

Representing Subcultural Identity: A photo-essay of Spanish Graffiti and Street Art

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Figure 1: 'Another Wall is Possible' - Valencia

Abstract

Graffiti has become a universal and almost ubiquitous feature of modern urban experience. It is to be found across the globe in towns and cities as signifier and material object of a youthful street culture that makes and leaves its marks on the urban landscape. Graffiti has developed and expanded its methods and media and subsequently attracted interest from not only those charged with policing and regulating urban space but also in the popular imagination, the art market as well as in academia. It has thus become subject to a variety of analyses from a range of disciplines including sociology, geography, criminology and not least subcultural studies. This chapter will explore the ways in which graffiti writers and street artists represent themselves and their identities, the methods and practices they use, as well as the meanings and values associated with their sense of belonging to a subcultural community of shared interests and experiences. The examples used here, using the authors own photographs collected during a visual ethnographic research project in Spain's three largest cities, illustrate the continuing commitment

of writers and artist to colonise, decorate and adorn the public arena of city's streets, places and spaces. These are both individual and collective responses to and engagement with the urban as a lived experience and practice that encourages identification with practices and ideas that seek to demonstrate that alternative urban aesthetics exist or in the words in Figure 1 state: 'another wall is possible'.

Introduction

Graffiti has a long history. Writing on walls was practiced by our distant ancestors as they represented themselves and the animals they shared their environment and lives with through cave paintings. On ancient Greek and Roman buildings, on Meso-American temples, signs, symbols and messages from the past are found scratched and drawn on walls. Explorers as diverse as Viking marauders and colonists and Victorian grand tourists have left their marks on walls to signify 'I was here' (see Lovata and Olton; 2015.) Abel and Buckley (1973) demonstrated that the fascination that exists for writing messages and leaving names on the private space of public toilets, 'Latrinalia', is a common imperative for many. In this way we can perhaps view graffiti as exhibiting a universal human tendency to 'leave signs of our passing', to make marks of existence and symbols of our being and presence in the places that we inhabit and occupy, even if only for a limited time.

The origins of modern graffiti reside in the creative expression associated with and located within the disadvantaged and deprived communities of US inner-cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The innovative and imaginative explosion associated with hip-hop also included graffiti as a fundamental backdrop and signifier of a new cultural field of expression. This was, at least in part, a demand for the recognition and acknowledgement of the lives and experiences of an urban population who were discriminated against, disenfranchised, alienated and ignored except in negative representations in popular and political discourse. The opportunity to give voice and to paint, draw and write provided marginalised urban youth a means to express their identity, creativity and worth through signs and symbols of a cultural politics that expressed the inhabitation and colonisation of the city that demonstrated and celebrated existence and being. The development of modern graffiti, particularly within New York, has been documented and illustrated by a number of authors (see

Cooper and Chalfant, 1984; Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987; Cooper, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Felisbret, 2009; Stewart, 2009), reflecting its increasing popularity and appreciation as a form of urban cultural practice. From the walls of the ghetto and the subway and transit systems of the city (Austin, 2002; Gastman and Neelon, 2011) graffiti has spread to become an almost universal urban phenomenon. Graffiti is now a feature of towns and cities across the globe (see Chmielewska, 2007; Valjakka, 2011; Benavides Venegas, 2005; Best, 2003; Ferrell, 1993 Manco, Lost Art and Neelon, 2005; Brighenti, 2010.) It has grown and developed in style, sophistication, complexity and form as it has been adapted by new writers in new urban geographies using new methods and media, with new influences and aesthetics.

Modern graffiti was and is associated with the use of permanent marker pens and aerosol spray paint to adorn the city with a mainly calligraphic or text based writing based on 'the tag' and its expansion into throw-ups, blockbuster and wildstyle as well as large scale murals, sophisticated and skilful (master)pieces. However, graffiti remains embedded as a street-based embodied practice, writing without permission or approval. It is made on and in the streets as unsanctioned and illegal embellishment, adornment and decoration of the city by predominantly young people who write for a variety of reasons and audiences, not least each other and the recognition and status to be achieved amongst fellow writers.

