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# Essays on interventions in public space

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## **From writing the streets to Instagram: a history of subcultural graffiti as media**

**Erik Hannerz  
Jacob Kimvall**



## Introduction

Needless to say, many things have changed since the first graffiti writers started writing their made-up names in Philadelphia and New York City in the late 1960s. First of all, subcultural graffiti – or if you prefer subway graffiti (Castleman 1982), TTP-graffiti (Jacobson 1996), or hip-hop graffiti (Ferrell 1996) – is no longer a regional phenomenon, primarily restricted to a few cities on the US East Coast; it is global in the sense that the subculture has spread to most parts of the world. Second, information technologies, such as social media, have made it possible to consume graffiti globally and instantly, yet from a distance (MacDowall 2019). Third, graffiti is no longer a minor offense but in many countries defined juridically as a serious violation that is punished with prison sentences and substantial fines. This has accordingly resulted in a multibillion-dollar industry with various removal technologies, drones, alarms, paint-sensors and special anti-graffiti squads combatting it (Gastman et al. 2016: 86; Kramer 2010; Hannerz & Kimvall 2020). Fourth, subway trains no longer carry graffiti throughout the city day after day, but are now in many places instantly taken out of traffic and cleaned. The arrival of the systematic cleaning – what in graffiti is referred to as *the buff* – has since it was introduced in New York City in the late 1970s (Mirando & De La Borie 2014) become standard in most world cities and has often been extended to include the city itself and its walls (Kramer 2017). Fifth, graffiti is no longer the do-it-yourself-phenomenon it was in the 1970s and 1980s where writers had to rely on office markers and spray paint shoplifted from the local paint store and then adjust them through mixing colors and exchanging nozzles (Gastman et al. 2016: 20ff; see Urbonaitė-Barkauskienė, this volume). Today, spray paint is produced especially for writing graffiti, with cans being both cheaper and more suitable for the task. There is now a wide assortment of colors, different pressures, and gloss, all avail-

lable through the web (Barenthin Lindblad & Jacobson 2011: 55). Such a technological development also includes markers, spray nozzles – or caps – and a variety of books, magazines, and documentary films on the subject.

This development of subcultural graffiti is what we want to discuss in this chapter. Our purpose is to outline a history of how graffiti communicates, but also how it is communicated, produced, consumed, and distributed, and how this has developed over its five decades of existence. We will thus attempt to trace out a history of the medialization of subcultural graffiti.

There are, of course, numerous accounts of the history of graffiti, chronicling global (Ganz 2004), national (Gastman & Neelon 2011), local (Barenthin Lindblad 2019) and individual developments (Witten & White 2001; Mirando & De La Borie 2014), as well as legal (Kramer 2015) temporal (Austin 2001), and spatial aspects (Cooper 2008). Subcultural graffiti histories are written and published in various contexts: subcultural (Phase II 1996), journalistic (Gastman et al. 2016), and academic (Castleman 1982; Stewart 1989/2009; Ferrell 1996; Jacobson 1996; Austin 2001). These histories of graffiti usually combine a mix of various formal, stylistic, technological, social, cultural, and political aspects, and primarily rely on ethnographic data combined with various types of visual and material evidence.

The chapter at hand is heavily indebted to the endeavors mentioned above, and those familiar with these stories will probably recognize some of the events and the general timeline. Our purpose, however, is slightly different: we build on these and other sources to chronicle the development of graffiti as a phenomenon appearing as, in, and through, different media. The focus will therefore be not on the deeds of single writers or crews, the development of styles and techniques, or describing graffiti in any specific a local or regional context, but on identifying and mapping shifts in

how, and through what, graffiti has been communicated, and how this has contributed to the development and globalization of subcultural graffiti.

The question of interest is thus how and what would a history of subcultural graffiti as media look like? And how would such a history contribute to the understanding of graffiti as a subculture? We want to do so by analyzing graffiti as a medium in itself, including its being mediated through other mediums such as fanzines, films, and social media, but also through track side walls and trains. The latter is what media theorist W.J.T Mitchell would refer to as nesting, “in which one medium appears inside another as its content” (Mitchell 2005: 262).

This is of concern, not just for those interested in graffiti and media, but also from a theoretical perspective: Historically, the role of the media and commerce has been treated in subcultural studies as part of a mainstream and thus as the opposite to the subcultural and a threat (Hall & Jefferson 1976; see Flaherty, this volume). Sarah Thornton’s (1995) eminent work on club cultures partly changed this. Her claim is that media in its different forms are central to subcultural establishment, and that disapproving tabloid stories work to disseminate subcultural beings, doings and ideals. New participants are attracted to the subcultural through mass media exposure and then become part of a collective through niche and micro media – such as music press and fanzines.

