

In the Pursuit of Permanence, Is There Only Persistence?
Contemporary Graffiti Practices in Toronto

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Abstract

This Major Research Paper is an intimate survey of current graffiti practices in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Based on interviews with three graffiti practitioners, as well as theoretical secondary sources, this paper provides a conceptual analysis of graffiti's contemporary perceived value and use in terms of subculture, popular culture and art history. This includes a brief contextual history, and definitions of pertinent terms within the graffiti practice. This paper considers the growth and versatility of graffiti as an artistic movement and frames its findings within two themes: persistence and permanence. This paper ultimately demonstrates that graffiti does not take its value from transcending its existence (seeking value through traditional venues of validation); instead, its significance lies precisely in its continued existence on the streets. Contemporary graffiti finds permanence beyond periodization by balancing its presence in both in subcultural communities and within a great popular culture.

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To the unique world of graffiti: from the suburbs of Mississauga to the alleyways of Toronto, thank you for teaching me everything the hard way, but not the hardest way.

For RAEL

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Introduction

Art as it occurs in the streets is an “other” history. Inherently anti-institutional, it has never fit well within the academy or the museum; basically free, it has consistently had a problematic relationship with the art market; iconoclastic, it is often hard for many to read; and stemming from the countercultural or underground tendencies of youth, it is by and large all too easy for those who “know better” to dismiss it without regard to its content or its intent.

- Carlo McCormick, “Art in The Streets”

The mystery, the anonymity, and the sometimes-incomprehensible alphabet of graffiti are what keep it a public secret; it is a language which exists across cities, produced by a community, descending from a subculture, whose members have dedicated themselves to reading and writing it. Its very existence begs for consideration: how has this practice been able to persist, despite the constant forces of erasure, policing, and politics working to eliminate it? My introductory quote from Carlo McCormick speaks to the author’s personal experience within graffiti subculture, and impeccably captures the “counter” of this culture within the greater art world as well as its unique brand of persistence. Graffiti’s positioning between preservation and authenticity, popularization and underground culture, are reflected in McCormick’s words — and also in this Major Research Paper. The title of my paper refers to the capacity of graffiti to live on, even to thrive, in the face of opposition. The persistence of graffiti and its creators is, in one way, a form of permanence. Graffiti replenishes as quickly as it is removed. As each tag is painted over or washed away, another appears. Within this cycle of erasure and production, the

artists learn to be persistent in their practice, while the desire to be as visible as possible lends a permanence to their name – even if the individual works do not survive. As the graffiti writer Trixter has said, “Most major art movements — impressionism, pointillism — are still being used by artists today, still being taught in schools, but the culture, the actual movement, generally only lasted a few years, maybe a decade. Graffiti still has its culture, and keeps developing, gaining depth.”¹ Perhaps this is the major difference between graffiti and other artistic styles: its community continues to exist and connect in a way that other artistic movements have not been able to maintain. Graffiti persists.

Toronto’s graffiti “scene” has a relatively recent history in comparison to other graffiti-covered cities around North America, but by observing and theorizing the characteristics of this local scene through the words of its artists, one can draw broader conclusions about the contemporary state of graffiti overall. By grounding this research on the themes of persistence and permanence, this Major Research Paper advances a more conceptual understanding of graffiti, as opposed to a history of scholarship which has previously placed graffiti’s value in its function as territory markers, gang declarations, or expressions of resistance.

The criminality of graffiti has produced a rich body of research within disciplines such as law, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and art history, but the focus of this research continues to shift as the practice of graffiti continues to shift. Researchers are arriving at a greater understanding of why and how certain populations *use* graffiti, as a tool or artistic practice, both in global and local contexts. Geographers are interested in the movement of artists between ‘hot spot’ cities (New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago etc.) and the social

¹ Gastman, Roger, and Caleb Neelon. *The History of American Graffiti*. New York: Harper Design, 2011. Pp. 394

communication occurring between artists. Art History is no longer particularly concerned with hi-brow and lo-brow categorizations which relegated graffiti to non-art status. These shifting perspectives are crucial in considering graffiti beyond moralizing frameworks, allowing for a critical and contemporary analysis of an art practice which has too often only been maligned.

This paper traces alternative perspectives on Toronto's graffiti scene in recent years, through interviews with local, current graffiti artists. Above all, it seeks to provide an accurate and inquisitive record of a practice in a particular time and place. This paper focuses on the individual practices and sites of mark-making in Toronto's urban landscape as determined by three graffiti writers. Using interviews with these local artists who are actively tagging downtown Toronto and its surrounding neighbourhoods, I argue that despite its constant threat of erasure, graffiti continues to thrive and adapt without the need to be validated by outside forces or consumers, and that its ability to thrive is partially thanks to this very threat. The motivation of the practitioners of this art is complex; but above all, the desire to persist in pursuit of some kind of permanence connects them. The history of graffiti and street art, when viewed as a "legitimate" artistic practice in the eyes of the market, tends to insist that the artwork produced hold a purpose. This function can be characterized in several different ways: historically, graffiti has often been understood as a form of gang territory marking, a form of expression for the oppressed, or political propaganda during war time and civil unrest.² Ultimately, this focus on graffiti requiring a greater purpose besides its existence is an expression of the assimilationist power of the market, and of disciplinary art history. Graffiti does not take its value from transcending its existence; instead, its significance lies precisely in its continued existence. The

² Lennon, John. "Assembling a Revolution: Graffiti, Cairo and the Arab Spring." *Cultural Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (2014). doi:10.5130/csr.v20i1.3203.

focus on function/purpose, as well as the (criminal) conditions of production, means that the messaging which is painted in the streets is assumed to have political potency. This false equivalency between the political nature of the “crime” of public mark-making and the assumed importance of the messaging the crime leaves behind forecloses the radicality of the act. Not all street art or graffiti is radical in its content — but its mode of production is.

As Boris Groys writes in *Art Power* (2008), the plurality of art movements means that the art objects within them are paradoxical because they each contain a thesis and antithesis: there will always be art that is accepted as a commodity, and then there will be art which is deemed non-saleable, which is declared as “invalid”. This invalid art is what keeps in balance the plurality and democracy of all artistic movements and their value. Graffiti, within Groys’ theories, would appear to be an artistic movement or product which has transitioned between these categories in practice. Historically, graffiti was an unsaleable, undesirable and certainly unremarkable result of criminal activity. As it has grown over the past decades, it has entered not only the fine art market, but also the pop-culture market, and now the boardrooms and restaurants of the wealthy. As Groys notes, “the notion of art became almost synonymous with the notion of the art market, so that the art produced under the non-market conditions was de facto excluded from the field of institutionally recognized art.”³ For Groys, it was political propaganda art which combatted the commodity culture of “valid” art. In this Major Research Paper, I situate graffiti as having surpassed these rigidly balanced categories, existing in both realms equally, and fluidly. Graffiti has the ability to be at once exclusionary, private, and mysterious, and at the same moment actively public, participatory and consumable. Although at times Groys’ understanding of the market may feel distant from our contemporary moment, his

³ Groys, Boris *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2008) pp. 5.

work provides a space in which duality, in opposition and in contrast, determine how art is consumed. Graffiti, in this balancing act, is an apt example of an art practice which has found its own internal balance in a productive resistance to these external forces.

