

BEAUTY IN THE STREETS: AN  
INTRODUCTION TO GRAFFITI

LA BEAUTÉ



EST DANS LA RUE

-  
*BEAUTY IS IN THE STREET – A PIECE OF GRAFFITI CREATED  
DURING THE PARIS STUDENT UPRISING OF 1968. IT EMBODIES  
THE PURE SPIRIT OF INSURGENCY WHICH IS SO OFTEN THE  
INSPIRATION FOR GRAFFITI. NOTICE THAT THE GIRL HURLING*

***THE BRICK EMERGES FROM A KIND OF OPENWORK METAL TUNNEL WHICH SYMBOLISES THE REPRESSIVE CULTURE AGAINST WHICH SHE REVOLTS.***

**(1)**

## **THE ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY GRAFFITI**

**“My students tag tables, walls, and chairs because their greatest fear is that no one will ever remember them. They do not believe they can give impassioned speeches, rally people in protest, paint masterpieces. They think they will die, small and forgotten, and it dictates their every action.”**

**— Thom Quackenbush**

**“Some people become cops because they want to make the world a better place. Some people become vandals because they want to make the world a better looking place.”**

**— Banksy**

**“Graffiti happens at the intersection of ambition and incompetence: people want to make their mark on the world, but have no other way to do it than literally making a mark on the world.”**

**— Paul Graham**

This essay comprises an attempt to define graffiti, a consideration of its various manifestations and a brief history of their evolution

**1\*.**

The origins of graffiti must have coincided with the invention of writing, but it was only because of the immense technical advances in 20<sup>th</sup> century technology that it suddenly started to metastasize on a scale hitherto unknown throughout the ages. In the past forty five years graffiti has attracted huge numbers of exponents, radically transformed the visual ambience of the modern city, and rapidly evolved a huge repertoire of widely different styles. In short, it constitutes a true late 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic revolution.

Graffitists execute this form of mark-making to record their passage, stake a claim to the territory, or leave their personal stamp upon the environment. The original proto-modern graffiti, 'Kilroy was here', was ubiquitously evident long before graffiti became a commonplace in urban environments throughout the world. In fact one could justly claim that it was the first graffiti to attain absolute universality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. James J. Kilroy, an American shipyard inspector during the Second World War, is reputed to have chalked the words 'Kilroy was here' on the sides of the ships that he inspected and passed muster. Somehow these magical words captured the imagination of American GI's who reproduced them in every country they fought or conquered during and after the war. The phrase and the drawing that often accompanied it, also appealed irresistibly to on servicemen from Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, and was soon adopted by the public at large, who used it in urban spaces everywhere, so it soon evolved into a global part of popular culture. Although the craze abated in the 1950, people throughout the world still continued to fill streets, alleys, blocks of flats, buildings, factories, public conveniences, trains, tubes, subways, bridges, doors, fences, walls, gates, street signs, telephone booths and streetlamps with this graffiti.



***KILROY WAS HERE: Kilroy is the incunabula of contemporary graffiti. The element of mischievous cartoon style drollery still remains an intrinsic part of twenty first century graffiti, although in general the latter is far more aggressive***

As I demonstrate later, the world wide popularity of graffiti occurred as a by-product of American black hip hop culture 2\* when, graffiti flourished to the same extent as hip hop music and break-dancing. According to the urban historian, Timothy Werwath: “After the population peaked in the years after World War II, the city declined as industrialization decreased, crime rates jumped, and middle and upper-class residents began moving out of the city and into the suburbs.

What was left was a city in which many of the residents were poor and of the working class. Most were locked into laborious jobs and had little way out. This created a sense of helplessness, as they saw those who had the ability to mobilize themselves out of the filth of the city and settle in the more pleasant suburbs.

The apathy reverberated through residents of all ages. It was in this climate that the idea of defining one’s self through a new identity took place. The new identity, "hip-hop," was expressed

lyrically and musically in rap music, physically through break-dancing, and artistically through graffiti.<sup>2\*</sup> “

The first documented evidence of New York City graffiti was in the mid-1960, when a youth who called himself "Julio 204", began to write his tag in the subway system. By 1968, his name could be found all over the city.

Contemporary graffiti were largely shaped by hip-hop prototypes which provided the stimulus for the evolution of innumerable different international styles.

**(11)**

## **THE ETHOS OF GRAFFITI**

Graffiti is essentially an assault upon the environment, upon the walls of factories, offices and warehouses throughout the public domain in which people vent their feelings about politics, religion, life, love and their particular situation so they can express hope, despair, belief, anger, joy, rebellion against authority and pacifist and anti-war sentiments. As the quotes I have used to introduce this section clearly indicate, writers consider graffiti as giving a voice to the disempowered and disenfranchised. It draws attention to the existence of people who would otherwise remain ignored, and allows them to make their presence and ideas known by evolving a personal identity through their own pseudonym and the formulation of their own strictly personal mode of visual expression. To them, this is a process which promotes self-growth and Jungian individuation. Graffiti is about

branding yourself and gaining some form of recognition within the street art community but also, hopefully, amongst the broader public. It also serves to bestow what graffitiists see as beauty upon squalid urban sites like vacant lots, abandoned buildings, derelict warehouses and slum tenements.

When questioned graffitiists always insist that they resort to the medium to make contrarian statements which are seldom aired in the popular media. "Graffiti writing breaks the hegemonic hold of corporate/governmental style over the urban environment and the situations of daily life. As a form of aesthetic sabotage, it interrupts the pleasant, efficient uniformity of "planned" urban space and predictable urban living. For the writers, graffiti disrupts the lived experience of mass culture, the passivity of mediated consumption" writes Jeff Ferrell in his book, *Crimes of Style* **3\***.

