

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

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Introduction

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

- Carlo McCormick, “Art in The Streets”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Graffiti has the ability to be at once exclusionary, private, and mysterious, and at the same moment actively public, participatory and consumable. Graffiti, in this balancing act, is an apt example of an art practice which has found its own internal balance in a productive resistance to these external forces.

Context

Graffiti has been both romanticized and popularized as more people are given access to its language. In Toronto, there are graffiti-writing workshops, paid tours led by guides and government-funded public art initiatives.³ Buying into programming or purchasing the experiences of a subculture is not to belong to one, and authenticity is a major point of contention amongst graffiti writers. As Bourdieu outlined, the familiarization and commitment to a subculture is a long process, and perhaps this is the ultimate sign of authenticity: committing and spending a lifetime developing status and knowledge about a certain subcultural practice. To be accepted within the subculture is an earned status, but in order for graffiti to remain relevant and not completely condemned by the public, graffiti must also become accessible to those outside of the subculture.

Toronto holds close to 3 million inhabitants within 630km², and though the official borders of the downtown core are often contested amongst locals, it is a small 17km² radius, as shown in the figure below. As Toronto's population increases rapidly each year, housing and density issues mean there are more and more people living outside of the "official" downtown core, creating

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

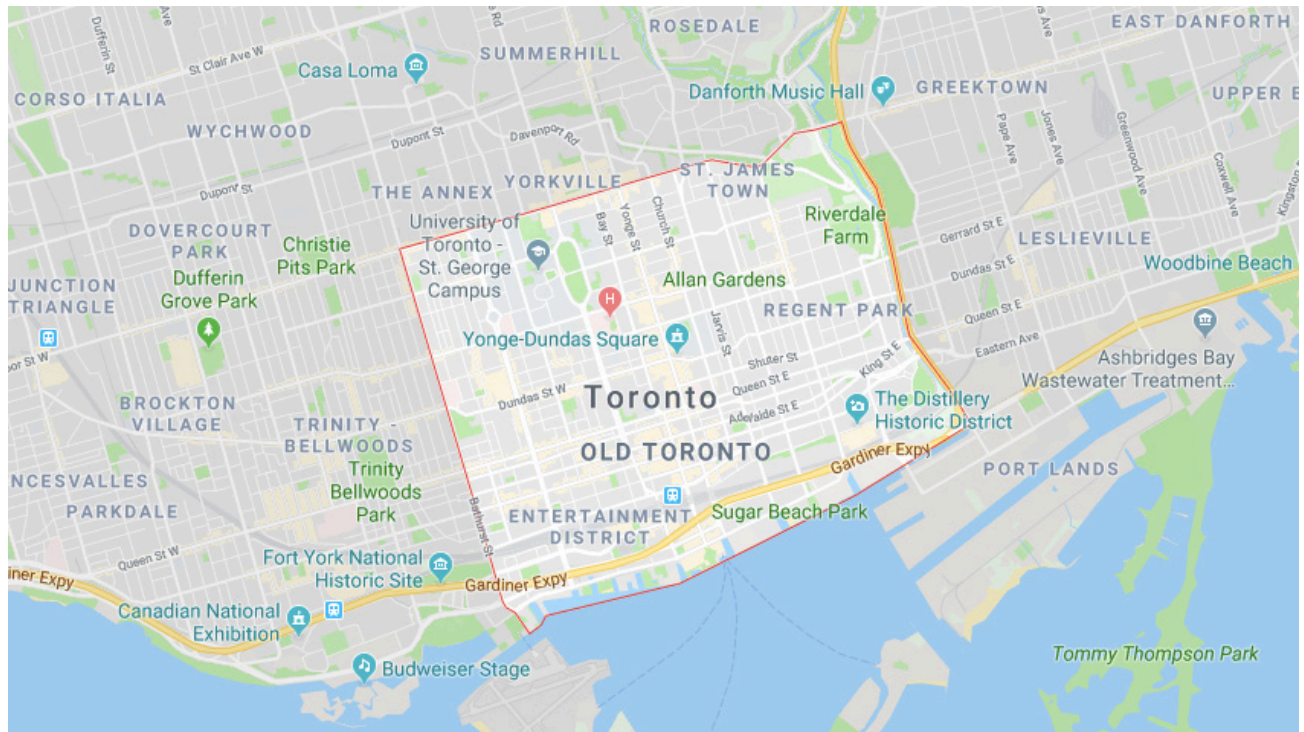


Figure 1 Map of Downtown Toronto. Google Maps.