Terminology

It is important to begin this research with a discussion of terminology. The terms ‘graffiti,’ ‘street art,’ ‘urban art,’ and ‘public art’ are often used interchangeably in both academic and more casual settings; however, they differ greatly depending on location, language and context. Terminology in this field is often determined by personal experience or preference; for example, one practitioner may see wheat-pasting as a form of graffiti, while others may categorize it as street art. And then, what is the difference between the two? Many choose to define the practices according to legal status, which is helpful but only when working within a contained geographic area, as many cities and countries differ in their vandalism laws. In Scandinavia, for example, a long battle with Zero-Tolerance legislation has come to change aesthetics, approaches and ultimately common terms, such as considering street art as an act of graffiti.⁴ Here in Canada, we face a similar context, and yet our terms are often different even between neighbourhoods or generations of graffiti writers. In the context of this paper, graffiti and street art are considered separate entities; this is a personal construction which I have found to be most accurate and beneficial to my research. They are separated by their legal status and also their modes of production. The subject of this research is graffiti, and more specifically tagging. My definition of these somewhat contested terms, which both follows and departs from that of other academics, comes from my primary research findings and personal experiences

⁴ Kimvall, Jacob. "Scandinavian Zero Tolerance on Graffiti." In *Kontrolle Öffentlicher Räume: Unterstützen, Unterdrücken, Unterhalten, Unterwandern*, by Eliza Bertuzzo, 102-17. Berlin: LIT, 2013.

within the Canadian graffiti community. For the purpose of this paper, I propose the following working definitions, as well as an extended glossary:

Graffiti is an “illegal” practice in that it is unsanctioned, informal and produced without permission. The word graffiti is derived from the Italian term “sgraffito”, an artistic method in which layers of paint are scratched away to produce a pattern or image.⁵ This method is still used today within graffiti practice, through scratching glass or metal surfaces. Even as we scrawl our initials into wood or bathroom stall doors, “sgraffito” connects contemporary graffiti with a long and detailed past, including pottery traditions. Graffiti can come in many forms and is produced using many tools. It is a street-level intervention, an act of vandalism ranging from small tags to large, elaborate, multi-layered “pieces”. Graffiti is often illegible to those outside of the practice, while being aesthetically pleasing to a specialized audience. Graffiti is a letter-based art, using mostly monikers or pseudonyms, and sometimes small characters or whole phrases, hence the term “graffiti writer” for its practitioners.

Street art employs a different set of tools and subject matter. Street art moves between both legal and illegal practices but is often seen as graffiti’s more approachable peer. Street art consists of stencils, wheat-pastes (or paste-ups), tiles, and larger productions such as murals.⁶ Street art is often very visually appealing and legible, and therefore much more attractive to the general population than is graffiti.⁷

⁵ For further reading on the “sgraffito” technique, specifically on facades, read Payne, Alina. "Renaissance Facades and the Circulation of Objects in the Mediterranean." *Synergies in Visual Culture / Bildkulturen Im Dialog*, May 2013, 229-41. doi:10.30965/9783846754665_018.

⁶ Schacter, Rafael. “Street Art Is a Period, Period!” *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*. Ed. Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi. 2017. Pp 103-18.

⁷ An excellent short documentary from Australia titled “Who Owns the Streets” provides contrasting opinions from the public on street art and graffiti, in an attempt to define the two. Published December 02, 2013. Accessed August 04, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBDSStMiRhk>.

Tagging is the fastest and most easily reproduced signature of a graffiti writer, done quickly in one colour with spray paint, markers, crayons etc. Tags are the most common form of graffiti, and are produced by writers of all experience levels.

Buffing is the painting over or power-washing removal of graffiti. Sometimes this also refers to one writer painting over the entirety of another writer's work.

Staying up is a term used to describe keeping a constant visual presence throughout the city or a neighbourhood. To "stay up" means your tag is seen on many surfaces; this also can be phrased as "beating the buff," as in the graffiti writer is able to keep up with creating new work as other work is removed.

While academic discussions of graffiti and street art often consider many of these terms to be overarching, I find defining them to be useful in terms of focus and clarity. I have chosen tagging as a specific practice which connects the participants of this study, and all graffiti artists. The nature and definition of tagging is therefore crucial to understand. Tagging is an imperative element of graffiti: it is the basis for all larger and more elaborate works, and it is the most accessible in practice as it requires the smallest and most readily available tools, is easy to produce quickly, and maintains a level of presence across the cityscape. Since it is the first and most common type of work by graffiti writers of all methodologies and media, it is an important equalizer. Tagging is often an artist's first foray into the graffiti world. It is accessible, cheap and fast, making it an excellent entry point to begin practicing. Since most tagging is done with markers, chalk sticks or whiteout pens, it is a more familiar production method (i.e., writing) as opposed to using spray paint which can be quite challenging. Tags with spray paint are often produced in one incredibly quick motion and tend to be smaller in size than larger, more complex pieces of graffiti. The practitioners interviewed for this primary research all "tag" on a

regular basis, which keeps them connected to the graffiti scene at-large even when they are not producing larger pieces. Writers will also often place stickers, also known as ‘slaps,’ around the city, which is arguably the fastest (and least noticeable) method of tagging. The effort to maintain a presence at street-level, through one or more of these forms, becomes second-nature to many writers as a habitual part of walking home on any given evening.

Context

The history of graffiti is as layered as the surfaces it lives on, turning cities into palimpsests recording shifts in culture and style over time. “I was here!” has been exclaimed on public surfaces for as long as humanity has been able to portray the sentiment with visual and verbal modes of communication.⁸ As modern graffiti culture has developed, the sentiment has perhaps shifted to, “I was here! And also, fuck you!” indicating its presence as a mode of subverting “official” and authorized speech and representation. But due to graffiti’s growing acceptance amongst the general or popular population, mostly through the commodification of its subcultural signifiers (the artwork produced, clothing, music, etc.), graffiti has in recent decades become more and more accessible to those outside of the practice. This popularization of graffiti is a double-edged sword for its communities, for as minority or marginalized practices are given visibility, they often also lose their othered status, i.e. their ‘edge’. Visibility invites and promotes, but also dilutes. Graffiti which contains explicit political messaging is typically meant to be legible and accessible; it is meant to be viewed by a wide audience and is not intended to be kept at the level of writer-to-writer communication. For example, painting

⁸ For further reading on graffiti’s existence in prehistory, see Viitanen, E.-M., Nissinen, L. and Korhonen, K., 2013. “Street Activity, Dwellings and Wall Inscriptions in Ancient Pompeii: A Holistic Study of Neighbourhood Relations”. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal*, (2012), pp.61–80.

“RESIST” on billboards or sides of buildings, or this commentary on Canadian politics from Guelph, Ontario.