Graffiti can take the form of a dialogue in which one person comments on what another has written as in the celebrated pairing: "'God is dead', says Nietzsche" and "'Nietzsche is dead', says God". Graffiti often follow this call and response pattern whereby people express their sympathy with the sentiments of a graffitiist by endorsing them in their own words, or alternatively voice their dissent by adding a comment either over the space, or beside it, or scratching out the original statement. James de la Vega **4\***, an artist, stated that he originally embraced graffiti because he liked "the idea of the artist going out in the world and creating a dialogue". He interrogates society and its institutions in order to provoke debate, and writes whatever he considers so meaningful that "people should hear and rehear it", so that it will force the public "to think and inhabit the moment." Graffiti aims to banish *idées reçues*, change peoples' mind-set about art, society and ideology, and act as a potent medium of intellectual

and psychological transformation. In this respect, graffiti is to a certain extent, the contemporary equivalent of the ancient Greek agora where people would gather to thrash out their political and philosophical views. Ideally it opens up an arena for truly democratic expression and dialogue.

Often graffitiists maintain that a "ruling class" or "establishment" controls the mainstream press, systematically excluding all radical and alternative points of view as pointed out in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky <sup>5\*</sup> (a favourite writer among more literate and politically critical graffitiists), which, according to Wikipedia, "proposes that the mass communication media of the U.S. "are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, without overt coercion", by means of the propaganda model of communication <sup>6\*</sup>." Graffitiists aim to redress the balance by using graffiti to express anarchist, feminist, anti-consumerist, far left and far right political views and gay, lesbian and transgender calls to action. Gang members use graffiti to designate membership of their particular gang, differentiate themselves from rival gangs and, most commonly, to mark borders that can be both territorial and ideological.

Graffiti often form an attack on property, capital, investment and the system they represent, an attack which manifests itself in defacement and disfiguration, an attack which expresses a destructive impulse, a protest whereby the graffiti artist, by covering the wall with his swishes of spray paint, takes symbolic ownership of the spaces he covers. It is an act of annexure and appropriation, and the writers justify their activity by claiming that they do not dispose of the funds or the desire to use

advertising to disseminate their message. Given their generally contrarian views, they would in any case despise the mainstream media.

New York art galleries were the first to champion graffiti art and expose it to the public in the early 1980's, and their lead was soon followed internationally. Amongst the roll-call of preeminent graffiti, or graffiti-inspired artists one must include Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Banksy, Crash, Lee, Daze and Lady Pink. A landmark exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2006 presented graffiti as an art form. This gave it the cachet of officially recognized aesthetic respectability, a development that had already occurred amongst many significant critics and collectors. Terrance Lindall, the executive director of the Williamsburg Art and Historic Centre, enunciated a view shared by many when he made the following comment on the exhibition: "Graffiti is revolutionary, in my opinion, and any revolution might be considered a crime. People who are oppressed or suppressed need an outlet, so they write on walls - it's free. 7\*" Marc Ecko, another advocate of graffiti as an art form remarked: "Graffiti is without question the most powerful art movement in recent history." 8\*

Graffiti exudes a very particular mystique all of its own, a mystique compounded of shock, enigma, and incomprehension because of the rasping blatancy of its presence, its whiff of the illicit, its challenging potency and its utter unpredictability. The average passer-by has no idea when and where they will chance upon it, quite what it means, what attitude to adopt toward it, and how it will evolve as other writers contribute to it.

Once it moves into the museum not only does it become static and unchanging, but the context saps it of its daredevil pungency



and *attaque*. Its subversive messages are defused by the very fact that they have been institutionalized. For this very reason, genuine street artists **9\*** often resent the fact that the work of men like Banksy and Swoon are now regarded as 'fine art', and sold at inflated prices by the auction houses and dealerships to public art galleries and wealthy collectors. To such purists this is tantamount to selling-out. What is regarded with even greater horror is that the packaging, advertising and magazine industries have increasingly co-opted graffiti and street art so that it becomes an integral part of the very capitalist system most graffitiists oppose. Today all modes of expression are parasitized by advertising which replaces lived social experience with the reassuring fantasy of being part of a snug consumer community to paraphrase Baudrillard **10\***.

Like Pop, graffiti de-aestheticizes 'high art', and is, in fact, an anti-art style that marks a decisive break with tradition through its insolently challenging in-your-face stance and confrontatory *force de frappe*. Its high energy and startling conceptual force derives from its ever expanding repertoire of shock tactics - mind-boggling juxtapositions, razzmatazzy exploding splashes, intricate curlicue shapes, wild zigzagging lines, garish colours and bold lines. It exploits montage, collage, serial imagery and repetition often employing material gleaned from digital and print sources in a gritty, but invariably over-the-top manner. In her *Handbook of Visual Culture*, Martine Irvine **11\*** emphasizes the nature of graffiti as performance, event, intervention, *détournement* (the French noun implies hijacking and misappropriation) embezzlement), revolution, displacement and manipulation of the culture one inherits. It is in a sense a performance in a public space, although the actual act of creation aims to remain unseen

Graffiti also assumes a political dimension in subvertising and culture jamming. Subvertising describes the practice of parodying corporate and political advertisements or reversing their meaning by criticizing the product or policy which is the subject of such promotion.





### ***THREE EXAMPLES OF SUBVERTISING***

Culture jamming or guerrilla communication, is another strategy intended to disrupt or the media and its culture. It attempts to uncover how mass societies are dominated, and thus conscientize the public, stir up revolt and promote democratic reform. To combat the conservative conformism of the mainstream press and television, writers cover the walls of cities with anti-consumerist and far left and far right political views, or use graffiti to express their sexual orientation and gay, lesbian and transgender sympathies.





