AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ICONOCLASH[1,2]

An Investigation into the Production, Consumption and Destruction of Street-art in London

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Abstract

In the following study, I will be investigating the distinct Iconoclash made manifest on our city streets, exploring the various discourses and themes raised through the clash over *graffiti*. Conducting an analytic account of this conflict, it will be suggested that the images possess both a potent and multi-faceted form of agency and are physically embodied by their patients; it will equally be implied that their efficacy is advanced through the explicitly performative nature of the graffiti act, the images' evident ephemerality and the specific character of their medium. Subsequently, through an investigation into the discourses of dirt and deceptiveness, the various rationales assumed for the images reviled nature will be discussed, and finally, utilising notions of appropriation and dètournement, the particular nature of the graffiti-artists engagement with their environment will be examined.

In concluding, the evident similarities between both graffiti-artists and graffiti-removers will be analyzed, and a personal account of the interaction with the images encountered will be attempted.

Key Words ◆ Iconoclash ◆ graffiti ◆ agency ◆ appropriation ◆ pollution

'Why do images attract so much hatred? Why do they always return again, no matter how strongly one wants to get rid of them? [. . .] How is it possible to go beyond this cycle of fascination, repulsion, destruction, atonement, that is generated by the forbidden-image worship?'

(Latour, 2002: 15)

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INTRODUCTION

Street-art (or if you prefer, graffiti), in its various forms and manifold designs, is one of the most ubiquitous sources of visual culture in the contemporary urban metropolis. Since its modern inception in the 1960s and '70s, illegally placed images have remained a focal issue for both artists and public authorities alike and have produced intense and impassioned emotions on both sides of the spectrum. It is, on the one hand, considered to be pure, unmediated expression and the most natural manifestation of public art; but, on the other, it is considered to be defacement, destruction, and an anathema to a 'civil' society. Street-artists will go to extreme, often life-threatening extents to produce their 'art'; council authorities will likewise spend vast amounts of funds and time in order to remove and completely eradicate the 'vandalism'. There is seemingly no middle ground.

So, is it art or vandalism? Facile scrawl on private property or revolutionary imagery on reclaimed space? Quite simply, that matter is not relevant to my concerns; it is an intractable debate with both the artists and the authorities seemingly unable to recognize the others' perspective. What I would like to undertake, however, is an analysis of the various *discourses* and *practices* raised through this clash over images, an exploration into the diverse themes that are invoked through this dispute. Utilising the Latourian notion of *Iconoclash*, the space where one 'does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive' (Latour, 2002), and through examining both the *aesthetics of the artists* and the *aesthetics of authority*, I will attempt to tease out the competing positions, approaches, and strategies employed by both sides of the graffiti debate and conduct an analytic account of the conflict. Through this I want to shift the focus on graffiti study away from the traditional conceptions and reflections on imagery and appearance, and towards the diverse *responses* and *reactions* that they generate (Freedberg, 1989), and thus uncover the underlying motivations and politics behind the act of *erecting*, and of *erasing*, graffiti and street-art in our cities and streets.

Although due to the size constraints of this work I have limited my study to a small area of London (understanding of course that this will naturally limit my final conclusions), I have conducted a number of in-depth, informal interviews with street-artists, gallery curators, 'legal' graffiti mural groups, public art commissioning bodies, local community centres, council authorities, and graffiti removal teams. Through all the various concepts and theories that arise I shall be referring back to the main themes of Iconoclash, examining how these images have become so despised by some yet so esteemed by others, how they have reached

the point where 'destroying them, erasing them, defacing them, has been taken as the ultimate touch-stone to prove the validity of one's faith . . . To the point where being an iconoclast seems the highest virtue, the highest piety, in intellectual circles' (Latour, 2002: 14). Iconoclashes are aroused when there is uncertainty over the eradication of an image, when we can not quite be sure if the destruction is a *decent* or *decadent* action: Where more pertinent a place could graffiti lie?

AGENCY/EMBODIMENT

Graffiti causes a reaction. There can be no doubting that. Whether this reaction is a positive or negative one is contentiously debated, but nonetheless, there can be no hesitation in accepting graffiti's ability to obtain and enforce a response. The distinct *agency* granted to the images, their ability to 'capture, hold and transform cognitive operations' (Hirsch, Pinney and Küchler – following Gell, 1997: 25), was suggested to me by nearly all of the graffiti artists that I spoke with. Many of them argued that their work was purely a *personification of the self*, that they actively imbued their images with particular facets of their personality and identity. Their beliefs were indicative of Dryden's suggestion that artistic creation is 'a process of objectification . . . The artist's insights into the dynamics of subjective experience are inseparable from the explorations

of the expressive possibilities of some medium, their insights are set forth, worked out, and brought to completion through their *embodiment in an object'* (Dryden, 2001: 281). The images were thus considered to be a corporeal element of the artist themselves, an objectified and material constituent of their producer. Even in their basic typographic form, they were seen to contain information and substance relating to much more than their letters apparent meaning and understood to represent the artist's identity and character in multifaceted and complex ways. As Bond suggested, 'my letters are living, they're the representation of my style. That's how we construct them, some fragmented, some deconstructed, just like a puzzle. That's why they're part of me, they're part of *my* puzzle' (personal communication).

For the vast majority of the street-artists that I interviewed, this attempt to instil their images with aspects of the self was paramount; when observing other artists' work, the members of the graffiti community would translate these seemingly incoherent images and letters and appreciate them not merely for their aesthetic value, but equally for their *emotional* presence. Whilst presenting his vast collection of graffiti images to me (which he had photographed over 12 years of intensive production), street-artist Zohar insisted: 'I've developed [my art] just like my personality . . . they're not just part of my life, they're an expression of my personality. They reflect it. They display it' (Zohar, personal communication). I would argue that this is more than a simply metaphorical statement, these ideals are in fact borne out in reality; the images are truly seen and believed to be 'alive' by the artists I worked with, and I would further suggest, are seen to create both actions and reactions in a way more similar to our traditional conceptions of human *subjects*, than to inanimate *objects*. The images were thus seen to be created *out of* persons, not in *separation* to them and the division between subject and object conflated.