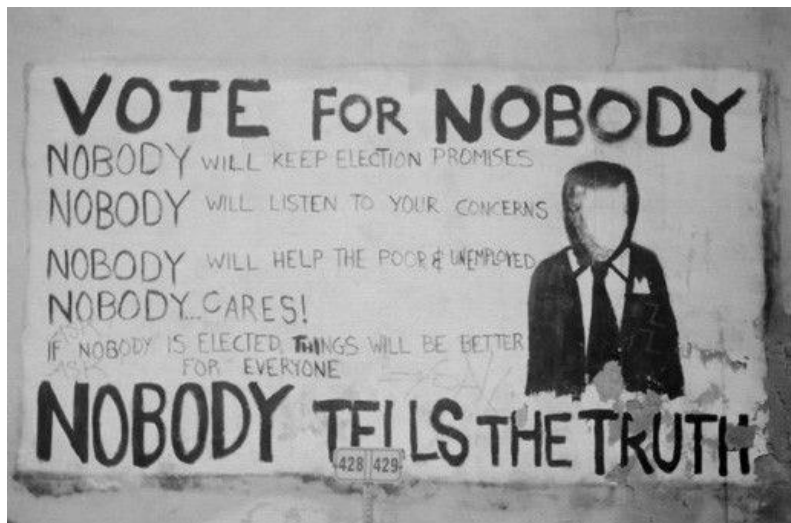


Figure 1 Anonymous. Vote. Photograph. Noume. Guelph, n.d. <https://www.noupe.com/inspiration/showcases/50-stunning-political-artworks.html>.

Less accessible graffiti, the kind which does act as a tool for communication between writers, is a product of a subculture which was founded on a desire to be oppositional. As Samuel Merrill writes in his research on subcultures and graffiti, “graffiti plays a formative role for the groups and individuals that repeatedly use it to establish their identity”.⁹ This is an act of empowerment where public spaces are used to produce public work only legible to a particular group; like a secret hidden in plain sight, graffiti is a connection web across urban spaces.

One can look to Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* to better understand how subcultures are formed. Bourdieu considered cultural capital, the specialized information which allows one to participate in a subculture, as something gained through education and the environment in which one is raised, resulting in a certain social status that functions as a form of authority/exchange. He proposed that cultural capital (or subcultural

⁹ Merrill, Samuel. “Keeping it real? Subcultural Graffiti, Street Art, Heritage and Authenticity”. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21:4, pp. 369-389.

value, in this case) is determined by taste and style: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.”¹⁰ To develop “good taste” is a social practice, and such taste is the result of becoming familiar with a certain understanding (and eventual expectation) of style amongst peers. A hierarchy of talent, presumably in tune with good taste, is present, and a hierarchal system is inherent to graffiti. There is a deep respect for more highly-skilled writers, especially those who have been producing for longer periods of time. Respect is shown by never painting too closely and certainly never painting over their work, among other more site- and time-specific agreements. These rules present a contrast to graffiti’s presumed lawlessness: although graffiti’s methods and tools make it accessible, as a subculture and a community it is perhaps more highly regulated by codes of behaviour and experience than other artistic practices, factors which work to limit access to the community by outsiders or beginners.

In the origins of modern graffiti, more specifically the hip-hop style of graffiti developed in the early 1980s through New York, Philadelphia and Chicago (which we continue to see in the streets today), the entire practice existed as a refuge for those who took part to communicate with one another. “Artists communicated with one another through tags, drawings, and concrete poetry on walls and doorways. The subway system became an artistic link between neighbourhoods.”¹¹ In some areas, such as the Bay Area in California, graffiti was a tool to mark gang territory, and pay homage to dead gang members or community leaders.

According to Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, the authors of *The History of American Graffiti*, “Graffiti is the art of freedom ... by being a graffiti writer or skateboarder, you were

¹⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹¹ Deitch, Jeffrey, Roger Gastman, Aaron Rose, and Ethel Seno. *Art in the Streets*. New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2011. Pp. 11

proclaiming your departure from the known and accepted, and thus alienating yourself completely.”¹² A central feature of this claim is that by alienating themselves, graffiti writers often found comfort in the company of others who felt the same way. This idea, of taking a step out of social norms and common society and into a place of acceptance and like-minded creators, is the foundation of every influential or successful subculture.¹³ Because graffiti encompasses a whole identity as a subculture, it transcends the idea of the static *style* or *movement* so familiar to modern and contemporary art practices and histories. Perhaps this is part of the reason graffiti is so often left out of art historical textbooks and teaching; not only does it rebel against the format, but it also refuses to die a proper death and thereby enter into a bounded historical frame.

A more endemic issue facing graffiti and its related subculture(s) is *preservation*. As graffiti continues to be practiced, it is also being made permanent in new ways; for example, graffiti work which is being protected in-situ with plexiglass, or graffiti which makes its way indoors and onto a canvas or gallery wall. As Tim Cresswell has established, the hierarchy of spaces in which art is displayed transfers value into different contexts. “Art has, in the modern Western world, been constructed as the product of individual inspiration and genius that is understood and appreciated by generally well-educated people in rarefied spaces that stand at the top of a hierarchy of spaces ... Public, activist art cannot fit easily into this milieu. It is often anonymous, it is there for all to see, it exists in the open, on the street, in the spaces of the

¹² Gastman, Roger, and Caleb Neelon. *The History of American Graffiti*. New York: Harper Design, 2011. Pp. 394

¹³ Much like terminology within graffiti, terms within subcultural studies are often loosely defined or conflated. Erik Hannerz research on subcultures including punk, hip-hop and graffiti can provide a detailed look into what exactly is ‘sub’ about a subculture, and how they are defined as successful in this way. Hannerz, Erik. “Redefining the Subcultural: the Sub and the Cultural.” *Educare 2* (2016): 50–74. https://www.academia.edu/31135468/Redefining_the_subcultural_the_sub_and_the_cultural.

everyday.”¹⁴ This removal, or physical preservation, is contentious within the field of graffiti and street art research. From one perspective, a removal from street-level into a frame is an act of cultural or heritage preservation, much like an artifact protected by a cultural institution: a piece of street art may be “rehomed” and displayed, as an act of resilience against the constant erasure of this artwork.¹⁵ Of course, in this scenario the pieces thus preserved are already deemed important by some outside force, and we can look to Banksy as the prime example. Famously, Banksy’s work has been deemed incredibly valuable both culturally and within the art market, and thus has been excavated from its original sites, or protected at all costs from the usual temporary life of graffiti and street art.¹⁶ The other position holds that the displacement of street-level artwork removes all of the qualities which define it: that graffiti’s individual works are *inherently* temporary, meant to be lost to the unpredictability of street life. In being removed from a public context, the artwork becomes something new; graffiti-art: more like an uncanny copy of something once original, as a situational and performative creation is cleaned up for a more market-conscious audience.¹⁷

Graffiti has been both romanticized and popularized as more people are given access to its language. In Toronto, there are graffiti-writing workshops, paid tours led by guides and

¹⁴ Cresswell, T. “The Crucial ‘Where’ of Graffiti: A Geographical Analysis of Reactions to Graffiti in New York.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 10, no. 3, June 1992, pp. 329–44. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1068/d100329>

¹⁵ Merrill, Samuel “Keeping it real? Subcultural graffiti, street art, heritage and authenticity”. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21:4, pp. 369-389.

¹⁶ Among other examples, this news article outlines the attempt to preserve a new Banksy work. White, Debbie. “RING OF STEEL Metal Barriers Installed to Protect New Banksy Artwork on Welsh Garage Wall Worth THOUSANDS.” *The Sun*, December 22, 2018. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8044716/metal-barriers-installed-to-protect-new-banksy-artwork-on-welsh-garage-wall-worth-thousands/>.

