Graffiti as art: Shedding Light on the Artistic Value of Graffiti in Minneapolis

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GRAFFITI AS ART: SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE ARTISTIC VALUE OF GRAFFITI IN MINNEAPOLIS

LUKE IVerson

Throughout the paper the author finds it incredibly important to set the stage for the audience and provide them with proper graffiti culture terminology, explanations of the styles and common motivations of graffiti, along with how the public and government typically respond to graffiti. The author seeks to share further understanding with the audience through sharing the trends of location of graffiti, the "hidden art" aspect of graffiti creation, the impact of legal walls and spaces in graffiti culture, how social media impacts graffiti, and ultimately how citizens can begin to recognize graffiti writers as artists. This submission challenges the audience to explore the places that they live and begin to ask questions about how the community views its local graffiti writers. After reading through this work, the audience should gain perspective of graffiti writers and have an increased appreciation for the work that they create and display for the community.
“Hiding From the Bull”: Pieces by Wundr and Biafra Inc, photographed by Luke Iverson

Building Credibility

As a Street Outreach team member with a nonprofit organization in Minneapolis that provides services to individuals experiencing homelessness, I am in my fourth year of seeking out “campsites” of these individuals in our city. In doing that work, I have had the unique experience of stepping into urban exploring through monkey-ing along cliff sides to reach remote plateaus in the woods, calling out greetings into sewer tunnels near the Mississippi, climbing on all fours under bridges, and peering into abandoned factories for lone travelers or groups of campers. Urban exploring, by definition, is the exploration of man-made structures, usually abandoned, such as buildings, ruins, or other man-made components of the environment. It was in this work that I became deeply familiar with and interested in graffiti in our city. Furthermore, as a long-distance runner who often takes lengthy runs through the city, I have had the time and energy to investigate areas of interest more thoroughly and to document many painted spaces in the city through photographs. In the next pages, I hope to share some of my findings about styles and types, locations of, motivation behind, and public and private responses to graffiti. I have used field
research, photographs, interviews with writers who create works of graffiti, and academic resources to prepare a written analysis of my findings which compares my experiences and insights from the city of Minneapolis with the findings of Dr. Cameron McAuliffe and Samantha Tavares that I will mention below in further detail. These findings are meant to stand as intensive field research in a local context, focusing solely on the Twin Cities and surrounding suburbs, and tend to underscore academic themes found in a broader context.

My official field research began with a map of the city of Minneapolis and a camera in November of 2014. I began taking photos of every piece of graffiti that I could find. Having built some credibility over the months, through gathering and categorizing photos taken in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, I began reaching out to graffiti writers in the local scene whose work I believed I had photographed. The social media smartphone app, Instagram, made it possible for me to get in contact with these graffiti writers that previously would not have been accessible, due to the secrecy writers must maintain to combat investigation by law enforcement. Being able to capture the work that the graffiti writer created in a photograph was a powerful way to build credibility with individuals because some graffiti writers are unable to get a quality photo of their work in the moment they are creating it. Having an appreciation for the graffiti writers’ work goes a long way in a community which welcomes more than those who are artistically inclined. As relatively unknown and inexperienced explorers respect the unwritten rules and norms of the community, what is known as graffiti culture to practitioners, they are more prone to be accepted and respected by practitioners and explorers alike. I personally demonstrated a lengthy dedication to finding and documenting the work of a number of writers through various styles of research of the City of Minneapolis, seeking out places that are uncommonly visited or run down. I spent days exploring Minneapolis and had several photography sessions, then discussed the works I captured with the writers in a casual context via social media and, eventually, requested to interview them to gain perspective on what goes through the minds of graffiti writers who develop and practice various styles. I ended up holding full interviews with writers Biafra Inc, Efup, and Zemog. Insights from these correspondences are integrated herein.

In addition to the field research that I did in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I sought up-to-date conversation around graffiti and graffiti writers from around the world. Dr. Cameron McAuliffe’s work, “Legal Walls and Professional Paths: The Mobilities of Graffiti Writers in Sydney,” published on January 24th, 2013, was an excellent reference to gain insight on the scholarly conversation on graffiti. While McAuliffe’s in-depth study of graffiti is in Sydney, Australia, his observation and dialogue on the graffiti culture and graffiti writers heads the current scholarly graffiti conversation. I believe McAuliffe’s research is incredibly applicable to the local scene in Minneapolis, which I have been observing both casually and intently over the past four years.
Another strong voice in the graffiti conversation in 2014 is Samantha Silva Tavares, who wrote “California Graffiti Removal Programs: Benchmarking San José’s Graffiti Abatement Program against Best Practices in the Cities of Long Beach, San Diego, and Santa Ana”. Tavares seeks to gain an understanding of the Graffiti Removal Programs in California as the state is continually seeking to rebound from the hard hit effects of The Great Recession. Her research offers the historical influencers and theories that have shaped American perception of graffiti and she reminds us of important successful and unsuccessful programming of the past.

