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The Writing on the Stall: Graffiti, Vandalism, and Social Expression

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Author

I am a fourth year student at UK and am graduating in May 2010 with a B.A. in Sociology and a B.A. in Spanish with a minor in German. I am attending the University of Kentucky Graduate School in Sociology in Fall 2010. My interests are in Food, Ethnic Identity, Social Movements and Cultural Sociology. This paper deals primarily with this last interest. I had an excellent experience conducting the project and would recommend applying to anyone who is interested. Music is my primary extracurricular activity. I sing in a choir, play guitar, and write and perform my own material. I am also an avid gardener and environmentalist, as well as an amateur cook. I like running and biking, and have recently begun playing tennis. This work is being presented at the Undergraduate Showcase in April. I want to live first, and work second, and I want that to be a possibility for every person.

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This paper reports an innovative research project on a topic likely to attract the attention of *Kaleidoscope* readers: the writing on the bathroom wall. The author challenges our perceptions of what is often negatively viewed as vandalism and provides an excellent survey and synthesis of the theortical literative on vandalism, graffiti and street art, which he then uses to anlyze his findings. He raises serious political concerns in the course of his analysis, and concludes by suggesting two forms of dialog: between the writers themselves and between the writers and the power structure itself, for instance, through the use of "free speech walls." The paper is well written and well thought out, and provides an excellent example of how to analyze and assimilate theory so as to appy it to isues that students encounter in their everyday lives.

The Writing on the Stall:
Graffiti, Vandalism, and Social Expression

Abstract

Graffiti and vandalism are everywhere in the modern city; they seem to be part of the typical urban background. While graffiti are usually associated with concrete walls, bridges and train cars, one particular area of focus of vandalistic writing is the walls and stalls of public bathrooms. This area, for both obvious, and sometimes unclear reasons, is a popular forum for anyone wanting to write. This project was conducted with the intent of better understanding these somewhat ubiquitous and seemingly mundane scribbles. As the first step toward this goal, a literature review of approaches to vandalism was conducted. This theoretical exploration, which comprised the majority of the project, explored vandalism in general, with a particular focus on graffiti. The second step of research was the collection of photographs of bathroom stall graffiti on the campuses of both the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville. This second step sought to take the general literature on vandalism and graffiti and apply it to the more specific example of bathroom wall graffiti. In concluding, this article proposes alternative approaches to understanding graffiti and vandalism.

Introduction

The focus of my research last summer was why people make graffiti. When I lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I saw a lot of socially critical writing on the street. This led me to ask questions such as, why do people feel the need to write messages or draw pictures on the wall? What is the social meaning of graffiti? In order to address this issue in a locally relevant, manageable way, I decided to narrow the subject of my own hands-on study to the walls of men's bathroom stalls on two university campuses in Kentucky.

I began my research with a general survey of the different types of literature discussing "vandalism" and "graffiti." My intent was to develop an understanding of major classifications within this literature and then to apply that to my primary research in the bathroom stalls themselves.

I discovered two main lines of thought in the literature. The first takes a negative view toward (what it calls) vandalism; this

perspective's two foci are classification and prevention. It develops the former as a means of facilitating the latter. My interest in this project is not in intervening to prevent vandalism, but rather to understand why it occurs in the first place. For this reason, I will focus on the portion of this literature dealing with classification.

Most of the other literature that dealt directly with the subject of vandalism and social expression was written from a seemingly pro-graffiti standpoint. This theoretical perspective ignores or dismisses the vandalistic nature of graffiti culture. Some of the authors took an anecdotal approach; an example of this is the autobiography of the graffiti artist Darius and his personal development in the genre. Others attempted to provide a brief history of the development of the graffiti (sub)culture. There is a dearth of traditional rigorous academic research done in this area (with the exception of Lachmann's (1988) study of graffiti in New York as a subcultural expression of protest and as an art form which is alluded to below), but the differing ideas and opinions in the literature aided in developing a theoretical framework.

The two polarized viewpoints are helpful for understanding the social meaning of graffiti, and I will develop a theoretical perspective that draws on both. I will also adapt and incorporate the archaeological idea of cultural property. Since this concept posits certain important points useful in integrating the aforementioned opposed frameworks, it is an important addition to my theory.

After reviewing the literature, I set out to take pictures. I searched through nearly every men's restroom on the campus of the University of Louisville as well as the University of Kentucky. I took pictures of everything I found on the walls and stalls and then partially classified those photos. Unfortunately, many of the writings I had hoped to find had been painted over for the upcoming freshman orientations. In spite of this, I found a good number of interesting writings to help me further develop and illustrate my theory. In addition, I encountered some writings that were difficult to explain according to my initial theoretical exploration. I returned to the literature and found additional perspectives to help my understanding.