However, since the late 1990s new means and methods of adorning the streets and walls of cities have developed. Street art employs a variety of techniques and methods that includes stencils, stickers (slaps), the pasting up or gluing of pre-prepared posters ('wheatpastes') and the placing of objects in the public sphere. Whilst for some this reflects an extension of graffiti, for others there are clear distinctions (see Catterall, 2010; Bengsten and Arvidsson, 2014; Young, 2012, 2014; McAuliffe, 2012; Iveson, 2010). Street art may not only be more varied in terms of methods and means, it may also be considered as more 'legitimate' - attracting paid commissions for work, and appreciated more as 'art' by the public, policing authorities and the art market. It has also become the focus of growing public attention as 'urban art' and has become popular and of interest as a form of creative practice (Jaka, 2012; Schacter and Fekner, 2013) that is collectible and saleable. Banksy may be the best known example of a graffiti artist whose work is regularly

bought and sold in auctions houses as well as appearing in galleries. However, there are many more writers and artists who are now recognised and promoted as having 'value'. This acknowledgement of graffiti and street art and its commodification has led to criticism that the original meanings and values associated with graffiti have been diminished (Dickens, 2010; Bengsten, 2013, 2014.)



Figures 2 and 3: Promoting Street Art, Madrid

Nonetheless, both graffiti and street art remain as embodied practices oriented towards a clear association with the writing and painting, adornment and decoration of the physical urban environment (see Schacter 2008, 2013, 2014) and which makes claims on the right to occupy, colonise and 'create' urban space (Nandrea, 1999; Zieleniec, 2016.) It is supported, promoted and promulgated as a subculture through the increasing use of social media. There are any number of digital repositories (see for example Art Crimes: The Writing on the Wall

<https://www.graffiti.org/>), open and closed Facebook groups, Instagram posts, forums and blogs for making and developing contacts, swapping tips, techniques, warnings and advice as well as publicising work and creating a sense of subcultural group identity and collective endeavour associated with the painting of the urban.

Graffiti and street art has been subject to a range of academic research that has explored its diversity and practice, the people and places associated with it as well as the conflicts and governance strategies that have been employed as a means to control or combat it. There have been studies that reflect the use of graffiti as associated with territoriality and gangs (Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974; Phillips, 1999), and those who consider graffiti as a pedagogical tool to promote identity, learn about culture and explore and understand the city (see Calvin, 2005; Civil, 2010; Iveson, 2010; Nandrea, 1999; Burnham, 2010, Schacter, 2014 .) There are also a range of ethnographic studies that have sought to document the lived experiences of graffiti writers and the meanings, values, aesthetics, risk and excitement they encounter in their mainly nocturnal adornment of the urban landscape (see Ferrell, 1993, 1996; Halsey and Young, 2006; Snyder, 2009; Young, 2014; McDonald, 2001; Schacter, 2008, 2014.) This has been extended by graffiti writers and street artists speaking for themselves about their motivations for writing (see Banksy 2002, 2006, 2012; City, 2010; Desa 2006; Jaka, 2012; Schacter, and Fekner, 2013; Gastman, and Neelon, 2011, Martin, 2009; Monsa, 2013, Puig, 2008; Scholz, 2003; Madrid Revolutionary Team, 2013; Uys, and Uys, 2013; Ruiz, 2008.)

Graffiti and street art employ means and methods by practitioners to make claims on or colonise urban space through their creative interventions, the production and circulation of a symbolic and aesthetic realm of signs, symbols, meanings and messages. It is a practice which often raises conflicted reactions. On the one hand it reflects an active engagement with the world and provides opportunity for expressing meanings and values as a practice that sees, reads and writes the world in ways meaningful to not only the individual but to a community of other practitioners engaged in similar activities. It can be considered as a creative, artistic and aesthetic urban practice that colonises, subverts or adorns often subjugated and commodified space. It represents a number of embodied practices (your body has to be there) that challenges the delineation, regulation and policing of the urban as a social and public cultural sphere. It is may be an everyday act and