¹⁷ Rafael Schacter, “The Invisible Performance/the Invisible Masterpiece: Visibility, Concealment, and Commitment in Graffiti and Street Art.” *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development*, 2015, pp. 203–223.

government-funded public art initiatives.¹⁸ Buying into programming or purchasing the experiences of a subculture is not to belong to one, and authenticity is a major point of contention amongst graffiti writers. As Bourdieu outlined, the familiarization and commitment to a subculture is a long process, and perhaps this is the ultimate sign of authenticity: committing and spending a lifetime developing status and knowledge about a certain subcultural practice. To be accepted within the subculture is an earned status, but in order for graffiti to remain relevant and not completely condemned by the public, graffiti must also become accessible to those outside of the subculture.

Context: Location

Toronto holds close to 3 million inhabitants within 630km², and though the official borders of the downtown core are often contested amongst locals, it is a small 17km² radius, as shown in the figure below. As Toronto's population increases rapidly each year, housing and density issues mean there are more and more people living outside of the "official" downtown core, creating additional central cores east, west and north of the city centre. In part due to this density, Toronto streets, both residential and commercial, are covered in graffiti tags. Mailboxes, lamp posts, brick walls and fences all hold names of passers-by, of graffiti writers on their evening strolls. And although much graffiti is quite visible, there is just as much that goes unseen. Despite its presence on public (and private) properties throughout the urban landscape, graffiti in Toronto also exists in the darkness of subway tunnels, maze-like alley systems, and behind the closed doors of bar bathrooms. Graffiti's essential character lies in both its desire to

¹⁸ Examples in Toronto include Start (Street Art Toronto), The Steps Initiative, The Laneway Project, MuralRoutes and many independent tour groups most notably visiting Graffiti Alley in Toronto's Queen West neighbourhood.

be seen and its ability to blend in. As tags are buffed away or replaced by others, what remains is the persistence of this practice, and of its subculture, despite the impermanence of its marks.

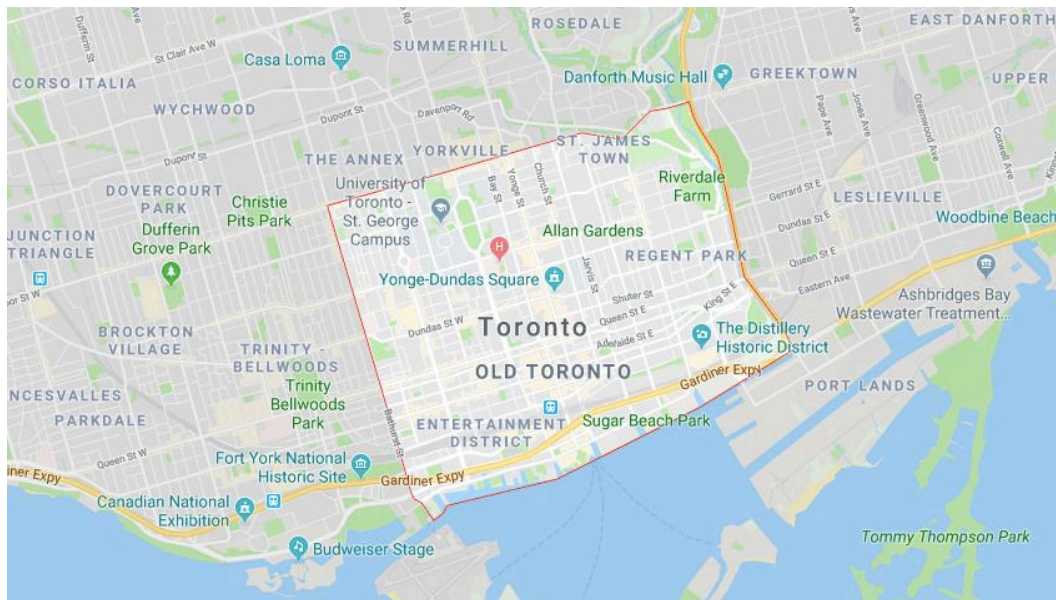


Figure 2 Map of Downtown Toronto. Google Maps.

In 1999, researcher Tracey Bowen published an essay entitled *Graffiti Art: A Contemporary Study of Toronto Artists*.¹⁹ In it, six artists are interviewed about their education, perspective on graffiti as an art form, and personal aspirations. Bowen's paper, though quite similar in format to this one, differs greatly in its themes and conceptual considerations. The focus on education, for example, produces an interesting pedagogical lens, giving these artists the space to provide feedback to art teachers and institutions regarding decision-making about which art is *worthy* of teaching (or supporting). The study's concern with the artists' education also seems to decide that graffiti falls into two categories, self-taught or formally trained, corresponding to the dichotomy Bowen presents between "*Vandalism or Self-Expression?*" To which my research replies, why not both? Bowen's research presents an image of Toronto

¹⁵ Bowen, Tracey E. "Graffiti Art: A Contemporary Study of Toronto Artists." *Studies in Art Education* 41, no. 1 (1999): 22-39. doi:10.2307/1320248.

graffiti artists who are eager to expand their practices beyond terms like vandalism, hoping that graffiti will gain the respect of Toronto's general population as well as its galleries. This desire reinforces the idea that graffiti requires some institutionally recognizable acknowledgements in order to be "legitimate". The general conclusions of Bowen's research include graffiti's existence as both vandalism and art but speaks only about murals within the interviews. By selecting artists who produce murals, especially legal ones, Bowen's research is limited in its consideration of "graffiti", an intrinsically rebellious and criminal art, and again turns *vandalism* into a moralizing word instead of an honest one. Despite its flaws, this earlier study is an important mirror against which to reflect on my own research, and to continue cataloguing the growth of Toronto's graffiti scene.

Methodology

This paper focuses on illegal tagging; as such, I have used open-ended interviews to allow artists to speak candidly about their practices without compromising their anonymity. This research has been approved by the OCAD University Research Ethics Board, which required that my method of approach, research and storage of data ensure that all practitioners were given anonymity and their privacy respected. The decision to speak with current graffiti writers, as opposed to a visual analysis of Toronto graffiti, or a cataloguing of local subcultural publications such as 'zines, was in order to provide space for voices which may be less involved with the graffiti "scene" or community. My desire to speak with artists who feel less connected to a subculture was intentional, as I believe this provides a new set of perspectives from the outside looking in. I approached five artists, three of whom agreed to be interviewed. Given the nature of the graffiti scene, which is reliant on secrecy, I was only able to approach people I know

personally and who would trust me with their data. I was aware my invitation might seem suspicious to artists with a real fear of being “outed” to authorities.

The questions for the interviews were based on previous conversations I had with graffiti artists from my time working for *12oz Prophet*, an online graffiti forum based in New York City, where my editorial responsibilities included managing forum conversations, writing articles about graffiti history, and interviewing graffiti crews and artists around North America. I received training regarding how to ask for more personal or sensitive information while keeping a safe distance from anything potentially incriminating. The lesson I learned, which I carried into this research, is that a graffiti writer will decide almost immediately if they are willing to speak with someone and divulge their secrets (and almost everything is considered a secret). I have learned to respect that instinct, and also listen to my own.

The context of each interview participant is also important to frame this paper’s findings; due both to the Research Ethics Board process and the comfort of the participants with disclosing personal information, this context is necessarily limited in detail. Their age and locations provide a balanced spread across the city, not focusing too intently on one particular demographic or neighbourhood. Differing sexes give light to power dynamics within the graffiti culture, as female-identifying writers face different challenges than males.²⁰ Further research on the demography, social class and psychology of writers in the community would prove fascinating, but is beyond the scope of investigation in this paper.

