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The Writing on the Wall

Graffiti as Art, History and Politics

Theory vs Practice

In the crypt of the Basilica in Lourdes, south west France, the walls are covered with graffiti. The temporary boundary fences placed around the ruins of the World Trade Center were covered with graffiti within days of the September 11th terrorist attacks. In the weeks after the London riots in August 2011, Post It note graffiti appeared across the capital. These three disparate places and times are connected not just by our common understanding of graffiti, but more importantly our collective need to express often overwhelming emotions and leave our mark for others to identify with.

In Lourdes, the messages that appear on the church wall are messages of thanks from those who have experienced healing – some are scribbled on paper or ribbons, some painted on decorative plaques. The expansive areas that surrounded the Twin Towers in New York were covered with photographs, pleas for missing loved ones together with prayers and countless unanswerable questions seeking an explanation for the unfolding tragedy. The Post It notes in London were a polite and measured response to the mindless destruction wreaked over several nights – many notes simply expressed love for the city and a reminder of the enduring community spirit in the face of chaos.

Whilst our first thoughts at the word *graffiti* might be wanton destruction and ugly tags scrawled on public transport or derelict buildings, it seems that the tradition of the unsolicited public expression of beliefs and ideas is as old as humanity itself.

What is Graffiti?

There can be little dispute that the word *graffiti* has multiple meanings or connotations. The etymology of the word is from the Italian *graffiato* meaning 'scratched'. Graffiti is the plural term with graffito used to describe a single example of graffiti. Graffito is often also used to differentiate ancient examples such as those found in Egypt, Rome and Greece from modern graffiti.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines graffiti as:

"Writings or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place."[i]

This definition would identify the works of street artist Banksy as graffiti, in addition to the ancient examples found in Pompeii and the Pyramids in Egypt. Society's most common understanding of graffiti, however, relates to illegal mark-making on any surface that is viewed as an act of vandalism.

Ancient Graffiti

The oldest surviving example of graffiti is an advert for a brothel in Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey). The graffito is described on one Ephesus travel guide website:

"The advert includes a heart, a cross, a woman's head, a foot and cash; and it has been translated as 'turn left at the cross roads where you can buy a woman's love.'"[ii]

Ancient graffiti has proved very useful as documentary evidence for archaeologists and historians who are able to ascertain the level of literacy and social interests of the population. It is possible to deduce the status of the authors from the location of the graffiti, such as within the walls of a brothel in Pompeii. Examples of ancient graffiti have been found throughout the world, from the Mayans in Guatemala to Viking marks left in both Rome and Ireland.

Ancient Egyptian Graffiti

Just as cave walls were painted and scratched in prehistoric times, so too were the great dwellings constructed in ancient Egypt adorned with writings and carvings. The key difference between these examples and graffiti, however, is the intention of the artist or writer whose images are an integral part of the purpose of the structure. By contrast, when the Great Pyramid of Khufu was built in Giza in 2584 BC, the workers left scribbles believed to explain how it was constructed.

Records from as early as 1240 BC indicate that it was commonplace for visitors to ancient sites to leave an inscription as a record of their visit. According to the Shortcuts Blog from the Guardian newspaper:

"....generations of European tourists, from Napoleonic soldiers to Lord Byron, left their marks across swathes of Greece, Italy and Egypt well into the 19th century"[iii]

So popular was the trend in leaving your inscription at famous sites, in a hope of sharing in their immortality and fame, that whilst French writer Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand was visiting Egypt in 1806, he sent an emissary to the Pyramids to engrave his name as he was unable to make the visit himself.[iv] Perhaps this was the historical equivalent of purchasing a souvenir or posting a holiday photo to Facebook.

In addition to this relatively contemporary graffiti, there are also examples that date from the era of the Pharaohs and hieroglyphics. Identifying the graffiti from the original inscriptions is possible, largely due to the different writing systems used at the time for official and more informal text. When considering the ancient graffiti of Egypt, Rome or Greece, it is worth considering the lack of alternative writing surfaces for many ordinary citizens. When one discovers shopping lists and advertisements were scrawled on public walls, it might be easier to understand and accept when remembering that cheap, hand-held writing surfaces were a yet to be developed invention.

Ancient Roman Graffiti

There still exists today a wealth of Latin graffiti in Rome and particularly in the preserved ruins of the city of Pompeii. This writing provides a fascinating insight into the lives of the ancient Romans. Harry Mount, in his article "*What can we learn from Roman graffiti?*"[v], asserts that the subject content of the graffiti is not that dissimilar to today, with references to unrequited love as well as crude sexual insults such as '*Lucilla ex corpore lucrum faciebat'* found written in Pompeii's Basilica and translating as 'Lucilla made money from her body'.

