The Art of Graffiti as Inner-City Communication and as a means of Public Literacy

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Graffiti and the City Los Angeles

A city such as Los Angeles, as a material site and a representational construction, has undergone a continuous cycle of expansion, demolition, and re-development. Cities are both a literal and a figurative formation, representing a geographic, social and economic collective. Often economic and political groups with vested interests in maintaining the status quo decide to promote their vision of the city. In her essay, “Who Has the Street-smarts? The Role of Emotion in Co-Creating the City,” Janet McGaw states that the city “plays a role in the development of people’s social identity and body image through the different representations of the body within the city: and the city’s form and structure encourage social conformity and can similarly create social marginalization” (67). The rise of graffiti art in the 1970s challenges this status quo. Although this graffiti art has often been associated with vandalism and gang activity, artists, community activists and scholars have come to recognize the artistic contribution of this street art, as well as its importance as a means of expression for members of Los Angeles’s subculture. This “wall talk” has become a means of establishing a communicative art that has become fundamental to the identity of Los Angeles.

Where it all began

What does the word graffiti mean? The word graffiti comes from the Italian word graffiato which means scratched. Art historians believe this word was coined because it comes from the idea of early artists scratching etchings on walls with sharp objects. In Klingman, Pearlman, and Shalev’s essay, “Graffiti: A Creative Means of Youth Coping with Collective Trauma,” graffiti is described as “virtually anything that is drawn, painted,
etched, scratched, or scribbled on any surface visible to the public.” Klingman et al. continue to point out that graffiti “has been variously characterized as ‘folk epigraphy,’ a form of artistic expression and temporary art form,” enacting a form of “discontinuous communicative strategy through which people may engage in visual dialogue, relying neither on face-to-face interaction nor on the necessary knowledge of the writer’s identity” (Klingman et al. 299). Wall art has had a long history from the early cave dweller’s first scratched etchings on walls to Romans writing political statements addressed to the citizens of Rome. As Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, authors of *Spraycan Art*, remind us, we do not realize how long graffiti has been around. Prigoff also gives examples of how “graffiti was [also] uncovered in Pompeii when the lava was chipped away” after the city was entombed by ash from the volcanoes. He also notes that the “Spanish conquistadors left their names on Inscription Rock outside of Gallup, New Mexico. Frenchmen scratched their names on the walls of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.” Graffiti also has the power to communicate and to affect the actions of its audience. In 1940, a man named Jack Kilroy drew his famous logo “Kilroy was here” to mark his completed tour of duty with a “funny face” that appears over the wall. Later, this wall art was “co-opted by GIs all over the world,” becoming a symbol for a rite of passage. Prigoff observes that graffiti has been and is a very important visual communicative device that has been used and discussed for years.

According to Robert Deitch in his book, *The History of Graffiti Art in Los Angeles*, graffiti art began in New York in the 1970s. As the debates concerning the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement continued to cause a collective tension within the communities of New York, many artists wanted to find a creative and communal way of
expressing their frustrations and deep-rooted resentments. After all, many artistic movements have occurred during political unrest. In the 1970s, the United States was involved in “economical and political expansion,” struggling with such issues as the oil embargo and the continuing debate over the Vietnam War. Disappointed with the “reality of America” the artists began engaging in “antiauthoritarian art forms” such as graffiti and punk rock. Graffiti art encouraged the view that everyone could be an artist, and why not? It appeared as if the world was their canvas. A few of these artists were not just painters but inner-city communicators that left their messages or wall poetry on the streets of major cities as a means of expressing their culture and ethnicity and a means of unifying the community. As a means of communication, graffiti art spoke to a wider public. Graffiti became an important means for groups to establish their communicative identity through art.

Although many scholars argue that graffiti art began in New York, other critics believe that a form of graffiti art was well at work in Los Angeles as early as the 1900s. This type of graffiti is not well documented or even regarded by some as a category of graffiti culture; however, it plays an important part in the foundation of graffiti art in Los Angeles: hobo art. As far back as the 1900s, hobos had been leaving secret codes on trains and in train stations. Hobos began riding trains traveling across the country at the start of the twentieth century and through the Great Depression. Many of these nomadic wanderers would leave comments—a language of survival—for each other, cautioning fellow travelers as to what dangers may lurk ahead. This was also an exclusive language that was used by the “brotherhood of the freight train riders” as they were called and used to keep the population of roaming workers fed and working.

