

Urban Creativity Online Talks

Talk #2 - Craig Castleman

With Indague and Contorno Urbano

Transcription

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Dialogue and Q&A

Craig Castleman is the author of seminal "Getting Up: Subway Graffiti In New York" originally published by MIT press, cult book for the graffiti/street art subculture and mandatory bibliographic reference in the academic field.

Advised at Columbia University by Margaret Mead, famous anthropologist known for her work on the relationship of culture and personality and Loius Forsdale that suggested: "this isn't the time to worry about why people write and fight graffiti, because we aren't sure yet jus what it is that they are doing. Find that out first. People can argue about what it all means later on."

We also share the room with the organisations Contorno Urbano and Indague, who developed in 2019 with Craig the Castleman Tour: a project in Spain with 16 events, an exhibition and the launch of the book Getting Up again: 40 years later, made it possible with the support of community writers in crowdfunding strategy.

Project Contorno Urbano and Indague Kickstarter book publishing idea. Craig Castleman. Tour in Spain, several spaces in Spain.

Esteban: For me, it was one of the best projects. Fernando called me one day and told me about Craig and about this idea about bringing to Craig to Spain. But no funds. We can make a new book around the anniversary of the book and at the same time bring Craig to do a tour. It was beautiful because you see a lot of people here in Spain. Because we have an earlier edition of the book, a lot of people knew

the book of Craig. And for other people, the book was an inspiration. It was a year ago and we're planning something more with him. The important part of the project is to not lose what Craig had because he has a big archive – anecdotes, stories. In a way he was forgotten, he got away from the movement. It was a cool thing to do and for me it was really special.

Pedro: We were talking about the first contacts. The idea is to have Esteban and Jaume explain their experience and then open for dialogue.

Esteban: For me, the most important thing I learned about the book in the tour was the thing, writers wanted to make art and now a lot of people consider it vandalism but they just wanted to make art. That speaks to me really strongly.. For me, it was a fine arts, writing, starting to paint, graffiti was the door for everything else. Especially for everything I am. Graffiti was clearly a door for it, an educational tool to accomplish some things. Introduce them to other things.

Craig: I've always been attracted to graffiti, but I have a different definition of graffiti, art that is given out of love of art, it's given for free. It's not that people paying for art is bad, but graffiti is free. So, what attracted me to graffiti in NY was the fact that the kids who were doing it were doing it for the love of art, to share their art, and to reach out to others, to share their ideas. It's not a bad thing that Basquiat or Haring made money on their art, but graffiti is free. Same for rap, it's free. The real delight comes from art that is given freely and is done just for the love of it. I grew up in South America and there would be spontaneous calypsos in the street, and it was free. And you just enjoyed it. I also saw tags and pieces around town. It wasn't really

until I met the writers that I realized that it was done for free, to get out their ghettos that they lived in, we were all trapped in our ghettos.

Esteban: Do you think graffiti and hip hop have educational value, when you say to your students?

Craig: I was never a professor but a schoolteacher. Good teaching at least the teaching I enjoy is based on graffiti, giving it for free because you love it. I'm the beneficiary of all these free wonderful ideas. Graffiti...education as its best is graffiti. It's people sharing their treasures with one another. I spent more than 40 years being the beneficiary of gifts. All I had to do was go in a room and sit down and people gave me gifts. The graffiti movement in NY was that writ large – giving to everyone not just me.

I left the US when I was four, but I can remember rap from my neighborhood...the kids in my neighborhood, we all knew rhyming slang, we knew how to rap on people's mothers. For example, "Your mother's a door handle, everyone gets a turn.... Your mother's a pie, everyone gets a slice."

When I lived in Suriname for six years, I used to go to singing. The men worked in the mines and the women worked in the city, they would take up with women and then return to the mines. This was a society of women and (??)-singing. Go to a house of a woman whose man had left her, take her to the house of a woman with a man and sing to cheer her up. They'd sing these songs about the man's shortcomings to warn the woman. I can remember all the songs. They're all gone now within the culture. They were just sharing their love for each other. No one was mad at the woman who got the man, but thought they ought to warn that he'll go to the corner and drink all your money away.

I'm not a big talker, my whole life is sitting around listening to other people. I'm not an artist, I'm not an art critic. And I haven't kept up with graffiti. I was too busy learning about other stuff. You've never lived until you...I've taught English to kids from >100 countries. When graffiti disappeared, it broke my heart and you invited me to Spain! You're still giving for free! Contorno – they go into a little plaza, find a neighborhood – white cardboard boxes, make a wall and put out a bunch of paint and all of a sudden everyone's painting. It's not just the painting, it's the talking, laughing,

competing, the language is beautiful. I took a bunch of bad pictures and I took a book written by my students and submitted it for a doctorate. I didn't need a doctorate. My life is one for stealing from children!