Having interviewed current practitioners and documented the process in a reliable and ethical format according to the parameters of the Research and Ethics Board, this paper contributes

²⁰ For further reading on gender and sexuality in graffiti subculture, read Macdonald, Nancy. *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

firsthand research to the ongoing study of this practice. I posed the following open-ended questions to the practitioners/artists that I interviewed:

Part 1: Does the practitioner in question operate within or identify with a community or apparent subculture? And if so, what are the values which shape this community?

Part 2: Does the practitioner believe that graffiti's historical functions (explicit political motives, gang-territory marking, etc.) are what give the practice longevity? What drives the persistent and repetitive qualities of this practitioner's practice? Of the graffiti practice as a whole?

Part 3 & 4: Does the constant battle with erasure (buffing, competing tags by other artists) influence the strategy of their practice?

These topics eventually divided into more direct questions, anecdotes and opinions that have proved to be invaluable in forming this paper.

Prior to conducting my primary research, I had to consider my own expectations and assumptions about graffiti and graffiti artists. I have encountered a variety of personalities and methodologies while participating in international Street Art and Urban Creativity conferences in Portugal and Sweden, and locally within Toronto's graffiti community. Graffiti artists/writers hold several differing opinions (or "camps") with regard to who belongs, is granted access, or is allowed to disseminate information. Some insist that graffiti should be left alone by academics, while others are in favour of expanding the conceptual and theoretical understandings of the practice. I knew, and expected, that a handful of invited practitioners might immediately reject the offer to be interviewed; some might even be offended by the idea of sharing secrets they have kept for many years. Those who agreed to participate in the project seemed to think of it as a way

to work through their own practices. I had to rely on my own network of friends and acquaintances who would trust my motives and therefore be willing to share their opinions with me, as some graffiti writers may have seen this offer as a breach of privacy or an exposing of trade secrets. This of course presents a bias, as my friendship with the interview subjects may imply that we share similar beliefs. I do think that in this line of research it may be impossible not to have any implicit bias, as graffiti tends to be such a polarizing topic, and one that requires long-term study and immersion in order to understand the subcultural significance.

Having spent the past seven years participating in and researching graffiti culture, my attraction to the practice has changed. Instead of being fiercely defensive of graffiti's radicality, my research and writing have led me to believe that perhaps this radicality is no longer relevant to graffiti, at least as it is practiced in Toronto, where the potentially political nature of this practice manifests largely as the personal expression of white males who feel the call to commit a petty crime while walking home from a night out. I do not want to dismiss the interesting psychology of this desire, but instead seek to readjust my understanding of what this practice consists of, in this moment, in this city. It reminded me that the central themes of my thesis — persistence and permanence — are still central considerations, regardless of any greater intention behind a graffiti writer's tags. Graffiti's ability to adapt to the forces attempting to eliminate it is evident across history and geography, and it is this ability to persist which renders the practice permanent. I was once resistant to graffiti's popularization, assuming the position of a "purist" who believed it only belongs to those who practice it; through my research, I have come to see graffiti's ability to exist and thrive as based instead in its ability to participate in popular culture. Now, I am more impressed by its clever flexibility than its rigid exclusivity.



Figure 3 A graffiti writer and surrounding alleyway graffiti in Toronto. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2014.



Figure 4 Examples of tags and throws in a Toronto alley. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2014.



Figure 5 A piece by Toronto graffiti writer ROBOT. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2015.



Figure 6 A selection of tags on a garage door in Toronto. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2016.

Primary Research Findings

The primary research for this Major Research Paper was gathered through interviews with three currently active graffiti writers in Toronto who do not know one another personally, I will continue to refer to them as practitioners to remain consistent and to signify their active status as a creator. Each practitioner answered the same set of questions, with room to speak freely about adjacent topics. Each interview yielded its own set of opinions and observations, and sparked unique conversation based on each practitioner's personal experiences.

Part 1: Subculture & Community

1a. *Do you feel as though you are part of a community? Do you paint alone or with others?*

Practitioner #1 (P1): This practitioner expressed that they are aware they are a part of a larger community, but that this community is not necessarily visible nor are they in direct contact with other such practitioners. They are not actively seeking out other writers to make connections but are aware that this is possible if they desire to do so. P1 has one other person with whom they paint on occasion, after coming to the conclusion that painting with one to three other people is an ideal group size to work efficiently; more often, they go out alone due to scheduling. Though they do not identify as having been a part of a crew at any point, they acknowledge that any group of writers often organizes and behaves like one.

Practitioner #2 (P2): Although Practitioner #2 paints alone almost exclusively, they do feel connected to the greater community through the ability to read and identify the work of other graffiti writers throughout the city. The choice to paint with other people must be made carefully, as it can often be more dangerous than working alone if fellow writers are loud, fail to watch for passersby, or encroach on existing tags or pieces. P2 feels there are fewer territory divisions in

Toronto now as opposed to ten or so years ago, and that the majority of conflicts between other writers has shifted from being about territory and instead has become increasingly personal or social. This adds to the careful consideration of whom to paint with, if anyone.

Practitioner #3 (P3): Practitioner #3 feels that there is a gender disparity in the community.

Women stick with women and men stick with men. This separation creates a gap in the community and can cause people to feel alienated or discriminated against despite the shared practice between genders. P3 tended to paint with other people when they were most active in previous years, finding it safer and more comfortable.

1b. *What signifiers or symbols would you associate with your community? (for example: clothing brands, aesthetics, music taste, attitudes, personality traits, etc.)*

P1: P1 concluded that the most consistent quality amongst all graffiti writers is the attitude or ego. P1 feels that there used to be more aesthetic qualities, such as clothing, which made graffiti writers stand out to one another, as a symbol of their subculture, but most (if not all) of these brands are no longer exclusive to this scene. OBEY, for example, is worn by people of all kinds, not exclusively graffiti and street artists as it once was. P1 also feels that most graffiti writers are quite current in their style and work to actively be outside of the 'norm'; they said that "anyone who would buy into the culture is not part of the culture". The only "true" way to signify a member of this community would be the small flecks of paint most graffiti writers carry somewhere on their body or clothing.

P2: P2 also felt that attitude was the greatest signifier of a writer. They believe that many people are able to look like a writer, but all those that do probably are not part of the "scene" (subculture). The ability to buy into the culture, through certain clothing brands for example, is a

form of commodification, which removes graffiti from its truest form: saying “fuck you” to anyone, and anything of authority. P2 was clear that it takes research to be fully integrated into this practice, knowing the greater North American or European history of the practice, the most influential writers, and who in your city is “up” the most. This is not a skill that can be attained just by looking like someone who is interested in it.

P3: P3 feels that men are more concerned about the attitude and image of a writer, and that female writers have different priorities which do not include attempting to fit in or be considered cool by other writers. They stated that maintaining a strong ego is partly a necessity, to have confidence in order to pursue this practice, but that they personally no longer feel the need to wear such emotional armor as they mature. P3 mentioned that those who have made a career out of graffiti by moving into commissioned jobs feel more pressure to maintain this attitude, to ensure that their public image is one that corresponds with wider impressions of graffiti culture. P3 makes an important point that not all writers share the same stakes – some people work at higher risk and may take more precautions to be unidentifiable. Others who feel like a challenge such as posting bail or receiving a permanent record is a small obstacle solved by money and privilege, may act more recklessly and may be more inclined to self-identify within this community.