experience for those who practice graffiti writing but also can be associated with resistance during particular events such as riots, protests, occupations and sit-ins. As such, it can be understood as a form of colonisation, appropriation and reflection on and representative of alternate readings and uses of community and space. Whilst academic research and graffiti writers own words reflect a range of motivations and reasons for writing, it is possible to identify a number of themes. These include territoriality, the marking and claiming of space, whether or not it is associated with gang affiliation. Engaging in graffiti may be a reaction to the boredom and frustration experienced by urban youth, whether explicitly deviant or criminal there is a sense of excitement, adventure and danger that has appeal. Writing graffiti can also reflect the need for individual and/or group recognition and status. Similarly, graffiti provides a means for personal expression, social and peer status recognition, the development of techniques, skills and abilities portrayed and advertised as a form of everyday art and practice in a very public gallery.

Graffiti and street art represent 'signs of passing', fleeting presence or symbols of existence as well as (self)identification and (self)publicity within a group of practitioners who assess, critique and comment on each other's works. These studies and the self-expressed meanings and motivations of practitioners provide evidence of graffiti and street art as subcultural forms of practice which, as Hebdige (1979) argued, use form, style and symbolism as an intentional and signifying communication and meaning system, a homology. Thus there are ideological or political values, beliefs and meanings, codes of conduct and practice, for example where it is or is not appropriate to paint or write that can be associated with graffiti and street art as a subculture. Such codes of conduct/ evidence of being in the know function as means to bind or include members, however loosely, within the group. Similarly, one can also reflect on the subcultural career of writers/artists as they progress from being novices ('toys') to experts ('kings') and as discussed above, how subcultural activity, style and material objects can be subsumed and commodified by the market. What is evident is that there are a range of identifiable styles or types of graffiti as well as abilities and skills, from the simple, quickly-done to the very elaborate and often breath-taking full-wall creations. There is a language and vocabulary as well as a complicated hierarchy involved in graffiti that reflects an internal communication between practitioners as well as its display and promotion to

a general urban public. What is created is an urban (sub)cultural aesthetic that uses the streets of the city as a gallery, notice board and medium for display, conversation and communication.

On the other hand, graffiti is often portrayed as anti-social and criminal behaviour, a symbol of community breakdown and decline, symptom of urban blight, a lack of direction, discipline and deviance in youth. Wilson and Kelling's (1982) 'broken windows' thesis argued that examples of low-level criminality such as graffiti are precursors or indicators of community decline and causally linked to serious violent crime. Whilst Harcourt (2005), Harcourt and Ludwig (2006) and Bowling (1999) have undermined such claims as flawed, the Broken Windows thesis and Zero Tolerance policing used in the US was supported by politicians and policy makers around the world (see Waquant, 2006). Iveson (2010b) refers to the policing strategies and criminalisation of writers as a 'War against Graffiti' that has led to the use of new technologies, innovations in urban design, and the securitisation of urban public space as a state-sponsored response (see also Ferrell, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2001; Young, 2010; Dickinson, 2008.) This reaction to graffiti and street art reflects how such practices and performance conflicts with the values and priorities of property holders, developers, the state, the police and courts (see Bergsten and Arvidsson, 2014) that view it as a threat to law, order and security and have sought to purge it from the public urban realm. Graffiti thus also represents conflicting ideas about who and what the city is for and punishes those who are caught with fines, confiscation of property and, in some cases, jail sentences.

Graffiti has become an omnipresent feature of the urban in recent years, eliciting as discussed above a number of responses, reactions and analyses. It has spread and developed to become a global phenomenon, one that has not bypassed Spain. There is an established and prevalent culture and practice of graffiti in towns and cities across the country. As is common elsewhere, there is a network of actors and communication within and between practitioners as well as competition over locations or 'spots' and demonstrations of skill and ability. The history of Spain's flourishing and developed graffiti and street art scene is evident both on the streets of its cities as well as in publications (see Madrid Revolutionary Team, 2013; Martin, 2009; Monsa 2013; Puig, 2008; Scholz, 2003.) This is supported and promulgated by a variety of web sites (for example, Valencia Street Art; Spanish Graffiare, Ultimate