It is through utilization of the sources described that I offer the following insights into graffiti in the local context.

**Types of Graffiti & Motivations**

Many residents of Minneapolis encounter graffiti on an everyday basis and never stop to consider what the purpose of graffiti writing is.

The tag is the most common type of graffiti that one would encounter because it is the most basic form of graffiti. Oftentimes a graffiti writer will go out “bombing” and etch, spray, or mark his or her tag in as many locations as possible to gain exposure in the community to show that they are “getting up” and active as a writer who deserves respect (Graffiti Dictionary). Getting up and bombing are different forms of motivation than a graffiti writer who is focused on quality of work would use because oftentimes bombing is focused in areas where time is very limited and the act of graffiti leaves them openly exposed.

For some, tags may be the first step into the world of graffiti or their only attempt. In his essay from 1988, “Graffiti as Career and Ideology,” Richard Lachmann suggests, “Once novices have acquired from their mentors the skills to write graffiti and an understanding that an audience can recognize individual writers’ work, they create distinct identities for themselves in the form of tags.” On the other hand, there are writers in Minneapolis who demonstrate that this is not always the case, which may be a difference of location or era. Many skilled writers have been known to put up tags in addition to more serious “pieces” or “murals”, which will be discussed further and is demonstrated by the graffiti tag “Shaper” below and a full piece pictured later.
A Shaper tag on City Pages box in Uptown, Minneapolis, photographed by Luke Iverson.

While driving down Lyndale Ave. I spotted this tag done by Shaper. Tags are common in this area and are oftentimes done at night or quickly during the day when little attention is directed towards the writer and the activity they are partaking in. Tags are commonly found on Franklin Ave, Lyndale Ave, Lake Street, West and East River Parkway, and many other locations in Minneapolis.

In addition to tagging, “throw ups,” which lack much detail, are another form of getting up that graffiti writers use to show the community (the residential community, but more importantly the graffiti community) that they are developing as a writer. Through throw ups, writers try to display their growth beyond the simple tagging, which they might show more frequently around the city. Throw ups are more detailed than tags and typically contain multiple colors or have layers of designs. Graffiti writers who tag limit the amount of artistic ability that the general public can view, but those who utilize throw ups begin to bring a more artistic product to the community, which is more complex than one might expect. Some graffiti writers who create in-depth murals or pieces, which are writer’s paintings, will oftentimes do a rough sketch version of their character or piece as a throw up in locations where they would never have the time needed to create an in-depth piece (Graffiti Dictionary).
A Kater throw up on a train car near Dinkytown, Minneapolis, photographed by Luke Iverson

This Kater throw up was located on a train car nearby the Mississippi River, in Dinkytown, on the University of Minnesota campus. I have observed that this specific train hasn’t moved in over a year, unlike the other trains that frequent this area. Kater shared with me that he frequently visits Minneapolis, but no longer resides in the area, limiting the amount of work that he creates in the area to only a few times a year now. He shared that he is able to throw up a detailed image like this in under 60 seconds.

Throughout my field research in Minneapolis I have found that both local writers Efup and Kater have been known to throw up partial characters in locations that urban explorers and other fans would normally not expect them. The advantage of throw ups, and the motivation behind them, tends to be that a graffiti writer can show off some of their skill and overall potential in an area that normally would not see any of their work, especially if they are a developed graffiti writer who typically engages in large pieces, murals, or work amongst a graffiti crew.

To the average member of the Minneapolis community, murals and pieces are likely the most impressive form of graffiti. In a piece or mural, the writer gets the opportunity to show off their ability as a graffiti writer and, some might say, an artist. Graffiti writers that have been around for quite some time develop in style as well, as noted by local writer Efup: “it is insane how much a style can change over time. I have changed my graffiti name twice, and my style has changed many times. I mostly do a rendition of a face that actually says my real first name, but it is so hidden in the facial structure that most people think I just bomb faces” (Efup).
What the mainstream viewers may not realize is that it is fairly uncommon for a graffiti writer to begin a piece or mural, even a throw up, without effectively planning out what they would like to create on the city’s canvas. Zemog explains, “One of my favorite pieces would be the angel protecting a kid that’s tagging on the wall. I had a lot of fun creating that because it took a lot of preparation for it. I needed to figure out how to get the paint, stencil, and all the tools there” (Zemog). Zemog explains that even with the brightest ideas and having worked out the entire creative aspects of the project, graffiti writers face additional obstacles to establish their creation on the public medium. Zemog adds, “It was hard to get to the wall because below the wall there was a big swamp and there’s nothing to step on. I spent all night finishing the piece because I was running into problems in the process.”