### ***THREE EXAMPLES OF CULTURE JAMMING***

**(111)**

### **THE TYPOLOGY OF GRAFFITI.**

Ever since 1949 when canned spray paint was first invented, it soon became and still remains the prime medium for graffiti. Aerosol cans of spray paint are readily available in virtually every colour, and easy to apply to any surface, thus providing the ideal tool of expression for the ever-expanding gamut of graffiti styles and techniques.







***NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY SPRAY PAINT GRAFFITI. THE INSIDE OF THE COACH IS A RIOT OF TAGS EXECUTED IN BLACK SO THAT THEY STAND OUT FROM THE METAL FRAMEWORK.***

## **TAGGING**

Tagging is probably the most basic, widespread and popular form of graffiti. Most of the general public have always considered graffiti an unsightly and vandalistic defacement. Attitudes have changed over the decades but, at the start, graffiti only commanded the admiration of the young and underprivileged. The correct word for a graffitist in that particular culture is a 'writer', and a tag is the writer's own individual design for his personal signature, or any other representation of himself, so tags take an almost inexhaustible variety of forms. Writers often spray a tag on, or beside, their visuals just as traditional artists sign their canvases.



Tagging is usually executed in a single color in spray paint, markers, or pens, employing colors that contrast with the urban background. Tags require a minimum of time or skill and do not aspire to the condition of art. They function as a means of signing your name anonymously, or adopting a *nom de plume* as in the graffiti statement “Dude, Skat and Go-Go man went tagging late last night.” To place one’s own tag over that of another writer is considered grossly ill-mannered and irreverent within the graffiti community, as it expunges all signs of the first tagger’s existence and is thus a form of visual extinction. A *crew*, *krew*, or *cru* is a group of aesthetically compatible writers or graffiti artists who pool their talents, often work together, and sign their work with a shared communal tag.







***VARIOUS FORMS OF TAGGING:*** As the last photograph illustrates the tags inscribed on urban walls present as a dense and layered accretion of personal hand styles by a multiplicity of different writers randomly grouped together on the surface without any consistency of style, scale or colour. Most tags are declarative and aggressive and, through the gestural vigour of their execution, they immediately draw attention to themselves as they contrast with the stereotyped formality of any other script we might see in the streetscape such as the names of shops, traffic signage and billboards. The wall illustrated forms a palimpsest where one writer often places his tag on that of another, as the available space starts to run out, so that the surface presents a riotous appearance of swirling entangled tags that look to the uninitiated as alien as it they were executed in

**the alphabet of some unknown lost tongue. This arcane chirography and one's inability to read it, imbue tagging with a tingle of mystery.**

## **THROW-UPS AND BOMBING**

Throw-ups (the term derives from the American expression throwing-up or vomiting), throwies or bombing are terms that describe the same process. Both are a tad more sophisticated than a tag, and usually they consist of strong outlined bubble letters usually consisting of artist's name and containing a fill-in executed in two colours and, more rarely, three. Both the terms bombing and throw-ups imply instantaneity, or at least speed of execution, and the creation of multiple throw-ups. When graffiti writers sally out bombing, they're usually either spraying tags or throw-ups everywhere in their particular beat. The rapidity of action means that throw-ups are spontaneous effusions that involve little thought or planning, and thus they rarely achieve the aesthetic stature of a 'piece', the standard term used to describe a large, complex, time-consuming and labour-intensive graffiti painting executed by a highly skilled and experienced writer in at least three or even more colours.





**THROW-UPS AND BOMBING:** The pneumatically swollen appearance of throw-ups often gives it a bloated three-dimensionality, like that of a twisted balloon, so that it appears to bulge out of the wall and enter our space.

## **SCRIBING**

Scribing or "scratchitti" utilizes a scribe (a sharp pointed instrument) to create a far more durable, virtually irremovable form of graffiti, as the writer actually scratches or incises his tag into the surface. If the writer does not possess a proper scribe, he would use a key, knife, stone, sand paper or ceramic drill bit to cut into the surface. Scribing, as the illustrations indicate, is usually

executed on glass surface, and the scribe holds his tool between the thumb and index finger like a pen, hence the term scribe.







**SCRIBING ON AMERICAN SUBWAY TRAINS:** Despite the calligraphic freedom and intricacy seen in the right hand side of the last photograph, scribing is to my mind one of the least aesthetic forms of graffiti, and often it becomes indistinguishable from an anti-social act of willful damage as it denies the passenger the pleasure of looking through the window and enjoying the spectacle of the urban landscape or countryside. Glass is an ideal medium for the scribe so that often its presence on the windows of subway and railroad coaches make it appear as if we were gazing through a partial veil of scratchy blur.

## **PISSING**

Pissing which is a particular sub-genre of tagging, involves emptying a refillable fire-extinguisher, filling it with paint, and using it to execute large scale graffiti running the entire length of a wall or the carriage of a train which would be a far more difficult task with spray paint.



The first specimen of pissing attains a strangely distasteful viscerality that borders on monstrosity, and is obviously designed to revolt the viewer as it looks as though the flesh had been parted to provide a glimpse into the interior of the human stomach and reveal the coils of the digestive tract and other organs and intestines. The canons of so-called 'good' taste are often violated by graffiti which aims to overturn accepted social and artistic norms. Hairpin bends and angularity are a frequent stylistic characteristic. The interlaced forms coil, twist and wind their way across the surface, gaining momentum as they expand and contract.