Guide to Barcelona Street Art and Graffiti.) What follows will develop aspects of the varied approaches and analyses to explore how, using a variety of styles and methods, graffiti writers and street artists in Spain represent themselves, exhibit their work, illustrate the means and methods of their practice as well as promote the scene and the activity as a subculture. The explicit focus will be on the material object of their work. It will use examples collected from the street, as opposed to its existence in virtual or digital reality, to illustrate aspects of the performed practice of graffiti as a subcultural activity and to demonstrate the self-reflective way graffiti writers represent themselves, their work and their practices in what they produce. It will explore, illustrate and analyse the way in which graffiti writers represent their identity, practices and themselves through their work in the public arena of the streets, walls, public places and spaces of the urban they inhabit.

The following illustrative commentary and analysis uses the authors own photographs collected as part of a research project, supported by a small grant from the Santander Research Fellowship Scheme. The photographs were taken by the author engaged in a visual ethnographic research project (Ward, 2014; Pink, 2013; Harper, 2012) conducted in Spain's three largest cities of Valencia, Barcelona and Madrid during multiple visits between August 2012 and May 2013. The methodology employed was a form of directed psychogeography (see Coverley, 2010; McDonough, (ed.) 2009; Ford, 2005; Knabb, (ed.) 2006) in which specific areas of each city were identified through online research and contact with graffiti practitioners who advised on locations/areas to investigate. Field work consisted of multiple trips to each city where 'walking' the area in a non-directional manner permitted investigation of the locale, the collection and collation of the types, forms and prevalence, the photographing of graffiti and street art found in the streets and public spaces of each area. This was coupled with a small number of interviews with practitioners and scholars in each city to extend and deepen not only the meanings, values and intentions behind their practice, but to elicit a situational understanding of the practice of writing/painting within their experience of the city as well as within the graffiti/street art community. The following illustrated commentary and analysis will demonstrate how graffiti and street art practitioners reflect on and represent themselves and their activities as part of associative identity making subcultural communities.

Tags

The most prevalent type of graffiti to be found in most cities in Spain and elsewhere is the Tag. This is a writer's signature made with permanent marker pen or spray paint. It can be simple or more complex and is the unique identifying mark of an individual writer that indicates participation in the practice of graffiti writing. In Spain there are a plethora of tags to be found in towns and cities. They can appear on almost any surface from walls, doors, windows, street signs and furniture as well as on public and private transport. Tags are relatively easy to do and quick to accomplish - an individual writer's identifying graffiti signature that acknowledges being in place as well as being and belonging to an active, if amorphous and non-constituted community of graffiti writers. It is akin to making a statement that 'X was here'. As the photographs below demonstrate the colonisation or occupation of particular sites by multiple tags is common.



Figure 4: Tags on unoccupied shops – Madrid

The concentration of tags in a single site may reflect an ease of access and/or a means to mark a particular spot that has significance or importance for writers. It may also mark out a common ground and meeting point for writers to clearly demonstrate their presence and active participation in the scene and on the street. Whilst for some the tag is evidence of vandalism and anti-social behaviour making public space ugly and inscribed with visual dirt, the use of multi-coloured markers

and paints can lend a kaleidoscopic and phantasmagoric aesthetic to what, in some cases appears abandoned or closed premises. Such tagging is evidence of an active population engaging in a form of practice that represents an urban street culture that gives a sense of life to the street in contrast to lack of activity in the premises or buildings tagged.



Figure 5: Tagged Doorway
– Barcelona



Figure 6: Tagged Abandoned Shop - Madrid



Figure 7: Crew/Gang Tag – Madrid

Tags can also be used to mark an individual's territory or as in the photograph Figure 7, to signal a group identity. The following example from a 'gang' was found across a wide geographically dispersed area of Madrid. The 'crew' responsible were clearly mobile, active and keen to be 'seen' in the city publicly announcing their existence and presence. Similar examples of multiple tagging by individuals or gangs/ crews are common features across many areas and cities in Spain. They represent attempts to ensure visibility that advertises or publicises the existence of a group as active practitioners.