Moreover, many of the artists felt they were consciously attempting to permeate their surroundings with their self-identity and personhood, to 'make a personal presence' on their otherwise alienated environment (Selman, personal communication). The markings can thus be argued to be an attempt to embody themselves into the very fabric of the city, to smudge the landscape with the stigmata of personhood (Mitchell, 1994). (For further discussion, see the analysis of Lefebvre and 'appropriation' later). I would propose therefore that each tag, each stencil, each image, can be seen as a form of 'distributed personhood' (Gell, 1998); wherever the artist has been or imprinted themselves upon, they can accordingly leave an element of their self. This conception of agency and 'distributed personhood', fashioned by Alfred Gell in his seminal text *Art and Agency* (1998), argued that art objects have an explicit, dynamic agency, and accordingly can act as 'indexes of personhood' (ibid.); they can be

considered equivalent to, and embody the same *intentional* complexity as human subjects, hence they can be seen as 'indexes' of the artist's agency. Significantly, Gell formulates three main features that distinguish 'things' or objects with active agency, and artefacts he would consider to be 'art' (as many things that have agentic qualities are not always widely considered to be works of art): Firstly that they are made to be seen, secondly, that they act as indexes of social agency, and thirdly, that they are 'difficult to make, difficult to "think", difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator' (Gell, 1998: 23). From this perspective then, graffiti can be understood to be not only an aspect of the artist's will, actively functioning through its use of imagery, but the artist's body, mind, or *oeuvre*, made apparent through the images created throughout the city. Through Gell's theory, the distinction between persons, images and objects (between artist and art, between tagger and tag), becomes fuzzy and interrelated; consequently the distinction between humans and objects, rather than being seen as distinct separated mediums, can be understood as messy networks of impure forms, constantly being modified and revised (Latour, 1993).

MEDIUM/PERFORMANCE

Gell further suggested that 'any object that one encounters in the world invites the question, how did this thing get to be here?' and furthermore consists of 'playing out their origin-stories mentally, reconstructing their histories as a sequence of actions performed by another agent (the artist)' (Gell, 1998: 67). Advancing this conception, we can argue that as the embodied artist undertaking the act of graffiti is also intrinsically an artist engaged in a criminal act, one can not view the image without perceiving this inherent illegality; when we examine and experience the images we consequently *internalise* this conscious act of transgression created through its performance. Accordingly, I would propose that the overt visual misdemeanour in the act of graffiti writing can induce a sense of *corporeal illicitness* to graffiti's very appearance, an experience of admiration and reverence for the effort and audacity of the transgression whilst viewing the images. As Hans Belting continues to suggest, an image only in fact gains its agency 'when one speaks of the image and the medium as two sides of a coin, sides that are inseparable, even though they separate and mean separate things to the eye' (Belting, 2005: 304). The image's significance thus only becomes *accessible* when we take into account the medium, the means by which images are *transmitted*, and as no visible image can reach us unmediated, the mediator not only controls the perception but 'creates the viewer's attention' (ibid.: 304). Thus the two elements, image and medium, are fused, and we cannot make clear the definition between the graffiti and the wall, the design and its legality.

Fried's study *'Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin'* (2002), similarly discusses a process of artistic embodiment in which the artist seeks not only to project himself creatively onto the medium at hand (as discussed earlier), but within this same process, we as the *viewer* place ourselves bodily within the art; we 'project ourselves as if corporeally' (Fried, 2002: 34) onto the works where consequently an

'exchange or transfer . . . between persons and things' takes place (Fried, 2002: 42). In this way, the illegality of the medium can give the work a performative aspect which makes spectatorship an *interactive* occurrence; the specific tension and euphoria the artist feels whilst producing the imagery is communicated to both peers and other spectators, who then share and participate in the experience. We can suggest that the act thus becomes a distinct accomplishment in which 'things create people as much as people make them' (Tilley, 1999: 76) and the images are hence seen to be 'not just communicating meaning but actively *doing* something in the world as mediators of activity' (ibid.: 265).

Perhaps graffiti's 'halo-effect', the means by which its powerful efficacy is fashioned, is created through the intensity of its very production, due not only to its illegality, but equally to the inherent physical difficulty of producing such artworks, without authorization, without permission, in such prominent urban locations. One cannot overlook this extreme and powerful facet of the graffiti performance; not only must the artists reach perilously inaccessible sites, from train tracks and railway bridges to central city locations, but once there they must spend hours perfecting their work, whilst constantly ready to sprint from the authorities. 'When people look at my work, when I'm looking at others', I'm thinking how did they get up there? . . . You want people to be blown away just by the location, you want to get your work on some crazy spot, impossible to get to, and make people think, how the fuck?!' (Delve, personal communication). Jumping over walls, scrambling up drain-pipes, working side-by-side with speeding commuter trains – none of these occurrences were unusual events for the artists I worked with – they were constantly interacting with the city in a highly physical, highly material way. I would argue that this not only stresses the connection between art and bodily action, but furthermore accentuates how the image is not just received visually but understood in a more extensive way. As Tilley suggests, our comprehension and awareness is fully entangled within the corporeality of our lived body, in which the perception of any event is controlled by involvement and participation, not a disembodied mental image (Tilley, 2004).

