

The dialectics of graffiti studies a personal record of documenting and publishing on graffiti since 1988

Malcolm Jacobson
Department of Sociology, Stockholm University
S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden
mail@malcolmjacobson.org

Abstract

There is an abundance of books, magazines, films and internet-forums dedicated to graffiti. How this documentation has influenced and been a part of the graffiti subculture has not been studied much. Drawing on personal experiences, as a documentarian and publisher of graffiti media over 27 years, Malcolm Jacobson recollects how the positions of participant and observer incessantly have twisted around each other. This has been mediated through development in media technology as well as by the coming of age of graffiti and its practitioners.

Keywords: Graffiti, publishing, professionalization, subculture, participant observer, insider/outsider

As a photographer and publicist, I have seen how the documentation of graffiti has shaped graffiti practices in a dialectical process. Since 1988, I have been a part of this, and I will here reflect on how these dialectics have changed over time. Since my space is limited, I will build my case on personal, first hand, experience. I suggest that this can be developed in future analysis of empirical data.

My earliest recollection of graffiti is when I as a child visited a pizzeria with my babysitter. On the television mounted on the pizzeria wall, a story was aired about youths painting the subway trains of New York. The creativity and energy that the graffiti writers brought about was paired with an intrinsic mix of individuality and community. This inspired me. I was eleven years old and started sketching graffiti letters and even wrote some signatures in the subway. However, my interest faded because I didn't find any graffiti community or graffiti writings in my neighborhood at this time. Years later, I found out it was the documentary *Style Wars* (Chalfant and Silver, 1983) that had been aired on one on Sweden's then two national television channels that Friday evening in September 1984, thus making a nation wide impact.

In 1987, I became fully aware of the significance of *Style Wars*, in addition to a few other depictions of graffiti from

New York. By then this had made a huge imprint on teenagers from distant parts of Stockholm who had built an informal network using the city's subway and commuter system. Even if there was a significant amount of graffiti in Stockholm by 1987, the amount of publications on both foreign and local graffiti was sparse. The increased amount of graffiti in Sweden was reflected in a mass media coverage characterized by moral panic (Hannerz and Kimvall, 2015). My friend Tobias Barenthin Lindblad and I were rookies, or (according to the graffiti vernacular that we studied in the few American books available) we were toys. Since we hadn't established respected positions within graffiti culture, we were also, to a large extent, cut out of the informal information flow.

Despite our inexperience, we had an SLR camera each, which benefited us greatly as we started producing our own information on contemporary graffiti. The photo quality produced with our cameras also caught the interest of well-established writers. Like many other kids we would watch out the windows of subway and commuter trains and where we saw a lot of graffiti, we would walk back along the tracks to study and document it. Our travels took us to parts of Stockholm and other cities across Europe we had never visited before (and probably never would have if it wasn't for graffiti). Initially these photos were used for personal inspira-

tion, but eventually our self-imposed vocation would lead us to professional careers in photography and publishing. We found that graffiti culture is very welcoming as long as you are willing to prove your sincere commitment through hard work, usually through intensive bombing or a mastery of style painting (e.g. Barenthin Lindblad and Jacobson, 2011). Nonetheless, our commitment principally materialized itself in printed matter as opposed to paintings on walls.

There have been considerable changes in the available type and amount of published information since I began documenting graffiti in 1988. I suggest a conceptualization of the dialectic relation between graffiti and publishing in four stages. These are theoretical ideal type constructions that will overlap in real life. Each new stage does not supersede the previous stages, rather it adds to them.¹

1. Outside observers – approx. from 1968
2. Self-publishing – approx. from 1990
3. Subcultural professionalization – approx. from 2000
4. Social media – approx. from 2005

I will concentrate on the first three stages since these are the ones I have had most experience of. I will then conclude with some brief reflections on the current fourth stage. I will discuss the stages in the perspectives of technique, participant and observer positions, as well as information flow and control. This can further be related to perceived and constructed audience and social borders, age, power, economics, informal learning processes, and several other aspects that I will only be able to foreshadow.

1. Outside observers and local graffiti writers

Like most youths outside of New York who were interested in graffiti in the 80's, I devoured everything I could find out about it. That consisted of about five books, a few record covers, a few movies, out of which a couple circulated on poor VHS copies, and occasional music videos one might happen to see blaring on a TV at some random fast food restaurant. The limited number of publications made my friends and I quite indifferent of genre boundaries. We didn't make much distinction between a video on MTV or a book by a social anthropologist.