Accordingly, media is here seen from a culturally historical perspective as plural: “media” is not one thing but many. Following Jarlbrink et al. (2019), we recognize that an analysis of a history of subcultural graffiti as media needs to pay attention to more than just something that is in between sender and recipient and makes it possible to distribute information in time and space. This means investigating

media as including *technologies and material distribution channels*. Cheaper spray paint, camera equipment and printing technologies, mentioned above, as well as the Internet and social media, have had an impact, not just on how graffiti is distributed, but also how it is produced and consumed. Consequently, we are also interested in media in the sense of *modalities*. Mitchell has noted that the “notion of a medium and of mediation already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual and semiotic elements”, and thus these are “mixed media” albeit not “mixed in the same way, with the same proportions of elements” (Mitchell 2005: 260). Mitchell’s point, and ours, is to problematize the term ‘visual media’, as it, according to Mitchell, is an inexact and possibly misleading concept. Subcultural graffiti’s most basic form – the tag – is, as we shall further develop, a case in point: It is at the same time an image and text, as well as a representation of the individual writer. It is here we use Mitchell’s term *nesting* – one medium residing within another as content – to rephrase McLuhan’s (1964: 305) famous aphorism “the medium is the message”, that is, the content of a medium is always an earlier medium. The point here would be to address mixed modalities without MacLuhan’s implied technological determinism and explicit historical sequencing (Mitchell 2005: 262).

Following from the stress on technologies and modalities, we are also interested in media in the sense of a social environment, something that instigates, shapes, and regulates social practices. We will point to how the mediatization of graffiti from walking the streets, collectively watching graffitied subways go by, buying books and zines, or scrolling Instagram, means a change in how the subcultural is conceived, yet that this change, rather than having replaced its previous environments, encompasses them.

This understanding of media – as technologies, modalities and a social environment – makes it possible to

transgress both distinctions and borders between, for example, mass media and artistic media, or popular media and subcultural media. We are thus interested in how graffiti has functioned and functions in a wide spectrum of communicational relations and networks, constitutes a media technology in itself, and is content in other material contexts and distribution channels. In other words, we explore how the modal characteristics of subcultural graffiti – text as well as image, but often also movement and sound – are part of its media history. Finally, we examine how graffiti creates social contexts and groups; practitioners and spectators; nodes and cultural networks; audiences and interactions.

## Graffiti as networked media

Every historical account on subcultural graffiti, in its various forms, departs from a single medium: the tag. The tag is graffiti's most basic, yet most striking medium. It is defined by its habitual aspect, becoming part of participants' daily activities, and written as you walk through your neighborhood, on the way home from school or to a friend (Gastman et al. 2016, see Hannerz, this volume). Tags reenact an ancient act of writing your name so as to leave a mark; still, it subverts this ancient past as the person behind the name is created through the very act of writing it. The difference between tags within subcultural graffiti and the historic visitors – such as the Vikings Halvdan and Arni leaving a mark inside Hagia Sofia, Rimbaud signing the Luxor temple, or the countless acts of lovers inscribing their initials on a tree trunk – is that in all of the latter acts the name directly represents a body that precedes it. In subcultural graffiti, the tag creates the subcultural individual; it is through the writing of a taken nom-de-plume that the subject is realized (MacDonald 2001; Kimvall 2007; Hannerz 2017). The iden-

tity behind a tag is thus not primarily understood as a noun but explicitly described as a verb. The proper question when two graffiti writers meet is not “what’s your name?” but “whatchu write?” (What do you write?) (Kimvall 2007).

Tags are in this sense performative in the very sense of Austin’s (1962) notion of the term. In contrast to other forms of unsanctioned public writings, the medium, to return to MacLuhan (1964), is the message. The writing on the walls, or trains, creates its own mediated environment as well as a social environment that goes beyond the single tag. The tag establishes a social environment that creates, at the same time as it implies a symbiotic network between the letters written, the place, previous tags of the same name, and other writers’ tags. In other words, graffiti writers create tags, but the tags at the same time create the writers (Barentin Lindblad in Cooper 2008). It is probably the logic of this symbiotic network that made Jean Baudrillard talk about the tags in subcultural graffiti as “names without intimacy” and “empty signifiers” (Baudrillard, 1976: 79).

In the texts covering the meanings of graffiti, such as the work of Craig Castleman (1982), Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant (1984), Nancy MacDonald (2001), Jack Stewart (1989/2009) and Roger Gastman (2016), graffiti is also described, from its initiation, not only as a communication of belonging, but also as one of presence, skills, and omnipotence. These texts point to how the writing of graffiti was, as early as the 1960s and early 1970s, part of an intricate system of communication where the style and execution of writing came to represent varieties in excellence and control of the medium; the difficulty of the particular location and access signaled varieties in risk-taking, and quantity and coverage across time and space pointed at commitment. The establishment of a subcultural play within which participants participate and compete through the communication of visibility, competence, style, courage and

belonging led to the development of the medium (Hannerz 2023a). When popular places for writing such as subway trains, entrances, and tunnels became saturated with different tags, the bigger and bolder meant that you stood out. This internal development was nevertheless made possible through technical developments. Just as mainstream use of the felt-tip marker and aerosol cans made graffiti writing possible (Stewart 2009: 30; Gastman et al. 2016), the creative use of caps (spray can nozzles) as being interchangeable between different kinds of aerosol products – for example spray starch – made the fat cap possible and hence bigger tags and the development of (master-)pieces. Even though Super Cool 223 is often credited as having invented the piece from the tag, such a distinction is hard to make. Characters were added to tags, such as Stay High 149's use of "The Saint", the stylized logogram of Lee 163d, and clouds around the tags had already been introduced (Stewart 2009: 41ff). The piece, or the masterpiece, was thus gradually developed rather than suddenly invented; it became a means to make your name larger and stand out.