Throughout the ruins of Pompeii there are countless examples of graffiti that refer to everything from a person's outstanding bar bill to an apology aimed at a hotel owner:

'We have wet the bed, host. I confess we have done wrong. If you want to know why, there was no chamber pot.'[vi]

The city of Pompeii laid undisturbed, buried in ash from the time of Vesuvius' eruption in 79 AD to its discovery by archaeologists in 1748. There are several theories as to why the existence of the city was all but forgotten by the Roman Empire. One theory is that the expansion of the Christian faith and its declaration as the religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century AD led to a radical shift in morality and social behaviour, and the debauchery of Pompeii was considered a thing of the past, best forgotten.

This theory may also explain why an earlier discovery of the hidden city at the end of the 16th century AD was never acted upon. It has been suggested that upon viewing the crude images and writing visible in the ruins of the city, the engineer who had made the startling discovery thought it best it remained hidden from view, as explained by Annalee Newitz in her article "*Lost City of Pompeii*: *Pictures of an Alien World, Frozen in Time*":

"Perhaps he was motivated by time constraints, or perhaps — as some historians argue — he was unsettled by seeing a world where everything we consider private was on public display."[vii]

Ancient Greek Graffiti

In 1976 in Athens, Mabel Lang from the American School of Classical Studies catalogued more than 800 examples of graffiti from ancient times. They date from the 8th century BC to the late 6th century AD and had various purposes. As well as graffiti that identified ownership, there were also examples of markings that were Christian inscriptions, dedications and even insults.
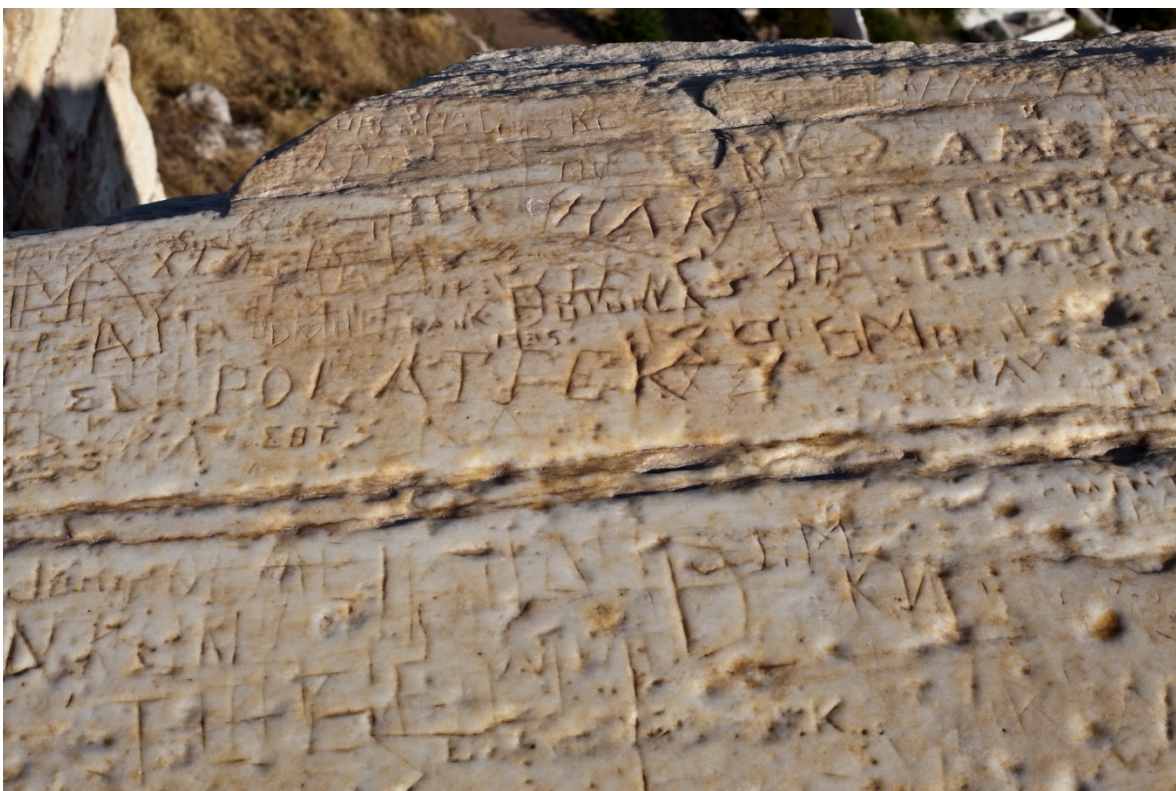
A History of Modern Graffiti

Some of the earliest examples of modern graffiti or tagging were seen in the 1920s when homeless men using the railroads in the United States would mark the boxcars as a record of their illegal journey. The first examples of tagging by groups within a city were found amongst the Mexican-American communities in Los Angeles in the 1930s.