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> This led me to ask questions such as, why do people feel the need to write messages or draw pictures on the wall? What is the social meaning of graffiti?

In the remainder of this paper, I will explain the key theoretical points of my research in greater detail. In addition, I will discuss several of the most archetypal bathroom stall writings (and the categories into which I divided them). Finally, I will present my conclusions.

Literature

In his book, *The Psychology of Vandalism,* Arnold P. Goldstein (1996) provides a convenient collection of several of the primary theoretical perspectives on vandalism. It is important to note here that this literature review deals with vandalism in general and not simply graffiti, but I will focus only on those theories that are relevant to graffiti.

The most frequently used theoretical approach is Cohen's typology of vandalism (Goldstein, 1996 p. 33). Cohen's framework identifies six categories of vandalism. Three of the classes do not apply to graffiti, but the other three are important for understanding its social meaning.
- Ideological vandalism is inspired by a political, social or other activist reason.
  o A good example of ideological vandalism is the "Por Amor" ("for love") campaign in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Students and concerned citizens organized a stencil graffiti campaign encouraging the use of contraceptives as a means of HIV/AIDS prevention. (Plevin, 2006)
- Play vandalism is motivated by competition between the vandals — who can do the most, biggest or worst act?
  o Many of the developments and much of the spread of the graffiti movement can be attributed to competition. This competition was based on getting one's name recognized via "tagging" (or writing a name or pseudonym in as many different places as possible). "Because of the competition that existed among the graffiti writers, it wasn't long before they started to jump down on to the train lines in order to tag…" (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 31-34. See also Lachmann, 1988.)
- Malicious vandalism expresses some sort of rage or frustration; the target of the vandalism is sometimes symbolic and may have a political dimension.
  o Keying a new sports car due to jealousy or breaking out windows in an expensive retail store in an affluent part of town might be examples of malicious vandalism. In terms of graffiti, malicious vandalism is characterized by a vocalization of frustration (either specific or general) about some perceived inequity. Some of the stall writings I

photographed exhibit this type of frustration. (Goldstein, 1996, p. 33-34)

A useful complement to this typology is the concept of the Equity-Control Model of vandalism (Baron and Fisher, 1984, p. 63). The basis for this model is how varying levels of two variables (perceived control over the situation and perceived inequity) determine the medium for voicing concern. When inequity is high and control is high — the subject thinks he or she can change the situation — a person is more likely to seek out "legitimate" means for voicing concerns. When inequity is high and control is moderate to low, vandalism often occurs (Baron and Fisher, 1984, p. 65-66). If people think they are being unfairly treated and there is nothing they can do about it, they are more likely to engage in vandalism.

My theory of why people write graffiti would be incomplete without Allen's perspective, which is useful in explaining some of the writings found in the bathroom stall photographs. Allen proposes a hedonic component to the causation of vandalism: "People spend a great deal of time and effort in order to participate in activities that are dangerous, frightening, risky and physiologically arousing…it [is] great fun trying to avoid getting caught and running away from police or other[s]" (Allen, 1984, p. 79). His theory is that a certain amount of vandalism occurs simply because the perpetrators find it fun.

Any graffiti artist reading this would be angry if I left the discussion theories of causation with only the explanations listed above. Graffiti is art. At least that is what many graffiti "artists" would say about what they do and gallery owners in New York have legitimized this view with their exhibits of graffiti muralists' work (Lachmann, 1988).

In fact, the graffiti movement has felt the need to split into two groups: "traditional" graffiti, and "street art." The former is more about "tagging" (writing your pseudonym in varied ways in as many places as possible so as to get your name seen and so gain notoriety among your peers), and creativity via destruction. It is sometimes linked to gangs and marking of territory. (Lachmann, 1988). Street art is unhelpfully defined by Lewisohn as "everything that is not graffiti" (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 15-23).