Eyena: Why is graffiti dead in NY?

Craig: Graffiti disappeared into NY because of prosperity. When it was poor, I could see beautiful murals on every train, the train traveled throughout. The city was bankrupt and no one worried about it. The kids made the city more beautiful. As the city grew more prosperous, gentrified – the city changed. All of that was stopped by the police just like the graffiti was stopped. 100s of millions spent to clean the trains, there was a war against graffiti. Many of people loved it.

Craig: Jaume – the great artist. Ramon is a new dad, a great artist and he just finished his dissertation. I'd love to learn some stuff from all of you. My email ccastleman@hotmail.com

Pedro: I will share all the emails to you. I will share to the group. Regarding this moment, where you had your class when you wrote your Getting Up book, while you were being advised by a major name in sociology. So, while you were on this dynamic and you felt this toward graffiti, were there were some moments where you had hope, hope for the world? We're talking about this almost 40 years later, indeed this is a global moment. People look to creation in public space, how people use art...to extend the borders of art in public so everyone can benefit. Did you feel that graffiti could extend hope?

Craig: Graffiti has been around forever. There's a war against graffiti, Free art is somehow subversive. Graffiti painted on trains is subversive. I'd read stuff on bathroom walls, hearing all kinds of music on the street. What my students were doing was another form of graffiti. My students write books – My job is to teach them to read and write English. I get them to read and write about what interests them. Whatever it is. My job is to get them to write about it and then read other's works. Only one got published about Subway graffiti. My students are endlessly creative. I have to say that my experience with Subway Graffiti changed my life, my enthusiasm, the creativity that

my students brought to that...changed me. I had gone to school my whole life and was taught some things. At the High School of Art and Design, I saw what my students were doing, it wasn't a good time to be talking, but to listen. I never felt a great obligation to teach people to do grammar but to listen and get them to talk about what they were interested in. My life expanded tremendously. I met all kinds of people and heard great stories.

Jaume: Graffiti is free of charge. Brilliant insights, great scholarship and they don't charge anyone.

Emma Love: You've never been forgotten to me. You're the first line of a thesis I'm writing. I just wanted to tell you that you're not forgotten. This book is actually, vitally important still and had a profound impact on me and my research. My life revolves around graffiti. I'm an academic not a academic. I teach, my teaching pedagogy is quite holistic, and people should have an opportunity to be creative. I'm also a photographer of graffiti. I wanted to say thank you, it's a real honor to see you. How you described graffiti- art that's free, I might have another quote for my thesis. So, thank you.

Craig: Please write me. Thank you for buying the book! It's nice to see it out there. The thing I want to remind you of is that it's really not my book, it's just channeling stuff from the kids. They're communicating to you through the book the same way they did for me.

Jaume: One of the most interesting things that Craig made with this book is that they [the students] fix our methodology, a field, approach for other researchers. He spoke about students, ethical codes, subcultural structure, styles, and only people understand that Subway Art is a kind of Bible. Many writers always think that Subway Art changed our life but like Moses with the 10 commandments, is like Moses for me. How was that as a PhD researcher, how he can mix the information that he takes from the students? How was it...the process?

Craig: I've been doing the same thing with my students forever. I grew up in a great era, the era of social psychology, animal and human communication. Everybody was excited about what was going on - not why, it wasn't theoretical, just wanted to know what was going on. Every class I taught

including preschool, we begin by doing field research, you can explain it to everyone. Observation: go out and look at something and come back and tell us. Survey go ask people a question and bring back an answer. For example, Neighborhood Chinese restaurants serve fried chicken, go out and ask people why they eat fried chicken at a Chinese restaurant. Then do interviews - We started with the observation. They talked to find out how people feel about it, what words they use. Interview in depth. Then, go out after the interview, conduct an experiment. Put out a blank sheet of paper in the hallway and see what happens. Just asking students to explore the world and report on it.

Jaume: I know you work with students. How was the moment that you decide to transform a little bit of work to a big book?

Craig: Well, I was a graduate student and was going for a Masters, picking classes to get my teaching certificate. I was teaching at the same time. When my students came up with all this good stuff, I gave a copy to one of my professors, Margaret Mead. She said it should be a doctoral dissertation. I had no intention of doing a doctorate. But I was on scholarship and it was free. I never had an intention of writing books.

Jaume: That moment they were not great photographers: Martha and Harry, they are known about graffiti, but they started with you, this project.