“GHETTO PROTECTED”: Created by Zemog, photographed by Luke Iverson Zemog spent hours preparing for a mural such as “Ghetto Protected, sketching and cutting out the proper stenciling for the multiple characters involved. He recently released a video on his facebook page which shows the process of him creating a mural in an underground drain. This particular piece can be found near St. Anthony Main in a local park.

Through another interview, I learned that graffiti writers can be successful artists in other mediums as well and that their graffiti work may offer writers a different outlet to connect with a group of people who would not normally encounter their artistic work that is done in a more private space. While speaking with Biafra Inc he shared, “Aside from stickers, stencils and spray paint, I am also a print maker. Primarily screen printing but I also dabble in relief and intaglio”
(Biafra Inc), intaglio and relief being two opposite styles of how printmaking can be done with ink. Because of Biafra Inc’s success as a graffiti writer and his work in showing his other art mediums at Minneapolis art shows, he has continuously branched into new mediums such as clothing as well. Each month in 2015 Biafra Inc. is offering a “Shirt of the Month” for $12 which he has designed himself that can be preordered online. If you’re ever out walking in Minneapolis, keep an eye open and you may come across one of his Biafra Inc stickers or see one of his Biafra Rail stencil prints on a train car.

Graffiti writers, veterans or rookies, are typically very planful before creating a piece or mural. When working on an in-depth piece or mural, graffiti writers will commonly work together or work side-by-side with one another to multiply the impact of the produced work. In these cases, each writer gets to show off what they are best at, which could be lettering, outlining, backdrops, or their individual characters, depending on the relationships of the writers and what they bring to the crew. Biafra Inc spoke about how his group, 4DK, started: “4DK came together as a collective, we were all hanging out and painting a lot, and doing art shows together, so we decided to put a name to our group” (Biafra Inc). What Biafra Inc didn’t mention in the interview was the amount of impact that the group can leave on the community. The 4DK is arguably the most talented collaborative in Minnesota, having brought together members: Biafra Inc, Kater, Winkie, Wundr, and photographer for the group/graffiti writer, Urban Camper. The reason that I would argue that they are the most talented is that the group has such a wide variety of skills and each member is incredibly adaptable, constantly honing new skills. Biafra Inc. consistently develops unique stencils that he utilizes in graffiti, along with lettering, and the development of free-hand characters. Although Kater no longer permanently resides in the Twin Cities, he returns with newly developed monster characters and lettering ideas. Winkie primarily focused on graffiti lettering with 4DK, but has not been an active member of the group as of late. Finally, Wundr brings the whole group together by consistently outdoing himself. Wundr created what is now known as the “Wundr Bird” character and consistently creates human-like characters that appear perfected the first time that fans encounter them, and does lettering with ease. The group has been known to feature other graffiti writers Shaper and Pater.

The motivation behind a piece or and mural can also be to convey a message that the graffiti writer believes the audience needs to hear. Local graffiti writer and artist Zemog has become known for his stencil work that almost always has a message behind it. He enjoys combining what he views as “art with a message” because he is intentional about what he creates and wants to leave a lasting impression on his audience (Zemog). He and other writers like him are questioning the public assumption of graffiti as an action backed by negative intention.

Public Response: Law and Graffiti

Graffiti differs from most other forms of art in that it is illegal and pun-
ishable by law in many public spaces across the world. Local governments in the United States make it well known that destruction of property will not be tolerated, and communicate that those who destroy, damage, or alter property will be held accountable. What they fail to agree on throughout the United States is the level of punishment that offenders must face. The law consequences range from non-existent in legal spaces, which are legalized locations for writers to graffiti, to extremely severe for damages that are above $500 or $1000 in some cities.

According to California’s Penal Code Section 594, if damage done by a graffiti writer is calculated to be over $400, the graffiti writer can be charged with a felony. If damage is over $10,000, which is possible for taggers and active graffiti writers, punishment can be over a year in prison and fines close to $50,000. The writer can also lose their drivers license for up to a year and if a writer is found with possession of graffiti tools (spray paint or markers) with the intent to commit graffiti they will be charged with a misdemeanor (Penal Code Section 594-625c). California is known for having more strict graffiti law than most cities around the country, but New York City has taken a very powerful stance as well.