Tagging, whether by an individual or group, is a simple way of 'getting up', being seen and known and ensuring visibility amongst peers. It can be linked to 'bombing' which is tagging a lot of areas/places over a short period of time. Similarly, tagging can develop into other practices such as the throw-up (a name painted quickly with one layer of paint and outline), and those who develop their skills to include more detailed writing styles such as block type lettering known as 'blockbuster'.



Figure 8: Tags, Throw-Ups and Blockbusters on a 'bombed' building - Madrid

The idea of claiming space and colonising areas reflects an aspect of graffiti subcultural identity making. Where sites or 'spots' provide opportunities they are often ones which become collectively owned and made by multiple use. Whilst there may be competition between individuals and groups and over-writing takes place, there is also the possibility for a mutual experience of being in a communally shared writing-place that offers a concentration of activity that reflects a vibrant and active graffiti writing scene. This allows writers to share tips and methods and to copy and develop the skills and methods of more experienced or skilled writers. This embodied practice where individuals act in what at times are often dangerous conditions and in the dark, these sites of multiple writing provide the possibility for a collective practice and sense of belonging to a group that exists in physical space as well as through shared digital media communication. This can be related to other practices such as squatting where the 'claim' to a building is often publicised by its external adornment by a variety of graffiti writers and street artists using a range of style, techniques and sophistication (Figure 9). Both figures 8 and 9 demonstrate how unused buildings can be appropriated or colonised and become an important, if albeit temporary, location for writers to make their mark. The photographs also demonstrate the extraordinary lengths and dangers that some writers go to get their name, tag or work in places where it is not only highly visible, but also difficult to

remove. Such spots are referred to as 'heaven' and, as in these examples, are usually high above the street in elevated locations.



Figure 9: Squatted abandoned office buildings 'claimed' by graffiti - Madrid

Self-representation

Graffiti writers also represent themselves and the practices and activities they engage in through what they leave on the walls of the city. This is done by 'self' portraits, figurative and idealized self-representations, showing the tools and methods they use to write and paint. Whilst this can appear as a hyper-inflated or romanticisation of the practice of writing it is also informative of how writers and artists see and represent themselves, giving insight into graffiti and street art as a subculture as well as association and identification with a community of active practitioners.



Figure 10: Barcelona



Figure 11: Barcelona

In relation to figures 10 and 11 we can view their self-depiction as an attempt to reflect their practices, techniques and tools and at times the heroic personage and active participation of a group of mostly unseen, invisible night-time contributors to the creative culture and aesthetic of the street. The images here collected from all three Spanish cities give some indication of a collective identity associated with the practices of writing/painting and the scene of which they are a part. In figures 3, 10 and 11 we can see writers and artists at work using the tools of the trade, the spray can and the ladders to get up higher.



Figure 12: Valencia

Similarly self-portraits (figures 12, 13, 14, 15) perhaps reflect a somewhat humorous and tongue in cheek sense of self. Whether as face-covered anonymous writers, cartoon figures (such as the Stick-Up Kids) or as heroic Che Guevara-esque 'bombers', they provide insight into the self-referential representation of the subculture and the means they employ as well as their experience of themselves as fleeting figures, anonymous but ever-present, in the creative culture of adorning, embellishing and decorating the city.



Figure 13: Valencia



Figure 14: Barcelona



Figure 15: Madrid

By way of contrast figure 16 is a large work that shows the scale of some street art and also depicts the means and equipment used to access sites and produce large scale works, as well as the potential dangers and extreme lengths that writers can go to get their work in 'heaven' or to produce (master) pieces that have a greater impact on the public as well as status within the community. Some large scale pieces are commissions in which permission and payment may provide a sense of security from

prosecution and safety in using equipment such as the scissor-lift depicted here, that can be used to provide safe access. However, not all large pieces are commissioned or approved. There is a clear sense that many writers and artists put their health and safety in jeopardy, working high up on buildings that may be in disrepair and fundamentally unsafe. Such commitment to getting their art and craft to the public and their peers reflects how participation in the world of graffiti and street art has inherent dangers, but which is nonetheless considered as worth the risk.