These etchings and drawings left an impression on graffiti artists of Los Angeles. In Joe Linton’s article, “Hundred Year Old Hobo Graffiti,” he writes about the etchings he found on the walls along the Los Angeles River: “On the underside of a bridge along the L. A. River somewhere in the heart of Los Angeles, there’s some very impressive hobo graffiti. It’s not written in spray paint, just chalk and charcoal. It was written by hobos nearly a hundred years ago.” Linton first saw this hobo art while leading a tour with a professor from Pitzer College, Susan Phillips, who as an expert in graffiti, pointed out
the hobo graffiti along the walls of the Los Angeles River. Luckily, these graffiti etchings have been preserved because of their location, situated out of reach of people and floodwaters, although still remaining visible to the naked eye.

The hobo graffiti tradition lives on and has become one of the most sought after art subcultures in Los Angeles. The hobo art community, which in Los Angeles is now known as the freight graffiti art community, has made quite an impact on the street graffiti artists. The graffiti art community embraces the artwork done by the freight graffiti community, and they have shown their enthusiasm by holding shows of artwork that is so lovingly painted on cold steel. An early form of tagging, the signs indicating the “hobo was here” are now considered art.

However, most scholars continue to regard New York, which became an “open air gallery” for graffiti artists, as the starting point for contemporary graffiti. In his article, “Discourse on Difference: Street Art/Graffiti Youth,” Rafferty sees graffiti as an “outright assault on urban architecture” that originated in New York: “The identity of an individual or gang was established by ‘getting up’ a signature in as many places as possible around town without getting caught” (77). These artists began to communicate with one another through tags, drawings, and concrete poetry on walls, buildings and doorways without much concern with the aesthetics of the urban architecture. The subway system became an “artistic link” between neighborhoods in New York City, spreading to the concrete walls all over New York. Eventually this “spray can art” would arrive in Los Angeles.

One of the early exporters of New York graffiti to Los Angeles was the 1981 music video “Rapture” produced by Chris Stecin and Debby Harry of “Blondie.” This video “Rapture” featured LEE Quiñones and Fab 5 Freddy spray painting in the background, which was inspiring to artists all around the world. This was the first American pop song to feature rapping and the first rap-inclusive video to be broadcasted on MTV. LA artist Mister Cartoon talks about how this video was his introduction to “wild style graffiti” (Deitch 11). Mister Cartoon says this began his graffiti art experience, for he saw how graffiti was becoming a part of the hip-hop movement. Watching Debby Harry’s video of “Rapture” as a graffiti artist, Mister Cartoon saw LEE
painting the wall behind Harry as she sang in the video, and Mister Cartoon immediately identified with LEE and his vision of combining hip hop and graffiti into a new art form. This new art form allowed him to find his place within a place, his art within the dance (Deitch 11).

**The Art and Techniques of Graffiti**

Before looking at contemporary Los Angeles graffiti art, we must first have a better understanding of the language of graffiti. In attempting to categorize graffiti art, some critics describe wall art as a form of vandalized art that is used to communicate a subculture’s individual and communal identity. Klingman et al. state that graffiti art “may also be regarded as a mode of communication with others that allows personal expression while behaving in an unconventional way and changing the environment” as we see it. Klingman et al. also feel that graffiti art is a form of negotiating with the environment, exercising some mastery or control within urban societal conventions. The techniques of these highly communicative slabs of concrete are indeed mysterious for most of us, so how do they do it?

Tagging is the most widespread type of graffiti that has been inscribed on the walls, buses, and trains of the urban environment, and every year it gains popularity. Alex Alonso states, in his essay “Urban Graffiti on the City Landscape,” that tagging is considered a stylized signature that a writer marks on the environment. In Los Angeles, tagging transformed into more sophisticated pieces of art, and an increasing number of these marks began to appear on the walls of the city. By the late 1980s graffiti became a public issue in Los Angeles with many forms of signage by local graffiti artists and some by artists from other cities. Taking anywhere from one hour to one week to complete, some pieces of graffiti became highly personalized and showed the artist’s distinctive style. Taggers started to become part of what is known in graffiti jargon as members of a “crew.” As these graffiti writers became more active, the artists would begin to paint larger projects, which included themselves, as the graffiti writer, taggers and a larger crew. Some bombers (the “throw-up” artist) would also join and by this time
these artists would be working on a production that could reasonably take up to a week to produce (Grody 18).