New York City has a wide variety of anti-graffiti laws as well. In New York City, the government has been known to offer rewards for information about graffiti writers, “Title 10 S 117.2 of the New York City Administrative Law Code allows the Mayor to offer and pay a reward, not exceeding $500, to any person who provides information leading to the apprehension, persecution or conviction of any person who vandalizes property” (Anti-Graffiti City and State Legislation). The State of New York instills degrees of criminal mischief in regards to property damage and is known for their intense graffiti task force that set precedence for graffiti removal. Criminal mischief in the fourth degree is intentional property damage of $250 or more to another person’s property or an abandoned building. The third degree is intentional property damage of $250 to property of another person and the second degree is intentional property damage of over $1500. These all fall under New York Penal law S 145.00 and S145.05 (Anti-Graffiti City and State Legislation).

When I asked Zemog to tell me more about how he chose his graffiti name, he shared a story that demonstrates the effect of such laws on graffiti writers, “Zemog was the name of one of my friends I used to paint with,” he stated, “One day we both got in trouble [while writing graffiti] and he got deported back to his country” (Zemog). Zemog reflected on his experience and shared that if he would have had a legal wall to work on with his friend, things would have turned out differently and the two could still be creating together. This is a perfect example of how the legal system in the United States makes an example of any graffiti writers that they catch, in order to make up for those they don’t.

In McAuliffe’s paper he argues that “The ability to ‘strike anywhere’ constructs all surfaces of the city as a potential canvas, producing perceptions of fear in the disruption of the constructed sanctity of urban space”. (Cameron
McAuliffe, 2013) When McAuliffe uses the idea of “sanctity of urban space” I understand this to mean that urban space should be free from unplanned interruptions or anything viewed as damaging. The perceptions of fear that McAuliffe speaks in regards to is the uncertainty of when the graffitists work will show up next. For followers of the graffitist and those who value graffiti, it is interesting to urban explore around cities for the work of graffiti writers in unconventional places.

In Minneapolis it is becoming increasingly more common for graffiti writers, along with graffiti admirers, to take part in exploration activities because of the legal ramifications of writing graffiti in public, making it more complicated for graffiti writers to create work in public. The “disruption of the constructed sanctity of urban space” that McAuliffe speaks of addresses the way that graffiti can alter the public’s perception of the urban environment. In places like downtown Minneapolis, everyday citizens expect crisp and clean spaces in their business communities and negatively view the alteration of public property without the prior approval of the government and city residents.

Both Efup and Zemog shared that as graffiti writers they have developed their style immensely over time and focus on the creation of the piece they have planned for as long as possible, unless they foresee an encounter with police. Although they both aren’t comfortable with the legal ramifications of graffiti, believing that laws go too far oftentimes, they personally thrive in the current culture and have not utilized legal spaces to do their work. McAuliffe echo’s this by sharing a quote by Ferrell (1996), “For the writers themselves, legal graffiti walls are problematic, as the performative power of graffiti resides for many writers in the illegal action itself”.

Efup specifically spoke about his encounters with the law, “I have been in legal trouble a number of times over the years. Never been caught in the act before, but pictures have gotten me in trouble, and paint covered hands when confronted by police as well. I’ve spent $9,000 dollars on my lawyer and a week in jail, due to graffiti in a building downtown being renovated. I know graffiti is a crime and that society thinks it is wrong— that’s what makes it so enjoyable” (Efup). While government officials believe that charging graffiti writers with felonies, misdemeanors, and fining them will convince them to stop their behavior, it may only affect those writers who lack dedication and belief in what they are doing. Both Efup and Biafra Inc view themselves as artists and don’t plan to alter their behavior, regardless of how Minneapolis views their graffiti writing.

According to founders James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, the Broken Window Theory is one of the many reasons that city residents dislike and fear the work of graffiti writers. The theory states that monitoring and maintaining environments in urban areas and preventing small crimes such as vandalism or drinking in public, would create a law-abiding environment that would stop more serious crimes from occurring. By scaring community members into thinking that
graffiti and minor law breaking will overtake their community, it puts residents of Minneapolis directly at odds with graffiti writers. The theory spurred the negative thinking towards graffiti and presents government officials with the idea that graffiti is a visible sign of losing the city to crime. In the 1990s and today, governments have continuously adapted new programs to rid cities of graffiti without coming to an understanding of what graffiti is (Tavares, 8).