Street art is difficult to define, but it does have some key characteristics. Firstly, for both graffiti and street art, anonymity is of the utmost importance. In an interesting look at the role and tribulations of women in the graffiti movement, Nicholas Ganz writes, "In the free gallery of the street to which everyone has access and where the artists can keep their identity secret or wipe out all traces of sex, anonymity has played a vital role" (Ganz, 2006, p. 10). This refers more specifically to gender's role in graffiti. "Fame is the name of the game in graffiti writing. But this has nothing to do with personal identity: it's purely about the brand" (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 43). This is an interesting paradox, but the artist's true identity is always kept secret behind the "brand" or "tag." Street art takes this notion another step further: there is no brand. The only thing important in street art is the work itself and that work's message. The artist disappears behind the work.
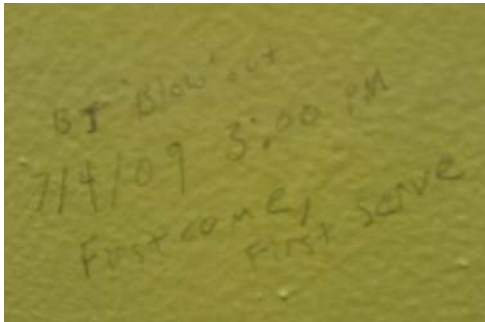
Secondly, graffiti focuses on a universal language and set of aesthetic properties. In New York, London, Cairo and Tokyo the lettering of graffiti all looks similar. On the other hand "Street Art is often reflective of the place where it is installed" (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 63). The previously mentioned campaign against AIDS is one example of this local and issue-specific work. The later pieces of Darius Jones (explained below) are another.

Thirdly, ideologically, the best differentiation between the two branches is this: "There's…something militant or anarchistic in the act of graffiti that seeks to destroy public property. This 'smash the system, smash the state' mentality is in opposition to street artists, who are more often in dialogue with the city" (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 104). To summarize, street art is a local, non-exclusive, message-based movement that gives primacy to the artistic message and merit to the pieces created. This is quite different than the image of rival gangs marking their territory.

One of the more anecdotal (and consequently entertaining) books on the subject of graffiti versus street art is entitled *The Adventures of Darius and Downey*. (Reid, 2008). It is a non-fictional autobiography of one particular street artist and

his development as an individual. While it is written in the third person, it is based on the life and experience of the author. The book's main character, Darius Jones starts as a graffiti artist intent on spreading his name. After the intervention of an art school professor and some personal soul searching, Darius decides to start doing street art. His pieces are, as described above, locally pertinent, message-based works that in some way create a dialogue with the city. Darius' forsaking graffiti for street art is spontaneous: "Before he could second-guess it, he had already put up four signs. One said 'READ' in one of the most illiterate, poverty-stricken neighborhoods in Cincinnati, while others proclaimed 'YOU CAAN DO IT!' and 'DON'T LET GO'" (Reid, 2008, p. 81). The works are critical, encouraging, and positive, yet unsanctioned by mainstream culture.

The word "unsanctioned" has enormous deep-rooted implications for the realm of what is and is not accepted. The ideas of cultural heritage and property provide an interesting perspective on this issue. In Cultural Heritage and Human Rights, Silverman and Ruggles (2007) define cultural heritage as a non-neutral concept, which is both intangible and tangible. It is linked to identity, competition and territory, and it "can promote self-knowledge, facilitate communication and learning, and guide stewardship of the present culture and its historic past. But it can also be a tool for oppression" (Silverman and Ruggles, 2007, p. 3). This concept is typically applied to archaeological studies. The idea might be applied to one religious group claiming the sanctity of its statues or temples while deploring those of other religious traditions. It is, however, also helpful in understanding the current societal classification of vandalism. Cohen, the creator of the typology used earlier says, "The problem of defining vandalism is political in the broad sense of referring to the contexts of power in which constructions of deviance are made and made to stick" (Cohen, 1984, p. 54).

This context of power refers to both control of traditional social and political power as well as power over history. "The Enlightenment conception of history was one in which the progressive freeing of human reason was gradually leading toward a more perfect state of affairs amongst people. Since reason was singular and universal, it was possible to imagine a single universal (and progressive) historical narrative" (Layton and Thomas, 2001, p. 2). The problem with this assumption, of course, is that it gives superior status to that one cultural narrative and ignores the others. Dorothy Smith (1991) points this out with her idea of the "relations of ruling" which argues that those in power institutionalize their point of view and their control over social reality through socially sanctioned practices and texts, thus silencing the voice of the powerless. Applying these ideas to the present day shows that there are examples of ideas and cultural heritage, which are not part of the primary narrative. The cultures from which street art and graffiti most often spring are examples of these sub-narratives. "Street Art, the natural heir to graffiti is rooted in the dislocated and alienated urban communities of America in the second half of the twentieth century." (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 8)

The existence of alternative cultures is not the problem; the difficulty comes when one culture (in this case the mainstream) attempts to assume primacy over the others. This is where the competitive side of cultural property emerges: there is active competition, if not war between these historical narratives. "Cultural Heritage is threatened when it is neglected and allowed - sometimes intentionally - to deteriorate" (Silverman and Ruggles, 2007, p. 11). In the case of graffiti and street art, the mainstream culture not only neglects the cultural heritage of alternative cultures and allows it to deteriorate, but also actually destroys and outlaws it. Returning to the Equity-Control model above, we see that such acts of "vandalism" may be perceived as the only way for people with little control to voice their opinions. These people feel they have no means for changing the high level of inequity they perceive. So, in essence, outlawing street art is silencing those who already feel they have no voice.