According to Steve Grody, “shout-outs” are the names of crew members, other crews, respected writers, girlfriends, or whomever else the writer or crew wants to greet. He says that these names are usually very decipherable and may be written inside or around the piece. The signature of the writer or writers is usually more prominent, stands out more vividly than any of the regular shout-outs and is accompanied by the crew or crews of which the writer is a member. Sometimes the entire roster of a particular crew is listed by the side of a piece and is referred to as a “roll call.” Some writers numbered their pieces, but this practice declined, as many writers were suspected of pumping up their numbers (Grody 68).

“Piecing” is yet another form of graffiti found in Los Angeles and marked by the hip hop era. According to Alonzo, this stylized letter writing shows how the graffiti artist is able to control the spray can and focus on not only the precision letter writing but also the artistic dexterity, understanding how to skillfully handle an aerosol paint can. As a tagger begins to gain recognition by his signature, he’ll eventually become known as a master “piecer,” demonstrating his artistic ability of style and technique.

How do graffiti artists put up such large pieces of art with such dimensional accuracy? There are three dominant factors that affect the construction of such a piece: the actual size of the available concrete piece, the natural reach of the writer, and the amount of working time that is available for the artist to complete the piece. If an entire wall is available and the artist has the permission of the owner then the whole wall will be used. There are also illegal whole wall productions that are done on walls that are in obscure locations. When a whole wall production begins the artist will mark out the space that each artist will use to work on his or her piece of art. Each artist also contributes background figures and cityscape scenes that will tie in with the production visually. The beginning outline and the scale of the artist’s work is usually done by the “natural range” of the writer’s arm to make one letter with the rest of the work to proceed from there. Sometimes standing on a box or an empty five-gallon container helps the artist reach the higher spots.
The dangers of graffiti art and becoming an exceptional tagger go hand in hand when embarking on the job of becoming a tagger. Alonso recounts that taggers are also inspired to continue their exploits because of the rebellious nature of their actions. The graffiti artists continually challenge the normative values of popular culture by figuring out how they can change or defy social norms and how to conquer them. For example, Alonso notes that graffiti artists have to confront such challenges as the barbed wire that is found around freeway and expressway signs, finding ways to circumvent these barriers. Alonso emphasizes that tagging can be dangerous; one tagger in an effort to complete a tag fell 100 feet from a freeway overpass while he tried to write his tag in a very inaccessible place. In his essay, “Whatever Happened to the Graffiti Art Movement?,” Lyon Powers notes that a tagger would receive special recognition if his tag were displayed where it would be difficult to reach. Because of the competitive nature of tagging, the experienced graffiti artist wants to be identified with the specific logo or signature. Although the general population may view tagging as an illegal and a narcissistic mode of expression, it actually is a part of the complex subculture of street art with its own category of fashion, music, and art.

**Los Angeles and the Art of Graffiti**

In terms of demographics, Los Angeles is the second most populated city in the United States. Los Angeles attracts graffiti artists from all over the world because here graffiti art becomes an all season endeavor, for Los Angeles’s warm climate allows artists to work year round. According to Robert “Wisk” Alva and Robert “Relax” Reiling, the “root of all graffiti” in Los Angeles “stems from local gang graffiti.” At one point, Los Angeles tried to suppress these artists by banning the sale of spray paint, legislating new laws against graffiti artists, and going so far as to suspend drivers licenses to those who were issued tickets for posting graffiti art. In time, however, this art opened the eyes of many Angelenos, and these bright, colorful, and subversive pictures would change the graffiti world forever.
Cholo gang graffiti

Graffiti art in Los Angeles was inspired not only by hip hop and music videos but also by the vision of artists, such as Chaz Bojorquez, who were part of the cholo gang graffiti movement of East Los Angeles (Deitch). It did not take long for graffiti art to emerge on the West Coast as the cholo gang tags began to appear on the walls of Los Angeles. Deitch writes that in the postwar period, pachuco culture developed into the cholo gangs of the 1960s. Derived from the Aztec word zolotl, meaning “dog,” the word cholo had been used in the United States as a derogatory term describing a person of Mexican heritage, but in the 1960s, Mexican American activists reclaimed the term—along with Chicano—for themselves, transforming an ethnic slur into a badge of pride. Cholo gang members, such as the pachuco, emphasized the creation of a uniquely Chicano youth culture based around the streets of Los Angeles (Deitch 146).