The expression 'Kilroy was here' together with a graffito of a bald man peering over a wall is one example of graffiti that has spread throughout the world, in a 1940s equivalent of a viral video on You Tube. The exact origin of the graffito is unclear, but it was made popular by American GIs who would leave the mark wherever they were stationed throughout Europe. So prolific was the graffito that it is understood that both Hitler and Stalin were convinced that Kilroy was a code name for a secret project or weapon.

Perhaps the most poignant example of graffiti from the Second World War was found on the walls of a fortress in Verdun, France. It simply reads:

"Austin White – Chicago, Ill – 1918
Austin White – Chicago, Ill – 1945
This is the last time I want to write my name here"[viii]

It was the 1960s that saw the rise of graffiti across entire cities, beginning with Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The first comparable example of graffiti in New York was seen in 1971, when the *New York Times* wrote an article about a young writer known as TAKI 183[ix]. As a messenger, TAKI 183, whose real name was Demetrius, travelled extensively across the subway system and his distinctive tag, written in Magic Marker, appeared over a large area. 183 referred to his native 183rd Street and TAKI was a nickname derivative of Demetrius. He is known as the father of modern graffiti and in a recent *New York Times* article the father-of-two acknowledged the transformation that has occurred within the graffiti movement since the 1970s:

"I think a lot of what the graffiti movement spawned, early on, was just vandalism and defacement. But later on, real artists started doing it, and it did become a true art form." [x]

As more graffiti artists appeared on the New York subway it became necessary for individuals to develop a technique to ensure their signature or tag was noticed. By the mid-1970s, the use of coloured aerosol paint and patterns within tags was emerging, as well as an increase in the scale of tags, with some covering the full height of the subway train carriage. [xi]

During the 1980s, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority began to win the war on graffiti on the New York subway, culminating in the launch of the Clean Train movement in 1989. Any cars containing graffiti would not be used, thus minimising the impact of the graffiti as the writer's goal is for their work to be seen by as many people as possible.

The birth of the Clean Train movement led to the evolution of *scratchiti* – the marking of the shatter-resistant windows on subway cars with tools ranging from emery boards to knives and keys. This modern form of graffiti is treated with ambivalence, by both wider society and more traditional graffiti artists. Many graffiti artists will argue the measure of talent is the length of time that a graffito remains in place; the longer the time between completion and removal, the greater the skill of the artist.

The debate about graffiti as a form of art will no doubt continue to rage for some time. Many would argue that if a graphic is aesthetically pleasing to some, it constitutes art regardless of its illicit location or the legality of its creator. It has also been suggested that the peace murals located in cities such as Belfast and Los Angeles help to establish a community's identity, in addition to providing a vehicle for their emotional response to events. This can also be said for the writing and graphics left in the wake of a disaster, most recently seen in the tributes created for the passengers of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. Whilst prayers can be offered and sympathies expressed via social media, the permanence of a public written tribute carries greater resonance in a transient world.

The Psychology of Graffiti

Teenage Rite of Passage?

Clinical psychologist Mandy Kok has suggested that adolescence has changed dramatically in recent years:

"It has always referred to the period from the onset of hormonal changes to the establishment of functional (including financial) independence." [xii]

Mandy Kok continues by explaining that 50 years ago this meant adolescence typically lasted from 12-16 years of age. In today's society, the onset of puberty can begin as early as ten and for many young people there seems little rush or possibility to gain financial independence until their late twenties. A recent survey suggested that 27 was the average age for leaving the parental home and more than 3 million parents over 50 have to support adult children living at home. [xiii]

At the same time, our increasingly permissive society results in an increasingly shrinking group of activities for young people to engage in to mark their rebellion or desire to develop their own persona. Kok describes graffiti as a vehicle for achieving several outcomes for the adolescent:

".. it pushes the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable by virtually all authority figures (including the law) so it certainly separates you from authority systems, it is a visible and public way to make your unique mark. There is a special thrill in engaging in low-risk, highly ritualised, antisocial behaviour."[xiv]
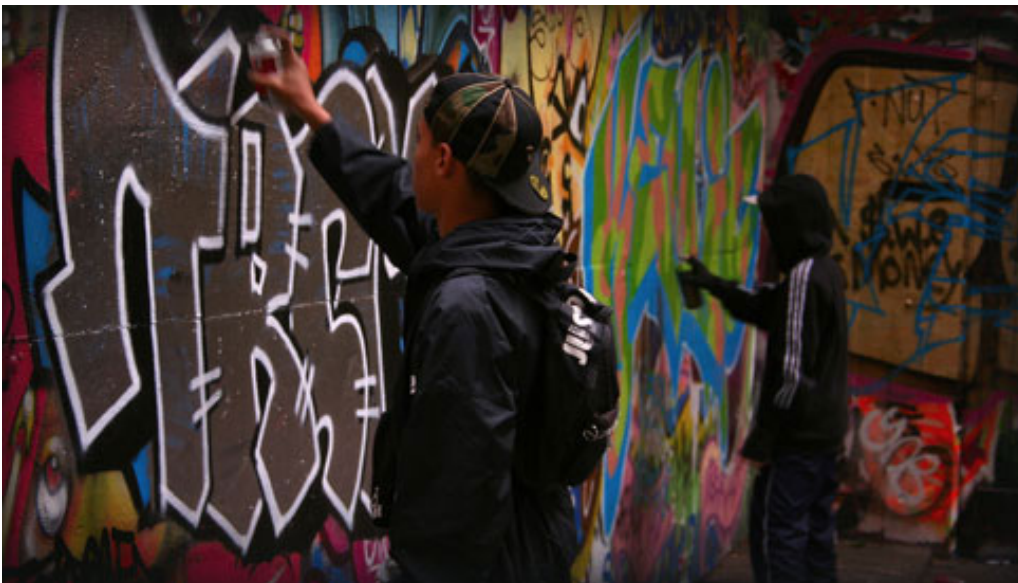
Many projects exist to harness the creative potential for young people interested in graffiti as an art form whilst curtailing their interest in breaking the law, such as those directed by Nick Halahan of OlasArt on behalf of The Prince's Trust.[xv]

Mark-making at famous landmarks

Resisting the urge to leave an inscription at a famous landmark is impossible for many, although perhaps the example described by the French novelist Gustave Flaubert is a little extreme. He wrote to his uncle following a visit to Egypt in 1850:

"A certain Thompson, of Sunderland, has inscribed his name in letters six feet high on Pompey's pillar … it can be read a quarter of a mile off. There is no way of seeing the column without seeing the name of Thompson. This imbecile has become part of the monument and is perpetuated with it." [xvi]

Perhaps this is the desire of any graffitist at a famous landmark or any permanent structure, to feel attached or associated with something greater than oneself, both in size but also longevity.

Whilst hefty fines and prison sentences are risked at famous sites such as the Taj Mahal and the Pyramids, the Chinese government have recently adopted a novel approach to unwanted graffiti. Fighting Tower 14 of the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall of China has been designated specifically for those who wish to leave an inscription.

In May 2013, a photograph of some graffiti spotted at the Luxor Temple sparked an online frenzy to locate the author of 'Ding Jinhao was here'. A 15 year-old school boy was identified and he made a speedy apology. The Chinese authorities were quick to issue new guidelines for appropriate etiquette when travelling abroad.

Graffiti with a Political Purpose

In the 1970s the phrase 'Dick Nixon before he dicks you' appeared on badges and car bumper stickers across America. In a short time, the phrase began to appear as graffiti, with adherents of the message seizing the opportunity to spread their political views to a wider audience.

The use of graffiti as a political tool is as ancient as the graffiti of Pompeii where there can be found examples of endorsements by groups in support of the election of individuals to the position of *aedile* or magistrate:

"All the late-night drinkers are canvassing for Marcus Cerrinius Vatia to be aedile" [xvii]

The general strike and student protests in Paris in 1968 led to widespread graffiti, including *L'ennui est contre-révolutionnaire* or 'boredom is counterrevolutionary'.