Similarly to my observation and experience in Minneapolis, Tavares speaks about local graffiti in California, “The City of Oakland cannot clearly define whether graffiti is seen as a piece of art or vandalism. The City Council passed a law that criminalizes tagging but also set aside $400,000 for mural projects” (Tavares, 11). In a related move, “the Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District (MDID) provides graffiti removal from public spaces within the district boundaries. Additionally, for a fee, MDID will provide this service to private properties within the district” (Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District). Outside of the Downtown Minneapolis area, Minneapolis takes this stance on graffiti on private property, “if the graffiti is on your property, it is your responsibility to clean it up. When graffiti is reported, property owners are notified by mail. If the graffiti is not cleaned up within seven days of being notified, the City may remove or paint over the graffiti and bill the property owner for the cleanup cost” (City of Minneapolis). “Buffing” a wall, bridge, or area that has been graffitied is the act of removing the graffiti from the location, usually by painting over it, using a high pressured power washer, or treating it with chemicals. Although it’s disappointing for graffiti writers and graffiti enthusiasts when buffing public locations takes place, it actually is providing a service for graffiti writers in the same way it would be for someone to buy a painter a new canvas to work with.

When work is removed by public works, anti-graffiti programs, or private property owners, the removers view this as reclaiming territory from the graffiti writers who previously had taken over the location. The City of Minneapolis webpage answers the question: Why Report Graffiti? Their answer to this is, “Graffiti has a negative effect on communities. Along with lowering neighborhood appeal, decreasing property values, and driving away prospective homebuyers, it also attracts criminal activity. Worst of all, gang members use graffiti to promote themselves. Covering up this graffiti takes away this gang tool and improves the overall look of neighborhoods” (Graffiti Questions and Answers). This response is very opinionated and the city appears to generalize their opinions while focusing only on tagging. In reality, this deters the graffiti writers for a very short time, and it provides them with another free canvas to put their work upon, when the area is unguarded by community members.

This same pattern happens in abandoned buildings in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota when people explore the open buildings and take advantage of the urban canvas that is available to work on. Some of the most intricate and beautiful works by graffiti writers are in abandoned locations that can be opened up and are accessible to many explorers, but also can be boarded or soldered
closed by private owners. Because these locations aren’t meant to have writers and explorers in them, they oftentimes allow more time for writers to spend developing their pieces. In Minneapolis it is also becoming common for private owners to put cameras up to combat explorers and graffiti writers. The owner of the Glenwood-Inglewood Fruen Mill was known by the urban explorer community, whom explored the mill, to patrol the site in the summer of 2013 to prevent potential trespassers from entering the building and, in my previous observation while working, I have received the previous message as well when speaking with the owner. On Saturday March 14th, 2015 several members of the urban exploring community confirmed to me that they had witnessed over twenty individuals be charged with trespassing during an hour period, by the Minneapolis Police Department. This prevents both writers from expressing their works on the urban canvas and urban explorers from happening upon such work.

**Locations**

It is well known in graffiti culture that writers enjoy the rush of graffiti, knowing that what they do is illegal, and creating in such a covert way as to avoid being apprehended by the police. This certainly isn’t what motivates all graffiti writers, but many are motivated by putting their work in the most public locations, and not necessarily always being focused on quality of work due to time constraints. Earlier in the interview Efup shared how graffiti has been a part of his life since he was in middle school and how he has always focused on developing the artistic side to his throw ups and pieces. With that being said, many of the psychological motivators have continually brought him back to graffiti writing in the public eye and into challenging locations. Efup shared, “My favorite part is the rush. Climbing up poles to get on roofs, running across highways, crawling through tunnels, running from cops, hopping fences, daytime bombing, bus hopping - you name it. All about the rush” (Efup).
Graffiti writers in Minneapolis are continuously more and more creative in the locations that they choose to graffiti because, in a way, they have to be. Graffiti writers specifically have mentioned to me that they have expanded their reach to suburbs such as: Maple Grove, Minnetonka, White Bear Lake, and any other locations that would be conducive to creating elaborate pieces that require extensive time and surface area, which has become a hot commodity. In Minneapolis I’ve seen work on telephone poles, on top of buildings, in alleyways, storefronts, under bridges, along overpasses, in abandoned buildings, train cars, on major highway bridges over the Mississippi River, and anywhere else a graffiti writer is daring enough to attempt. McAuliffe speaks regarding graffiti writers and graffiti culture stating, “In sub-cultural relations, graffiti writers accrue fame and respect among other writers through their daring escapades; risk-taking behavior and the breaking of laws become significant ways through which graffiti writers move up the hierarchy towards recognition and respect by their peers”.