In *Graffiti as Career and Ideology* (1988), Lachmann argued that the subcultural import of street art can be destroyed not only by outlawing it, but also by coopting graffiti artists so that their work is subsumed into mainstream culture. He posits that graffiti as a vibrant subcultural expression was neutralized both by the police who broke up the writers' corners in which graffiti writers met in subway stations where lines crossed to appreciate and criticize each others' work, but also by the fact that graffiti muralists were recruited to paint for exhibits and sale so that their work lost its cultural relevance and their audience shifted from their peers and their neighborhoods to the art world. He discusses how in the 1980s, galleries began taking more notice of works produced by graffiti artists. As gallery graffiti gained prominence, some of the earlier social networks of

graffiti artists broke down, and artists quit sharing their tricks and techniques. With the breakdown of the social relations supporting the cohesion of graffiti, a schism in the once more unified graffiti world emerged. Socially acceptable gallery graffiti artists began further distancing themselves from the criminal vandalistic activities of subway muralists. A shifting audience, a changing relationship between artists, and a co-opted art culture led to significantly different messages in the works of the graffiti movement.

An important contribution that Lachmann makes to the debates surrounding graffiti is his discussion of audience and social context as crucial to understanding the meaning of "vandalistic" works. He writes quite simply graffiti "assume meaning in terms of the social relations within which they are created" (Lachmann, 1988, p. 243). Lachmann describes the social network of meaning and appreciation in the larger graffiti world. He places emphasis on the relationship between graffiti writers and highlights their appreciation of each other's work. He sees the writers' corners, which existed in New York prior to police intervention as crucial in developing graffiti muralists' styles, the social imports of their work, and their appeal to an audience consisting of other graffiti writers and others in their neighborhoods. The bathroom stall scrawler has a more general, less clearly defined audience, and the act of writing in a bathroom stall provides anonymity and isolation, in contrast to the networks developed in the writers' corners. The relative privacy of the stall may lead writers to express views and feelings they would be unwilling to identify with in a more open public space. These are crucial distinctions between graffiti-street art culture and bathroom wall graffiti.

We will return to these observations at the conclusion of this paper. Before moving on to hypothesizing further about why the writings on the bathroom wall occur, it is important to look at what is being said in the bathroom stall. The pictures I discuss here can be found at the end of this paper in the brief appendix. I chose one to represent each of the categories I developed for classification.

Photographs & Categories

Category 1: Crude, overtly sexual

The vast majority of the writings in the stalls fit into this category. Some are homosexual in nature while others are heterosexual and regard women. This particular one reads "BJ 'Blow' out, 7/4/09, 3:00 P.M., First Come First Serve." With regard to what I saw, this is fairly unremarkable and, similar to the other writings of its type.

Category 2: "Traditional" Graffiti Tags

I actually found more of this type than I had expected. This is a tag, apparently "SLUG" written in a fairly typical graffiti script.

Category 3: Overtly Political

This photo is of a drawing of a marijuana "bong" upon which "Open Your Eyes, Legalize" is written. There is clearly a political and social message behind this.

Category 4:
Sexist, Racist, Demeaning

This is a very light photo of a swastika. The anti-Semitic associations are clear.

Category 5: Other

Many of the photos overlap in category and some simply do not fit into any of the classes neatly. If there is a common characteristic between the writings in the "other" category, it is their ambiguity of motivation. That is, they may be inspired by boredom, frustration, or nothing at all. Their actual message is less clear than the photos in the other categories. This one reads "FTW": an abbreviation for either "F*** the World" or "For the Win" This expression of anger or ennui is interesting in either case.

Category 6: Dialogue

Sometimes what one person writes on the stalls will in some way resonate with a person who reads it later. That person will then respond to the first writing, another person will respond later and so on. I refer to this as dialogue writing, where the topics sometimes change and the purpose of the original post may be lost, but there is some sort of movement to the conversation. The person who

wrote first does not get the last word.

The photo here started with a general statement about politicians being bad (not included in the shot), then moving to "Democrats Suck" (later crossed out), "Bush Sucks" (again, crossed out) followed by "Kennedy's Sucks" with an illustration showing the UK bookstore profiting greatly off of textbook sales. This is a locally pertinent, meaning-based drawing as well as an entertaining play on words (based on the clever use of the name "Kennedy"). This is the closest thing to street art (albeit in a stall) that I found.

