

Aspects of Graffiti

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As a natural part of our environment, graffiti is both spontaneous and functional—free from design conventions and often the sole communications weapon of an oppressed people. It can be a personal identification or it can mark the boundaries for an urban street gang. Its history is probably as old as writing itself. Graffiti has adapted personal expression to whatever space, writing tool, surface, or viewing requirements the environment demands.

Graffiti is always new, spontaneous, and functional. It can shock us, amuse us, incite or bore us. Because graffiti is actually a highly structured communication medium, it can even instruct us. It is a natural part of our visual environment, defining both the spaces and our responses within that environment. Even when it seems surprisingly new, graffiti is always familiar.

Often pornographic, the content of graffiti tends to be more informational or persuasive. Experiencing graffiti is more immediate than is the “naive sign.” Graffiti is free from the design conventions of signs, as well as from economic or political limitations. It has often been the sole communication weapon of an oppressed people. Unlike the naive sign, it is not a folk-art, but a public medium and can be applied easily to any convenient surface.

Although graffiti is a visual medium, its origins do not lie within the history of art. Graffiti grew out of man’s biological capability and necessity of expressing his immediate thoughts. For a child, to make a mark becomes a confirmation of his own developing kinetic sense, a record that his hand has moved through space. This mark becomes *his own* mark, an external visible sign of his identity and existence. This Kinetic dialogue evolves from mark to sign to symbol as a constant interaction between himself and his environment.

Norman Mailer¹ describes the kinetic relationship of boys in the

New York ghettos to their spray-can graffiti on buses and subway cars. They spray their "mark" on vehicles that move through the city, which then "return to them." Identity is confirmed by the return of your own sign, still more kinetically enhanced by throwing rocks at "your car," or aggressively at someone else's identity.

Graffiti probably surfaced only after writing had ceased to be magic. The "macaroni lines" incised by Paleolithic cave dwellers used the kinetic mark as their first content, believed to be both informational and magical. The repeated and careful incising suggest complex purposes, which later developed into the pictorial images of an Altamira or a Lascaux. The Romans scratched their (and our) favorite four-letter word on carved stone signs and walls. Writing in Roman times was hardly magic, and graffiti was already an alternative media.

It is difficult to understand just how magical the written word once was. One Mayan codex describes the plight of a stone carver resisting being sacrificed in order to "save his soul by becoming at one with the Gods" because he had mis-carved a glyph. Such sanctity of the written word did not exist in Europe at that same time; illiterate monks often carefully copied a mis-spelled word from manuscript to manuscript. And graffiti flourished in Medieval England.²

As the marks or signs evolved into more complex symbols, they become more demanding in their precision. A separation occurs between the pictorial aspects which stay pictorial and those that can easily be replaced by words. When the subject communicates stress, anger, fear, or overwhelming delight, there is a tendency to return to the pictorial. Graffiti lacks the objectivity and distancing found in the naive sign, as the writer himself is covertly the main content and subject of his graffiti.

Most modern graffiti uses words instead of images or symbols, except for pornography which tends to be highly visual. Drawings of the human body are often fragmented and unfinished, stressing a graphic style based on the last formal art instruction, usually in grammar school. The role of pornographic graffiti is as little understood as is pornography itself. Whether it is a "release" or an advertisement is unclear, but it is most often meant to be an entertainment.

The use of graffiti among urban street gangs, such as "The Popes," demonstrates still further kinetic awareness. The gang's "territory"

is usually clearly defined by graffiti—painted on walls, sidewalks, trees, etc. When the Popes' territoriality was openly challenged by a rival gang, it was through additions to their own graffiti by the rivals. Instances of calligraphic aggression (such as the "Gas War" sign or the hole in a Mexico City street) frequently incorporate "design elements" closer to the naive sign. As in more sophisticated typography, when additional authority is being evoked, the graffiti is often symmetrically organized for increased emphasis.

Political graffiti tends to stay within the verbal form and is limited by the language, except for those rare phrases or images that manage to migrate. Few visual images or symbols in the long unwritten history of graffiti have ever had the international use or impact of the "Ban the Bomb" graffiti of the 1960's. Recent protest graffiti on many university campuses shows a hybrid between verbal content and visualized pornography. This often suggests a ribald political cartoon leaving open the relationship among cartoons, pornography, and graffiti.

Curiously there does seem to be an internationally uniform letter style found in most countries using the roman alphabet. It is a sans-serif, blockish kind of gothic letter usually used in all-capitals. There is rarely a mixture of styles. The international vogue for using spray-cans to letter is producing a softer, more cursive style. Even though the communication itself is highly personal, handwriting is rarely used. Perhaps handwriting is *too* personal for the objective distancing of graffiti.