But just as the act of writing meant a creative use of products already available, the figurative language of graffiti was not born out of nothing, but was developed through a playful competition around visibility and style that drew heavily from comics and advertisements (Miller 1994). During the early 1970s, different elements – such as shadows, or 3D, backgrounds, highlights and second outlines – were developed, as was the use of characters to frame, surround, and occasionally replace the letters on the train. The use of characters from mainstream comics such as the Pink Panther, Snoopy, Beetle Bailey, as well as underground comic such as Vaughn Bodé, points to the close links between graffiti and the style of comics – especially the almost obligatory use of an outline to letters and characters – but also to advertisements, not only in lettering but also with the

backgrounds and the position of the characters (see Anssi Arte 2015 for an in-depth and highly informative study on the links between advertisement and the lettering styles of graffiti). The overall code of the medium is clearly subcultural, and primarily communicates with peers, yet is seen by the whole city. And despite the overall subcultural status of the medium, the figurative elements – the characters – are often picked straight out of the broadest everyday visual cultures, such as commercials and mainstream comics, as well as other subcultural contexts, and the letter styles consciously inspired by international and avant-garde typography. As notes writer AMRL /Bama:

Writers used to flip for company logos, because they would get ideas from them, to the point where you would see a serious looking B-Boy walking around with a Good Housekeeping magazine or any magazine that carries a lot of ads. [...] he's looking at the ads, looking for style [...] There used to be a place on 42nd street that sold magazines from all over the world, and we used to hit that place! German magazines had great ads, especially during the 70s" (Miller, 1994: 163).

More so, that graffiti is often presented with a linear development from a written medium to a more artistically complex and visual medium is rather incorrect. This structure is implicit in, for example, Jacobson's (1996) interesting definition of TTP-graffiti. Jacobson seems to build his concept on an assumption of artistic development, where the tag is the most elementary and the piece the most elaborate, with a throw-up in between the two other forms, hence the abbreviation T(ags) T(hrowups) P(ieces). A closer look at the history of writing rather points to how tags and pieces preceded throw-ups in both time and style, with throw-ups developing out of fast and simple pieces by writers, for

example, Comet and Cliff 159 (Stewart 2009: 157) around 1974. It would then find its form as a larger version of the tag and a quicker and simpler form of the piece with the work of IN and IZ during the mid-1970s. The development of throw-ups thus completes the full circle of the development that preceded it: fast straight letter tags turning into intricate stylized letters resulting in pieces in which the letters were made bigger but also bent and obscured beyond direct recognition. The throw-up combines the size of the pieces with the swiftness of the tag. It merged the basics of the piece – the outlines to a fill-in – with the repetition and mass production of tags. Whereas pieces were to be unique works, the tag and the throw-up stressed style through quantity and pace.

A final aspect of the figurative language of graffiti as a medium needs to be added, one that is rarely given the attention that it merits: that of the *production*. Whereas the writers of the early 1970s at times wrote next to each other on the trains, the pieces were still individually separated. With the inclusion of characters and background in the mid-1970s, writers began tying their individual works together through a similar color scheme, background or even style of letterings. In graffiti terminology, this is referred to as a production and it supersedes the piece as it includes a collective aesthetic (Snyder 2009). Hence, although we find Jacobson's (1996) definition of TTP-graffiti – tags, throw-ups, and pieces – adequate, we argue that in order to stress media chronology rather than an implied artistic refinement, the theoretical concept designating subcultural graffiti should rather be TPTP-graffiti (Tags, Pieces, Throw-Ups, Productions) (Kimvall and Hannerz, forthcoming). Furthermore, the term TPTP-graffiti makes it possible to distinguish subcultural graffiti from the artistically and culturally partially overlapping phenomena of street art (Kimvall 2019b).

Accordingly, even in its most basic form of media –

that of writing – subcultural graffiti captures a multimodality, merging text and image with walking and experiencing the local neighborhood. This is also the most rudimentary of distribution channels: graffiti being produced, consumed and distributed through walking. More so, Mitchell's notion of nesting is here rather obvious in its different forms. Each of the forms of TPTP-graffiti includes and points to another form. The piece or throw-up is often signed with the tag, the production entailing both the tag and the pieces. Each form adds to another rather than replaces them. This is no different today than it was almost fifty years ago: Contemporary graffiti, regardless of whether we speak of New York City, Paris, London, Buenos Aires, Melbourne, or Bucharest, still revolves around these forms. Whilst the layman's attitude towards graffiti is as meaningless disorder, graffiti rests on an obvious aesthetic order, relating to various forms of the basic medium of writing.