While enjoying the risk, hiding a writer’s identity and working under-the-radar are incredibly important principles of graffiti. However, the finished
product is arguably the most important because it is what they leave behind for others to see and directly reflects the effort the writer has put into the work. Onlookers and fellow graffiti writers will be impressed by location selection and the boldness or the writer, but graffiti writers that create visually appealing and message sending work to everyday people who view the piece are incredibly powerful. The strength of graffiti writer’s clean lines, intricate design, polished work, and the addition of an empowering message touches everyone who views it, but fellow writers cannot deny quality work.

Even the most serious of graffiti writers would prefer that the punishments were lessened or adapted so that they could focus more on the artistic development of their creations for the public. Biafra Inc offers a unique and realistic perspective for the community; “I would never advocate that graffiti be completely legalized but I am in favor of the charges being reduced. I think the illegality of graffiti is what keeps people that aren’t really serious away. I like that when I see a tag or a piece or whatever else that I know someone felt passionately enough about doing it that they risked their freedom to do it” (Biafra Inc). It’s important to note that even though he is one of the top graffiti writers in Minneapolis, he respects everyone who takes part in the art of graffiti creation. By opening up an environment that eliminated some of the legal pressure from the government, it would change the graffiti culture and encourage community members to spend time understanding graffiti in a different way.

Hidden Art

Regardless of your opinion on graffiti as vandalism or art, it’s important to take note of the message that we send to graffiti writers and the outcomes of our actions. In the Minneapolis graffiti scene, it has become apparent that graffiti is unwanted by the government. That idea is spread to residents through public policy and acted out by Minneapolis Police. The message sent to graffiti writers is that there is no place for you to create your work in our city and that we only recognize it as damage to property and public space. Tavares shares a quote that focuses on differentiating terminology that oftentimes is incorrectly used interchangeably, “contemporary graffiti can be categorized in a variety of ways. It is important to separately categorize graffiti and vandalism, as the two terms tend to be discussed in the same context” (Tavares, 10). These policies and the legal ramifications of being caught have forced graffiti writers into locations that are deemed the least valuable in the city (under bridges, in abandoned buildings, in sewer drains, train cars, and anywhere these writers can find). In the same way that graffiti writers are forced into these undesirable locations, if a graffiti writer goes against this and writes on property that is brand new or deemed historic, the perception of art is completely eliminated and everyday city residents get upset. A perfect example of this was in Mill Ruins Park in the spring of 2014. Graffiti writer Decer wrote a piece in the ruins and news organization CityPages titled the article: “Mill Ruins Defaced by graffiti” and the Star Tribune’s article emphasized “defacing” and “vandalism” that took place.
“Your Life on Repeat”: Created by Biafra Inc, photographed by Luke Iverson
I have interpreted that Biafra Inc. created this piece to symbolize the draining pattern that many employees fall into while working in Corporate America. The idea is that these people begin to feel like every day is on repeat, being the same, and that there is no escape from the lifestyle they have chosen. This piece was found in an abandoned compound on the outskirts of the University of Minnesota campus.

A number of local businesses have commissioned graffiti writers to decorate the outside of their businesses, suggesting that these owners value the work of the graffiti writers enough to pay for it, as if to show it off to the public. In the Lyn-Lake neighborhood near Uptown in Minneapolis, such murals are a common occurrence. Similarly, on the strip of Broadway Avenue between Interstate 94 and Fremont Avenue North in the Near North neighborhood, a handful of prominent businesses on the strip have covered their storefronts with commissioned murals. The City of Minneapolis actually offers commissioning a mural on your private property as one of the ways to “Protect your Property from Graffiti” (Graffiti Solutions). Minneapolis has offered Innovative Graffiti Prevention Micro Grants since 2008, which allows community members to plan out projects that can help prevent graffiti and the city will fund them (Innovative Graffiti Prevention Micro Grants).

One of the writers interviewed, Biafra Inc, along with Wundr and Kater
from 4DK, are known to do commission work in Minneapolis and whenever opportunities become available. Several members of 4DK teamed up to do a mural of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox at North Country Skateshop in Bemidji, Minnesota and you can find an incredible “Ninjas and Turtles” mural done in 2012 by Shaper and Wundr in the alley behind Loon Grocery (on 2501 Lyndale Avenue South). Arguably, one of the most powerful mural commission works in Minneapolis is Wundr's fence work along 3rd Avenue South and 2nd Avenue South. Because it is in the middle of the neighborhood, Wundr is able to share his work with the community. By allowing him into the neighborhood, they are allowing him the opportunity to create specifically for them. By allowing this creation to take place, the neighbors get to appreciate the work and creative process that it took to establish, thus gaining more of an understanding of the artistic (non-vandalistic) side of graffiti culture. Wundr's work on the community fence is a potential step toward public approval of graffiti in their neighborhoods.