Perhaps the most striking example of the power of political graffiti was demonstrated in Syria in March 2011. The Arab Spring which had brought political change to many countries inspired a group of 15 children to graffiti the phrase that epitomised the revolutionary spirit: "The people want the regime to fall." Their scrawling of these words in the agricultural town of Dara'a resulted in their detention as well as physical punishment whilst in prison. The action of these young people led to the anti-government protests which have subsequently resulted in the civil war in Syria that has left more than 100,000 people dead and over 2 million refugees.

Perhaps the most influential and well known political street artist is Banksy, the anonymous British stencil artist whose work appears mainly in the United Kingdom but also in other locations around the world, including Los Angeles and Palestine.

Banksy's political stencil art, which demonstrates strong anti-war themes, epitomises the 'vandalism vs art' battle, with some London councils seeking to protect his works for others to view and some paying for its removal. A spokesperson for Hackney Council, responsible for removing one of Banksy's creations from a building in Dalston, said:

"Our position is not to make a judgment call on whether graffiti is art or not; our task is to keep streets clean."[xviii]

Banksy's thought provoking work is much sought after in the art world. In 2012, at the time of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, a Banksy graffito centring on the theme of child labour appeared on the wall of a Poundland store in north London.

In February 2013, the image was removed from the wall and was sold at auction for $1.1 million in June 2013, much to the annoyance of the local community in Wood Green who felt that the artwork was a gift to them from Banksy.

The Future for Graffiti

There has been a 37% reduction in acts of vandalism in England and Wales since 2007. There are several reasons cited for this significant improvement, including more sophisticated prevention methods and more stringent enforcement of antisocial behaviour laws. It has also been suggested that the prevalence of smartphones and social media have provided new outlets for young people wishing to share their frustrations with the world.[xix] Whilst social media forums can bring their own moral challenges, local communities are benefiting from this recent trend.

There is also the question of the nature or true definition of graffiti – is it only writing or images created on a space without the permission of the owner, or does it also include subjecting people to viewing images that they did not have a choice in viewing? If this is the case, the same could be true of the barrage of advertisements that we are exposed to both online and in the local community. The power of the well-chosen written phrase or carefully constructed image is perhaps even more apparent when it is not sought out by its audience, but thrust upon them, or in the words of Banksy:

"Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable."[xx]

i http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/graffiti?q=graffiti

ii Quotation taken from http://www.theephesus.com/ephesus/brothel-in-ephesus.html

iii Quotation taken from Shortcuts Blog from the Guardian Newspaper, published online in March 2014 located at http://www.theguardian.com/culture/shortcuts/2014/mar/04/graffiti-leave-mark-on-ancient-monuments

iv Information taken from http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2013/05/ding_jinhao_defaced_the_luxor_temple_writing_graffiti_on_egyptian_pyramids.html

v http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10336768/What-can-we-learn-from-Roman-graffiti.html

vi Example of graffiti catalogued at http://www.pompeiana.org/resources/ancient/graffiti%20from%20pompeii.htm

vii Quotation taken from http://io9.com/5825459/the-roman-city-of-pompeii-pictures-of-a-lost-world-frozen-in-time

viii Graffiti described on http://www.truthorfiction.com/images/img315.jpg. Original source referenced as Reagan, Geoffrey. Military Anecdotes (1992) p. 33 Guinness Publishing ISBN 0-85112-519-0

ix A copy of the original New York Times article can be located here: http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/arts/taki183.pdf

x Quotation taken from R Kelly's article TAKI 183 still lives: Celebrating Forefather of Graffiti, published online in June 2011 and located at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/23/arts/design/early-graffiti-artist-taki-183-still-lives.html?_r=1&

xi Information taken from http://at149st.com/hpart1.html

xii Quotation taken from interview with Mandy Kok located at http://gangsofgraffiti.wordpress.com/2011/08/30/gangs-of-graffiti-qa-with-clinical-psychologist-mandy-kok-editorial/

xiii Statistics taken from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2327674/Staggering-million-parents-50-grown-children-living-home.html

xiv See endnote xii

xv For more information visit: http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about_the_trust/in_your_region/south_of_england/south_west/bristol_centre/news_and_events/1307_graffiti_skills.aspx

xvi Quotation taken from Guardian Shortcuts Blog – see endnote iii

xvii Graffiti described in Telegraph article cited at endnote v

xviii Quotation taken from http://www.standard.co.uk/news/battle-to-stop-new-banksy-being-destroyed-6867249.html

xix Information taken from BBC news magazine article by B Wheeler, Why are vandalism rates falling? Published online in January 2013 and located at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21041160?print=true

xx Quotation taken from http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/28811.Banksy

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