additional central cores east, west and north of the city centre. In part due to this density, Toronto streets, both residential and commercial, are covered in graffiti tags. Mailboxes, lamp posts, brick walls and fences all hold names of passers-by, of graffiti writers on their evening strolls. And although much graffiti is quite visible, there is just as much that goes unseen. Despite its presence on public (and private) properties throughout the urban landscape, graffiti in Toronto also exists in the darkness of subway tunnels, maze-like alley systems, and behind the closed doors of bar bathrooms.

Graffiti's essential character lies in both its desire to be seen and its ability to blend in. As tags are buffed away or replaced by others, what remains is the persistence of this practice, and of its subculture, despite the impermanence of its marks.

In 1999, researcher Tracey Bowen published an essay entitled *Graffiti Art: A Contemporary Study of Toronto Artists*.⁴ In it, six artists are interviewed about

their education, perspective on graffiti as an art form, and personal aspirations. Bowen's paper, though quite similar in format to this one, differs greatly in its themes and conceptual considerations. The focus on education, for example, produces an interesting pedagogical lens, giving these artists the space to provide feedback to art teachers and institutions regarding decision-making about which art is *worthy* of teaching (or supporting). The study's concern with the artists' education also seems to decide that graffiti falls into two categories, self-taught or formally trained, corresponding to the dichotomy Bowen presents between "*Vandalism or Self-Expression?*" To which my research replies, why not both? Bowen's research presents an image of Toronto graffiti artists who are eager to expand their practices beyond terms like vandalism, hoping that graffiti will gain the respect of Toronto's general population as well as its galleries. This desire reinforces the idea that graffiti requires some institutionally recognizable acknowledgements in order

toronto Artists." *Studies in Art Education* 41, no. 1 (1999): 22-39.
doi:10.2307/1320248.

⁴ Bowen, Tracey E. "Graffiti Art: A Contemporary Study of To-



Figure 2 A graffiti writer and surrounding alleyway graffiti in Toronto. Sabourin, Rachele. *Untitled*. 2014.

to be “legitimate”. The general conclusions of Bowen’s research include graffiti’s existence as both vandalism and art but speaks only about murals within the interviews. By selecting artists who produce murals, especially legal ones, Bowen’s research is limited in its consideration of “graffiti”, an intrinsically rebellious and criminal art, and again turns *vandalism* into a moralizing word instead of an honest one. Despite its flaws, this earlier study is an important mirror against which to reflect on my own research, and to continue cataloguing the growth of Toronto’s graffiti scene.

Methodology

This paper focuses on illegal tagging; as such, I have used open-ended interviews to allow artists to speak candidly about their practices without compromising their anonymity. This research has been approved by the OCAD University Research Ethics Board, which required that my

method of approach, research and storage of data ensure that all practitioners were given anonymity and their privacy respected. My desire to speak with artists who feel less connected to a subculture was intentional, as I believe this provides a new set of perspectives from the outside looking in. The context of each interview participant is also important to frame this paper’s findings; due both to the Research Ethics Board process and the comfort of the participants with disclosing personal information, this context is necessarily limited in detail. Their age and locations provide a balanced spread across the city, not focusing too intently on one particular demographic or neighbourhood. Differing sexes give light to power dynamics within the graffiti culture, as female-identifying writers face different challenges than males.⁵ Further

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



Figure 3 Examples of tags and throws in a Toronto alley. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2014.

research on the demography, social class and psychology of writers in the community would prove fascinating, but is beyond the scope of investigation in this paper.