1c. *Regardless of a feeling of community, what is your current understanding of the graffiti subculture (in general, or within Toronto)?*

P1: P1 feels that writers who feel “above” being a part of a subculture will say it does not exist in Toronto, but the one that does exist most prominently in Toronto feels more like a fine art scene, one that is focused on transitioning any illegal practice into a profitable one. At the very

least, P1 feels they are aware of this subculture but not active within it, but graffiti will continue to persist, and it will also continue to change. These subcultures exist in Toronto because graffiti exists end-to-end in this city; there are differences between generations, neighbourhoods and approaches, but the practice is still prominent and is being produced by a variety of people which will produce a variety of subcultures, all connected by the practice. The access to different tools and mindsets (some writers are destructive, some are more creative, some are just out to have fun) is what keeps writers separate.

P2: Like P1, P2 feels that yes, there is a wider culture of graffiti, but the separations within this culture are pared down into smaller, more tightly knit groups. There is no assumed camaraderie amongst all writers; trust and respect must be earned and having to prove oneself is ultimately part of the subculture. However, it is possible to exist outside of this, and to avoid the social aspects of the practice, such as drinking or drug use.

P3: P3 stated that when they first began painting, approximately seven years ago, the subculture was very different in that it was focused more on visibility in public locations as opposed to documenting or sharing their work online. The catalyst for change has most certainly been Instagram. It has bred a new generation of writers which are concerned with visibility much more than P3 and their peers, who understood visibility in terms of the streets, not the internet. Now, it seems many writers have begun focusing more on careers and personal lives and are not as consumed by maintaining a social subculture founded in graffiti, this directly relates to the dilution of crews over the years, and a return to solitary creation.

1d. *Who would you consider the audience for current graffiti?*

P1: P1 was clear in their statement that graffiti is created for other graffiti writers, regardless of its quality; it exists to be seen by other writers and for this reason is only legible to other writers.

P2: P2 believes there are various audiences, but every time that they paint, they consider who may see their work: other writers, passersby, only themselves, or no one at all. Producing large amounts of work, or ‘staying up’, is often accomplished by younger writers, or those who dedicate most of their time to the practice instead of other commitments. This pursuit of being seen everywhere is one ideology of graffiti writers: “the point is I have to be up, and if I’m not up then I’m failing.” P2 does not necessarily agree with this but understands its attraction. For them, writing is more of a release, not necessarily about creative expression, but about consistency in terms of the quality of work they produce. Each tag should be identifiable as theirs and maintain a level of style they can be proud of.

P3: P3 feels that the audience is not a main consideration in their practice, it does not exist for anyone other than themselves. P3 is more concerned with painting for themselves. P3 did observe that businesses seemed to be a developing audience for graffiti, looking for artists to add cultural value to their spaces by commissioning murals, though this seems to be a waning trend.

Part 1: Results

Attempts to identify the current graffiti community and subculture in Toronto located the writers as feeling affiliated with different ideologies of practice. The practitioners all indicated they are aware there is a greater community amongst all graffiti writers, that they feel a connection or tie to anyone who has pursued this practice, but this is not necessarily a social experience or one that causes direct engagement. In part due to my selection of interview

participants, I was not wholly surprised to hear these answers. Writers are connected by their ability to read and produce graffiti and exist in smaller subdivisions categorized by location or style within this greater appreciation for the practice as a whole.

As described by Halsey and Young, artists occupy the “writer’s gaze,” which is an ability to see public, urban spaces in ways that the non-graffiti citizen cannot. Much as skateboarders are able to identify attainable sets of stairs or handrails to grind down, graffiti artists can identify opportune painting spots and how to reach them.²¹ After describing the “writer’s gaze” to all three practitioners, they agreed that this additional lens is an ability which connects them, as those outside of the practice may lack this ability. They are able to retain a mental rolodex of artists and their unique styles, as well as identify ideal painting spots which have excellent visibility. Responses to this framework also differ according to the sex of the writer. For female writers, it seems the community is much more connected, as this kind of immediate and physical support is a necessity for survival. In the context of a highly masculine and often sexist community, it is a challenging world for a woman to navigate alone. Men, especially white men, in graffiti practice have much lower stakes and a much smaller chance of being challenged or approached while painting. The implications of this reality can be quite dire. Personally, I have experienced gender-based violence while practicing graffiti in Toronto, and because of this I am no longer a practitioner. In other conversations outside of this research, another female graffiti writer had mentioned she felt safer in terms of getting caught (police wouldn’t assume a woman was vandalizing) but far less safe painting in the streets in terms of the public (a neighbourhood vigilante protecting his property, or fellow writers). This is of course not always the case, but is a sentiment that I have heard multiple times.

²¹ Halsey, Mark, and Alison Young. “Our Desires Are Ungovernable.” *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2006, pp. 275–306., doi:10.1177/1362480606065908.

All three practitioners mentioned the introduction of Instagram as a platform for graffiti, and that its presence has rapidly changed the culture. Instagram is a significant outside force which alters the concept of “staying up” and of the temporal quality of graffiti. In addition to granting access to graffiti from any city in the world, it also digitally archives a practice which may not desire to remain permanent. This online archive is certainly an act of permanence or preservation, the power to preserve being in the hands of any audience member (and any smart-phone user). Graffiti’s contemporary “presence” must then be divided into two locales, the streets and online. Permanence for graffiti in streets comes as a cycle of removal and replacement, achieving a consistent level of tags or pieces throughout an urban landscape. Online, this permanence is instant, acting much like an exhibition catalogue to archive the imagery of the exhibit once it has been uninstalled.

Part 2: Persistence, Function and Public Space

2a. *In your opinion, how or why do you think graffiti continues to persist despite outside forces continually removing it or outlawing it?*

Practitioner #1: P1 believes that the relationship between the erasure and the production of graffiti is symbiotic: “you can’t have one without the other, if it was legal, I wouldn’t do it anymore, it wouldn’t be graffiti anymore.” The implication of legality is that it would not be removed as quickly, or with such wanton techniques creating space for new tags and pieces. P1 stated that their practice is not about destruction (of property, or other writers’ work), rather it is about making their presence known.

Practitioner #2: Much like P1, P2 states, “The more you try and take it away, the more we will work to keep putting it up”. They believe that the illegality of graffiti is the essence of the

practice, if graffiti were to become legal, it may become self-regulated within the community, in a sense policing itself.

Practitioner #3: P3 was not as enamoured of the criminal aspect of the practice, but instead believes that the persistence of graffiti is due to its general mystique, both in its practitioners and the process. The practice's ability to remain invisible to the general population and separate from the art market keeps audiences guessing about how it is created, and keeps all writers guessing about one another's abilities. P3 believes that the next wave of graffiti may become more political in nature, returning to its "original" function. They believe that graffiti is not often passed down from older generations to younger ones; it is up to new writers to find their own path.

2b. *Considering the current climate, and potential future of graffiti as an accepted form of street art, what is your opinion on the investment into publicly funded murals, festivals, workshops, etc.?*

Practitioner #1: P1 is not completely opposed to publicly-funded or for-profit festivals but considers them to be a showcase of high-quality street art and not graffiti. P1 has more respect for writers' graffiti work than murals or street art, because this kind of work is a "true" representation of graffiti. Jams, underground gatherings of like-minded writers, are infrequent compared to pre-Instagram graffiti culture but offer a more "genuine" representation of the culture than festivals or public programming.