One could suggest that much of graffiti's power in fact emerges from this very act and the particular performative nature of its production. Freedberg (1989), whilst examining the consecration of religious images, whereby a particular image is infused with power through means of *ritualistic* action, argued that it is through this form of engagement that an image is transformed from a basic material artefact into a powerful *embodiment* of that which it represents. I would suggest that this theory could easily be altered to consider the 'ritualistic' performance of graffiti production and the force *it* subsequently contains. Repetition, formalization and stereotypy are the customary features of religious rites and

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equally play a huge role in the world of street-art; the method, for example, of recurring stencilled or postered imagery, often on a vast spatial and temporal scale, or equally the graffiti artist's routine of repetitively signing their name, the same three to six letters across an entire city, would seem to give itself this certain consecrated capability. Ritual events also contain various specific gestural responses; the distinct bodily movements of physically altering the walls, through spray-painting, stenciling or stickering, and equally the evident physical movement of climbing over fences, sneaking onto private property or onto train tracks, all whilst involved in a prohibited act, I would suggest, instils graffiti with a particular *ceremonial* quality. The event was treated in a *sanctified*, *sacred* way by many of the artists, from the preparation beforehand to the actual act; it was mediated by highly specific and habitual methods and practices (from the cleaning of the various spray-can nozzles prior to the act to the physical encounter with the medium during it), combined with numerous materials and potent, expressive signs (such as the assorted tools used by the artist and the unique codes each of them would employ), as well as the various decorations and clothing fashioned for the specific performance (obvious examples being dark attire, hoods, gloves and battered denims) – all elements, which, I would suggest, contribute to the ritual character of the experience, and thus concomitantly, to the images' powerful efficacy and embodied nature.

VIOLENCE/DIRT & POLLUTION

The dominant motif that emerged from conversations with members of the anti-graffiti establishment was the ability of these illegally based

images to *physically* attack, rob, or commit violence to their victims and the local communities (various informants, personal communication). Graffiti was frequently condemned for not only providing an unpleasant, 'ugly' aesthetic and an 'unsightly' surrounding to live amongst, but also for the way it *violently* confronted the viewer in a *bodily* manner. Steven Kelly, an environmental officer responsible for tackling graffiti in the local area, asserted that 'people feel alarmed, harassed, distressed. It puts fear on your doorstep' (personal communication). Its unsanctioned and illegal existence was believed to actively seek to harm the onlooker, to confront them through a 'threatening and aggressive act' (ibid.). I would suggest that it is an image's capacity to 'touch' its recipient, their ability to create a bodily response and sensation, that reveals why these illicit images are so often considered to be 'violent'. The image, through an unsanctioned act, can be seen to actually *penetrate* the viewer, not merely to remain on the wall or canvas, emphasising the fact that our visual perception involves our entire body; we are therefore not just visually *seeing* the graffiti but appreciating its *entire* manifestation. It would seem therefore that the images' distinct *agency* and *corporeality*, imposed by the various graffiti artists and interiorised by their viewing subjects, is the prevailing factor bestowing upon these images not only much of their efficaciousness, their ability to attract, arrest and enthral the beholder, but subsequently, it would seem to be this very aspect which gives rise to the necessity for graffiti's destruction by those in positions of authority. When viewing graffiti, it would seem then that we can not ignore the images' irrefutable bodily nature, their ability to capture, draw in, and engage with one's physical presence, to transfix the viewing subject with its gaze (Fried, 1988).

A further significant theme that arose from the anti-graffiti authorities was a continuing use of language and terms such as 'dirt' or 'pollution' to portray graffiti, terms innately linked to ideas of space. Mary Douglas's study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (2002), considered the social understanding of dirt and danger, and suggested that what is (and what is not) perceived to be dirt, is structured through the varying transgressions made by people, objects, texts, or images, over socially constructed symbolic boundaries. Douglas reasoned that wherever dirt is identified, the offending substance must be *isolated* and *removed*, before it 'contaminates' the surrounding environment. Things that transgress are thus seen to be in the 'wrong place' and the definitions of impurity and pollutants play an important role in not simply creating, but *maintaining* our social structures. (One could argue that society in fact *needs* these transgressive acts to occur in order to illustrate acceptable boundaries, and graffiti is thus selected to demonstrate the boundaries of public and private property. See later discussion for more). Graffiti is therefore described as 'dirty' because it exists in

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unsanctioned places, it occurs on unauthorised sites and in *prohibited* locations. Its appearance in back alleys, by train tracks and in the more dilapidated and dangerous parts of the city, all simply further maintain this conception of dirt and grime. As soon as graffiti moves *inside*, however, into the gallery space or the home, it becomes acceptable, it becomes unpolluted. 'Crime becomes creativity, madness becomes insight, dirt becomes something to hang over the fireplace' (Cresswell, 1996: 49).

Graffiti is further considered to contaminate society because, as Douglas suggests, dirt is also linked to *disorder*. From outside the subculture, the graffiti world is often considered to be a lawless, chaotic mess, its complex social structures and codes are completely overlooked. As those not intimate with its complexity cannot crack its codes and hidden communications, it is appreciated simply as dirt and disorder. Furthermore, the indecipherability of visual representation, its seemingly disordered, disorganised arrangement, seems to have an actual *physical* affect people, an ability to make them feel genuinely uncomfortable, to give the impression of being under personal attack by the graffiti; its *analogue* and *uncoded* properties is seen to give rise to the threat of the undesired or unexplained content and its subsequent 'misreading' (MacDougal, 1997). Thus the city must be maintained as a place of conformity, of *sameness*, of what Douglas describes as '*purity*'. Strangers or strange*ness* in the neighbourhood are considered to be purveyors of dirt and must accordingly be expelled from the boundaries of the community. By identifying the

anomaly as something of a threat to society, it is also *implicitly removed* from any possible dialogue; any potential open discussion or debate is thus silenced by the very suggestion that it is an explicit, unequivocal menace to society, and any argument supporting its existence is simply implied to be acquiescing to the inherent 'threat' to 'natural' order.