Clearly the figure to right is still engaged in executing his graffiti whilst his mates keep cavy. One pretends to nonchalantly read a newspaper while his companion opens his mouth in horrified surprise as he gazes pitifully at the viewer as if caught in flagrante delicto. Graffiti characters often react to the spectator and thus involve us, willy-nilly, in their illegal activities so that we can vicariously become their accomplices. There is invariably this somewhat playful aspect to graffiti.





**TWO EXAMPLES OF PISSING:** Illusionist three dimensional lettering and the incorporation of comic book characters are typical of many forms of graffiti. Here the green crocodile-like mutant points at a segment of the composition in order to direct the viewer's attention to it. Again the character reacts to the presence of the spectator thus involving us in the action.

## **BLOCKBUSTERS**

A blockbuster or roller is like huge mural which is usually executed in block-shaped letters covering a wide area, like an entire wall, in two contrasting colors. The objective is to create catchy razzle-dazzle decoration by applying large quantities of cheap paint intended for outdoor use with very wide rollers in order to cover the maximum area, in the minimum amount of time. Blockbusters usually employ two or three different colors to create highly simplified letter forms that look like font, but can occasionally present a very distorted and convoluted appearance which can only be read with ease by fellow graffitists. The writing in almost all forms of graffiti is intended to excite interest, while remaining difficult to decipher. Many graffitists consider their script to be a secret language that can only readily be understood by the graffiti community, although it provides a visual jolt to every passer-by as its near illegibility lends it a compelling fascination. Usually blockbusters are put up to cover over pre-existent graffiti, or to monopolize all the space, and thus prevent other writers from applying any further designs to that particular tract of wall which in graffiti culture symbolically becomes the property of its writer.







**THREE EXAMPLES OF BLOCKBUSTERS:** Each undeniably asserts its character as an intervention in the landscape, whilst the background defines graffiti as a purely urban phenomenon. In the first fiercely contrasting day-go colours and wildly swooping and zigzagging lines give this blockbuster a sizzle and electricity which entirely differentiates it from the drear greys of the sidewalk through its chromatic neon brilliance and recklessness of execution. The writer clad in a black hoodie presents a sinister appearance. Hoodies are often worn by criminals during robberies and heists illustrating the inexpugnable link between graffiti and crime.

In the last two blockbusters, the starbursts, white highlights, leaping flames, labyrinthine purpled-pink architecture upon which the lettering is superimposed, plus the rollicking undulations of the script produce the hyper-excited liveliness and zing which is the hallmark of the accomplished writer.

## WILD STYLE

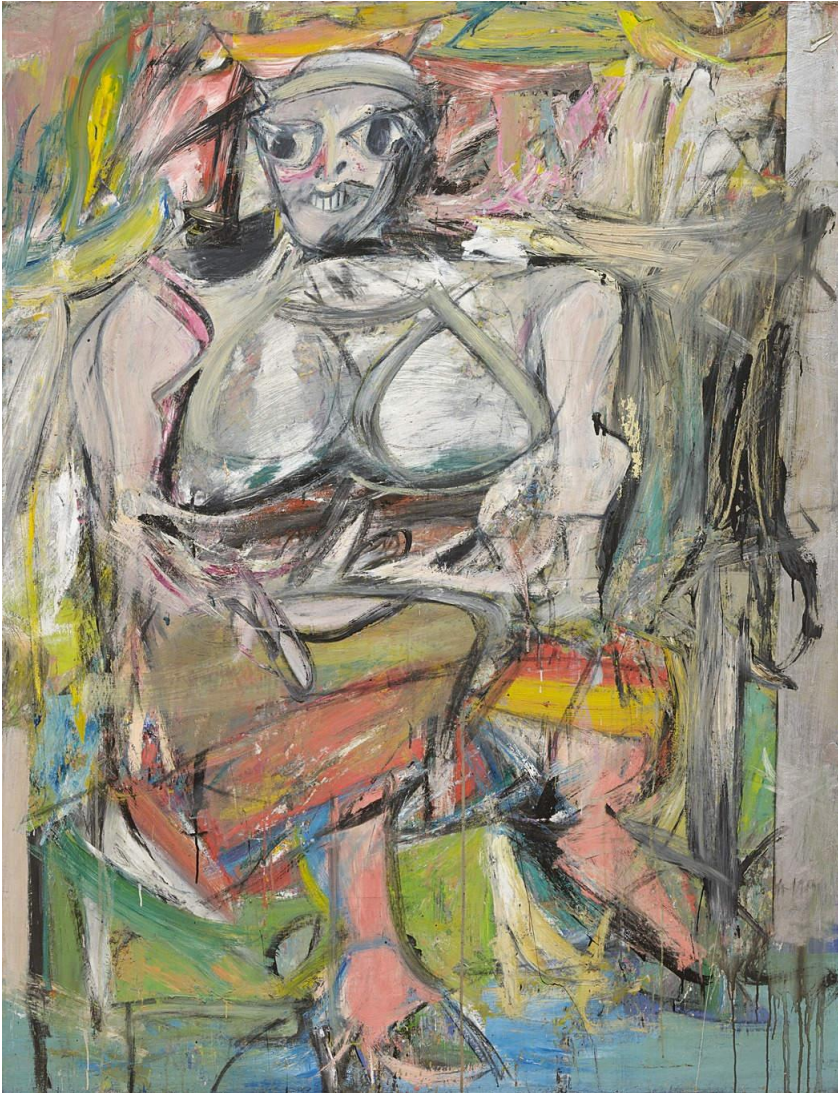
Wild style is perhaps the most complex form of graffiti both in its appearance and the process of its creation. Wild style is a particular style of graphology that was developed and popularized more or less simultaneously by a triumvirate of New York City graffiti artists - *Tracy 168*, *Stay High 149* and *Zephyr*. It consists of extremely stylized writing with bulbous interlocking three-dimensional letters and linking devices, arrows, spikes, curves and other elements that tend to merge with each other, and thus prove difficult for a non-graffitist to understand.