Clearly some of these writings are more socially critical than others – they say more and elicit more response in the reader. The hazard of deeming every writing in a bathroom stall artistic and socially expressive is that writings like the fellatio message and the one criticizing Kennedy's or supporting marijuana legalization are all considered equal by default. However, the converse is also true. Saying that every unsanctioned act of expression is vandalism makes Darius' "READ" sign the same as "For a good time call 555-5555" written on the wall. The compromise between these two ideas can be found in a theory suggested by the last category of stall writings, dialogue.

The important point here is that saying that bathroom stall writing has social meaning and should be studied does not mean that all bathroom writing is automatically treated with cultural reverence. Bathroom writing should, however, be respected as having social meaning. Some of it seems to be inspired by pure boredom, other writings may be caused by Allen's hedonic component discussed above. Some are indeed expressions of social or political messages. So to answer the initial question, "Why do people make graffiti?" the answer is: because they have something to say or have a feeling to express. More importantly, returning to the equity-control model, they feel that they do not have enough control to make a difference by voicing their opinion in a "legitimate" forum, and that if they did no one would care.

> "[Respecting all cultural histories] does not commit us to an uncritical acceptance of anything and everything that is said about the past…Archaeologists should enter into dialogue with other traditions of understanding the past…[dialogue] should bring different traditions into a productive exchange, in which each can be enriched without surrendering its identity" (Layton and Thomas, 2001, p. 17)

Conclusion

As a result of my research, I am calling for two forms of dialogue. First is a dialogue between the bathroom stall writers themselves. This would be similar to the previously mentioned "Kennedy's Sucks" piece where a writer takes an unproductive message, "Democrats Suck/Bush Sucks" and introduces something more worthwhile. In addition, if someone takes offense at a writing in a stall (the swastika, for instance) they might write a response. Prurient responses are just as certain as the unprompted juvenile writings already noted ("BJ"). "The democracy of the genre, where anyone can put their work up, has inevitably led to massive disparities in quality. But the really good artists who are doing something original easily stand out from the crowd" (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 65). In a dialogue, which so many people read each day, eventually the more socially constructive points of view will gain an audience. The second form of necessary dialogue is one between the writers and the power structure itself. It would be wonderful for no one to have the need to write on the stalls because they feel they can resolve their problems in a more effective way. Political engagement and social protest (in a more active and visible form) can both be much more effective forums for voicing opinions. Clearly there are many people who feel they do not have a forum for effectively voicing their concerns. Providing a legitimate forum or directing people to such a place would be much more helpful than summarily censoring them. For instance, some universities have put up walls or pillars of wood where students can express their thoughts and feelings about events. The University of Virginia and the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression installed a "free speech wall" to allow anyone passing by to write what is on their mind (Jaquith, 2006). Lachmann (1988) again provides an important critique. Part of the attraction of writing graffiti comes from the deviant label that it receives. A sanctioned wall may provide a relatively anonymous forum, but anonymity is not the only draw of bathroom graffiti. The sanctioned wall writers and the stall vandals might divide along lines similar to the gallery and street graffiti artists in the 1980s.

With regard to the importance of the social context of graffiti writing (Lachmann, 1988), some graffiti writers may be unwilling to write the kinds of things they write in bathrooms in a more open public space where they are liable to be surprised in the act of writing. To some extent this issue could be circumvented by the design and placement of the wall. For instance, the wall should be located where the messages can be easily viewed, but it is also important to allow for some measure of privacy for the

writers. The wall should be large enough to allow for expansive writing and should be made of a material suitable for common writing utensils. Offensive messages should not be censored, and everyone should be encouraged to participate.

As noted above, Lachmann (1988) also expresses concerns about the subway muralists' social concerns and subculture being silenced by their cooptation into mainstream culture through gallery work. While providing a "free speech wall" may in some cases be seen as domesticating and trivializing students' concerns about serious political and social issues (particularly if the university administration is not attentive to understanding and addressing these concerns), providing a forum for expression of and non-threatening reaction to racist and sexist feelings may eventually lead to greater openness to others and their views and so, in a sense, to a form of cooptation which is actually emancipatory.

One of the core issues brought up against graffiti and bathroom wall writing is that it is a destruction of public and private property. This is certainly true, but covering up the messages included therein is counterproductive. The goal should be identifying the problems that inspire the graffiti, not covering them up, and providing a forum where those who feel they have no voice may be heard.

Acknowledgements

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