While graffiti art exploded in New York, Chaz Bojorquez was “building on cholo gang graffiti to invent a new artistic language” that brought the culture of his community to a larger arena in the city of Los Angeles. Bojorquez grew up in Highland Park, East of Los Angeles. He created a “graffiti icon” that was adopted by the “local gang, the Avenues.” In an interview, Bojorquez states that graffiti in Los Angeles goes back as far as the 1930s when the shoeshine boys would mark their spots on the street by writing their names on the wall. Bojorquez also states that he knows of tags down by the Los Angeles River that date back to the 1940s, painted with sticks and tar that could be the signs made by the hobos that had passed through Los Angeles but nonetheless are still visible (Deitch 146). Bojorquez explains that the graffiti he made was mostly cultural. He said that this is what is unique about Los Angeles and that the artists that bring their culture into their art. He explains that cholo culture expresses his Mexican American heritage; however, cholo is also a subculture of the West Coast, and Bojorquez uses the materials that are also part of Los Angeles. For instance, he and his crew write in the lettering that the Los Angeles Times uses, the Old English type, for this lettering has the look of prestige, and this lettering, according to Bojorquez, reflects their style: “well that it’s our strength” (Deitch 147).
Bojorquez, in recounting the history of his *cholo* graffiti, explains that Chicano gangs were originally formed for protection in response to racism. He says that when people think of Los Angeles gangs they often think of drugs and violence but the Chicano gangs were more about taking pride in their neighborhoods. In 1943, when the Zoot Suit riots occurred, many in the community angrily responded to this targeted racism, creating the groundwork for the *cholo* culture. Graffiti, says Bojorquez is a way to identify his ethnicity and identity saying, “This is our Latino territory.” Recognizing the political implications of graffiti, he states that when we see a wall in the neighborhood tagged by an individual gang, we can regard that graffiti as a complaint, but when we see a lot of tags one after another, Bojorquez remarks, “That is a petition” (Deitch 147).

In his book, *Graffiti L.A.*, Grody describes the work of a well-known Los Angeles graffiti artist named Revok, noting how he was influenced by the *cholo* graffiti art he saw as a young teen. Revok remembers that *cholo* graffiti had bold, hard, super-high-
contrast letters, just black on white or grey, Old English letters that had a really forceful, egotistical, dark, intimidating presence. According to Revok, these letters that the cholo graffiti artists painted had a “bad-ass, kick-your-head-in, you-don’t-want-to-fuck-with-us presence”; “the big gang blocks, the thick hard black lines” is in the subconscious of all LA graffiti writers. The “subliminal message” the graffiti artist created with the angles, shapes, colors and boldness has become unique to Los Angeles (Grody 44). Los Angeles has its own style.

According to Grody, by the mid-1980s territorial disputes began to break out among writers and crews over various areas on the East Side of Los Angeles,
particularly over the Belmont Tunnel. It is interesting to point out that the first crews to paint the tunnel claimed ownership of the area by closely monitoring anyone who wished to paint there. “Prime,” an East Los Angeles graffiti artist, insisted that writers ask for permission and show detailed sketches of their work before painting on the walls. As anonymous graffiti artists were beginning to penetrate the East Side, conflicts with neighborhood gangs were becoming an issue. By 1986, many active gang members started to think about affiliating with non-gang graffiti crews, motivated by the idea of a “less violent, less constrained, but more expressive lifestyle.” These desertions, Grody states, threatened East Side gangs, who occasionally reacted with violence. As a result, graffiti activities were severely curtailed on the East Side. Some graffiti writers traveled to the West Side yard, Motor and National also referred to as “Motor Yard,” to find a place to paint in relative peace (Grody 24).

**Venice, California**

Graffiti art was spreading throughout Los Angeles, as evidenced by the paintings on subways, freeway overpasses and on open concrete walls. While *cholo* graffiti was mainly focused in East Los Angeles, in the 1990s, graffiti art would also become an important part of the art scene in Venice, California. Venice was a hot spot for graffiti artists, and a key innovator of Venice style graffiti was Craig R. Stecyk III. Like Chaz Bojorquez, Stecyk attempted to create his own innovative artistic language. In his art, Stecyk brought four different movements together: surf, graffiti, hip hop and skateboarding. Stecyk created the famous “rat bone” tag that arose on the walls of Venice and jumpstarted another revolutionary and popular movement: the “artist-skater community.” Stecyk believes in the words of Andy Warhol who says, “Art is anything you can get away with” (Surfer mag.) and proves that by tagging his “rat bone” tag throughout Venice and Santa Monica.
Deitch states that Venice in the 1990s was dubbed “the most popular place to paint.” Many famous painters from all over the country infiltrated Venice, hoping to leave their legacy on the walls of the Venice Pavilion also known as the “Graffiti Pit.” The “Graffiti Pit” was the best known place to paint. Painters from all over the world came to use the walls of this coastal town to imprint their style and color on the walls of Venice. Not only did the community of Venice admire the works of the artists but these walls were continually used in many movies and TV shows giving what the graffiti artists wanted most: exposure.
Grasp graffiti at Venice Beach, California