**WILDSTYLE:** In the first piece of wild-style muralism, the breaking waves a la Hokusai, the inclusion of a French horn and hint of musical notes and sheet music all indicate Omaka's debt to 'High Culture' as does the splashy paintwork which recalls Willem de Kooning's abstract action painting. Each writer has developed his own individual style, forms and palette



**Willem de Kooning's *Woman, I* (1950–52) above and Jackson Pollock's *Number 5* (1948) below, both illustrate the formal links between American Abstract Expressionism and the work of certain graffiti artists.**



## **STENCILLING**

Stencilling is another universal medium for graffiti. It originated in the early 1980's in the hands of artists like Blek le Rat and Banksy who used a simple technique of cutting out shapes and designs in cardboard or thick paper, and then applying the design onto the surface with spray paint. This is a fast and highly efficient method of creating a far more complex, richly coloured and intricate image with a far higher degree of detail than you ever achieve using a spray can. Stencils enable the user to build up two or



three layers thus creating far more elaborate figurative imagery in which text is often relegated to a minor role.



***STENCILLED GRAFFITI: While first right illustrates the brainwashing and silencing of dissident voices that the writer attributes to the schooling system, the second right is a humorous exercise where the fish-bowl encircling the injured dogs head gives him a likeness to an astronaut. The example to right is purely inspired by fashion, and appears to supernaturally walk out of the wall as ghosts are said to do.***



## **SLAPTAGS**

Because of their sheer ease and speed of application, self-adhesive stickers, usually referred to as "labels", "slaps" or "slap tags" have become a very popular form of graffiti instantly adhering to zebra crossings, stop signs, phone booths, walls, streetlights or almost any surface. Some graffiti artists favour stickers because they can execute artistic images with fastidious care in the privacy of their own homes, and then quickly slap them onto any available surface they find in public spaces. Other stickers are both far less labour-intensive and artistic, and often take the form of the red name greeting labels reading "Hello my name is" (that delegates wear at conferences or large meetings in America) with the writer's tag applied to in the blank space. Alternatively they may take the form of elaborate, professional-looking printed stickers with a message or image plastered all over. Hardware store reflector stickers are frequently combined to form a crew's tag or that of an individual writer.









