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GHETTO ART : A THOUSAND VOICES IN THE CITY

The graffiti subculture is a system of action that renegotiates the social significance of public space. Certainly, the city is a structured space that mirrors social, economic and cultural forces in its organization and architecture. The city is a place in which markers of identity and collective meaning are displayed and exhibited in a democratic space. Similarly, urban spaces shape individuals' perceptions and determine the way they interact and relate to the whole group. The city is a nest in which a group of distinct individuals behave or 'misbehave' according to society conventions. Within this diversity the visual sphere interprets primarily mainstream ideas and reproduces political and economic ideologies of the society in which it operates. As a reminder of what society should not be a spray can is in some places equated to a gun. Writing on the walls is the oldest way of human expression. A means of expression that preceded language in primitive times re-emerged in 60's New York and spread globally as an artistic and political form of graffiti. The graffiti subculture incorporates elements of its parent culture, performs a symbolic resistance and defends a cultural space introducing alternative voices. Moreover, the graffiti subculture suggests that the city is either a no-man's land or everyone's territory.

by Valeria Appel

Heartened by its public exhibition of signs, graffiti originated in the city of New York as a neighbourhood-based activity. The first art form born in the slums responded to the political conditions of the city. Street signs, lights, cinema, theatre billboards and advertising among others made up a permanent display of messages, names and images acknowledging the existence and significance of particular elements in the visual landscape. The recurrence of particular brands, artists and corporative names in the city was commonplace. The semiology of NYC in the 60s seemed to suggest that some identities enjoy a greater level of participation and inscription in the shared public space than others. When examining the city, Lewis Mumford once defined it as 'primarily a storehouse, a conservator and accumulator'¹ and stressed its capacity to transform. Besides, he pointed out the city's role of 'storable symbolic forms'. When theorising about the city's conceptual essence and future viability Mumford located it somewhere inbetween Necropolis and Utopia. Certainly, several authors have considered akin binary oppositions when analysing the city. Indeed, Joe Austin refers to this antagonism when he defines New York and its other, the 'naked city' as a metaphor of decline. A related reflection struck Walter Benjamin when he looked at late nineteenth century European cities and noted that: 'urban spaces carried a potential that hesitated between conformity and utopia a world of commodities or of dreams. Today, urban places respond to market pressures, with public dreams defined by private development projects and public pleasures restricted to private entry'². Undeniably, it could be argued that Benjamin's today is to a large extent ours. Similarly, it is this battle between commodities and dreams, necropolis and utopia that demonstrate the potential of the city as a symbolic arena of power struggle.

The city is a space that has the power to organise since it operates as a structuring medium. Moreover, this structuring medium can also generate people's sense of belongings, desolation or isolation. Thus, the public space is a symbolic structuring medium that expresses itself through urban planning and material design. Nonetheless, there is a certain structural logic, urban planning interventions are ideological expressions disguised in documents and city plans that have significant social consequences. These decisions have an influential political background and can alter to some extent the very structure of the public sphere. Indeed, these transformations in the visual landscape can provoke changes in the relationships and perceptions among the inhabitants of a space. In fact, the changes in relationships and perceptions may lead to an urban apartheid or/and a classification of citizens based on the district they occupied. Austin explains how post-war urban renewal policies and post-Fordism excluded some parts of the population in New York since: 'significant portions of the poor and non-white populations were further pushed

¹ Lewis Mumford (1961) *City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*.

² Walter Benjamin in Zukin (1991) *Landscapes of power: From Detroit to Disney World*.

economically, physically and socially towards the margins³ Similarly, the suburbs were intentionally built out of sight in the outskirts around most of France's major cities and there was hardly any transport connecting the suburbs to the urban centres. As a result, these policies confine some sectors of the population and prevent them from participating in city life. Obviously, this designed exclusion does not remain only as a physical condition. Certainly, urban planning and architecture make the city 'speak' by creating semiotic barriers, representing dominant discourses and reproducing physical structures for control and surveillance. As an example, it is not a concealed secret that the Eiffel tower is not a symbol of submissiveness and humbleness but the very visual expression of Michel Foucault's panopticon. Indeed, representations of surveillance and control are unexcitingly routine in contemporary western societies and their matching cities. However, as renowned urbanism theorist Manuel Castells points out 'a society is not a reproduction of structurally dominant social tendencies but a confrontation of goals⁴' and so, it could be argued, is its public space.

In this urban setting graffiti comes into play. In fact, the signatures or 'tags' as known in graffiti jargon originally associated a name to a street number. Thus, they were visible in the neighbourhood in which the 'writer', that is the graffiti writer, lived and his body, face and persona were recognised by the members of his community. Hence, writing one's name on the walls seemed to provide the opportunity of being locally recognised. In fact, later on when graffiti spread beyond district boundaries it meant that from being nobody one could become someone. To be sure, the city of New York and all its visual signs seemed to imply that there was a possibility to be visible to the public eye. In fact, being someone and achieving a certain status is in the graffiti lingo known as 'making a name'. Subsequently, writers started to develop their art beyond the margins of their local communities. By extending their activity to the entire city graffiti writers began a prestige economy of writing. In the case of graffiti, a prestige economy means a set of subcultural rules that determine how status is assigned, achieved, generated as well as the way it circulates. In local communities status is synonymous with 'respect'. However, when status transcends local environments is therefore equated to 'fame'. This is due to the unfamiliarity of the surroundings in which graffiti operates. Definitely, writing in unknown surroundings makes writers famous but not physically identifiable.