## **Trains and benching: from the hyperlocal to the translocal**

Writing tags, as described above, was initially a hyperlocal communication; it was produced and consumed among peers and locals, while passing by and moving elsewhere: to and from school, to and from leisure activities, etcetera, meaning that the writing of tags often followed bus lines and centered around subway stations that writers would pass. As you would walk around the city, you would meet the tags of others, thus production, distribution and consumption were fused through the activity of writing (Gastman et al. 2016; see Hannerz, this volume). The first node of this social environment was also based in the streets: the Writers' Corner on the corner of 188th Street and Audubon Avenue. Chris Pape and Trina Calderón (2016) tell of how this corner

became *the* meeting place for writers in the early 1970s, a place where you could meet other writers and establish physical networks. The facade of the actual corner and a nearby truck became a hall of fame and writers began to establish alliances and friendships with one another.

But at the same time, graffiti had started to go beyond the streets. Buses and trains were already tagged in Philadelphia in the late 1960s, and by the summer of 1970, the insides of the subways became the main target of New York writers (Stewart 2009:16, 28). Through the trains, subcultural graffiti invented its own mass medium as it incorporated and made use of the subway system as a distribution network for their names. Whereas the communication through graffiti in the streets were limited in a sense by production, distribution and consumption being tied to a particular place, the subway cars became a medium of communication that was translocal: the subway cars with its graffiti travelled through the city. More so, in comparison to the streets, graffiti in, and on, the trains meant that the communication was concentrated through the medium. Tags, and later pieces and throw-ups, were delivered to a particular audience in a spatially condensed environment through the train. The trains had the advantage of constantly delivering new surfaces to exploit, as well as previous messages, to the same spot. Writers could thus get their names up from within the subway system rather than having to walk the city putting up tags.

Whereas the initial tagging in the streets created a social environment where the production, medialization, distribution and consumption of graffiti all revolved around the single context of the local or even hyperlocal, the trains meant that the technologies, modalities and social environment coalesced into a single subcultural infrastructure around the subway. At the same time, as the train moved graffiti from the local neighborhood to the regional, the train created a social environment that was condensed

through the nodes of the subway and the trajectories, yet dispersed as they traveled from borough to borough (Austin 2001: 67). In a socially fragmented and segregated city, this distribution network evokes the etymological roots of the word distribution as made up of “dis-” and “tribus” so as to deal out in portions or *to allot among the tribes or a tribe*. The writers, notes Austin (2001: 66), exploited the trains to “create an alternative ‘screen’ where the writing community could make itself visible to the city and to itself.” This last part is important, as the trains worked to connect and bring together individual writers as well as crews of writers from different parts of the New York metropolitan area – as it was covered by the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s subways (Castleman, 1982).

This situation – where medium and distribution as well as geographical and sociocultural context are fully integrated – further established a new social environment, as it meant an equal condensation and concentration of the audience. Much like the advent of early mass media, such as the personal radio or home television, which meant that family, neighbors, friends, and other social groups gathered around so as to listen to the news or follow a boxing game, graffiti on trains gathered the writers at particular nodes in the subway system. Whereas the first subcultural node of graffiti, the *Writers’ Corner* on 188th Street and Audubon Avenue, was literally a street corner, the later nodes were located at subway stations: 149th Street and Grand Concourse in the Bronx, the Brooklyn Bridge subway station in Manhattan, and Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn (Castleman, 1982: 84ff). Similar to the original writers’ corner, these nodes were used as meeting places, as well as for exchanging experiences, ideas and concepts. But, more importantly, they were also used so as to consume, discuss and criticize pieces of graffiti as it passed by (Austin 2001: 68; Castleman 1982; Cooper & Chalfant 1984). The benches that were intended to be used

by passengers simply waiting for the trains were here utilized to establish an arena for evaluating and discussing the graffiti in front of them.

We have previously made the analogy between the vertical swiping of pictures on Instagram and the horizontal passing of graffiti outside the train car window (Kimvall 2008; Hannerz 2016), but it can easily be transferred to the early days of benching, where new works were delivered on display and then replaced by another. All around the subcultural graffiti world, similar spaces (with or without subways, corners, or benches) have usually been referred to as either writers' corner or writers' benches. The latter noun also gave birth to the verb 'benching' – used to denote the activity of socializing and watching graffiti on trains.

Further, although sketch books had already been used as an auxiliary medium at the first writers' corner (Pape & Calderón 2016), it was further developed around the writers' benches. Accordingly, the nodes of the communication network of the subway gave birth to another subcultural technology, one that might have been the first auxiliary medium: the *black books*. At the writers' corners and benches, participants shared, traded, and commented on signatures and drawings within the same context as the production, distribution, and consumption of the graffiti (see Austin 2001: 127). The medium of black books evolved through the condensation of the subway – and it was a response to the fluidity of the very same medium. Castleman (1982:21ff) describes the black book as a sketch book that almost every writer carried around to collect drawings by other writers – preferably the older and more experienced. A sketch book implies that the black book was used as a preparatory tool, an auxiliary medium used to produce the (master)piece. But the way it is described by Castleman, the black book also seems to have functioned as a pedagogical tool, where aspiring writers could study the styles of more

experienced writers in a way that was not possible from benches at platforms where the trains usually stopped for a few seconds. Further, Castleman also connects the black book to the concept of burner: “a writer who does an exceptionally fine drawing in one of them is said to have ‘burned the book’”. A ‘burner’ in an autograph book reflects well on both the artist and the owner of the book” (1982: 21). In this way, the black book constitutes an artwork, (or a collection of art works), in its own right. As a medium, the black book thus seems to have a threefold function as a sketch, as a pedagogical tool and as an artwork. These different functions of the black book do not necessarily contradict each other, and in their book *Graffiti New York*, Eric and Luke Felisbret (2009: 330) define a black book as a hard-bound sketchbook “used for personal artistic development and for collecting other artists’ work”.