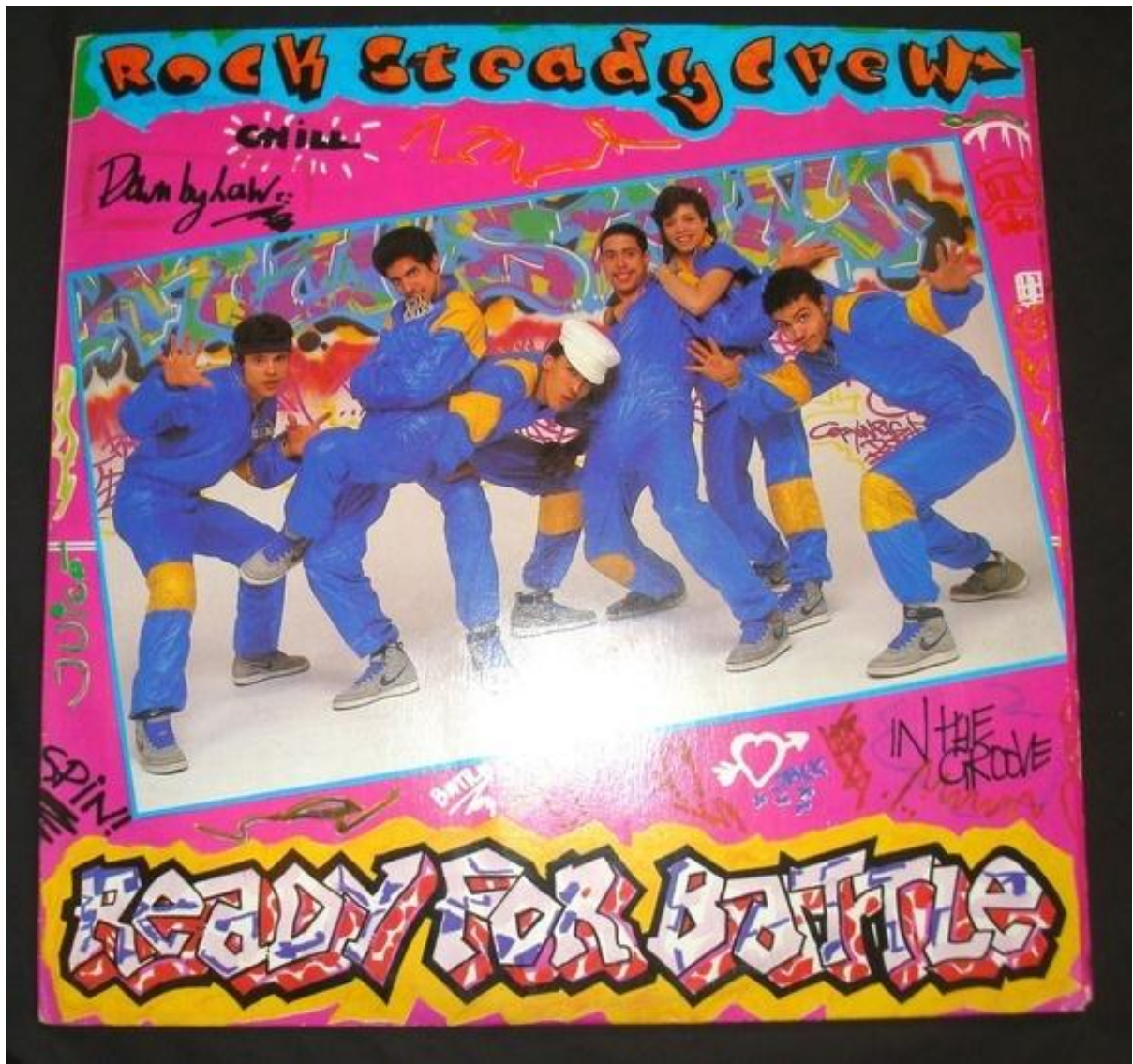
**STICKERS OR SLAPTAGS**

**PIECES**

The graffiti term 'piece' is an abbreviation of masterpiece. A piece represents the most sophisticated form of graffiti which often includes subtleties like delicate tonal transitions, shadows and three-dimensional effects. Normally a piece is extremely time-consuming and complicated so that the writer usually perfects the design which may involve several drafts, rather like a cartoon in old master art, and only when the final version is complete, is it actually put up in the street

A true piece usually commands much respect and a genuine admiration for the aesthetic mastery of the writer, and as it is so time-consuming and painstaking to create the writer usually asks for permission to execute it, and now that graffiti has achieved recognition as an art form, pieces are often specially commissioned. The piece may often take the form of a pictorial scene with figures, and it is probably the supreme example of the aesthetics of graffiti producing brilliantly colored high-impact visual statements reliant on bold and highly stylized three dimensional and blocky lettering, exciting line and a general air of live action and vibrant energy.

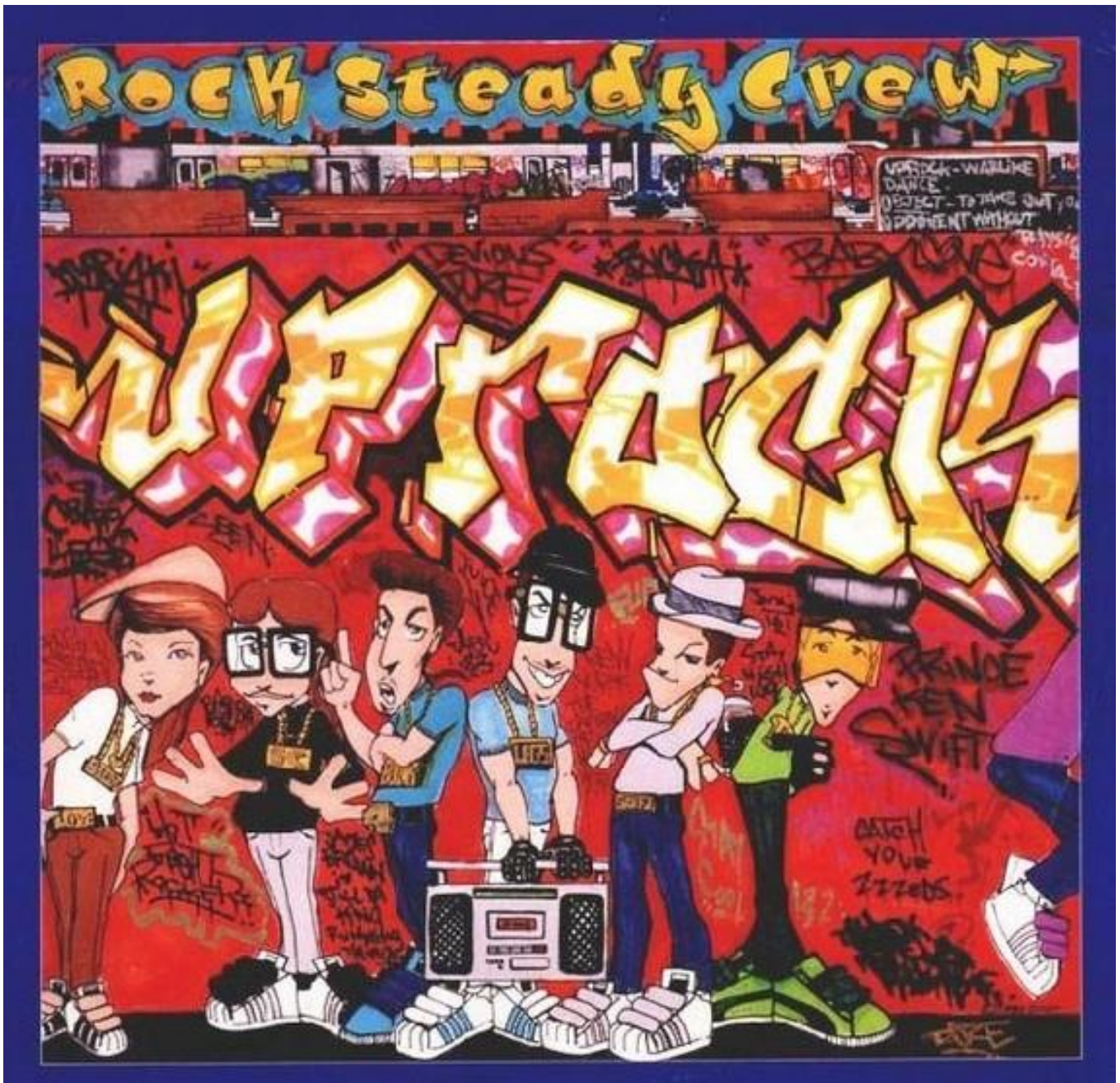
### **THREE EXAMPLES OF PIECES**



The first example of a piece, is clearly inspired by Rock album covers, and it portrays the Rock Steady Crew, which Wikipedia records “is an American b-boying crew and hip hop group initially formed in The Bronx, New York City in 1977 by b-boys Jojo and Jimmy Dee. The Manhattan branch was created by Crazy Legs and B-Boy Fresh. The New York Times called the Rock Steady Crew “the foremost breakdancing group in the world today.” The piece clearly comprehends a performative dimension as the costumed Rock Steady Crew strike lively poses