I posed the following open-ended questions to the practitioners/artists that I interviewed:

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

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

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

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

Prior to conducting my primary research, I had to consider my own expectations and assumptions about graffiti and graffiti artists. I have encountered a variety of

personalities and methodologies while participating in international Street Art and Urban Creativity conferences in Portugal and Sweden, and locally within Toronto's graffiti community.

Having spent the past seven years participating in and researching graffiti culture, my attraction to the practice has changed. Instead of being fiercely defensive of graffiti's radicality, my research and writing have led me to believe that perhaps this radicality is no longer relevant to graffiti, at least as it is practiced in Toronto, where the potentially political nature of this practice manifests largely as the personal expression of white males who feel the call to commit a petty crime while walking home from a night out. I do not want to dismiss the interesting psychology of this desire, but instead seek to readjust my understanding of what this practice consists of, in this moment, in this city. It reminded me that the central themes of my thesis — persistence and permanence — are still central considerations, regardless of any greater intention behind a graffiti writer's tags. Graffiti's ability to adapt to the forces attempting to eliminate it is evident across history and geography, and it is this ability to



Figure 4 A piece by Toronto graffiti writer ROBOT. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2015.



Figure 5 A selection of tags on a garage door in Toronto. Sabourin, Rachelle. *Untitled*. 2016.

persist which renders the practice permanent. I was once resistant to graffiti's popularization, assuming the position of a "purist" who believed it only belongs to those who practice it; through my research, I have come to see graffiti's ability to exist and thrive as based instead in its ability to participate in popular culture. Now, I am more impressed by its clever flexibility than its rigid exclusivity.

Primary Research Findings

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

Part 1: Subculture & Community

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

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

Practitioner #2 (P2): Although Practitioner #2 paints alone almost exclusively, they do feel connected to the greater community through the ability to read and identify the work of other graffiti writers throughout the city. The choice to paint with other people must be made carefully, as it can often be more dangerous than working alone

if fellow writers are loud, fail to watch for passersby, or encroach on existing tags or pieces. P2 feels there are fewer territory divisions in Toronto now as opposed to ten or so years ago, and that the majority of conflicts between other writers has shifted from being about territory and instead has become increasingly personal or social. This adds to the careful consideration of whom to paint with, if anyone.

Practitioner #3 (P3): Practitioner #3 feels that there is a gender disparity in the community. Women stick with women and men stick with men. This separation creates a gap in the community and can cause people to feel alienated or discriminated against despite the shared practice between genders. P3 tended to paint with other people when they were most active in previous years, finding it safer and more comfortable.

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

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

P2: P2 also felt that attitude was the greatest signifier of a writer. They believe that many people are able to look like a writer, but all those that do probably are not part of the "scene" (subculture). The ability to buy into the culture, through certain clothing brands for example, is a form of commodification, which removes graffiti from its truest form: saying "fuck you" to anyone, and anything of authority. P2 was clear that it takes research to be fully integrated into this practice, knowing the greater North

American or European history of the practice, the most influential writers, and who in your city is “up” the most. This is not a skill that can be attained just by looking like someone who is interested in it.

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

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

P1: P1 feels that writers who feel “above” being a part of a subculture will say it does not exist in Toronto, but the one that does exist most prominently in Toronto feels more like a fine art scene, one that is focused on transitioning any illegal practice into a profitable one. At the very least, P1 feels they are aware of this subculture but not active within it, but graffiti will continue to persist, and it will also continue to change. These subcultures exist in Toronto because graffiti exists end-to-end in this city; there are differences between generations, neighbourhoods and approaches, but the practice is still prominent and is being produced by a variety of people which will produce a variety of subcultures, all connected by the practice. The access to different tools and mindsets (some writers are destructive, some are more creative, some are just out to have fun) is what keeps writers separate.

