suggests a strikingly dissimilar view is warranted. Among the graffiti writers with whom I have spoken, the issue is not one of maintaining a position that is independent of consumer culture and therefore one from which a “resistant” standpoint can somehow be secured, but a matter of establishing connections with those who control capital in order to ensure that any possible economic gains go to graffiti writers and/or graffiti writing culture.

I think it’s a real good thing when we can get in and work with people outside of the culture. The problem is that outside entities come into our culture, they look at the way we do certain things, then they go paying some other people top dollar and they cut us out. You’ll see a lot of computer generated illustration and graphics that are graffiti based. And if you’re from the graffiti world, you’ll sit there and say, ‘Yo, a graffiti writer had to have something to do with that.’ And, yeah, a graffiti writer had something to do with that, but not necessarily created it for them. (NIC ONE)

When it comes to having real graffiti writers do these advertisements and getting paid good money for it, it’s all great. I’m happy to see graffiti writers make money for it. [Advertisements show that] graffiti is a big part of America. And they use it to advertise their multi-million dollar business and their products . . . [But] for someone who never did graffiti, yet actually take the style and use it and make money of it, there’s a problem there . . . I don’t dig that too much. (SONIC)

When you have a graphic designer trying to imitate graffiti I think it’s wrong. If graffiti writers can get paid and be involved in it, then I’m definitely all for it. People say it’s ‘selling out’ – I think that’s a ridiculous term. If you love what you’re doing and you can get paid to do it, there’s nothing better than that. (DEMER)

It would seem, then, that producers of legal graffiti lead lifestyles and hold to values that many people would consider “conventional.” Many of them are career and family oriented individuals who spend their spare time creating paintings within the urban environment. More often than not, the artists absorb the costs involved in producing legal graffiti. The writers see themselves and their art as contributing to communities in ways that are beneficial and it would appear that portions of the general public are appreciative of the work that they do. (To be sure, much of the general public enjoys the more elaborate forms of illegal graffiti too.) When possible, graffiti writers try to work not against, but as NIC ONE might well put it, “with people outside the culture.” Almost needless to say, this is not the type of imagery that comes to mind when one usually thinks of “anarchists,” “rebels,” or those who revel in their “outlaw” status.
Conclusion

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork, I have suggested that a portion of graffiti writers in New York City do not reflect, at least in two important respects, the image created of them in previous academic accounts. Whereas previous research tended to focus on illegal graffiti and often saw in this illegality some form of “resistance,” it would appear that since 1990 some graffiti writers have not only become adamant about seeking out and acquiring permission in order to produce graffiti, but have also attempted, in various ways and at various levels, to become a part of the society in which they find themselves embedded.

Of course, this should not be taken to mean that we can go too far in the opposite direction and begin to imagine graffiti writing culture as something that always operates on the permissible side of legality. Nor should we simply imagine graffiti writers as philanthropic altruists free from egoistic impulses. To do so would amount to over emphasizing a particular segment or “region” of graffiti writing culture at the expense of others.

However, in light of how graffiti has adapted to a shifting political context, it is clear that writing culture cannot be reduced to a singular entity that is united through a shared disregard for the law. To be sure, previous scholars did explore tensions among graffiti writers, but they did not explore the differences (and/or similarities) between those who produce graffiti with and without permission in much detail. This, of course, did not generally occur because, until the 1990s, such a tension was difficult to discern given the ways in which the painting of graffiti was historically practiced. It is, however, becoming apparent that graffiti writing needs to be recognized as a culture that has expanded and become more complex, and is likely to continue to do so with time. I suspect that this is due to a variety of reasons, such as the movement of its practitioners through the life course, and through times and spaces regulated in fluid ways by powerful actors such as the state.

Our understanding of graffiti would be enhanced by further research that consults a greater diversity of graffiti writers, that is, those who paint with and without permission, and works towards the development of a descriptive account that more adequately reflects the heterogeneity of contemporary graffiti writing cultures. Future research could also address explanatory and policy concerns. In relation to the former, one important question revolves around the causes and mechanisms that shape the choices of individual graffiti writers in terms of how and what type of graffiti they will want to produce. In relation to the latter, future research could explore the policy implications of legal graffiti at the city level. Should urban political elites, for example, reconsider current policies that attempt to suppress graffiti and, instead, work to incorporate legal graffiti writers into civic life?

Notes

1 Special thanks to Jeffrey Ian Ross for thoughtful comments and feedback on this chapter. This chapter builds upon my article “Painting with permission: Legal graffiti in New York City”, Ethnography, 11(2), 235–253.

2 This quote, and all of the subsequent quotes from graffiti writers that appear in this chapter, are taken from in-depth interviews conducted by the author from 2006 through to 2008. After acquiring consent from study participants, all interviews were audi-taped and transcribed as part of a larger ethnographic research project.

3 I prefer the term “graffiti writing culture” over “aerosol art” and “hip-hop graffiti” as this appears to be the convention used most widely among graffiti writers. While this type of graffiti was firmly established by the early to mid-1970s, it is important to note that it has its origins in the late 1960s (Powers, 1999). It then appeared throughout New York City’s subway system during the 1970s and 1980s before finding new spaces in which to exist during the 1990s (Murray and Murray, 2002; Ganz, 2004). Although slightly anachronistic, it is generally acknowledged to consist of three main forms:
“Tags,” “throw-ups,” and “pieces.” In my view, on the basis of the (sub)cultural context in which it is produced and its stylistic regularity, this type of graffiti is to be sharply distinguished from political graffiti, racist graffiti, and so on. In what follows, I am not concerned with these latter forms, but only with “graffiti writing culture.”

4 For variations on the graffiti-as-resistance theme that take their lead from psychoanalytic perspectives, see the brief essays of Spitz (1991: 44, 55) and Mailer (1974: np).

5 For a comparable view concerning the relationship between graffiti and consumer society, see the brief analysis offered by Stewart (1987: 174–176).

6 Halsey and Young (2006: 278, 290) also found that graffiti writers – even those who paint illegally – will spend approximately 50 dollars to produce a “piece.”

References