Typically at this stage in the dialectics between graffiti and publishing, there would be a big distance between the graffiti

writers and their observers. This was reflected in age, geography, time, and perspective of graffiti. But since the amount of information was limited these distances were bridged over by our strong demand for information. This is why we, as fifteen-year-old kids from Sweden and elsewhere, read *Getting Up* by Craig Castleman (1982), an American social science dissertation. What we didn't master in language, we learnt on the way. Us teens treated the available publications on graffiti like canonical documents. But due to distance, in all the aspects mentioned above, the information available did not quite correspond to our time and place. During the second half of the 1980's there was plenty of graffiti in Europe and elsewhere. By then youths were inspired by what they saw around them, rather than by documentations from New York (although these continued to play a significant role).

The limited and slow information cultivated local graffiti styles. It was possible for a trained graffiti connoisseur to recognize a particular style and tell which city (or part of a city) it originated from. Stockholm in the 80's distributed information on recent graffiti in the same way that New York had done in the 70's. In order to stay current, you had to get on the train tracks to actually see what had been painted or make the effort to meet people who were doing it. Tobias and I hadn't mastered graffiti style yet, nor did we have our names up in the streets or on the trains. But we were lucky to run into a graffiti writer that would show us around, and teach us the unwritten rules and codes: Jacob Kimvall who was a year older than us. He would eventually team up with us in our informal learning process as graffiti publicists.

In this stage, direct encounters with the walls of the city filled a cardinal function, i.e. to see which writers had style and were "up". In other terms, who manifested their commitment to the graffiti community. Complementary to this, the oral and visual subcultural information flow had links between many countries. At this time, information was treated like industry secrets, those who had photos of new styles from other cities and countries often kept them to themselves. Control over information gave a certain amount of power within local graffiti scenes.² This power is still exercised, for instance, some writers choose not to put their pieces online and occasionally even ask others not to publish their work, or to remove it from the Internet (Hannerz, unpublished).

2. Self-publishing and international network

In March 1992, I participated in publishing the first issue of Underground Productions (UP) in a print run of 320 black and white offset printed copies, together with Tobias Barenthin Lindblad, Jacob Kimvall and the graffiti writers Bonus and News. UP had an ambition: to give a true and just depiction of graffiti. This would complement what we perceived as a biased depiction of graffiti in general mass media and a lack of information about contemporary graffiti. We soon discovered that neither the editorial staff nor the readers always agreed on what this meant. Nonetheless our efforts were appreciated. Within the same year, two more issues were released in 1000 and 1500 copies.

We were teenagers without much knowledge of the printing industry. But the developing technique of desktop publishing made magazine design accessible for larger groups and spurred a rapidly increased quality of magazine publications, as well as raising the skill level and confidence of us publishers. By the mid 1990's, the number of graffiti magazines in Europe and elsewhere had increased significantly, and by then it was standard to print these magazines in full color.

Previous to this magazine boom, a hand full of people in graffiti scenes around the globe had felt the same urge as we to produce photos of graffiti in a systematic way, by travelling the train lines of their cities. In his dissertation, Jacob Kimvall (2014: 39) suggests within-subculture-documentarians to be labeled chroniclers. We were not simply documenting an existing reality, but rather participating in constructing graffiti as a phenomenon. Kimvall also points out that the practice of chronicling within graffiti is under-theorized.

These images and this network served as a foundation for the magazines that desktop publishing had facilitated. Many of us chroniclers traded photos over national borders and continents. This was an informal reciprocal economy where an equal exchange of photos was expected. These photos were required to have the same quality (concerning both photographic technique and style of the graffiti depicted); otherwise the established trade link would fade. In addition to trading photos the editorial staff at UP (initially meeting in my mother's apartment) was now sending boxes of magazines for international trade. We applied the same rules here: one magazine of equal quality against another. Soon we

were supplying open minded magazine stores and hip-hop clothing shops with dozens of different graffiti magazines from around the world. During the second half of the 1990's, self-published graffiti films were added.

These magazines become somewhat like national institutions and hubs in an international network. They offered international fame to writers that had been local heroes and increased the speed and spread of information. This also came with a wave of criticism that accused the magazines of not reflecting the scene in a correct manner. The classical debate within graffiti concerning the primacy of quantity or quality (with respect to placement and risk) was vivid at UP's editorial meetings. UP wouldn't usually print a full page of images depicting the same tag, even if that writer totally dominated a city. Pieces that would be interesting to study in detail were preferred.

Some writers argued that graffiti should be experienced first hand, without mediation or someone editing and controlling information flow. This is a noteworthy perspective but does not acknowledge that fame within graffiti was built from long ago by telling stories, narrating myths, and creating legends, a practice in which people always had different skills and positions.