Legal Walls & Spaces

Legal spaces allow graffiti writers to create without having to worry about being reprimanded by the Minneapolis Police Department. According to Legal Walls, an online reference that allows users to document and search for legal wall locations across the world, Minneapolis only has a few legal spaces for graffiti writers to use. Shameless Inc is a graffiti and shirt store that allows graffiti writers to contact store employees to set up times to paint pieces and murals on the walls of the organization's building. The Shameless Inc's walls typically get repainted about every month for new graffiti writers to utilize. This gives graffiti writers a safe location to develop their graffiti writing without the fear of the Minneapolis Police Department arresting them and charging them with damage to property. Intermedia Arts is local non-profit organization that also allows graffiti on the walls of its building. The Walker Arts Center and Juxtaposition Art occasionally offer legal wall access as well. I believe that Minneapolis could greatly benefit from an increase in legal walls or locations, both because it would provide more positive opportunities for graffiti writers and allow the residents to appreciate the work of graffiti writers and their culture.

McAuliffe shares that in his research, “several users of the Parramatta graffiti walls have progressed towards roles as recognized creative workers” (McAuliffe). Parramatta was a legal wall that he found in Sydney and he spent time getting to know the individuals who used it. Writer POIZEN IVY completed her design degree at the University of Western Sydney and has since incorporated her graffiti within the design curriculum. She became a graphic designer and also created a graffiti sub-culture magazine focusing on female graffiti writers. Other people that McAuliffe met shared that they began teaching graffiti at a technical college, opened a small business designing images for t-shirts and skateboards, and an older writer stated spoke about his crew of more than 30 members who, “half of them are in jail, and the other half are architects”.
Biafra Inc. felt passionate about this as well: “I appreciate the people in the Twin Cities pushing for legal walls. I think legal walls are a great opportunity for people to showcase their talents and try out new things” (Biafra Inc). Additionally he traveled to South Dakota’s very own Art Alley in Rapid City, South Dakota (between Main Street and Saint Joseph from 6th to 7th Street) to spend some time working in this community. He had quite the opinion on Art Alley, with both praises and critiques, “On one hand I really love that it’s open and available for anything you want to do. It’s a fantastic place. You can do giant things you may not otherwise do, it has a variety of walls and people are always coming through to admire the walls” (Biafra Inc). Biafra Inc. has some frustrating critiques of the Art Alley and free walls as well, “history and respect are two big parts of graffiti culture and they are taught as you come up. With the lack of respect and knowledge in the alley it becomes commonplace for someone to spray ‘Tom Rocks!’ or any number of dumb phrases on top of pieces that people spent a long time on” (Biafra Inc).

After reflecting on Biafra Inc’s frustrations about the Art Alley, I would suggest to the businesses that maintain the Art Alley to encourage newer graffiti writers to focus in one specific portion of the alley. Business owners could designate the portion of the alley specifically behind one business to be for newer writers, or they could create a rule, or a contest, and keep the most unique pieces up for 6 months, 1 year, or an agreed upon time span. This would promote respect in the graffiti culture and prevent un-established writers from being viewed as toys, which is a derogatory term for an inexperienced writer (Graffiti Dictionary). The polished work of veteran writers would be respected and honored for a period of time without someone who is unaware of graffiti culture accidently disssing a well-established artist. Art Alley and legal walls provide a welcoming environment for members in the community that may not appreciate the same thing under a bridge. Shedding light on the intricacies of graffiti and street art is a powerful tool to promote many of the positives that these graffiti writers bring to their community.

Social Media

Due to the lack of accessibility for those who appreciate quality graffiti and the rising use of photographic social media outlets such as Instagram and Flickr, urban exploring around the world is on the rise. Veterans of urban exploring and graffiti writing have complained on Instagram that they never thought exploring drains would be the thing to do, now everyone is. Social media allows countless graffiti fans to follow the work of any graffiti writer that posts their work online (or has their work posted online by others) and, additionally, allows fans to connect with others who share similar interests. Because urban exploring has grown so much through the communication of social media, magazines such as UrbanExplorerMag are creating their first issue in January 2015 and are actively seeking out photographers via Instagram.
In Minneapolis it is becoming increasingly more common to take part in exploration activities because of the legal ramifications of writing graffiti in public, making it more complicated for graffiti writers to create work in public. The “disruption of the constructed sanctity of urban space” that McAuliffe speaks of addresses the way that graffiti can alter the public’s perception of the urban environment. In places like downtown Minneapolis, everyday citizens expect uninterrupted perfection in their business communities and negatively view the alteration of public property without the prior approval of the government and its citizens.