Thus, graffiti allows an experience with 'the stranger' since its medium contests the fact that the actual privatisation of the space has diminished interaction with others. Writers capitalise on the fact that shared public space leads to a mass spectacle and take advantage of the possibilities for public exposure in the city. Indeed, urban public space is always under scrutiny by the mass media, passersby and cameras. Thus, although graffiti is permanently in the public eye, its codes and language are alien to most of the citizens. In fact, graffiti deliberately separates itself from the dominant culture and creates an inaccessible discourse by transforming the language and writing through unreadable messages. Graffiti's 'unreadability' is partly due to the 'redesigning' of the alphabet, i.e the different style of letters, fonts and colours. This design should be considered as a message in itself. Certainly, the different style of fonts and colours challenges the standardisation and homogenisation of other public signage like street signs and ads. Likewise, it is not by chance that graffiti finds mainly in walls its best canvas, since walls are symbols of spatial introversion, contention and fortress like constructions. Graffiti has the ability to transform walls of protection/exclusion into walls of 'fame'. Austin's structural standpoint claims that 'writing disrupts the uniform orderliness of shared public spaces, 're-coding' or 're-territorializing' them⁵.'

Moreover, trains constitute a special category in this subculture. Trains allow mobility, literal and metaphorical. The writers' names, identities and messages acquire recognition within the city. However, in order to gain fame, a writer needs an audience. As a result, the places where they write signatures known as 'tags'/'throwups' have to be visible thus highways, overpasses, bridges, streets and traintrack walls become suitable surfaces for this purpose. The more dangerous and inaccessible the surface is, the more respect the writer gains. Although a writer once said that graffiti was a celebration of the self it is definitely also a tool for marking territory and establishing particular identities. Writers 'tag' and do 'pieces' which is the short for masterpiece, a drawing of considerable dimensions in a certain area or tube line, in order to gain respect, status and fame. Graffiti is a career path, which has a symbolic reward for the members of the subculture. A writer

³ Joe Austin (2001) Taking the train: how graffiti art became an urban crisis in New York City.

⁴ Manuel Castells (1978) City, class and power.

⁵ Joe Austin (2001) Taking the train: how graffiti art became an urban crisis in New York City.

becomes a 'king' when his tags and pieces are ubiquitous in the metropolitan area. Some writers specialise in tube lines and thus become the 'king of the 9' for instance. Or else they focus on particular boroughs of the city. This hierarchy seems to question the ownership of shared public space. If a writer is not the 'king' of a particular area then who is? In other words who owns public space? The people sounds like a rather vain response.

Apart from being skillful at drawing writers have to be competent at shoplifting. Indeed, the graffiti subculture requires stolen spray cans to write with. If a writer is not able to steal sprays then he associates with other writers who are. When writers associate among themselves they form 'crews'. And this transcends the concept of neighbourhood and its related links: house, street, city and social class. Actually some associated writers live miles away from each other yet they are linked by the common action of modifying the visual landscape. Thus, the quarter's physical boundaries are no longer significant to the experienced writer, and in a number of cases their relationships include apart from other writers, DJ's and people related to Hip Hop culture. Thus, nowadays graffiti really is an international community yet its members' identities denote a particular urban location and mark concrete territories.

As any subculture, graffiti has been stigmatised and considered as an activity in which groups of young people engage in subterranean, unclear activities and communicate through unofficial channels. In the case of New York, the war on graffiti originated in the mid-1960s as a result of the urban crisis the city was undergoing. Essentially, this crisis was partly media staged and responded to political interests. In fact, some mass media drew attention to a number of urban issues like air pollution, crime and so on. As Austin pointed out 'the shadows of the city had fallen over the bright lights of New York, New York'. In this context of social and cultural upheaval, graffiti did not limit itself to new-names writings, it was witness of the deterioration of the city and started writing messages that conveyed political commentaries.

However, the distinction between graffiti and other forms of 'unauthorized' public writing was wiped out by a number of property owners, managers and maintenance workers. This had to do with their ideas or tasks of keeping the walls 'clean'. However, the construction of graffiti as a problem developed in the 70s.