Craig: With Henry, I was taking the worst anthropology class in the world, [the professor] was all about these theories, his class was boring. I wanted to get out of the class. I made a deal. This class is anthropology and art, can I talk about the graffiti? He said sure. I went to class, showed slides, and pictures. After the class, this guy, Henry Chalfant walked up and he showed me his pictures. And they were magnificent. He had these magnificent photographs. His work is art. I met Martha too, photographer of NY post, she was a superhero. She went all over the city listening to a scanner to get the photographs of fire and murders. She took these gorgeous photos of children. She's an artist. I taught a class for her husband.

Pedro: In Getting up book introduction - you have a quote from a professor that suggested it was not time to worry

about why people write and fight graffiti, this war because they weren't sure just what they are doing. First find out, then people can argue about what it all means later. This is s thing from that time. Do you think we got to the later?

Craig: I think there are people who figure out why – that's not mine. One of the reasons for this quote, is that a sociologist named Nathan Glazer had just written an article about how graffiti was a sign of the collapse of society and if anyone caught a child writing graffiti, they should beat them up. Glazer said you should beat students up, put them in jail because they were motivated by the desire to destroy. They'll destroy the world. I read the article. We had coffee and talked, and he said he changed his mind. [Describing Nathan]: I realize that they were doing it for the love of art, for the love of other people. He got it from reading the book. People who explore the why – they need more information. From vandalism to this vast appreciation for the kids. My students supplied the what and then it's up to others to come up with the more complicated. Kids are so often misunderstood.

Isabel Carrasco: https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/on-subway-graffiti-in-new-york. I think your tour should be done on a regular basis. You're not only a reference for graffiti, you're also a reference in the human dimension., you're great company. I think what is necessary is to do the NY tour, when is the last time you're in NY? Would you like to return to NY? I remember an anecdote, it stuck with me about one of your students who was visually impaired...

Craig. I found some old black and white pictures, my pictures were in a box or an old suit case in the garage so I started scanning the black and whites. One of the pictures brought back a memory of a kid I met at 149th street. There was this kid who was with his father, an MTA employee. His father had been coming home telling him about the art. The kid was blind and got excited – the father got expert on graffiti because he was on the trains. The kid said he wanted to do this. The father and son went out with spray paint and markers and the father helped him do this. He would have been fired from MTA, but it was worth it for his son and his son became a name on the train.

I'll turn 67 this week, I'm an old man, traveling doesn't

come easy. The reason I didn't continue doing stuff about graffiti, nothing could beat teaching those classes. Coming to Spain and meeting all these wonderful writers, it was such a great experience, I don't think I would want to do it again. One of the great experiences of my life. NY is not my NY. I love bankrupt, dangerous NY. I love the old NY. To hear Bushwick is occupied, it was a great place because no one had any money. One year, I had students gather the cocoons of moths – My students did amazing things, the people did amazing things. The 1970s were amazing, the changes broke my heart. I did go back to Spain, I was there in 1971. I was afraid that if I came back again, people might be disappointed.

Alicia: Reflectively – what is some of the feedback you've had from your students about the style of teaching you've used. Any of the students from the graffiti still in contact.

Craig: I haven't kept up with any students. After I got my doctorate, I wasn't hired back at Art and Design because with a doctorate thy had to pay me an additional \$200. The students, they owe me nothing. I'm there to enjoy. I'm a hedonist, there to enjoy. I don't think I did much good. I did some work at a state prison. They have so much stuff to teach me, although I got fired. In a high security prison, you have the crazy and great philosophers, wonderful art, tattoos, drawings upon walls. I got fired there because I taught a prisoner Allah in Arabic. I was branded a subversive!

Eynat: I personally am doing my PhD, researching the topic of the municipal side. Graffiti is a responsive thing, so much research about the arts. It's very interesting to see the reactions. How do you think graffiti has changed the urban landscape? As a visitor, why do you think graffiti is flourishing in Spain and in Portugal? Because you're a visitor you see things differently. There's an association about signs, in Texas I think they would love to hear that story.

Craig: Because I grew up overseas, the US government thought I was deprived. So, in 1971, when I turned 18, the government gave me a trip around the world for free. My favorite place in Israel was Haifa. There was a lot of graffiti, lots of free stuff going on. I don't have to feel guilty about being a nonobservant Jew, it made me feel good about

myself to be in Israel. You're home, welcome home. You should write to me and I would love to hear more about your dissertation. Is there still a lot of graffiti in Israel?

Eynat: In Jerusalem, there's no graffiti. In Tel Aviv, everywhere. In Haifa, there's some strong crews.