to impress and engage the viewer. Down by Law appears as a handwritten slogan near the top right of the piece. According to Jim Jarmusch, director of the eponymous film which starred the pianist, composer, lyricist and singer Tom Waits, the phrase "Down by law" at the time in the mid-80s, was kind of in use on the streets as meaning a very close connection with somebody. If somebody was down by law, they were close to you, or you would protect them. I know that, earlier, in prison slang, if somebody was down by law, and they got out before you, they would contact your family or look after people outside if you needed them to. So it meant someone very close" as in this quote from the dialogue Jimmy ain't gonna rat on me. We're down by law attests. According to the Urban Dictionary on Wikipedia, "Down by law is American slang which is also used in musical (primarily jazz) circles where it means having paid your dues, to have earned respect for your talent through hard work." In this piece the band members are also buddies whose music has won substantial recognition. Spin and In the Groove which may have been added subsequently by other hands, endorse the hip musicality of the Rock Steady Crew's compositions. The slogan Ready for Battle at base signified the group's readiness to engage in what Wikipedia calls "Battle rap (also known as rap battling)", "a type of rapping that includes bragging and boasting content. Battling can occur on recorded albums, though rap battles are often recited or freestyled spontaneously in live battles, "where MCs will perform on the same stage to see who has the better verses."





In the second piece, the musicians and singers from the Rock Steady Crew - Devious Doze, Prince Ken Swift, Baby Love, JoJo, and Kuriaki can be identified by their signatures. They pose as for a photograph in a three dimensional space against a pictorial background of a graffitied wall with New York subway trains



above it. Their clothes embody 'street cred'. The word 'Uprock' is emblazoned in a three dimensional mixture of yellow and pinks above the band. Wikipedia states "Uprock, or Rocking as it was originally referred to, also known as Rock, is a soulful and competitive urban street dance, performed in synchronization to the beats and rhythms of soul, rock and funk music, but was mostly danced to a specific and exclusive collection of songs that contained a hard driving beat. An example of such a song is the uprock classic "It's Just Begun" by noted jazz musician Jimmy Castor. The dance consists of foot shuffles, spins, turns, freestyle movements and more characteristically a four point sudden body movement called "jerk".

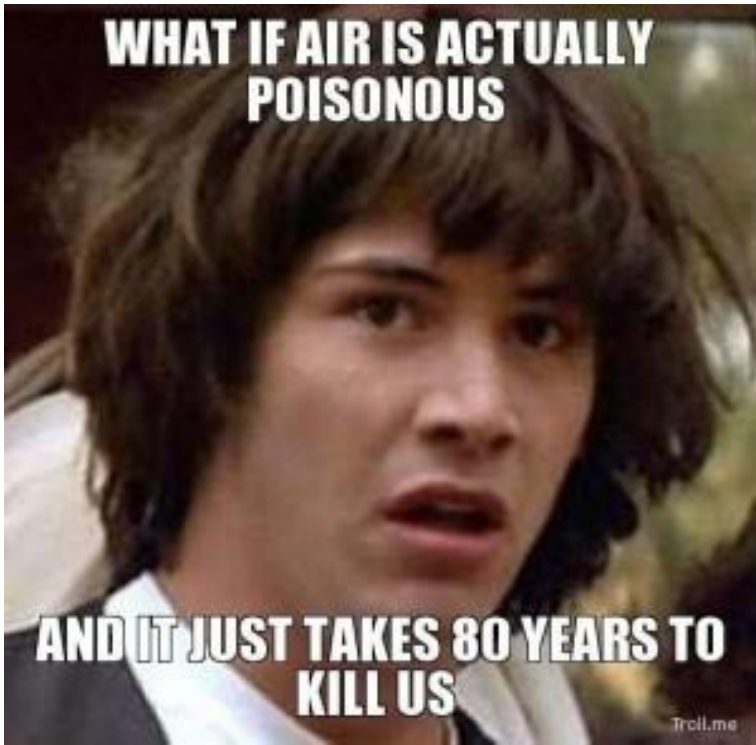


The third piece is stencilled. Blacks, whites and greys often form the palette of stencilled pieces which frequently avoid the riotous pyrotechnic splurge of colours seen in most pieces, and create an almost contemplative mood. Here the format is that of a portrait, and it almost attains the dignity of a presentation drawing in high art.

## MEMES

The majority of modern memes are humorously captioned photos that often satirize human behaviour, but memes can also be verbal statements, ideas - often of a somewhat philosophical nature - slogans, phrases, images, captions and audio and video files, images, hyperlinks, websites, hashtags and, of course, interventions in the streetscape. Memes are an international social phenomenon, and they act like infectious flu and cold viruses, traveling from person to person quickly through social media, blogs, direct email, or news sources, and it is this endless multiplication and dissemination, rather than any aesthetic merit, that forms their main attribute **12\***.