Following this, the anti-graffiti establishment is also involved in a war of semantics, a battle over the terms 'art' and 'vandalism'. It would seem evident that they appreciate street-art as vandalism and pollution, pure and simple, with an absolute refusal to contemplate it in any way as 'art'; presumably, any break in the ranks, any *acceptance* of graffiti as an acknowledged art form would lead to a moral dilemma, a notion that what they were undertaking is *image* destruction, rather than simply the *ref*acement of *def*acement or the cleansing of dirt. Whilst sitting in his cramped, art-less (or artless?) office, Douglas Gatti, the anti-graffiti tsar for the local council, told me that 'it's just not art, is it . . . art is not done on public property, it's unwarranted, nobody asked them to go and draw there. How would they like it if I came and drew on their bedroom walls? Or on their jackets or trainers?' (personal communication). For him, graffiti was a violent, virulently anti-social activity; it was a 'war' he was engaged in, a 'battle' to cleanse the streets of these 'aggressive' and 'hostile' markings. Seemingly, according to this stance, 'art' cannot be produced in unlawful spaces, whatever its aesthetic content or substance, the very term art can only be ascertained for the anti-graffiti establishment, *after* contextualisation; as Belting's theory suggests (Belting, 2005), the anxiety over graffiti comes directly from its *placement* rather than its *aesthetics* (its medium rather than its content), as its illicitness means one cannot differentiate the art from its illegality. However, even legal graffiti walls, authorized, lawful areas for art productions and murals using simply the method of spray-paints, are also deemed to be unacceptable by the anti-graffiti authorities; in fact any signs of graffiti, used in advertising, in music videos or films, even as public murals and messages must be completely wiped out, perhaps to disprove absolutely its acceptability as an art-form. Part of the reason for graffiti's destruction therefore seems to come down to its semantic attribution. If the image destroyers were obliterating what could be even *conceived* as art then they would be considered *philistines*, no better than fundamentalist iconoclasts in their keenness to destroy the image. One cannot destroy *art* without experiencing ethical difficulties, but graffiti on the other hand, mere 'vandalism' or 'dirt', seems to contain no such dilemmas.

EPHEMERALITY/DEFACEMENT

Both the graffiti authorities and the removers believed that the artists would be extremely infuriated and annoyed by their images' destruction,

in fact Gatti even went onto suggest that 'when it's removed I think they feel raped [because] it's a symbol of their manhood'. (I would suggest that this potent retort further reinforces the conception of graffiti being an actual part of the artist's body – when it's removed, they are believed to feel *physically* injured.) For the graffiti-artists, however, destruction was *not* in fact seen as a negative act, rather, ephemerality was seen to be part of the very *process* of street-art. Many of the artists argued that the life-span of their images was genuinely irrelevant, the act of *production* counting as the vital part of the process; 'I just write for the moment of writing and the feeling I get from it. I really have no interest in what happens to my work once I've finished creating it' (WK, personal communication). Although this type of reflection may be seen as a form of bravado, an appearance and active custom of neglect to support the conception of graffiti's non-commoditisation, of its separation from the institutional 'art-world', it is still temporal in a way that is completely at odds with the practices of the fine art world, with the traditions of main-tenance and conservation prevalent in that establishment. The emphasis for many of the artists was heavily weighted on the process; the work is often *'for-the-moment'*, for the *experience*, for the *freedom*. Thus the image's destruction, believed to have the effect of somehow emasculating the artist, or perhaps *personally* wounding them, can in fact be seen to *eman-cipate* the producer.

The ephemerality and mortality of graffiti can therefore be seen as a way to bestow a heightened importance on the *process*, to the *produc-tion* of the art, not necessarily the *reception*. 'For me personally I create my art purely for the enjoyment and excitement it gives me . . . For that short moment, that time when a random flash of an idea or maybe even a mistaken drip of paint gives me that brief feeling of creativity, and then the endorphins kick in for the fix, that's when I'm happy' (Necitate, personal communication). Thus we could suggest that graffiti's ephemer-ality and form, its transient, shifting nature, can be seen to exemplify the flux and instability of the modern city. The images can be understood to act on the walls as an urban palimpsest, its formation and destruction creating aftershocks and tremors, its erasure generating its disappearance from actual sight but perhaps not from active memory. Similar to the New Ireland *Malangan* described by Alfred Gell, or, as explored by Nicolas Argenti, 'the appearance, disappearance, and the falling into decay of several highly ambiguous objects' during the inauguration of a new King in North Western Cameroon, the graffiti can be seen to exist as a 'socially salient object' for a very short period of time, they are indexes of agency of an overtly temporal nature; however it is perhaps this temporality which gives them their specific efficacy (Gell, 1998). The emotive impact of the objects and the *embodied* reactions which they then create thus serves to communicate meaning through performance

in a social, rather than cognitive space (Argenti, 1999: 21); the graffiti thus simply becomes an 'internalised image' and its very *destruction* causes one to *remember*.

The majority of the artists however, even if not completely adhering to this purely *process* driven analysis of the form, did anticipate and accept that their work would be removed but appreciated that this factor often led to a more *liberated* and *uninhibited* style. The destruction of the images was seen to act as a 'fresh canvas', a new area to paint in for a form that was often restricted in its locations, and, furthermore, seen to act as a stimulus to 'get up', an additional incentive and motivation to put more of their images on the walls and the streets. As Gamboni has suggested, the destruction enforced by various iconoclashes merely encourages this enthusiasm to replace them with more images. 'Attempts to get rid of a specific image or of images at large invariably lead to a proliferation of new images. The gesture of aggression itself, in retro-spect or seen from a different perspective, can reveal itself to be a gesture of reverence – and visa versa' (Gamboni, 2002: 88). The destruction of the

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graffiti by the local authorities thus simply alludes to its power, insinuates its efficaciousness; according to this theory therefore, the artists take the destruction as a sign that their images *are* provoking a response, that their images *are* functioning successfully.