The new social environment established through the transit system fused the production, distribution, and consumption of graffiti at the same time as the movement of the trains disconnected the written from its immediate context and enabled a translocal, or regional, distribution. Similarly, the auxiliary media associated with the physical culture of the subculture – the photos, sketches and black books – constituted a materialization that superseded the written from its immediate context.

To sum up this part, as media in itself, graffiti appears to occupy a somewhat paradoxical position in the media landscape of the 1970s and 1980s. Tags and throw-ups are hand made yet based on seriality or even mass production, and thus both unique and reproduced. The pieces are also unique, and rarely mass produced; still, the use of the subway as a distribution technology meant a mass mediation to large and condensed audiences. In terms of modalities (text, image, sound, touch, smell), subcultural graffiti is most often a hybrid of text and image, as the letters in a tag, a throw-

up or graffiti piece are as much visual as they are textual. In this sense, graffiti is often literally “painted words”, a phrase otherwise used indirectly as to describe importance of subject matter in history painting and the theoretical discourses in abstract modernist painting (Mitchell 2005: 258). It is also multimodal when combining the figurative (characters) and textual (piece). From this point of view, graffiti is in Mitchell’s sense a braided media – “when one sensory channel or semiotic function is woven together with another more or less seamlessly” as in “cinematic technique of synchronized sound” (Mitchell 2005: 262).

## Chronicling: graffiti as nested

The use of the subway trains as a distribution network brings us to the importance of the buff: a car wash for trains established in the New York City subway in 1977 (Austin 2001). Whereas the buff is often discussed for how it threatened graffiti as a whole – as it eradicated years’ worth of tags, pieces, and throw-ups on the trains – or for how it revitalized the subculture – as it in an instant wiped the train cars cleaned and thus provided new canvases to write on – our focus is rather on what the buff meant for the medialization of graffiti. From the point of view of the transit authorities, the success of the buff was that it largely destroyed the subcultural media infrastructure outlined in the previous section: Within a decade, New York City was graffiti-free in the sense that graffitied cars no longer ran in traffic, and thus the benching and the nodes of the subway lost much of its meaning.

The buff meant that graffiti slowly started to move away from trains as a primary means for distribution and instead began using the train as a means for consuming graffiti. As writers increasingly ventured out along the subway

line to hit the track side walls and tunnels, trains – even though they were still being graffitied – no longer delivered graffiti to an audience, but rather delivered the audience to the graffiti. The transit system thus remained central, but the train was no longer the main screen onto which graffiti was projected. Instead, it became the space from where to experience and consume it. Traveling through European cities in the 1980s and 1990s followed a similar trajectory, even though the trains, at the time, were neither systematically buffed nor minutely surveilled, the track sides and the city walls were the main medium for graffiti pieces (Kimvall 2008). The technologies and social environment thus changed, as the subcultural nodes of particular stations became less central. Consider, for example, the difference between experiencing the track walls along the line from the train and walking the city. Both are immediate in the sense of being there, yet the former places the individual piece within the larger context of the line even though your vision is limited by the speed of the train and its distance to the wall. Walking the streets, however, is more direct, both in the sense of immediacy and control. It involves a multi-modality, you can walk up to the tag or the piece, study it from different angles, and take your time. Nevertheless, the immediacy of the context risks getting lost.

This does not mean, however, that the trains lost their meaning as a medium of graffiti. Their meaning was just altered. Photographing your pieces already existed to a certain extent around the writers' corners. As Joe Austin (2001) notes, photos became, together with sketches and stories, an important medium for displaying, distributing, evaluating, and developing the works. In a way the photos developed the black book. In *Subway Art*, Dondi White describes how he and his friends took photos of their work in order to study them and make progress. Similar to one of the functions of the black books, the photographic medium worked both as

a document and a learning device (Chalfant & Cooper 1984: 32). The combination of clean trains and cheaper and more accessible camera technology meant that graffiti on trains lived on – to this very day – largely through the material representation of the photo. Your piece might be erased within hours but the photo of it still exists (Kimvall 2019a; Hannerz 2023b). With the terminology of Mitchell (2005), the medium of a graffiti written or painted on the wall is nesting within photography (see Jacobson, this volume).