P2: Like P1, P2 feels that yes, there is a wider culture of graffiti, but the separations within this culture are pared

down into smaller, more tightly knit groups. There is no assumed camaraderie amongst all writers; trust and respect must be earned and having to prove oneself is ultimately part of the subculture. However, it is possible to exist outside of this, and to avoid the social aspects of the practice, such as drinking or drug use.

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

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

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

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

P3: P3 feels that the audience is not a main consideration in their practice, it does not exist for anyone other than themselves. P3 is more concerned with painting for themselves. P3 did observe that businesses seemed to be a developing audience for graffiti, looking for artists

to add cultural value to their spaces by commissioning murals, though this seems to be a waning trend.

Part 1: Results

Attempts to identify the current graffiti community and subculture in Toronto located the writers as feeling affiliated with different ideologies of practice. The practitioners all indicated they are aware there is a greater community amongst all graffiti writers, that they feel a connection or tie to anyone who has pursued this practice, but this is not necessarily a social experience or one that causes direct engagement. In part due to my selection of interview participants, I was not wholly surprised to hear these answers. Writers are connected by their ability to read and produce graffiti and exist in smaller subdivisions categorized by location or style within this greater appreciation for the practice as a whole.

As described by Halsey and Young, artists occupy the “writer’s gaze,” which is an ability to see public, urban spaces in ways that the non-graffiti citizen cannot. Much as skateboarders are able to identify attainable sets of stairs or handrails to grind down, graffiti artists can identify opportune painting spots and how to reach them.⁶ After describing the “writer’s gaze” to all three practitioners, they agreed that this additional lens is an ability which connects them, as those outside of the practice may lack this ability. They are able to retain a mental rolodex of artists and their unique styles, as well as identify ideal painting spots which have excellent visibility. Responses to this framework also differ according to the sex of the writer. For female writers, it seems the community is much more connected, as this kind of immediate and physical support is a necessity for survival. In the context of a highly masculine and often sexist community, it is a challenging world for a woman to navigate alone. Men, especially white men, in graffiti practice have much lower stakes and a much smaller chance of being challenged or approached while painting. The implications of this reality can be quite dire. Personally, I have experienced gender-based violence while practicing graffiti in Toronto,

and because of this I am no longer a practitioner. In other conversations outside of this research, another female graffiti writer had mentioned she felt safer in terms of getting caught (police wouldn’t assume a woman was vandalizing) but far less safe painting in the streets in terms of the public (a neighbourhood vigilante protecting his property, or fellow writers). This is of course not always the case, but is a sentiment that I have heard multiple times.

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

Part 2: Persistence, Function and Public Space

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

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

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

Practitioner #2: Much like P1, P2 states, “The more you try and take it away, the more we will work to keep putting it up”. They believe that the illegality of graffiti is the essence of the practice, if graffiti were to become legal, it may become self-regulated within the community, in a sense policing itself.

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

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

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

Practitioner #2: P2 is also not opposed to festivals or publicly-funded programs relating to street art and graffiti. They believe that large-scale productions don’t incite change in the graffiti scene or community; it is a separate world which only includes more professional artists who are seeking payment for their work.

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

artists from possible opportunities. Community art projects need to be reflective of the communities they are attached to, including the medium and education level of the artists.

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

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

Practitioner #2: P2 reiterated an earlier point that the internet has been the largest source of change in the graffiti scene. If there are political writers, they are within their own circles and separate from the graffiti community that P2 resides in. Like P1, P2 feels that small acts like tagging are far less risky than greater acts of rebellion. P2 questions what it even means to be radical now, when there is a surplus of radicality in general as each news cycle brings more protests, policy changes and media debacles. The function of this practice is to make space for oneself.

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

Part 2: Results

Graffiti’s impermanent nature is not a flaw, but a necessary component to a coactive relationship. Some practitioners felt that if it were made entirely legal, it would still exist, but end up policing itself within the community.