One must equally appreciate though, that the image destruction does not simply evolve from the local councils and public officialdom, this 'legitimate' destruction of vandalism, but that there are in fact a number of distinct iconoclashes present within the graffiti world itself. There is the *internal* destruction of images, the iconoclashes emerging from within the community itself, occurring for three main reasons: Firstly, graffiti is often painted over by other artists simply due to the lack of available space. Images are thus often removed and then simply written over; if, for example, an image is in a premium setting and an artist thinks they can *surpass* the present design, they will attempt this, they will have no qualms about defacing and then re-painting over the current image. There can be seen to be a distinct *hierarchy of spaces* in the graffiti world, sites which are held in higher esteem, places with more 'kudos' and cachet attached to them, and this exists in parallel with a particular *cycle of temporality*; as long as the image has had sufficient time to be appreciated by other members of the graffiti community (say, for example three to six months), then there will be no issue in its destruction and subsequent replacement. The graffiti walls are thus frequently renovated, as different writers compete and collaborate on the public canvas. In this way the walls can be perceived as a form of *ongoing dialogue*, a continual artistic discussion and public forum.

Secondly, graffiti is also often erased when there is acrimony or animosity between artists; if the artists personally dislike each other, or maybe if they do not think the artist is really proving themselves, they will literally just cross the images out, put a line through them, maybe also emblazon the design with the phrase 'toy', a term denoting an inexperienced or incompetent writer. This can sometimes lead to 'cross-out wars', the artists constantly defacing each others' 'defacements' and superimposing their names or tags on top of the others' designs. Once again however, this action can be seen as a not entirely unconstructive phenomenon, as it is often this extreme competition and rivalry that leads to increased aesthetic innovation and development, each artist vying to outdo the other in scale and expressiveness.

Thirdly and finally, the images' external location means they are also subject to the force of the elements, to bleaching by the sun, to battering by the wind and rain, and to coating with grime and dirt from the cities' smog and pollution; much of the graffiti thus simply weathers away. This equally can be seen to be part of the street-art tradition however, an element that is in itself an important aspect of its constitution. The process of decomposition, the way the graffiti looks damaged or corroded

can be seen to be part of the very aesthetic system. Speaking to Bond after he had recently returned from a trip to Denmark, he related to me how disheartened he felt when seeing the graffiti there: 'It was just too clean, too pristine, unspoilt! It has to be deformed for it to look right, it's gotta look all battered and bruised, it gives it the character . . . It's got to be rugged, it's gotta be the dirt, the city, the grime, that's where it works. If it's presented too well, it can seem like an insult, if it looks too clean, it can look too good!' (personal communication). Thus the graffiti is perhaps more powerful not when it is looking gleaming and new, but when it has started decaying, when it has started to naturally erode, as it perhaps then starts to fit in naturally with its surroundings, starts to look at 'home' at its sight. This form of passive iconoclasm (Strother, 2002), this destruction by proxy, could be suggested to bring its own form of efficaciousness to graffiti. It could be seen as a physical objectification of an idea in mind, the suggestion that things fall apart, that we all are subject to transformation as situations change. Ephemerality and impermanence are therefore often seen as neither intrinsically good nor bad, more as an undeniable factor; its recognition possibly the comprehension that development and progression can often depend on decomposition and transformation. For the artists, this destruction is thus not only predicted, but *fundamental* to their process and an inherent part of the art-form; it is seen to be both *accepted* and *expected* that this cycle of production and destruction will occur.

Michael Taussig's examination of the defacement of objects, spaces and ideologies, in his text *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (1999), further develops this notion of defacement as not always being an intrinsically negative act. Using examples of various *unmasking* events, he demonstrates that the activity of destruction can actively liberate new meanings and new conceptions. Defacements are seen to be *slippages* in the concealing devices of public secrets, the taken for granted 'common-sense' information which must be kept invisible from the public eye, thus they are immediately *re*faced when they are revealed to maintain the power of the secret. Advertising, I would argue, symbolizes such a particular societal 'secret', the complicity of private property that informs our 'public' opinion, the 'common-sense' analysis that advertising hoardings and posters are a 'normal', acceptable use of public space, all essentially due to the fact that they are regulated by capital. Graffiti, on the other hand, estranged from the commercial sphere, confronts this 'rational' conception of space and intrudes on these 'aesthetics of authority'; the very sight of the images thus turns the whole issue on its head. Like Taussig's unveiling of public secrets, graffiti can thus create a brief stirring inside us, letting us become aware of this normally hidden social regulation. It can be seen to act as a medium continuously attempting to bring these public secrets into exposure; what is created out of these

'defacements' are the visible signs of the cracks in the structures that act to conceal these secrets.

APPROPRIATION/DETOURNEMENT

Many of the artists I spoke with felt that their work was an overt tactic to *reclaim* parts of the city, to *regain* possession of the metropolis which they believed had been sequestered from them by big business and private property. It seemed to be a recurring theme that what they performed was in fact a way of *communicating* this alienation, a way of *suggesting* other modes of appreciating and accessing urban life, a fresh means of *participating* in the city and *engaging* with the environment. It was equally seen as a *critique* of the system of modernity that they resided in, as a 'movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth' (Foucault, 1997: 32). Even without an overtly radical or politically motivated message, the very act of graffiti (due to its inherent illegality) was envisioned by many of the artists to be a marked political action, an explicit political statement. I would perhaps also suggest, that even when the artist does not conceive it as being a political action, it still remains as one; whether it is a conscious or unconscious decision, the repercussions of the image making serve to render it political.

