

GRAFFITI, HISTORY, SYSTEMS

Graffiti is an observed and observable fact. It is a phenomenon of current concern and consequence, and has produced price-less historical archives. Indeed, historians of graffiti are now in a position to realize that there are many more such archives (some of them hiding in plain sight) waiting to be recovered, and others facing imminent destruction before their significance can be realized. If curators worldwide have been slow to appreciate these archives this is, at least in part, because graffiti is not a unified concept.

However, could it be one? A global history of graffiti, which might be said to run at least from Upper Paleolithic hand stencils (40,000 BCE) to the present, could no more be written than could a single history of human culture. Intimately connected with the history of writing, graffiti is nevertheless pre-historical. That is, it occurs in the historical record long before writing, as well as beyond and beside it in so-called 'literate' communities: understood in this expansive way graffiti thereby solves, by erasing, the vexed problem of where writing begins and ends. Were it to be identified as an academic field, graffiti studies would need to draw from the elaborated expertise not only of rock art studies, epigraphy, paleography, archaeology, theology, geography, geology, ethnography, anthropology, indigenous studies, post-colonial studies, art history, theology, linguistics, aesthetics, astronomy, sociology, criminology, law, architecture, heritage studies, political science, visual studies, and histories of writing, but also spatial arts, graphic design, orality studies, musicology and ethnomusicology, environmental studies, geomapping, urban planning, media studies, communication studies, affect theory, behavioral studies, psychoanalysis, systems theory, game theory, performance studies, sound and landscape studies, visual cognition studies ...clearly this list could not be closed. I have argued elsewhere that the task facing historians is therefore to develop site-specific protocols that will allow us to identify, read, and preserve graffiti as it occurs at local sites, within local graffiti economies or 'graphospheres.'¹ But could there be a way of thinking about graffiti that would stabilize the concept while also, and not incidentally, enlarging its scope? My proposal today is

that graffiti might usefully be thought of as a popular, multi-platform, ancient and enduring, media network.

Attempts to define graffiti – whether as a criminal, artistic, political, expressive, or ‘simply human’ practice – have been many, and they continue to yield conceptual tools that allow us to grasp its significance. The importance of graffiti archives is increasingly being recognized, and sophisticated technological tools and protocols are being developed to record and store them. However, no definition of graffiti has been found to fit all cases. We might, for example, want to describe it as broadly as possible, to include every instance of unauthorized writing as it appears at any location, in any medium, and on any and all imaginable surfaces. But even here we face two problems. The first is what is meant by ‘unauthorized’. This feature, the only one that, in this definition, separates graffiti writing from other forms of human writing, is also the one from which much of the value of historical graffiti is currently derived – for it is held that if graffiti, as a short form, understandably doesn’t have much to say, it is nevertheless a unique expression of experience: individual, counter-cultural, anti-institutional, non-commodified, and ‘authentic’.

But is it? Who writes spontaneously? Or alone? What piece of writing has ever been fully ‘individual’ or socially unmediated?

It would be naïve to ignore the consequences of the fact that much of today’s most visible graffiti is “illegal” and exposes practitioners to systems of criminal justice, sometimes to their great personal cost. As an argument over who gets to say what, and where, graffiti can rightly be considered the expression of those whose alienation or exploitation is part and parcel of a given social order, and its archives contain crucial records of alternative, overlooked, non-official, and differently regulated histories. Rightly appreciated these archives contain evidence, not only of political struggles, past and present, for inclusion in mainstream cultures, but also of an achieved aesthetic indifference towards, and a creative difference from, those cultures. Graffiti, that is, can constitute a strong instance of outsider art. Nevertheless, behind every graffiti inscription lies the encouragement, facilitation, advice, example, provocation, and authorization of others: it takes a community to create, as well as preserve, even the most ‘artless’ and ‘autonomous’ inscription. However small the group within which it is produced and read, and however ‘illegal’ its emplacements, graffiti is an ‘instituted’ form; its inscriptions may be ‘unauthorized’ in relation to certain institutions, and they may revel in and draw strength from this fact, but they are no more ‘individual,’ ‘authentic,’ or ‘free of rules’ than any other form of writing or drawing. Whoever thinks graffiti is ‘spontaneous’ (a claim that is often made for it) has never seen it done. Today’s writers usually identify a site in advance, and approach it ready-equipped, carrying not only markers or paints, but also harnesses and climbing ropes, with friends to act as lookouts, and prepared getaway plans: the most experienced may have a lawyer on speed-dial. Graffiti writers in all media tend to

have significant graphic expertise: they typically carry some record of designs they have developed and practiced until each one can be thrown up at speed, and they will certainly have served what amounts to an apprenticeship in the protocols and street rules of their local scene, including where they can tag or throw down a design in relation to the graffiti that is already there. Months of preparation can precede the right moment, and if it is sometimes felt that graffiti 'attract' other graffiti (as if they own a tendency to appear in spontaneous clusters) what is really at stake is the development of the highly organized microcultures that institute graffiti and render it legible.