Practitioner #2: P2 is also not opposed to festivals or publicly-funded programs relating to street art and graffiti. They believe that large-scale productions don't incite change in the graffiti

scene or community; it is a separate world which only includes more professional artists who are seeking payment for their work.

Practitioner #3: P3 feels that publicly-funded programs such as Street Art Toronto or the Patch Project would be more beneficial for artists within this community if they were more accessible. To attempt to fit an art practice which is inherently unique and outside of the regular art systems into an application process, which P3 identified as feeling rather professional, removes many talented artists from possible opportunities. Community art projects need to be reflective of the communities they are attached to, including the medium and education level of the artists.

2c. Looking back on the history of graffiti, where the function of it served in political fashion or organized crime-related movement, what do you believe to be the function of your practice today? (If any).

Practitioner #1: P1 feels that despite graffiti's developing public perception, it is still political in nature and does operate for political reasons. "In its essence, it's writing your name on stuff, it doesn't necessarily hold any value, but it is civil disobedience." P1 went on to explain that "this disobedience may be less risky than other forms of protest that exist right now," claiming that these small crimes are moments of systematic rebellion at lower stakes. Political graffiti is graffiti with a clear, legible sentiment or message, and this doesn't seem to exist in Toronto right now. "In Toronto, there isn't any agenda or messaging, it's just a game of getting up and staying up."

Practitioner #2: P2 reiterated an earlier point that the internet has been the largest source of change in the graffiti scene. If there are political writers, they are within their own circles and separate from the graffiti community that P2 resides in. Like P1, P2 feels that small acts like

tagging are far less risky than greater acts of rebellion. P2 questions what it even means to be radical now, when there is a surplus of radicality in general as each news cycle brings more protests, policy changes and media debacles. The function of this practice is to make space for oneself.

Practitioner #3: Unlike P1 and P2, P3 feels that their practice is quite political, and seeks to connect more women in graffiti – which itself is radical within this practice. Because of the difficulty of finding funds in order to paint graffiti, it is important to support one another as much as possible.

Part 2: Results

Graffiti's impermanent nature is not a flaw, but a necessary component to a coactive relationship. Some practitioners felt that if it were made entirely legal, it would still exist, but end up policing itself within the community. This could result in more aggressive or violent crew interactions, and a greater opposition to new writers attempting to join the ranks. Even now, graffiti writers tag over or paint over each other's work, but without the constant third-party erasure, this cycle would certainly change. One practitioner and I discussed Lisbon, Portugal as an example, or even Paris, France where, though graffiti is not legal, it is not heavily policed, and therefore there is a greater concentration of it. But within this concentration, writers seem to police one another, and find more creative uses of space. This may be an indication of what less erasure could look like in Toronto. Although the tags and pieces painted throughout the city are subject to being painted over or removed entirely, the permanence of this practice exists in its consistency. Where one tag is removed, another immediately replaces it. This system is in part protected by the secretive nature of the artists, each moving through different streets and neighbourhoods.

Publicly-funded festivals and projects are unrelated to the illegal practices of tagging and writing. Though they share the same tools and often the same artists, these festivals are more like showcases for graffiti writers who have chosen to make a career of their painting. Commissioned mural projects are often framed as community art projects due to their public nature; however, as one practitioner aptly noted, the process of applying for these commissions is beyond reach for many artists within graffiti practices. This leads to a small number of repeat artists receiving a majority of commissions across communities. These programs, despite many graffiti writers' resistance to them, are necessary for illegal graffiti to continue to exist. In some respect, the legitimization of graffiti in these venues and its commercialization in the art-world and popular culture provide a basis for illegal graffiti to exist: by giving paid jobs to graffiti writers, which also heightens a general awareness of graffiti as an artistic practice, it also provides a foil for illegal graffiti to work against. Graffiti writers will continue tagging or painting in the streets even with a "legitimized" practice. There appears to be an exchange of power, the graffiti subculture pays into popular culture, so both may have access to each other in order to remain stable.

When discussing the function of contemporary graffiti, it is apparent that despite its growing acceptance in popular culture over the years, graffiti is still very much illegal in Toronto. Though there is a current lack of political graffiti in Toronto, it is important to remember that even the small white-out tag on a parking meter is political in nature. Even in the absence of explicitly subversive or political messaging, the act of tagging is subversive. Graffiti will always be a tool of communication and an expression of disobedience, regardless of the exact words written in public space.

Part 3: Risk & Reward

3a. *Does the criminality of the practice increase its attractiveness? Does it affect your process?*

Practitioner #1: P1 is adamant that the fact this practice is illegal makes it far more attractive and enticing. They admit that they have always had an inherently oppositional attitude towards authority, and that if they find something that they want to do, such as tag public property, they will do it. Concerning process, the illegality of tagging means there are several things to consider, such as where and when they go out to paint, how often, and with what tools. Though it is dangerous to do so, they often keep stickers or a marker on hand for any potential opportunities. P1 acknowledges that they have privilege in their appearance and that they have never been approached by law enforcement or property owners while painting.

Practitioner #2: P2 feels similarly, that criminality makes the practice far more attractive. The same rebellious attitude informs their practice: “if you tell me not to do something, I am absolutely going to do it.” Much like P1, they have always felt a call towards graffiti, associated with other subcultural scenes such as punk, metal or rap music.

Practitioner #3: P3 does not feel that the criminality of graffiti makes it more attractive; they don’t feel that the risk informs reward. “It is not that worth it to me. I’ve slowed down because of my life, my job, my responsibilities – my priorities have changed.” P3 feels that this attraction to chaos or rebellion is a more masculine trait and is also informed by age. A younger practitioner may pursue this rebellious calling with less care, and lower stakes.

3b. *How would you measure success in your work?*

Practitioner #1: “Up with a consistent quality.”

Practitioner #2: “If there are photos of my work online, if someone that I respect also respects my work, and a consistent level of quality.”

Practitioner #3: “If I’m personally happy with it, which to be honest is quite rare. I’m very technical in all of my creative practices so it’s hard to feel entirely successful.”

Part 3 Results

The criminal aspect of graffiti is, to some, its most attractive element, while to others it casts an ugly shadow on their artistic practice. The practitioners implied that it is a younger and mostly male perspective which seeks the chaos and risk of painting graffiti in public spaces. As artists mature and gain other responsibilities in their lives, the risk of being prosecuted outweighs the risk of finding the best possible spots. For P3, the crime of vandalism has always been a condition of graffiti, but not what drew them to the practice. I have always found this inherent desire to oppose, to rebel against authority, and alter public space in feeling, fascinating. While many people may feel this call, only a few act on it. That turning point is surely a topic for a lengthy psychological study, far beyond the scope of this research. But more broadly, this oppositional quality is a defining characteristic of all subcultures: the feeling of not belonging, of existing outside of what is considered normal, producing counter-cultural groups and spaces, and a sense of community within a shared practice.

Defining success seemed to be the question which caused the most pause: all three practitioners took their time in finding a succinct way to express their definition of success but were not able to elaborate; their answers felt more intuitive than previous answers. Some practitioners felt that they have a certain standard of quality to uphold, and this quality is more

important than quantity (visibility). This is an ideology which separates some writers, as the pursuit of “getting up” and staying up can be wholly consuming irrespective of quality.