This conception of recovering ownership of the 'lost' city, of re-*appropriating* 'public' space, has been considered in most depth by Henri Lefebvre, in 'The Production of Space' (1991), and Guy Debord, in his treatise 'The Society of the Spectacle' (1967). According to Lefebvre, space is not a disconnected or compartmentalised structure, it is not a detached enigma severed from our daily experience, but is in fact inherently political, indivisible from the imbalanced social relations that structure

it. Through a conception of 'abstract space' (the sphere *created* by the modern form of capitalism), Lefebvre reasoned that space was used in modern urban life as a tool of brute domination. He reasoned that capitalism's very survival depended on a so-called '*mystified* spatiality', a space obscured by both ideology and illusion. Through this space, social life was thus established as a series of elusive, highly mediated social relations, and furthermore, the very structure of space was marked by various unyielding prohibitions; the abstraction of public space by the control of private property had led to the creation of various boundaries and limitations, inhibiting liberated social action. The history of the production of capitalist space was further marked by our body's *disconnection* and *severance* from it, and modernity could be seen as an account of the '*decorporealization* of space' (Simonsen, 2005: 2). Lefebvre thus implied that our way of existence was based on philosophical and scientific positions that sought to actively *exclude* the body, shifting us from a more concrete, applied, and corporeal relationship with the world, to a more intangible and intellectualised one, hence producing this disjointed and abstract space within which we reside. For Lefebvre therefore, space was not only ideological, but actively reproduced uneven social relations and repressed conflict.

In his discussion of 'appropriation', which he defined as a practice where space has been modified in order to satisfy and expand human needs and possibilities, Lefebvre suggested that this includes not only the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space for their personal benefit, to appropriate already *produced* urban space, but also incorporated the right to radically *change* urban space so that it meets the needs and demands of its residents. This form of appropriation, this altering of urban space for the citizen's discrete intentions, is, I would infer, indicative of the opinions and judgments of many of the street-artists I spoke with. The artists actively aimed to modify and transform their environment to make it more personal, more inalienable; they wanted an active role in producing and constructing their lived-in surroundings. 'When I'm out tagging and graffing I'm a part of the city. I'm not just going with the flow, I'm not just observing or following, I'm changing *my* area. *I'm* transforming it' (WK, personal communication).

Debord's work similarly aimed to unravel the existing conditions of production in capitalist culture, a culture that he suggested presented itself through an 'immense accumulation of spectacles' (Debord, 1967, accessed online); all that was once directly mediated and physically experienced had now, according to Debord, become simply a *representation* of reality. Through the manipulation of these representations however, the social order imposed by capitalism was both maintained and perpetuated; the spectacle was considered to not only serve the *perpetuation* of our alienation, it equally encouraged our *separation* from natural social life and

the *false consciousness* necessary to make it acceptable to the general population. Similar to the concept of appropriation, *détournement*, the renowned and celebrated device of the Situationists, was a strategy aimed at the reversal of the 'spectacle' and the concomitant relationships it created. At a core level, détournement involved the subversion of the existing *symbolic* landscape through an activity which would permit the 'integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu' (ibid.); it would be a symbol of opposition, a 'critique of existing human geography' (ibid.), through which individuals and communities could create places and events suitable for their own appropriation. At a practical level, détournement found its expression in numerous urban guerrilla activities such as graffiti and the modification of billboards, the main intention of which, according to Debord, was 'to take effective possession of the community of dialogue, and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely represented' (ibid.). During the events of May 1968 in Paris, the concept of détournement was used prevalently in series of posters and graffiti daubed across the city. Slogans such as: 'Sous les pavés, la plage!' ('Beneath the pavement, the beach!'); 'On ne revendi-quera rien, on ne demandera rien. On prendra, on occupera' ('We will claim nothing, we will ask for nothing. We will take, we will occupy');

and countless others, were disseminated across the entirety of the urban landscape. Their aim was to use the existing spaces of the city, the normally private, separated, segregated parts of the city, to confront society itself, to challenge and question the particular nature of social life. It was not simply that these symbolic practices were undertaken to merely *represent* material interests, what was in fact being suggested was that they may be able to actively diminish inequalities, to *forcefully change* the way we think about and understand social life.

Many of the artists I spent time with had strikingly similar motives for their work. They felt that what they were undertaking was a practice that, in many ways, aimed to alter or transform the way people thought and felt about modern urban life; it was an overt statement concerning their perceived lack of rights to the city, a practice examining the notion of 'public' space. The very conception of urban space as being shaped and enveloped by private property, as a specific form and *commodity*, is explicitly what the method of détournement and the right to appropriation stood diametrically against; they both deliberately aimed to confront capital's ability to commoditise urban space, they attempted to *modify* control of this space, whilst crucially stressing the primacy of rights for its inhabitants. The very existence of 'blank space', signified for many of the artists I was working with (by its very nature), ownership, private space and exclusion; their appropriation thus creates a new form of 'public' space, and challenges the very notion of private ownership: It forcibly creates a visual legitimacy on par with the economic power of commercial advertising, a direct reaction to the prevalence of private property and the lack of a 'truly' unrestricted space. The legitimacy of advertising, its consideration as matter *in* place (due to its hegemonic endorsement and placement in not only public space but on public transport etc.) led many of the artists to believe that their criminalisation was overt proof of inequality in society, that with huge financial backing, advertising companies were allowed to display their wares, and promote their 'tags' with huge billboards and advertisements, *and* with local councils' tacit backing and support; but with nothing to sell apart from their names, nothing to display but their art, and with no financial backing, the graffiti artists were merely branded criminals and vandals. Many of the artists saw what they produced as a form of antidote, or perhaps a challenge to the mass commercialisation and advertising imbued in our culture (in fact, a number of street-artists, such as Neckface in the USA and 3TTMan in Spain, specifically target and transform public advertisements into articulating subversive or ironic messages). The appropriation of space by the artists was thus appreciated to be a radical means of reclaiming public space, a way of highlighting the influence of the private sector in the public, the magnitude of private property and their prohibited rights to the city.