This change of the medialization of graffiti coincides with the appearances of external chroniclers. The works of researchers, photographers, and photojournalists such as Craig Castleman, Jack Stewart, Martha Cooper, Henry Chalfant, and James Prigoff all filled an important void in documenting graffiti, in that the medium of the trains lost parts of its immediacy and vertex with the cleaning of trains (Snyder 2016:208). Still, the increased dependency of the photograph, and later the moving images, as a central material distribution channel meant that the distribution and consumption of graffiti was partly separated from the production. The social environment created – first through the tags in the streets, and then later through the trains – was largely de-fused. On the other hand, the local and regional character of this environment was replaced with a global one. The lack of internal documentation and distribution, and the success of the documentary movie *Style Wars* (1983), the book *Subway Art* (1984) and motion pictures such as *Wild Style* (1983) and *Beat Street* (1984), meant that graffiti spread across the world. As a phenomenon stemming from New York City, this is not unique to graffiti. As Marshall Berman (1982) poignantly pointed out: New York City has for more than a century functioned as an international communication system and been a multi-media performance with the world as an audience.

All over the world, writers imitated the styles, formats

and placements from New York City. The subway remained the most desired object to paint and write on (see Paulsson, this volume). However, as mentioned above, in many parts of the world the train line replaced the subway car as a primary medium for display. In northern Europe, for example, most of the graffiti was consumed from and through the window of the subway or commuter train.

Even if chronicling through books and documentary movies disseminated the graffiti subculture geographically, and to some extent gave birth to new versions of graffiti, it initially also meant increased consolidation of graffiti mass media as partly external. This consolidation includes both the number of people who could access a sender position in this new distribution system and the images distributed. Since very few of the often teenage graffiti writers had access to the international publishing system, the books were authored by roughly a dozen adult chroniclers from outside the subculture. Furthermore, early to mid-1980s chronicling established an international subcultural canon of masters and masterpieces that, almost forty years later, still stand strong, and some pioneering graffiti writers that for various reasons were left out of the early movies and books are often destined to remain in the obscure corners of graffiti history (Kimvall 2019a).

In one of the last books of the era, Henry Chalfant's and James Prigoff's *Spraycan Art* (1987), Vulcan reflects on the drastic changes in the system of graffiti production and consumption: "Fame, nowadays, is a lot different. You can get fame for having good style. Ten years ago, style was part of it, but you had to have a lot of good pieces, hundreds" (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987: 25).

When the subway system was used as a distribution network, subcultural visibility, and the fame it brought, was dependent on hard labor by individual writers and collective work by crews, of continuously getting up on the subway.

A couple of years later a single photo of a piece in one of the early books could render worldwide and long-lasting fame (or as pointed out above, the lack of presence in a book could put a pioneering writer or a whole crew into global obscurity). The work of the chroniclers was crucial for the documentation and dissemination of subcultural graffiti, but as it coincided with the buff, it also meant that the writers lost the immediate control of their own mass-media.

## Graffiti as subcultural mass media infrastructure

The very first graffiti zines, such as David Schmidlapp and Phase II's *IGT* (*The International Graffiti Times*, later renamed *International Get Hip Times*, 1984-1994) were already present by the mid-1980s, but it was not until the late 1980s or even early 1990s, with the establishment of a graffiti fanzine-scene, that the subcultural regained control of the production and distribution of graffiti as mass-media. This zine-scene partly grew out of the network of pen-pals that had been established as the scene grew globally. Sketches and photos, as well as the stories behind them, were communicated to other writers, in other cities and countries, much like in other subcultural groups – be it punks, goths or comic artists. It was a one-to-one communication: private, yet worked to create both an interest for what was happening in other cities, as well as building global subcultural networks (cf. Snyder 2016, see Urbonaitė-Barkauskienė, this volume).

More so, fanzines were far from unique to graffiti. They had existed, for example, within the avant-garde art world since the 1960s, and were made possible through cheaper printing technologies and Xerox-machines becoming standard office supply. Yet contrary to music subcultures, graffiti long lacked a physical infrastructure. Punk

zines could be sold at shows and record stores, distributed through subcultural record companies, and thus tied to other media consumption. Graffiti, however, at the time largely relied on local gas stations, office suppliers, or paint and hardware stores for the supplies needed for writing, and the latter were rarely paid for. Beside the writers' corners, which were often precarious places for the distribution of physical documentation due to the risk of police raids, graffiti largely lacked a concentrated socio-geographical environment compared to other subcultural groups.

To an extent, this makes graffiti, as a subculture, rather unique. Punk, hip hop music, rave, goth and other music-based subcultures had an already existing media structure to tap into: that of recorded music. This media structure included commercial companies, publishers, logistics, magazines and an array of other entities (cf. Thornton 1995). The music networks also included public geographical nodes in the shape of record shops. The first punk zines – complete with photos, illustrations and interviews – coincided with the first punk shows and first punk records, to the extent that it is hard to draw a solid line between the documentation of the subculture and its initial development (Hannerz 2015). Fanzines in punk constituted both the chicken and the egg, whereas in graffiti, the development of a published subcultural documentation would take more than a decade to develop. The subcultures around skateboarding and climbing are in this sense closer to graffiti in the development of a subcultural media infrastructure than the music-centered subcultures (Borden 2001).