Craig: I haven't done anything with graffiti since around 1982. I wasn't aware that it was an international phenomenon. That same spirit of love is still motivating people. It makes me happy that people are trying to make the world more beautiful. I know a little Yiddish, I would see Yiddish graffiti.

Pedro: Jim Prigoff didn't cross your path, you met in those days. But you never met before. Hopefully you can exchange some ideas here.

Craig: Jim Prigoff wrote a great book! '

Manel: After traveling the superman of graffiti, you got forgotten but then come back to the scene. In the couple of years you came back, have you been following it, the new artists, the new styles?

Craig: Now that I have friends like you, of course, I'm following it to see what's going on. The Sugarman comparison is not really a good comparison. When Sugarman was discovered he was an artist who had art to share with people. I don't. There'd be no reason to come back on tour because I'm not an artist.

Manel: You as a follower of street art or graffiti, in 40 years, you didn't follow any graffiti. Are you following in the last year?

Craig: The way of sharing is that I get emails with beautiful photographs and in this way I get to share with people I know and care about and I get the real feel of it. I don't follow the subject (magazines), I'm a primitive thinker, not a scholar. I'm interested in the people. For example, I don't know or follow anybody in Nigeria or Argentina because I don't know people there.

Jaume: People think that he was a kind of superstar and I can see clearly that he is a shy teacher but when you give it

more than 20 minutes he transforms into a real superstar. Do you remember that we make some interviews on Spanish TV, a documentary, how do you feel about this?

Craig: I felt, for a teacher, it's strange to be a shy person in front of people. In the classroom, I don't talk at all. I put a question on the blackboard and let others talk. I find myself boring. I found interviews strange. I've read many books about graffiti, but I can't read my own. I haven't read it since I read the galley's in 1981. I was amazed that anyone was interested in meeting me. I don't think it was me, I think it was the students and the stories that I channeled through me. I don't have an art. The idea..I don't think they see me as anything except the person who can bring the message. I have nothing to offer of my own, I have not artistry. I did see myself on TV and it was embarrassing. I can't speak Spanish, here I was on TV using bad grammar.

Paz: I'm not a academic or a researcher. I like something you said from the beginning. Your definition of graffiti as free art. I relate to this a lot. It's the most generous thing in this world to do something for others to see and enjoy. It's been good during lockdown to see little things around London. Coming from minorities, around London, lots of artists, and graffiti, and streetart. What do you think about division between graffiti and street art? What is your opinion?

Craig: It's an interesting question. There is accepted public art that's usually paid for and there's the art that's given for free that is as beautiful as that, that is rejected. All I can do is report – Orozco, or Diego Rivera was still for love of art, for love of humanity. They got paid so they can eat but it isn't graffiti, art that's given for free. That's the difference. That's why people say it's ugly, bad. Even if it's paid for, Rivera's mural in Rockefeller Center was torn down because it had Marx. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington will be there forever, but beautiful works of art were destroyed because they were free. Talking about Paz's art in her space, "This is your graffiti, you're channeling graffiti."

Pedro: Sharing content. That's graffiti.

Craig: You get all these wonderful people together. It appears and then it disappears. I would have liked to see Jim.

Pedro: He doesn't assume himself (Jim) as an artist. Craig, you'd make a great documentary. Not as an expert, but as a person. So, keep aware of that!

Craig: I think that...I wish that we had a documentary of our trip to Spain, not of me, but of the incredible people we met. I wish I had made a documentary. I wish I could share what I've seen. I don't think a documentary about me would be that interesting. But I've seen miracles, I've seen interesting things in my life, and I wish I could share them.

Pedro: I understand the thing about documentary, the thing you do with your students is just amazing. Do you have other projects with your students that could be published?

Craig: Every semester my students do this great research. I was teaching in Seattle; where they said all of your students will be Vietnamese. They told me what room to go to – all of these kids were sitting there and didn't "look Vietnamese." I thought I must have come to the wrong room. They responded to me in Vietnamese, the children of American soldiers, completely rejected. They spoke no English and they were Vietnamese. That year they made movies. They spent the whole year making movies. I have papers that the students wrote – amazing and wonderful things. The thing was for them to learn to read and write. We would get excited about a subject and they would read and write about it. In the closet, there are 1000s of papers written by students. For example, a Haitian student wrote about writing love potions. I have tons of material. But, I've never thought about doing anything with it. It was just so much fun getting it all. Maybe when I'm dead it will be like Emily Dickinson and someone will find the box. The things I've had to learn. You couldn't say no to Margaret Mead. I wouldn't have published except for her insistence.