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Through this form of action, the artists also believed they were able to reintegrate their corporeal encounter with the city; through the distinct and manifest *performance*, through the bodily encounter between the artist and the medium, the alienated space of society was thus in some way recovered. Graffiti was understood to powerfully transform their relationship with their surroundings and landscape, to in some way confront the anomie felt in the modern urban environment. Similar to Lefebvre's idea of the *festival*, the idea of radical play, many of the artists suggested that the act of graffiti had led to a new type of enjoyment, a new *playful encounter* with the city. 'You're constantly checking out your surroundings, the back alleys, the little corners. It's your own personal playground! The whole city is a potential canvas, you're constantly looking out for new places to write on . . . looking for ways you can alter it. I think it's totally different than what others experience, for most people everything around them is controlled by other people' (Delve, personal communication). This also brings to mind the Situationist tactic of the *dérive*, the practice of wandering through the city, experiencing and perceiving it at first hand, free from preconceived notions of social practices. To dérive was to become aware of the way that certain parts of the city could possess an efficacy to realise different desires and possibilities, it was a way to search for new motivations and stimuli for passage

other than those the environment was actually designed for. It was a method of using your surroundings for your own means, for your own motives, bringing a little chaos into the city to expose the way in which our experiences are *repressed* by the capitalist mode of production, and furthermore *express* how they could be appropriated, inverted and consequently empowered (Plant, 1992).

CONCLUSION

What I found truly intriguing during my fieldwork was the considerable resemblance between the graffiti *artists* and the graffiti *removers*. On a purely physical level, both artist and remover were constantly covered with paint, their clothing was incessantly soiled with various pigments of multiple hues; the language they both used, the slang and intonation were practically identical, many of them having grown up in the same local enclaves; both camps were also always on the look out for graffiti, searching the area for new tags or murals, looking high up onto buildings, down dark side-streets, scouring parts of the 'back-end' of the city that most members of society never come close to. In fact, for both artist and remover, their entire way of encountering the city was totally altered, the methods they used to *navigate* the city, completely changed from most conventional citizens. Both of the groups also knew the names and styles of thousands of taggers and artists, they knew 'who' was up 'where', which areas they were most prevalent, who did what variety of tags and designs. They had their favourite artists, the ones that they could really appreciate, the ones they had no problems cleaning off (or for the artist writing over), and equally the images they would choose to leave alone. Even the graffiti removers' process of *removal* was an extremely similar performance to the graffiti artists' process of *application*; for one, they both used aerosols in their act, they had thus developed a similar form of 'can-control'; the distinct sounds of the cans shaking, the marked smells of the fumes, all similar; the bodily movements, practically identical. From a still photo, one can really not tell who is the graffiti artist and who the remover. In fact, the removers were often treated with suspicion by members of the public, being believed, on innumerable occasions, to be graffiti-artists! Concomitantly, the graffiti-artists would utilise this very semblance, and don 'official' council day-glow protective clothing in order to attempt to blend in with their surroundings and look like they were undertaking 'authorized' work.

Somewhat surprisingly, the members of the graffiti removal team that I spent time with also had ambivalent feelings towards the destruction of the images. On the one hand, they felt that many of them were a plague on the area, they made the surroundings look 'spoilt' or 'damaged', and it was little different from ripping up bus seats or scratching cars.

However, on the other hand there was a feeling that not *all* of the images were wanton destruction, that *some* of them had artistic merit and value;

> 'Most of it's a mess, just *scribbling* all over the walls, makes the place look run-down . . . we had some political stuff though, stuff about [George] Bush, he had big Mickey Mouse ears, think it was stencilled. We had to get rid of it, been called up by a member of public . . . But that kind of stuff, that's alright, some of those murals as well, they're quite funny, I don't really mind them . . .' (personal communication).

Unlike the anti-graffiti authorities, they did make distinct divisions between the varieties of graffiti that existed in the landscape. Their day-to-day work consisted of erasing *particular*, *specific* instances of graffiti, as instructed by either local environmental officers or as requested by members of the public, and although there was a certain amount of spontaneous and unprompted removal, for the most part it was prearranged; they had a list, a catalogue of graffiti that was due for removal, and they simply went through it systematically. This procedure in itself had led to dilemmas in removing some graffiti, instances where the act of removal was seen by them to be image-destruction, rather than simply the removal *of* destruction.

> 'We were cleaning off this one bit, think it was by "Lone" [a local infamous graffiti artist], round the back of those garages. So we started taking it off, and this guy came out, started going mad at us. It [the graffiti] was like a big face, it was alright, more like a mural, but we'd been asked to take it off, so we had to do it. He was really pissed off, but we painted it over, we had to do it you see. Some of them look quite good, he does nice stuff, but we've got to cover them up' (personal communication).

The graffiti removers actively respected a number of graffiti artist's designs, they saw many of them as artists, not vandals, and did regret, did feel somewhat remorseful in having to remove their work. There was no doubt that a creative distinction was clearly being made when it appeared that the graffiti had an overt point (social or political), a specific task (prevention of graffiti tagging, provision of social cohesiveness), or just simply looked 'artistic' in their eyes (generally the larger, colourful images rather than letter based forms). In such cases, it was deemed to be acceptable and more often than not left untouched unless *explicitly* requested. There was a frustration at the frequency of the return of the images after they had been erased, but this was mixed with a sneaking admiration for the voracious appetite that the graffiti artists exhibited. And although they could not really understand the specific motivation for the production of the images, they appreciated the obvious enthusiasm and passion that stimulated the graffiti artists.