But just as graffiti initially parasitized the train system, so it had to parasitize other subcultures—such as hip hop—and sociocultural structures. In the absence of graffiti stores and safe meeting places, the subcultural zines used clothing stores, record stores, magazine shops and art galleries for

distribution. The retail music chain Tower Records, with stores across the US as well as in parts of Southeast Asia, the UK and elsewhere, became an important international distributor. Larger corporate distributors such as Tower Records were, however, an exception, and to a large extent the distribution was dependent on the cooperation between zine-makers. Malcolm Jacobson (2015) describes how zine-makers swapped copies with one another so that they could be distributed to various local stores, and thus mimicking developing the distribution of photographic images between pen-pals since the late 1970s.

The transformation of the social environment through fanzines and the distribution networks is also reflected in the early fanzines. For example, the second issue of the fanzine *SFM*, released in 1991, contains four short articles and advertisements, all of which discuss and reflect on graffiti mass-media as well as promoting other products. The early video-zine *Video Graf* was promoted in explicit contrast to photos in books and fanzines, with the argument that “You can only look at a flick, but you EXPERIENCE Video Graf. See shit happen right before your eyes. Plus hear what the writers have to say.” In contrast to the predominantly visual qualities of the photography [“a flick”], the multimodality of video is here obviously perceived, or at least promoted, as a richer, and more accurate medium for graffiti: a way of “experiencing” graffiti – the nesting of graffiti as an image is here replaced, at least as a promotional argument – with what Mitchell would refer to as braiding, “when one sensory channel or semiotic function is woven together with another more or less seamlessly” (Mitchell 2005: 262).

The links between mass-media and the geographical distribution of subcultural graffiti is in the same issue of *SFM* discussed under the headline ‘Europe’:

Back in the 70's if you even suggested that graf would be worldwide, you'd be getting some weird looks your way.

But thanks to books like *Subway art & Spray can art* and tourists who liked what they saw when vacationing in NYC, that's a reality. The styles that emerged were influenced in a way by the popular NY styles, but now more and more writers overseas are experimenting and coming up with their own individual styles.

England, Germany, Australia and Sweden lead the way – take a look... (SFM, 1991)

*SFM* was an abbreviation for *Styles 4 Miles*. The fanzine focused on outlines (drawings and sketches), specifically by writers from the US, but as noted above, also from Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. As such it continues, in a different form, the tradition of the black book. Some of the material might very likely be taken from black books but is disseminated far beyond its initial semi-private audience.

Zines such as *SFM* did not just become a global development of black books; more importantly, they became a global version of the writers' corner. They advertised other zines and included their addresses; they featured scene reports and interviews with writers across the Atlantic, as well as the Pacific Ocean, and thus provided a means for graffiti writers to communicate with each other. When you found yourself in Rome on your Interrail in the 1990s, the care-of addresses of the local zines were a good way to start when seeking to connect with other writers. More so, the drawings once shared semi-privately through black books at the writers' bench or corner corresponded to the photos exchanged via mail to other parts of the country or the world.

During the 1990s, the DIY-spirit of subcultural print media meant establishing a wide variety of graffiti zines all

across the U.S. and Europe (Duncombe 1997). Some were photocopied and in small circulation; others were in full color and with an edition numbering thousands. All of this relied on a subcultural infrastructure of distributing each other's magazines, as well as exchanging photos, interviews and local zine reports (Jacobson 2015). In 1996, the crew behind the Paris-based zine *Xplicit Grafx* released a book – *Sabotage* – covering European graffiti. And other zine makers, such as the Swedish *Underground Production*, would follow in its footsteps a few years later, thus creating subcultural publishing companies in graffiti (Snyder 2009). In the 2000s, this led to more and more books on graffiti being both produced, published as well as distributed from within the subculture. This infrastructure, as well as the video-zines and graffiti films produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, furthered this subcultural internal control of mass-media. It is worth mentioning that among the initiators of *Underground Production* was the second author of this text as well as Malcolm Jacobson (see Jacobson, this volume). Moreover, the publishing house that grew out of Underground Production, Dokument Press, is today partly an academic press and the publisher of this very volume (cf. Jacobson 2015).

Still, the different media remained de-coupled – in the sense that graffiti was distributed and consumed largely outside of the medium of writing. The writing was still separated in time and space from the consumption and distribution of graffiti. If the tag was the beginning of producing and distributing graffiti, walking constituted the initial means for both production and consumption. The only way you would get an idea of the subculture, of its participants, hierarchies, differences, and similarities, as well as its links and conflicts, was to physically experience it – in a specific geographical context. The technologies, material distribution channels, and modalities thus coalesced in a particular environment. At first by walking the streets, then

by benching, and with the increasing interest in highway and train trackside spots, through traveling by train or car. Just as this is a development of media, it is equally a change in control and immediacy. As we will see, the Internet has changed this completely. The horizontal passing-by of pieces, as in a train journey, has largely been replaced by a vertical movement: swiping through your Instagram flow.