Part 4: Persistence & Permanence

4a. *What does the word persistence mean to you, in terms of your practice or the graffiti practice at large?*

Practitioner #1: “Up. Graffiti will always be here and it always has been.”

Practitioner #2: “Quantity, sometimes even if it’s bad, it’s constantly being put up.”

Practitioner #3: “I feel I am persistent because I’m still here, and I still want to do this.”

4b. *What does the word permanence mean to you, in terms of your practice or the graffiti practice at large?*

Practitioner #1: “Always being on the quest to ‘beat the buff’ and finding new ways to do this. Permanence is something you strive for.”

Practitioner #2: “Quality. Better work will last longer. Graffiti is permanent because of its mystery.”

Practitioner #3: “Nothing... To be a part of this, you need to know and accept that nothing is permanent. If you want permanency, go into the fine art world. Everything is temporary.”

Part 4: Results

After having thought about how to define success in their practices, questions about the nature of persistence and permanence seemed to draw natural conclusions for all three practitioners. Between their answers, it seems some connections can be drawn between persistence and graffiti as an artistic practice; both the producer and the product must be resilient and seek new ways to consistently tag (as others are removed). Permanence, however, stands in contrast. Graffiti tags, pieces, throws, etc., are not permanent. They are inherently temporary, they are fleeting and ever-changing, and this lack of permanence is essential to understanding graffiti as a practice. The practice as a whole holds permanence in a more historical understanding: although individual works come and go, the entire graffiti culture, and the act of writing graffiti, remains and continues to thrive. This duality between temporality and permanence is a unique quality of graffiti, and a unique quality for its practitioners. These two words, persistence and permanence, were not introduced to cause a division, but instead to weave an understanding of how they come together in complex ways throughout the graffiti vernacular.

Conclusion

Much like the human body produces chemicals to numb pain in order to produce acts of survival, graffiti also finds a way to persist despite its defensive state against constant threats of removal or erasure. This state of shock, of adrenaline, is mirrored in the practitioner's ability to climb a fence, scale a rooftop or creep along a train line in the dark – the precise skillset needed to execute this practice is unique, and the motivations, as we have discovered in this research,

complex. It is obvious, but worth mentioning, how dangerous the world of graffiti can be, and how quickly serious, even fatal, mistakes can be made.²²

To formally conclude anything about a practice which is inherently independent and flexible feels, at times, counterintuitive. My approach in this research has been to promote a more open understanding of the balance that graffiti, as a practice, has achieved between subversiveness and popularity, belonging and independence and, ultimately, permanence and persistence. My suspicions upon beginning this inquiry were rather pessimistic given my own bias on what constitutes authentic graffiti practices, but I have come to understand that despite erasure, commodification, popularization, etc., graffiti finds a way to remain authentic due to the self-determined actuality of its practitioners who all possess different motivations, as seen in this primary research. Its ability to be both exclusive and accessible is a matter of preservation, and ultimately what keeps it from going extinct.

The subcultural communities stemming from graffiti have also changed, and so has their perceived value. In this study, those who do not directly participate in the subculture (in a crew, for example) still feel connected to it, with the understanding that they belong to a practice which requires (often a life-long) commitment to reading and writing a language unavailable to the general population. This feeling of connection to a network-at-large is representative of social media's role in the changing culture of graffiti, as well. Instagram has enabled permanence through a digital archiving of once-temporary works, while also providing an online community

²² Unfortunately, many graffiti artists each year succumb to the full risk of their practice. Train painting may be the most dangerous, but climbing rooftops, billboards or police brutality can be fatal to graffiti writers. Two examples from Wynwood, Miami (a neighbourhood almost entirely dedicated to graffiti and street art) illustrate this: Elfrink, Tim. "Graffiti Artist Demz Dies From Injuries After Police Car Hit Him in Wynwood." *Miami New Times*, December 10, 2014. <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/graffiti-artist-demz-dies-from-injuries-after-police-car-hit-him-in-wynwood-6560636>.

for graffiti artists internationally. This cataloguing is adjacent to graffiti photography and videography, earlier modes of popular preservation.²³ This capturing of ephemerality is thus not new to graffiti; but to conceive that the movement as a whole, through its constant replacing of removed work, is permanent, provides a unique perspective on the value of contemporary graffiti. Not just to validate individual pieces, but to understand that graffiti's value does not lie in transcending its existence (becoming 'valid art,' or by participating in larger political or cultural movements) but instead its significance lies precisely in its persistent presence, its very existence in the streets.

I began this project thinking I would set out to prove that graffiti is still a crucial tool of communication for subcultural groups and resistance used in urban spaces, regardless of the messaging conveyed. Instead, I have found that graffiti is far more impactful when viewed from a macro scale, shifting focus away from individual works and their messaging and onto the practice as a whole, from the perspective of art history. Graffiti is a practice which escapes periodization and stylization and a practice which remains resistant to (and independent of) any one audience (the art-market, the education system, the subcultural realm, etc.). My primary research found that the individual perspectives of each practitioner contributes to this ability to persist, and the ability to redefine permanence in terms uncommon to other artistic practices. The flexibility graffiti has to move between audiences and value systems ensures that its practitioners are able to produce both legal and illegal work, maintaining graffiti's subversive nature. The potency of graffiti is in its radicality as an act, and as a practice, not in the individual works

²³ There is an endless amount of digital and analogue graffiti videos and photography; most famously, *Style Wars* (1983) spread graffiti, hip hop and b-boy culture across continents. Silver, Tony. *Style Wars*. Film. Produced by Henry Chalfant. New York, 1983. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9KxbaSU-Eo>

produced. Beyond the scope of this paper, there are still many more interviews and analyses to take place, and my hope is that this research may be a starting point for Toronto researchers specifically.

Graffiti has not always been (in some eyes, is still not) a topic which desires close investigation. It is this resistance to being understood which perhaps makes it so enticing to investigate. A common sentiment expressed at conferences and meet-ups of fellow graffiti researchers is the desire that all those who wish to lean in and ask questions first experience the culture and production first-hand. To write about graffiti requires one to have written it; I am grateful to have lived the experience from both sides.

Glossary

A handstyle is a more stylish or aesthetically complicated version of the more common tag, produced with a marker, crayon or another writing utensil. Graffiti writers are often highly respected for having unique or complex handstyles.

A crew is a group of individual writers who paint together and support one another, traditionally within a hierarchy determined by experience. A crew can teach younger or newer writers, show them spots to paint, and help keep one another safe while painting. Some crews are solely concerned with territory, others with camaraderie. Often confused for gangs due to appearance and associated activities, not all crews are involved with organized crime outside of vandalism.

A Piece is a large and detailed work of graffiti. Short for masterpiece, it refers to a work which has multiple colours, dimensions, graphics and/or characters. Pieces are often found in more secluded areas where writers are able to take their time, or on legal walls also known as **walls of fame**. Sometimes these are commissioned legally to (unsuccessfully) deter tagging on residential properties. In Toronto, this is especially prominent on garages which face into alleyways.

A Throw-up or Throwie is a smaller work, often consisting of two contrasting colours, one for an outline and one for a fill. These are a mid-point between a tag and a piece, a higher skill level, but produced quickly and frequently.

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