Their connection, apart from being in some way cyclical, was also a *symbiotic relationship*. Both artist and remover explicitly *relied* on each

other, the artist for space to be created for new work (and perhaps for the illicit edge of the medium to be retained), the remover to keep themselves in gainful employment. This was an overt consideration made by the removers; they completely understood and found almost comical that their livelihoods depended on the very creation of graffiti. One must consider that the anti-graffiti industry is a multi-billion pound business in the United Kingdom alone, London contributing to an estimated £100 million a year (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/1972248.stm), thus the strange situation arises where the industry as a whole in fact *needs* graffiti to survive; there is the notion that the authorities will want a *certain* amount of graffiti removed, but if it is entirely consumed then the employment of removers is superfluous. This probably hints at some of the reasons for the mass confusion within anti-graffiti implementation amongst London boroughs, the numerous conflicting and contradictory procedures initiated and upheld by the different London councils. It would seem that within the iconoclash one could find 'a maze of all too human motives – desires for successful career, social acceptance, wealth.' And therefore, 'the purity of the motive . . . is polluted by the intrusion of merely human motives' (Pietz, 2002: 65). The removal of graffiti has simply become too much of a *political football*, used to score points, to win votes, to be seen to be fighting to keep the city clean. The very act of iconoclasm fails 'if any fragment escapes the destruction' (ibid.: 65), yet on the one hand it seems impossible that graffiti will ever be

completely vanquished, there is simply such a huge amount, and on the other hand, the anti-graffiti infrastructure could simply never condone its complete removal, as their very existence is dependent on graffiti's continuation.

On a personal level, as my research continued, whereas previously it had been the large graffiti murals, and especially the sardonic, witty, stencil-art that I found most enticing, it was the customarily regarded 'unsightly' graffiti tags that became increasingly fascinating to me; in fact, they became the aspects that I would look at and admire the most. I began to recognise and become knowledgeable of the various names and tags, the innumerable styles and designs, the various places each individual writer travelled and frequented. Furthermore, I started to decipher and appreciate some of the complex calligraphic skill involved in the production of many of the names, the way that many of the writers scrutinized and formed their tags in a similar way to how calligraphists create and dissect them. But even more important to me than the calligraphy, the complex, intricate styles, were the very *locations* that they were positioned in. Above just their aesthetic element was this strange thrill you could encounter when stumbling upon a tag you recognised in an area you had never seen them before. Their very frequency became an appreciated factor in and of itself, as did the admiration of observing them in seemingly unreachable locations. Of course, there were many tags that had little or no significance, but the more I recognised specific tags, the more I could differentiate and distinguish between them, the more efficacy they seemed to exert upon me. One of my favourites was 'Soulman', a prolific and infamous North London graffiti artist. He was 37 years old, unemployed, with an ASBO preventing him from carrying a felt tip pen, let alone a can of spray paint. He was due in court during the time of this writing on graffiti charges, after having only recently spent nine months in prison for a similar conviction; he was a graffiti addict, unable to stop. When I used to see his tags, to distinguish the simply written name, 'Soulman . . .' always with the three dots after the name, as if saying, 'I'm here again . . .' there was something so very *personal* in witnessing them, something that sincerely affected me, made me genuinely sense and perceive his character, to truly feel like his 'extended personhood' was acting upon me. Now, he would probably laugh at me if I told him this, would probably think I was philosophising about it too much. But just as with the majority of my other informants, the more I would talk to him, the more I would hear *him* talk about it, the further these issues would emerge and become manifest.

For me, the city must be seen as a place of varied and diverse *social practices* not simply as an entity of set, inflexible means; the city is a social form, not just a collection of dispassionate physical objects. Graffiti makes apparent a lack of social accord, a discourse of disagreement, a conflict,

which I would suggest, can be seen to actively create, rather than negate, democracy. Simply by forming an overt sign of a public discource, its occurence can thus reaffirm the open nature of a truly democratic society. The artists are quite conscious of the fact that any attempt for compromise over their aesthetics is rather pointless, they are aware that these judgements are always open to questioning and uncertainty. Thus their task is merely to see alternative ways of approaching public space, to find unconventional ways of reintegrating themselves with their landscape, to attempt a *meaningful* connection with their surroundings. Of course, I am by no means suggesting that all graffiti is intentionally or consciously provoking a debate about the use of public space, and equally I am not trying to suggest that every artist is involved in street-art for completely altruistic reasons. Perhaps some artists see their work as being a springboard into the design or art-world as a whole, but very few of those whom I worked with were in any way consciously taking this route. (Of course the renowned street-artist Banksy is an obvious suspect to suggest that graffiti-art *is* consciously attempting to break into the mainstream, and is thus just another aesthetic form to be appropriated by the neo-liberal art-market, but he himself acknowledges the ridiculous nature of the *aura* surrounding him – particularly of the prices his works now sell for. For more see his website, www.banksy.com, and specifically his latest print *I can't believe these morons actually buy this shit*).

Still, I would contend that no other aesthetic form intermingles, enmeshes itself so deeply within our daily lives, using urban space as both its specific medium *and* body. Graffiti can thus awaken us to otherwise hidden arguments, can hint and insinuate at different ways of approaching our world, re-affirming the city as a place of social discussion and heterogeneity, rather than austere social hegemony. Perhaps the only way for us to reach beyond this dreaded cycle of 'fascination, repulsion, destruction' (Latour, 2002: 15) is by attempting to encounter the city and public space in a fresh, innovative manner, to recognise that this apparent *destruction* is in fact leading us to a more nuanced and grander question, that of the very nature and significance of our urban landscape itself.

Notes

1. All names used in this article have been changed so as to protect the identity of both the artists and authorities alike.
2. The images within this paper have been left intentionally untitled; they have not been used to 'illustrate' arguments within the text but rather to simply confer a heightened visual appreciation of the diverse nature of graffiti within London today.

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