The second problem with defining graffiti as "unauthorized writing" is equally consequential, for it claims to know in advance what would more usefully remain in question. What is writing? And what has it been historically, not only for ourselves, but more particularly for the varied local cultures -- some ancient, and others, more recent, said to be "non-literate" -- with which graffiti historians may be concerned? Here, if our understanding of writing does not extend, at a minimum, to include drawings, images, designs, tallies, and other marks, we will have abandoned, altered, and impoverished much of our archive. Even the term "marking" is not broad enough: if we restrict the term to its narrowest modern sense graffiti today still includes sticker bombing, fly posting, wheat paste-ups, stenciling, 'subvertising' (which amends corporate advertisements), illegal sculpture, and certain forms of land and laser art. Furthermore, graffiti interacts with and is supported not only by its own materials and locations, but also by other artforms (especially music and dance); other media (photography, fanzines, the internet); highly various geographical (and therefore physical, political and institutional) environments; and local communities and cultures (including corporate sponsorship, the entertainment industry, art school, art galleries, and the world of fashion). All of these could be said to be part of its 'writing' in the broader sense. Although historical graffiti continues to be used as an index of 'literacy,' and taken as evidence that certain groups could or could not 'write,' its most valuable lesson is to demonstrate the theoretical poverty of such categories. For everyone "writes" in the expanded sense that Derrida gave to that term, and we should use his observation to enlarge our understanding of the locations, media, and practices of current and historical graffiti writing.²

To have jettisoned an overly-narrow definition of "writing," and to have stopped simplifying the complex, variable, and un-generalizable distinction between "authorized" and "unauthorized," is already to have started thinking about graffiti in terms of the small and large systems within which it occurs and can be identified. Thinking with systems will also save us from disappointment: in those places where we are forced by lack of evidence to stop searching for the individual histories that may lie behind the initials and the generic scratches and symbols of much historical graffiti, we can begin to research instead the sites, systems, and practices -- we might call these the environmental and cultural affordances -- within which

they appear, and within and from which they have disappeared. If, in relation to graffiti, we scale-up the notion of affordance (as that which, in an environment, allows something else to occur) we could say that one of its most interesting instances is time itself.

The strange potency of historical graffiti, not to mention the potent efficacy of contemporary graffiti, lies in the fact that it appears to have the power to capture the fleeting hour even as it monumentalizes and therefore leaves it behind. Graffiti and photography are both technologies that engage with the simultaneous loss and preservation of the moment, and when photography emerged, graffiti was quick to establish links with the new technology (I have suggested elsewhere that we might try to think about graffiti as the photography of a pre-photographic era). Today this dependency remains deep: those who study or curate graffiti usually do so through photographic media. Nevertheless, the argument is often and rightly made that while photography can capture graffiti as an image, it leaves behind graffiti's site-specific embeddedness, and so robs it of the 'aura' – not to mention the local contextual meanings – that makes graffiti what it is. Although the commercial interest in graffiti and the lucrative artistic careers of some graffiti writers can suggest otherwise, many of today's graffiti writers feel that graffiti is one of the few things in our lives that cannot be bought or owned. But the special aura of graffiti is importantly different from that ascribed to site-specific ritual objects by Walter Benjamin, in that graffiti is ostentatiously in process with, rather than protected by, the place where it happens to be.³ Graffiti is site-specific because it has come into being as an immanent part of the environment with which it is in constant improvisational contact, subject to all forms of wear and tear, and seen in different lights, from different and non-frontal perspectives, within a constantly changing visual context. Laudable and necessary as they are, efforts to preserve graffiti in situ, or alternatively to remove it for safe keeping, reveal all the paradoxes of attempting to curate ephemeral phenomena. Its environments aside, graffiti itself is always on a timeline: some graffiti accrue their value only once they have survived decades or centuries; others have an intense social salience at the point of their appearance, before quickly disappearing into the visual background; others still initiate or participate in an ongoing dialogue with new pieces of graffiti, or with re-emerging political events, so that their visibility is, at least for a while, in a state of evolving renovation.

The fascinating problems that graffiti pose in relation to the archive, in theory and in practice, are thus immense. On the one hand, these concern their fragility, inaccessibility, built-in ephemerality site-specificity, illegibility, and the fact that we may not know what we are looking for, or what we are looking at. On the other hand, is the problem of its quantity: some graffiti is now rare, and precious, but by and large there is just too much of it, and even historical graffiti easily overloads its archives and the energies of those who would study them. And this is a problem with both practical and theoretical consequences. As municipal authorities know, the removal of one piece of graffiti often results in the appearance

of several more; the destruction of one element of the system quickly promotes new growth, drawing those who would control it into complicity with its expansion, and enlarging the sphere for the interactional, cognitive processes that create the institutional identities of today's graffiti writers. Graffiti thus represents a strong case of what Derrida calls "archive fever," his term for the ineluctable double movement of preservation and destruction, for our desire to save and our desire to burn or look away, that constitutes the human archive and our relation to it.⁴ The graffiti archive is continually being lost, continually being replenished, and continually being lost by being replenished: it has always been so vast as to be conceptually and practically unmanageable. The task is to develop ways of exploring, without attempting to master, this forgotten communication system and its immense archival terrains.

ENDNOTES

¹ Juliet Fleming, "Graffiti Futures," *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 9 (2020): 29–36. I am grateful to Jamie Lambert for the prompt and opportunity to return to that essay and to deepen and re-think its arguments here.

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 118–140. See also Juliet Fleming, *Cultural Graphology: Writing After Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 1–30.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935–1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et. al., eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge MA.: Belknap Press, 2002), 103–104.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), *passim*.