This stage in self-publishing of graffiti media, in many respects, stood in opposition to the stage characterized by outside observers.³ Compared to a few years earlier, the amount of information was abundant, the distance in time was shorter, the producers of the magazines came from within the graffiti culture and were the same age as other graffiti writers. The network of graffiti publishers bridged over long distances (Macdonald, 2001). But since these distances in the dimensions mentioned above were shorter, the feeling of global community and closeness was enhanced. Not before long, the increasing flow of information mitigated the aesthetic differences between various countries.

3. Subcultural professionalization

Grffiti magazines were typically produced by amateurs and were non-profit venues. At UP, we invested revenues in raising the quality and print run of the magazine. By 1994, the print run was 4000 and by 1995, after three years in business, the print run was 6000 copies, a considerable number for an art magazine published in a small country like Sweden.

What had started out as a hobby now looked much more like a profession. Along the way, we also had to learn sales and economics, but we still worked with this in our spare time. I had initiated a career as a freelance photographer and journalist, along with the publishing of magazines. In this line of business, I had participated in publishing several books. By 1996, I decided to publish a book on Swedish graffiti based on several years of documentation. This resulted in the book *They Call Us Vandals* (Jacobson, 2000) and a publishing house I then founded, Dokument Press (at first called Dokument förlag).

The staff of UP took an active role in distributing the book. In 2003, Dokument Press published its second book, *Overground*, which was edited by members of the UP editorial team. The network that had evolved between graffiti magazines was decisive in the distribution of books in Dokument Press's initial years when books on graffiti composed the principal publishing program.

Our professionalization again widened the gap between the ones producing magazines and the graffiti scene. As the amount of work increased and more economic considerations were taken in publishing decisions, "traditional" graffiti books eventually consisted of a smaller part of the publishing program. Among the editorial staff at UP, there has been a movement from the perspective of insider to observer that has increased over the course of twenty years. The last issue of UP was published in June 2012, twenty years after the first issue. Dokument Press was unable to spare time to work on the magazine (which had been a pro bono part of the publishing program) due to the workload with other publications.

The staff at UP is not an exception, many of the people that produced magazines and videos eventually used their acquired skills and network professionally as journalists, photographers, publishers, researchers, spray paint manufacturers and store owners. This should be discussed in relation to an increased professionalization among graffiti artists (e.g. Snyder, 2009).

Dokument Press and our professional careers might be described as cuckoos raised in the subcultural nest, finally pushing the subculture out. But that is only a relevant description if you believe subcultures do possess some kind of static authenticity. Rather we, as subcultural publishers, embrace all the roles and stages we have experienced. We

have matured, and so has graffiti. When Dokument Press published a book that Tobias Barenthin Lindblad edited with Martha Cooper's (2008) photos of early New York tags it was like we entered a wormhole that brought us back to the roots from which we had seasoned – Cooper's photos had been amongst the most inspiring in the few American books that had reached Sweden when we were kids.

4. Social media – back to self-publishing

The last stage I have identified is the present situation and I will not develop this here, other than a few brief reflections in relation to the earlier stages. The regular publishing of graffiti magazines no longer fills the same purpose since the media landscape has shifted dramatically through the Internet and social media. This was reflected in lower demand for UP abroad and for foreign magazines in Sweden.

The institutional role that magazines and niche publishing houses took forced editors like us to function as gatekeepers deciding what to publish. Social media like Fotolog, Instagram, and Facebook do not have gatekeepers in that sense. Thus, the distance between the roles of documenting and painting graffiti has diminished. Today, lots of photos from the 1980's and 1990's by chroniclers who didn't become publishers earlier surface on Internet, intermingled with a torrent of contemporary graffiti.

At the same time the distance, in space and time, to the actual walls with paintings, has, in a sense, never been bigger. The need to actually travel and put yourself in front of a painted wall when it is still present has declined in opposite proportion to the increased publishing of graffiti. Still the symbolic power of site-specific graffiti is apparent and often reflected in the photos. Graffiti is still as much about context as style, something that Peter Bengtsen (2014) has discussed concerning street art.

What is less apparent in the torrent of images on the Internet is that the contemplative narration of stories has been pushed into the background in favor of a visual fragmentary flow. Here, I believe that we who have distanced ourselves from the subculture – but still are close to it in terms of experience – have a lot to offer, especially in theoretical perspectives. One topic to be studied in detail would be the dialectics of graffiti and documentation that I have sketched

above. The way I have discussed distance and closeness as well as participant and observer positions throughout this essay can be related to Georg Simmel's (1971 [1908]: 143-145) social type, "the stranger", an objective observer with a complicated relation to the community: "the distance within this relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near."

Malcolm Jacobson is co-founder of the Swedish graffiti magazine Underground Productions (UP) and founder of Dokument Press, a leading international publisher on urban culture. Jacobson is currently graduate student in Sociology at Stockholm University.

More information on Dokument Press at www.dokument.org and Underground Productions at www.upmag.se.

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