**WHAT IF AIR IS ACTUALLY  
POISONOUS**

**AND IT JUST TAKES 80 YEARS TO  
KILL US**

Troll.me



**SO I'M BORING BECAUSE I DON'T  
DRINK OR GO CLUBBING?**

**HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT MAYBE YOU'RE  
BORING BECAUSE YOU NEED ALCOHOL FOR  
YOUR DULL PERSONALITY?**

THREE EXAMPLES OF MEMES

## FOOTNOTES

**1\*** Graffiti has evolved into up-market fine art in the hands of street artists like Banksy and Sheperd Fairey. This aspect is summarily dealt with here as the emphasis of this essay is on so-called 'street art'. The distinctions between fine artists working in the graffiti tradition, street artists, and pure graffitists are confused, and different authorities on these phenomena often disagree on the appropriate terminology.

**2\*** American Hip Hop subculture evolved in the early 1970's amongst alienated Afro-American youths living in the Bronx area of New York, and at first the lead was taken by blacks from Barbados, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. Graffiti is closely associated with Hip Hop as Hip Hopsters considered it a visual expression of Rap music. Hip-hop culture in general puts a high value on genuineness and authenticity. "Keep it real!" was one injunction that applied to hip-hop across the board, and what it meant was the graffitist had to be true to his experience of the ghetto, and celebrate it, the brave resilience of its inhabitants, their cool, incorrigible vitality, and unconventional art. Because graffiti was an illegal act, performed in haste by dissidents, both its form and its content exuded a refusal to beat about the bush. This raw and blazing honesty was extensively imitated by professional artists and widely admired by critics and curators who shifted its locus from the street to the gallery and museum in record time.

**3\*** In *Art Crimes: The Culture and Politics of Graffiti Art* by T. Werwath. See <https://www.graffiti.org/faq/werwath/werwath.html>

**4\*** Jeff Ferrell, *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1993.

**5\*** James De La Vega (born 1974) is a muralist of Puerto Rican descent resident in New York City. He is best known for his street aphorisms and pieces.

**6\*** *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Pantheon Books, New York, 1988.

**7\*** Terrance Lindall is a builder of institutions such as the Greenwood Museum in upper New York State, and the Williamsburg Art & Historical Centre, which has achieved international recognition in the emerging art world. Terrance Lindall's surreal/visionary art has been on the covers of numerous books and magazines and has been exhibited at many galleries and including the Brooklyn Museum, The magazines CREEPY, EERIE, VAMPIRELLA, HEAVY METAL AND MARVEL'S EPIC, and Rod Serling's TWILIGHT ZONE, for which he produced some of the most dazzling art of an era, are now highly sought after collectibles, and form part of the history of an important American art form, which has

influenced many young persons and would-be artists growing up in America and around the world.

**8\*** Marc Eckō is the founder and Chief Creative Officer of Marc Eckō Enterprises, a billion-dollar global fashion and lifestyle company. On addition Eco is recognized as a fashion designer and artist.

**9\*** The Herron School of Art and Design, a faculty that belongs both to Indiana University and Purdue University in Indianapolis draws a clear distinction between graffiti and street art. "In most people's minds the connotations of the words "street art" and "graffiti" are one in (sic) the same -interchangeable, and often associated with vandalism, gangs, urban plight, and decay. While both graffiti and street art involve the re-appropriation of public space to create a finished product, there exist strong differentiations between the two forms of expression (as well as the types of people that create them).

In terms of ideology, methodology, stylistic differences, and recognition, there exist many variances between street art and graffiti. Graffiti limits an individual to what he or she can do with a spray can, on the spot. Street art, on the other hand, while employing some of the application techniques of graffiti, often involves a finished product that is ready-made and brought to the location -think stickers, wheat paste prints, and stencils.

One can say that street art is a modern art form or trend predated by graffiti. While graffiti can be considered an art form, it is also a cultural movement. In most instances, graffiti artists are individuals lacking in any formal artistic training. Their goal is to "tag" or "throw up" pieces across the breadth of a city, often under time constraints imposed by the risk of fines and imprisonment. Think of SAMO, the graffiti associated with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz in the late 1970s, early 1980s or the more popular Banksy, as examples.

Street Art, on the other hand, is a more modern art form that has adopted practices from graffiti artists. Street artists, in many cases, are formally trained art students who pre-prepare their work before hand and arrive on location with the product. This isn't to say that street artists don't feel the same real threats of being caught and punished for creating illegal art as graffiti artists. But because street art is many times "ready-made", the artist's message is often much more developed than in graffiti. Good examples of street art include Morley, who specializes in typographic wheat paste prints, and Retna, an LA based graffiti artist turned street artist known for creating his own alphabet.

Basquiat was a self-taught artist and high school dropout and Banksy is a London based underground artist and vandal. On the other hand, street artist Morley is rumoured to have studied at The School of Visual Arts in New York.

Despite this dichotomy between graffiti and street art, neither art form should be considered more culturally valid than the other. Street art and graffiti are both powerful forms of public art that use visually striking, bold images and metaphors to convey a

message. And in both cases, artists are risking legal punishment for spreading these messages.” See [http://tag line blogspot.com/2007/04/evaluations-debates-and-comparisons](http://tagline.blogspot.com/2007/04/evaluations-debates-and-comparisons)

**10\*** Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was a leading exponent of what is popularly known as ‘French theory’ which in his case is strongly associated with postmodernism and post-structuralism.

**11\*** *The Handbook of Visual Culture* by Ian Heywood and Barry Sandwell with photographs by Martin Irvine, Iconoclast and Distributed Art *Publishers*, Wooster Collective, New York, 2014.

**12\*** For an explanation of the nature of memes, see [Netforbeginnersabout.com/od/weird/web culture/what-is-an-internet-meme.htm](http://Netforbeginnersabout.com/od/weird/web%20culture/what-is-an-internet-meme.htm)