One also finds a careful placement of graffiti upon surfaces within various environmental spaces. The changing relationship of the viewer as he walks or drives through the space tends to be carefully considered. With a kinetic origin, it is only natural that graffiti reflect this spatial awareness as well.

1. *The Faith of Graffiti*. Documented by Mervyn Kurlansky and Jon Naar; text by Norman Mailer. New York: Praeger, 1974.

2. V. Pritchard. *English Medieval Graffiti*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.



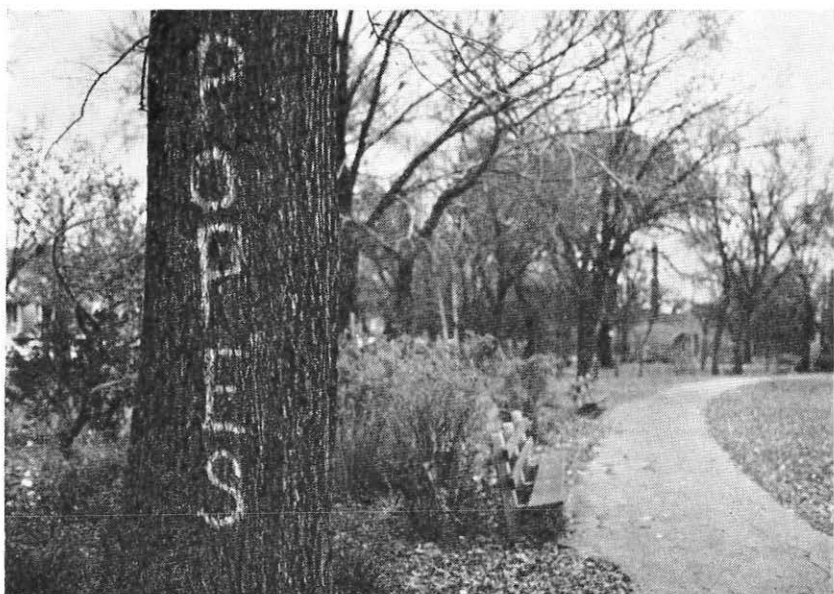
Hole in a Mexico City street, pointed out not only by a warning of danger (peligro) but also by traditional calaveras or skulls.



Graffiti and modified graffiti in a Peruvian election, 1962.



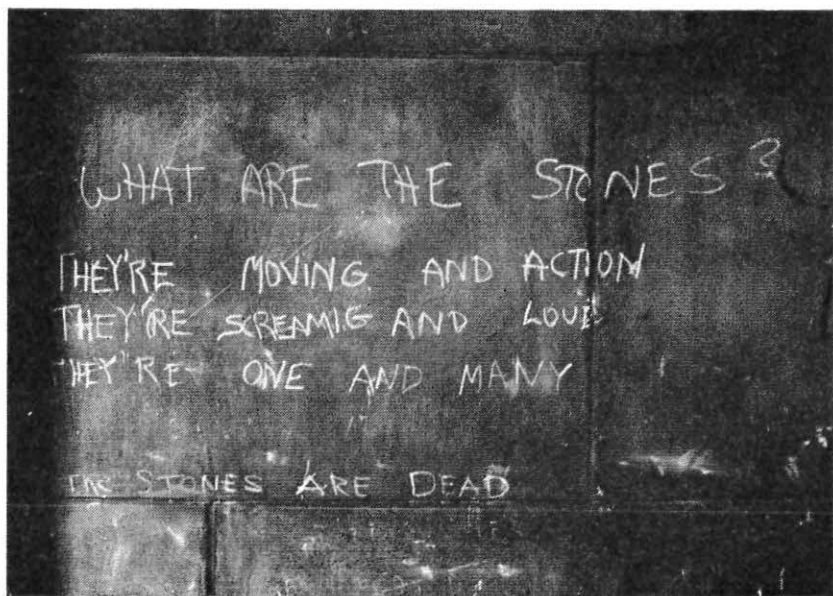
Graffiti in spray-can technique, two colors; part of the net that defines the territoriality of a Chicago street gang.



Graffiti designating territoriality in Chicago.



The potential of graffiti as a communications medium, Cambridge, England.



Graffiti eulogy for a Chicago street gang.



Naive sign in graffiti style in Joplin, Missouri.



A Chicago doorway.