

Week 2 – Lecture

Graffiti: Crimes of Style

Gender, race, socioeconomic standing, and institutional background, level of education, determine power relations.

- Graffiti is seen as a contemporary phenomenon
- Graffiti has a long lasting history throughout human culture
- Ancient graffiti can be found in Pompeii
- Graffiti was a prevalent form of marking identity on the walls of Pompeii
- Graffiti along with political images in ancient Pompeii
- Documented examples of graffiti from ancient Rome to practice their outlawed religion of Christianity
- A celebration of Christian identity as they defied the pagan Roman state
- Aboriginal aesthetic marking on cave walls can be seen as forms of graffiti, dating back more than 30,000 years
- Arabic calligraphy that marks architecture influences graffiti to present day
- Graffiti is inspired from two fundamental elements:
 - Graffiti as:
 - A marker of identity
 - A clandestine and/or subversive practice through which to articulate political dissidence

1930s Graffiti

- Graffiti first began to be taken seriously with the work of Brassai with his photography of the graffiti that grasped his interests
- Of cultural forms that have been washed away by police and authorities
- Etchings and graffiti that are today marked as vandalism, he viewed as galleries, free galleries, for which art was all around
- He saw the act of graffiti intertwined with politics and emotions
- “The wall, safe haven for what is forbidden, given voice to all those who would, without it, be condemned to silence” – Brassai, Graffiti. Paris: Flammarion, (2002)
- this quote offers us a bridge to discussing the contemporary form of graffiti that emerged from the genre of hip hop during the 1970s
- Hip Hop culture was a form of cultural expression, significantly political resistance to the dominant white culture in America
- This culture, the dancing and music of hip hop culture gave African Americans their identity, and aided them to resist white culture
- Hip hop culture developed from 3 interlocking and distinctive cultural forms:
 1. Rap: a style of using words, based on traditional Black cultural genres
 2. Breaking: a virtuosic, acrobatic style of dancing
 3. Graffiti
- Hip Hop belonged to the politically disenfranchised
- African Americans repaired broken down turn tables in parking lots so they could create their music, create their resistance
- The poor or homeless take over the debris of the dominant culture, and temporarily take over their space to create a place of expression for those who do not normally have it
- Hip hop culture emerged as a form of African American identity politics. It challenges, resists and overturns dominant white norms and codes.
- Hip Hop is an important

- Style
- Identity
- Belonging
- Hip more than an aesthetic movement, it is a way of marking identity
- Born of a generation of artist who grew up in an era of violent race relations
- Black people attempted to overturn the laws that rendered them second class citizens in their own country
- Tactics versus Strategies: Black Civil Rights activists violently set upon by US police force

1970s: Black Panthers and Hip Hop Graffiti

- Profound economic, social and political disenfranchisement in Black communities fuelled discontent
- Alongside the Civil Rights practice of breaking the law in order to expose its violence this discontent sparked the tactical resistance of hip hop graffiti

Graffiti Practices

- Tags/tagging
- Pieces (short for 'masterpieces'): elaborate
- Throw ups: located between tags and pieces, they are usually tags executed
- Bombing: putting your tag on as many places as possible
- Biting
- Going over: when a writer partly or completely goes over an existing piece of graffiti
- Dissin' : disrespecting a masterpiece
- The buff: painting over of graffiti
- Sign painting: when graffiti artists are paid by the community to produce

Graffiti Terms

- Style: signature look of cool, a writer who has an individual, accomplished and innovative style
- Rhymes
- Kings
- Toys
- Crews

Graffiti subculture is in its own way, highly organised

- Tags are the colonel of graffiti, where it all started
- From nervously scribbled to tags, to extremely detailed wall sized murals, the graffiti artists in the Bronx began to create masterpieces
- Poor and homeless people, armed with nothing but markers and aerosol cans began to create their own art practice
- They took their culture to the city by painting trains with graffiti, so the trains moved through the city and the privileged, white, dominant people of the city of New York couldn't help but see the art
- They literally took their culture, art and graffiti to the city
- Graffiti must also be viewed in terms of the democratisation of artistic skills and practice
- Graffiti is a hip hop tactic equivalent to rap sampling: it relies on cheap, easily obtainable art tools (e.g. markers)
- It is for people who cant afford art school , canvas and oil paints, brushes etc. it is for people who cant afford the expensive experiences of art galleries and courses

- Graffiti writers always acknowledge their art practices
- Acknowledging is transitory, ephemeral status, graffiti artists produce work predicated on its potential obliteration (e.g. painted over by the government/council) and the consequent possibly for another writer or crew to paint over the same space
- It thus becomes a democratic art practice
- A cycle of give and take, in some terms “a global community art project/initiative”
- Graffiti is something that is always being contested by authorities
- Situate the graffiti we are studying in context, and always remember it is constantly under threat of being obliterated
- It is constantly rendered against the aesthetics of authority
- Who gets to decide what can and cannot be in public space? Why do they come to these decisions?
- Who are these laws really protecting? The 1%?

Why is graffiti declared a crime?

What constitutes graffiti?