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

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

When discussing the function of contemporary

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

Part 3: Risk & Reward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part 3 Results

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

Defining success seemed to be the question which caused the most pause: all three practitioners took their time in finding a succinct way to express their definition of success but were not able to elaborate; their answers felt more intuitive than previous answers. Some practitioners felt that they have a certain standard of quality to uphold, and this quality is more important than quantity (visibility). This is an ideology which separates some writers, as the pursuit of “getting up” and staying up can be wholly consuming irrespective of quality.

Part 4: Persistence & Permanence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part 4: Results

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

of writing graffiti, remains and continues to thrive. This duality between temporality and permanence is a unique quality of graffiti, and a unique quality for its practitioners. These two words, persistence and permanence, were not introduced to cause a division, but instead to weave an understanding of how they come together in complex ways throughout the graffiti vernacular.

Conclusion

Much like the human body produces chemicals to numb pain in order to produce acts of survival, graffiti also finds a way to persist despite its defensive state against constant threats of removal or erasure. This state of shock, of adrenaline, is mirrored in the practitioner's ability to climb a fence, scale a rooftop or creep along a train line in the dark – the precise skillset needed to execute this practice is unique, and the motivations, as we have discovered in this research, complex. It is obvious, but worth mentioning, how dangerous the world of graffiti can be, and how quickly serious, even fatal, mistakes can be made.⁷

To formally conclude anything about a practice which is inherently independent and flexible feels, at times, counterintuitive. My approach in this research has been to promote a more open understanding of the balance that graffiti, as a practice, has achieved between subversiveness and popularity, belonging and independence and, ultimately, permanence and persistence. My suspicions upon beginning this inquiry were rather pessimistic given my own bias on what constitutes authentic graffiti practices, but I have come to understand that despite erasure, commodification,

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

popularization, etc., graffiti finds a way to remain authentic due to the self-determined actuality of its practitioners who all possess different motivations, as seen in this primary research. Its ability to be both exclusive and accessible is a matter of preservation, and ultimately what keeps it from going extinct.

The subcultural communities stemming from graffiti have also changed, and so has their perceived value. In this study, those who do not directly participate in the subculture (in a crew, for example) still feel connected to it, with the understanding that they belong to a practice which requires (often a life-long) commitment to reading and writing a language unavailable to the general population.

This feeling of connection to a network-at-large is representative of social media's role in the changing culture of graffiti, as well. Instagram has enabled permanence through a digital archiving of once-temporary works, while also providing an online community for graffiti artists internationally. This cataloguing is adjacent to graffiti photography and videography, earlier modes of popular preservation.⁸ This capturing of ephemerality is thus not new to graffiti; but to conceive that the movement as a whole, through its constant replacing of removed work, is permanent, provides a unique perspective on the value of contemporary graffiti. Not just to validate individual pieces, but to understand that graffiti's value does not lie in transcending its existence (becoming 'valid art,' or by participating in larger political or cultural movements) but instead its significance lies precisely in its persistent presence, its very existence in the streets.

I began this project thinking I would set out to prove that graffiti is still a crucial tool of communication for subcultural groups and resistance used in urban spaces, regardless of the messaging conveyed. Instead, I have found that graffiti is far more impactful when viewed from a macro scale, shifting focus away from individual

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

works and their messaging and onto the practice as a whole, from the perspective of art history. Graffiti is a practice which escapes periodization and stylization and a practice which remains resistant to (and independent of) any one audience (the art-market, the education system, the subcultural realm, etc.). My primary research found that the individual perspectives of each practitioner contributes to this ability to persist, and the ability to redefine permanence in terms uncommon to other artistic practices. The flexibility graffiti has to move between audiences and value systems ensures that its practitioners are able to produce both legal and illegal work, maintaining graffiti's subversive nature. The potency of graffiti is in its radicality as an act, and as a practice, not in the individual works produced. Beyond the scope of this paper, there are still many more interviews and analyses to take place, and my hope is that this research may be a starting point for Toronto researchers specifically.

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

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