Murphy’s Ranch

Interestingly enough, graffiti art has also been represented on the backdrop of one of the most beautiful areas of Los Angeles. Murphy’s Ranch, located two miles deep in the Santa Monica Mountains, is in a wealthy area of Pacific Palisades. The property originally was owned by Winona and Norman Stephens, who believed that at the conclusion of WWII, the Germans were going to invade the United States and take over the country. Desiring to have a self-sustaining compound and community, the Stephens built a power station, a machine shed, a massive water tank and a stable to house their livestock. The Stephens eventually abandoned both their dreams and the house, which later turned into an artist’s colony. Soon the artists were also asked to leave the property and now it is owned by the city of Los Angeles. Graffiti art has completely taken over the ranch and the buildings are covered in bright “bubble art” and signs of many graffiti artists. Spray cans are thrown all over the ground as one can visualize the artists working to create bright, colorful, productions and “thrown ups” as personal and individual pieces of artwork overtake this compound. What began on
Stephens Ranch as a fascist rebellion against the United States government became, ironically, a way of connecting and centralizing artists from all over Los Angeles, creating a communal form of art that united many groups of artists from Los Angeles.

In their book, *The History of Los Angeles Graffiti Art*, Robert Alva and Robert Reiling talk about the “First Era” which begins with their discussion of graffiti art in the year 1983. During this period, a few teenagers discovered a new way to communicate with each other outside the “civilian world” known as Los Angeles. Alva and Reiling explain how teenagers came from all different areas of Los Angeles and different social and economic backgrounds and found a way not only to express their artistic flair but also to “escape the dangerous elements” of their neighborhoods. As Alva and Reiling state, some of these artists had exchanged gangs for crews and guns for spray cans. Because this was a new way of communicating with the city within the city, these pioneers were willing to do what it took to understand this new art form, which was in its infancy. For some of these First Era teens, Murphy’s Ranch provided a space where they could paint without the feeling of competition but rather a feeling of unity and accomplishment. Feeling a sense of community, the artists that came to Murphy’s Ranch desired to express their artistic ability in a place they regarded as a safe environment to communicate their artistic emotion. Ironic as it seems, although Murphy’s Ranch initially began as the Stephens’ fascist dream, it eventually became a place of artistic harmony.
Graffiti art began as a communicative form of artistic expression and has continued to communicate in many ways through wall art in Los Angeles. Graffiti artists feel a desperate need to communicate through tags, drawings, and concrete poetry on walls and doorways. The significant paintings and individual tags that began as distinctive styles on New York subway cars transformed into LA wall talk in the hands of artists from the East Los Angeles, to Venice, to the Santa Monica Mountains and back again. This graffiti has connected a city and created a “common outlaw culture.” The communication between artist and observer only becomes stronger as the artist sharpens his or her skill to become a master at graffiti art, and the observer becomes more informed about that art.
Many critics agree that graffiti artists draw motivation from many influences, but the best artists do more than skillfully re-create what has been done before. Any good artist takes the best of what he or she has learned and takes it to the next level to make his or her mark. Some artists emphasize design balance, almost architectural in their construction, while others are more concerned with a resulting naturalistic, visual flow. Superior artists know when their work is succeeding by their own goals and when it needs to be reworked to achieve the desired effect (Grody 140).

In *Graffiti LA* Grody asserts that the artists in Los Angeles are extremely dedicated to their craft and to the preservation and growth of graffiti culture. As graffiti art has grown, more and more people are becoming aware of the difficulty and passion it takes for an artist to produce graffiti art. This art form has not only adorned buildings, walls and buses, but graffiti has been pivotal in pushing forward the arts in “fashion, design, and the world of advertising,” and there has not been a greater need than today
to better “understand the world of visual language.” I hope I have been able to open that world for you. As Grody states, graffiti artists are always “pushing the envelope,” and the best graffiti artists are always striving for more, whether trying to refine how he or she renders a cloud of bubbles surrounding a piece or a radical new letterform. He also believes that these artists’ creative achievements are often picked up and absorbed not only by Los Angeles artists, but also by the international graffiti community that strives to stay informed of current trends through personal connections, magazines, and the Internet (Grody 156).
Works Cited