Jim Prigoff: It's wonderful to see you. You're a mensch. A modest, warm human being. It's the essence of learning. What you've shared is about learning. I've watched this develop into an art form. I stayed on the train, you got off. If you get back in touch with it, you'll have all the same smiles. The growth of graffiti is exponential. You said that graffiti changed your life but I have a t-shirt that says graffiti saved my life. So many of their [graffiti writers] friends are RIP, after having come into gangs. I'm not creating art, I'm

documenting and trying share what I see. What you have and what you brought today is a great gift – insight. Thank you.

Craig: It's such an honor to meet you. You really do take the photographs. I had students who did the work. Color xerox was rare!

Jim Prigoff: You have so many good quotes from writers. I still know them personally, and, am still in touch with them. (e.g., Lee, not only a good artist but a super human being.)

Craig: Meeting you and meeting the people in Spain is like the experience of meeting Margaret Mead...to meet exceptional people. I had the same experience of meeting Lee, when he was a 16 year old kid. You know when you're in the presence of someone great. He took my breath away. So did Blade.

Jim Prigoff: Blade's in Florida – I knew him when he was a cabdriver in NYC.

Craig: I'm glad you kept this alive.

Jim: I wanted to give dignity to young people who were creating images, they were expressing their feelings and relationship with the community, to the culture they lived in – (haves and have nots).

Craig: I never thought I'd meet you in person.

Jim: I waited until age 92 to just get together.

Craig: It's the model – you must be a Rolls Royce, at 92, you look younger than me. You're a lot sharper.

Jim: You're too modest. I'll settle for 100!

Craig: There are still Model T fords driving around because they're a good model. I'm more like a Yugo.

Jim: We're both street people.

Pedro: Because you've so many experiences and we're dealing with a specific period of time. What capacity to do what we're doing now can improve the present situation?

How can we use this experience to improve the next step post-Covid?

Jim: It's hard to predict where this art form will go. Maybe a more capitalist form – as writers bring up children and families. Will it follow the same trajectory as Lee's Bondi, Blade, etc., ? I don't think so, I think what will come in the future will be different. It's different in terms of training – such as Shepard Fairey people going to art school. I don't know if that will be repeated, because they'll come out of training and will be at a different Tracy168 learning how to draw his first Tracy's or wild style. All art forms evolve and other art forms take their place.

Craig: Ditto. There's nothing I can say to replace that. It will live on in new forms. There will always be that affection for the world and it will take new forms. “

Pedro: Graffiti in every sense, it's not just the canonic image of graffiti. I know there's a moment in NY. But it's also temporal and something connected to human nature.

Craig: Coronavirus graffiti – would be a great documentary. People want to share with neighbors and they want to reach out. Kids in NY were trapped in gang ridden neighborhoods or wealthier neighborhoods – they were reaching out to one another. At the Writer's Corner – they would be from everywhere. They were trapped. Right now, we're seeing a whole new form of graffiti. As people share their affection to one another. I walk my dog and people who have never spoken to us call out to us. Everyone in Santa Fe is an artist, people are hanging out their art everywhere.

Jim: In San Francisco, people are painting the boarded up buildings. Graffiti has been with this world forever, we start in minus 60000, graffiti in every period of creation. From 1969 to present, is just one segment of graffiti. There will be other segments. I went to MIT – the tech review published an article about me. They had to write someone to write a negative article. Spray Can Art sold >250,000 copies.

Craig: Got the book at the time and I liked it. I don't own very many books on the subject, I own yours. My history with MIT was that they very reluctantly published it. I don't think it sold 10,000 copies. Whatever they're still selling is

part of the original run. When I sent them the manuscript, they crossed out all the fucks and shits. I said, You're taking direct quotations out. It's what they said." We had this huge debate. I told MIT, forget the whole thing. They left them in. Graffiti Civilization history of graffiti (Volume 1) is a great book!

Jim: In Pompeii, they unearthed graffiti that said, "I cannot understand how this wall can be standing because of the weight of so much graffiti."

Pedro from Jaume: What's the future sense of graffiti books?

Craig: As long as they're producing graffiti there will be graffiti books. There's a huge future for graffiti books. There's all different types – there's those who document, there's those whose own art informs them. Henry and Martha are artists, they're not just snapshots, they're art.

Jim: As long as something is happening, there will be room for books.

Pedro: There may be books, there may be a documentary. I will try to arrange another talk where you can join and share again. If you manage to have Lee, a common person between you two that would be great!!

Craig: I hope this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship for all of us!!

Jim: We're passing the baton onto the next generation.

Pedro: Thank you for everything. I will share everyone's emails.