Pre-social media it was challenging for graffiti writers to connect with one another to work together because of the necessary secrecy that graffiti writers must have in order to protect themselves. In the past, graffiti writers would have limited exposure to other graffiti writers aside from physically producing graffiti in the same location at the same time or it coming up in face to face conversation. Social media allows writers to connect with peers they admire and also allows them to connect with fans who appreciate their work, which was also a key way in which I was able to make direct contact and conduct interviews.

Fans of graffiti view it as much more than the altering of property. These followers appreciate the intricate detailed artwork that is displayed on various surfaces around the city; regardless of how much understanding they have of the creative processes that most graffiti writers go through before their work ever materializes on a surface viewable for the public. Urban exploring in Minneapolis has become a very non-traditional way for art observers, specifically graffiti fans, to encounter talented graffiti writers work. Many of these individuals are willing to travel far distances, trespass into abandoned buildings, and explore tunnels to find the work of these graffiti writers. Regardless of how you view these individuals, it clearly is an activity that can be driven by more than a sense of adventure, but a sense of purpose. If seeking out the creations of the most talented graffiti writers wasn’t a large fuel for this urban exploration fire, why would these social media sites be thriving so continuously, if they’re solely based on individual’s photography? It appears that Instagram and Flickr users have self-interest in multiple forms: appreciating the masterpieces of local graffiti writers as art-work and the gratification they receive for capturing a quality flick (photo) of that individual’s creation.

**Recognizing Graffiti Writers as Artists**

This notion that graffiti writers are artists has been argued time and time again by previous scholars but I believe it comes down to the motivation of their work and the cultural perspective of the city. If a graffiti writer is motivated to create a piece or mural to display in the community, in a similar way that an artist would create artwork to share with the community, and they share similar processes in planning and intention as to the outcome of the work, it’s challenging to not appreciate the work of the graffiti writer in the same way as an artist. The
overall consensus is that the location of where the graffiti writer creates is the most problematic part of the overall experience.

In terms of legal sites Cameron McAuliffe argues, “Legal sites play a significant role in the maintenance of graffiti sub-cultures and that legal work by graffiti writers helps in the conceptualization of the graffiti writer as an artist” (McAuliffe). McAuliffe’s argument is validated in that when community members can view the work of graffiti writers in a positive light, and as a contribution to society, it takes away from the negative vandalistic lens that is typically stuck on writers. McAuliffe adds, “...Set in context with the present success of creative cities discourses and the subsequent revaluing of creativity in the city” (McAuliffe) meaning that these graffiti writers need a cultural value to be placed on creativity and art before they can be accepted and recognized as artists. The legal barriers that much of the United States has created for graffiti writers, specifically in Minneapolis, make it incredibly challenging for writers to safely create murals and pieces without being arrested. Through my field research in Minneapolis and time spent researching the most up-to-date scholarly conversation on graffiti, I have found that graffiti writers are resilient and will continue to create regardless of the social pressures that are forced upon them. If the City of Minneapolis created a more welcoming attitude to graffiti writers, which would be reflected by an increase in legal opportunities for writers to display and develop their craft, I believe the negative perception of graffiti amongst residents would begin to decrease. Instead of the large budget that is currently allotted to removal of graffiti, the canvas could be focused in a particular area, or other alternatives that have been explored in other cities. Contrarily, the appreciation for graffiti as an art would likely grow. The next time you find yourself in your local city with some free time; I’d encourage you to do some exploring, and find at least one graffiti piece or mural in the community to appreciate. Like I’ve mentioned previously, they may not be in the most obvious locations, but the city’s art gallery is free and it’s waiting for you to come and enjoy it.
This unique Wundr piece strays away from his popular and most common Wundr Bird character. Wundr showcases his wide range of ability by adding intricate details to the character (Hotdog, Flag, Beard, & Hair) and this can be found on “The Wall of Fame”, a well-hidden 200+ foot long wall that is a graffiti spot in NE MPLS.

References:


Efup, personal communication, November 24, 2014.


Zemog Stencils, personal communication, November 26, 2014.