Figure 16: 'Hello Sorrow' - Valencia

Representing and Promoting the 'scene'

Some graffiti and street art is explicit in making connections to a recognised community or subculture (see figures 1, 2, 3). Thus practices, events, messages and meanings can be explicitly conveyed in some works reflecting a self-aware belonging to and promotion of a scene with a collective sense of identity. This represents reflects various aspects of graffiti and street art activity, practice and culture. For example Figure 17 depicts two figures dressed in suits and resembling characters from Quentin Tarantino's films *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. These figures are clearly identifiable as graffiti writers or street artists by the multi-coloured spray cans flying through the air and are depicted in a fist fight, perhaps representing the

competition, sometimes violent, between writers and street artists over spots and/or status and authenticity.



Figure 17: Fighting for Art, Madrid

Two final examples also illustrate the sense of collective identity and a culture of practice that is shared and promoted within the street art and graffiti subcultures. This is in the ways in which graffiti writers and street artists use the walls as advertising spaces for events. Figure 18 is an example of wall art that explicitly uses street art as a means to inform the public as well as other artists and writers of a specific event. *Mislata's Representan* is a Biennial graffiti and street art festival held in a neighbouring Valencian municipality with the support of the local authority. This promotional piece has a resemblance to advertising industry techniques and aims but uses the art form itself to paint space to signal a meeting point, time and event for fellow writers and artists as well as the general public who may be interested in such creative practices.



Figure 18: Street Art Advertising Graffiti Festival, Valencia

Figure 19 again reflects a somewhat ironic and tongue-in-cheek self-awareness of practice and identity (see also figure 2). The stencil promoting 'the university of stencil art' explicitly acknowledges that stencil art can be learned but there is nowhere to learn it but on the street itself. Thus graffiti and street art practitioners are aware and appreciate that in part what defines their work, their creations. is not only the media and methods that they use but also the spaces and places that they practice, that is the street. It is a performed aesthetic and creative practice that is inextricably connected to the street and the city. Those who do it share, through their experience and their works form or make-up an identity of associative community that reflects a do-it-yourself culture of practice, learning, belonging and identity formation that has some correlation to better known and studied youth subcultures.



Figure 19 - Barcelona

Conclusion

Graffiti and street art can be understood as a demonstration of a process of associative identity making. By inscribing, painting and decorating the physical environment of the city with signs, symbols and markers of subcultural activity graffiti writers and street artists are directly engaged in the creation and promotion of an urban aesthetic that reflects individual identity, a collective sense of belonging to a group of similar practitioners, as well as a wider public. This public appeal and value is recognised by the sale of prints, gallery exhibitions and a market in original works by well-known writers and artists for most practitioners. However, it is primarily the communication of a system of meanings and values within a self-identified community which promotes and perpetuates activities and practices that reinforces a sense of belonging, often supported by digital and social media, as well as funded, for some, by commissions and the sale of prints and original artworks. This represents subcultural identity making, affiliation and projection through praxis. Graffiti and much street art remains an embodied activity that necessitates the

writer/artist to have intimate knowledge of the world on which they write/paint as well as putting their bodies, safety, security and liberty at risk. The photographs used here illustrate a number of inter-related themes to demonstrate that graffiti and street art practices and material objects are indicative of subcultural identity making and promotion. These include the use of individual writers' tags, group or 'crew' tags as signifiers of collective belonging and identity, the self-representation of writers, and the 'tools and methods of 'writing' they use, as well as the promotion of the graffiti and street art scenes themselves. Graffiti can be and remains for many the relatively simple act of getting out there and getting your name, tag or reputation recognised by your peers. However, the world of graffiti and street art is increasingly complex and sophisticated, using styles, methods and locations to promote activities and practices in the very public forum of the public spaces, streets and walls and remind us that subcultures not only exist and flourish but have the potential to change the way we see and read the city.

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