Accordingly, some sectors considered graffiti as a deviant and uncivil practice that obstructed the social order and 'stole' the citizens and the ensemble of society by going beyond city budgets and workers capacity. Certainly, graffiti contests the semiology of the city and in doing so it challenges the values and beliefs that preserve the status quo. Thus, some structures may feel threatened by the ideology of this activity and the need to 'clean' that discourse becomes a matter of "survival". Likewise, to clean the walls means to leave the walls with no messages and 'cleanliness' in this case symbolises the annihilation of an alternative discourse that threatens the 'spotlessness' of dominant ideas. Miserably, a blank space denotes the absence of debate or the expurgation of facts.

Nowadays, graffiti is a global subculture with New Yorker roots and basically same principles. Furthermore, graffiti as an essentially urban guerrilla spread globally and evolved in style and conception. Clearly, there are local differences that are reflected in the discourse. In Europe, ethnicity plays a less significant role among European writers. However, philosophical traditions and European politics are present. The concept of 'class' understood as a brutal dialectic confronting the rich and the poor is a Marxist legacy that replaces ethnicity as a cohesive group element. Indeed, graffiti artists were originally unpaid street artists. However, at the present time graffiti also exists in the market-driven scene.

Banksy is an artist that has transcended street galleries and reached art galleries as well as 'authorised' public space. Thus, some graffiti artists operate both in a legal and an illegal sphere. Banksy's tags, throwups and pieces are in a dialectic relationship with the city. That is, the city's architecture appears as an appropriate framework to debate particular issues and to change taken-for-granted meanings. Next to CCTV cameras Banksy's throwup asks: 'What are you looking at?' A wall becomes a two-dimensional surface to tell a story, punching graphic images that most of the times convey political commentaries. Moreover, Banksy questions the very nature of graffiti itself: 'The time of getting fame for your name on its own is over. Artwork that is only about

wanting to be famous will never make you famous. Any fame is a by-product of making something that means something⁶.

A less well-known Peruvian writer called Sizerom epitomizes the locality within the universality of this subculture. Sizerom's work represents indigenous faces and identities emphasizing a somewhat lost national distinctiveness throughout his work. When talking about an exhibition he organised at a sports facility centre, Sizerom mentions the power of a mural: 'Some of the neighbours (of the sports facility) met up with certain law firms because they didn't like the (painted) figures that they saw or the faces that questioned them... Everything that they did to erase the murals was directed towards the (art) agency. Nobody thought that it was going to happen, but they realized all that a mural can do; it gives you the power to play with people (metaphorically speaking)⁷.

Os gemeos are Brazilian twins and highly respected graffiti artists in the milieu. They talk about the influence of culture on their own way of writing and even the use they made of materials: 'At first we were the same as the others, painting b-boys and generally staying close to the themes in hip hop culture. As time passed, naturally things changed. We never forgot the roots, but we decided to go our own way. As for techniques, here in São Paulo things are different. We decided to use different materials (for example, latex) not only because it is more economical, but because it's more available, it covers so well, and because it supports what we find in the streets. We always use latex for backgrounds and then outline in spray. Yellow latex and red spray paint are used just for bombing. For the big panels, we use only spray paint. We think that latex goes with our culture⁸.'

Jean-Michel Basquiat was certainly the story of a wannabe street kid from Brooklyn whose career as a graffitiist went stellar and even became iconic after his decease. While Basquiat was sharing photo shoots with Andy Warhol in the 80s the institutionalised war declared on graffiti was far from snuffing out. Interestingly, this conundrum is still not a 'has been'. Sizerom's commentary actually touched on that point, noting that graffiti possesses powerful weaponry when it is not commodified and subject to market rules. Some city councils do provide authorised 'walls of fame' in an attempt to keep writers away from other urban spaces and to encourage them to express themselves. However, this rather seems suitable armour against censorship criticisms apart from being a misconstruction of graffiti's real meaning.

To summarise, contemporary mass mediated icons have undeniably influenced graffiti aesthetics. However, graffiti shows the relationship among humans, the city and urban spaces. Graffiti is beyond the marking of territory since writers are in a conversational relationship with the political, physical, economic and social environment.

Graffiti art dramatically changes the visual landscape and awakens passers-by's eyes that are too used to standard ways of communication. Eyes excessively adapted to signs that do not go over particular dimensions, letters that are readable and measured, brands that are easily recognisable through colours or fonts type, and corporate identities that impose themselves in the shared public space. This state of affairs makes citizens feel like guests in their city. However, graffiti rises above this set of visual clichés. It invites conversation, recreates the space by providing alternative meanings and interestingly, publicly exhibits a closed discourse. Graffiti is often considered as an attack on public property usually by bureaucrats yet never by the public. Institutionalised punishments against graffiti including jail and fines together with an eternal mass-mediated campaign against it suggest that the 'shouts from the wall' really made themselves a name. Likewise, as a large-scale phenomenon that operates in late-capitalist societies, graffiti is in a number of cases objectified and becomes another profitable experience of the city. Either way, graffiti literally developed in space and time from the slum to the global metropolis.

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⁶ www.banksy.co.uk/help/index.html

⁷ www.graffiti.org/sizerom/index.html

⁸ www.graffiti.org/osgemeos/index.html