## Graffiti as online phenomena

If music subcultures have historically had an advantage in terms of being able to exploit a physical subcultural infrastructure for distribution and consumption, the Internet, in many ways, switched the tables. When the music industry was decrying piracy, and subcultures such as punk and rave championed vinyl, and even cassettes, rather than digital distribution, subcultural graffiti largely embraced the new technology. Through digitalizing its previous forms of media, the graffiti subculture re-coupled the different parts of a subcultural mass-media – in ways unimaginable in the 1980s or 1990s. Still, this followed from graffiti's history and traditions. Chat-rooms, email-lists and social forums made it possible to discuss the definitions, hook-ups, traveling, information, and of course, conflicts that had previously been covered through letters or fanzines – in an immediate, direct, and inclusive way. This was furthered when sharing pictures and films became possible online. The website *Art Crimes* started already in 1994 and was probably the first net-zine focused on graffiti, and most certainly the first digital writer's corner where people would eventually cyber-bench. Many other digital media followed. Some, such as *12ozprophet.com*, evolved out of a printed fanzine. The Finnish fanzine *Äimä* (2000) discusses, for example, graffiti web pages as one of the most important countermeasures to zero tolerance:

The other rate Finland has the 1st place in is the amount of Internet accounts [...] there's also a huge amount of hits in graffpages from Finland. Since there is action out there but the buff is so effective, the net has become an important forum for writers to show what's going on out there. (Äimä 2000)

More importantly, and perhaps more controversially in relation to subcultural graffiti, we argue that from a media history perspective, the Internet made it possible for participants to regain subcultural control of the distribution and consumption of graffiti. Together with the arrival of graffiti customized spray paint and graffiti shops, the different elements of graffiti media were again re-fused, yet on a global scale. As these graffiti shops went online, graffiti was at once democratized but at the same time stratified: regardless of where you lived you could order spray paint directly to your door, and for half the price of what the rust preventive paint at the local gas stations once cost. The ease by which spray paint can now be acquired, the improved quality of the paint, and the lowering of costs, has largely meant a decline in the need to steal paint, but also an increase in possibilities: easy access to paint, notes Stockholm writer Skil, made it possible to do a whole car with a purple fill-in, something that previously was simply impossible as there was no way you could amass 20 cans of purple through stealing (Sjöstrand 2012: 134). More so, a quick look through contemporary graffiti films, for example, *Fyboda* (2017), points to how the high-pressure spray cans can now be used to paint whole cars in minutes. Still, these technical developments have had the consequence that the subcultural commitment of knowing how and where to steal paint has largely been replaced with a need for the financial means to pay for it. This is not the time nor place to argue for the consequences this has had on the DIY-ethos of graffiti; it suffices

to say that from a sociological perspective the reliance of stealing paint was financially inclusive yet subculturally exclusive, and that an emerging graffiti industry has turned this partly upside down (see Urbonaitė-Barkauskienė, this volume).

Yet, it would be too simple to argue that technology in itself changes graffiti; rather, it enables other forms of creativity. Whereas the DIY-aspect, pre-Internet, was largely tied to the doings of graffiti as well as its materialization through print media, social media has made it possible and simple for anyone to become a producer and distribute graffiti. Hence, changes in the ways graffiti is done and consumed relates rather to how technology is being used. With Fotolog initiated already in the beginning of the 2000s, and Flickr and Tumblr in the mid-2000s, the arrival of smartphones tied the consumption of graffiti to its distribution and production. Besides communicating, the smartphone can be used to map out the surroundings of a spot, specifying the location of that potential abandoned factory, locating possible entrances through maps, and then finally guiding you to the place (see Paulsson, this chapter). Further, the smartphone is used to document the entire practice. It provides you with the means to cut the image, add filters and brighten the image, combining photos and films and adding a soundtrack, such that you can distribute the final result to others through messaging apps, or through Snapchat, Instagram, etcetera (MacDowall 2019). The smartphone this way *produces* graffiti. The series of tags and pieces consumed through walking the streets or traveling the line, the context within which you were up or not, are now largely virtually assembled, through Instagram feeds and YouTube-videos (Hannerz 2023a).

Internet graffiti enables you to remove the flaws, to censor the mistakes. It makes productions possible that twenty years ago would have been hard to document and

even harder to distribute. The Instagram accounts of @dais\_dk, @moses.taps, or @whentriplgetsfurios, to name but a few, capture this re-fusion of the different stages of mediation: Triple's and Dais' stop motion graffiti, or Moses and Taps' short films, where zoomed-in elements of train pieces are warped into another piece rolling by. All of these are examples of graffiti where the piece is produced through the technologies of social media; it is a layering and juxtaposition of different forms of modalities that is made possible through camera technology and social media. The online videos by Good Guy Boris, 1UP, or KCBR are here similar in their playfulness, and for the use of the technology, not just as a means to remediate-as, for example, a photo of a graffiti-tied train, but as a merger of the technology and the graffiti so as to become something more.

In many ways, the Internet has made it possible to retain, not only graffiti as a communication, but also its different forms of medialization: the writing, the trains as mass communication, and the remediation of graffiti through photos and films. Yet the creative use of media technology has led to a digital subcultural infrastructure that is both at the same time global as it is hyperlocal. These new media constitute what contemporary graffiti has become. Most of the graffiti writers we have followed in our different research projects now consume more graffiti on their phones than they do on-site. They might be unaware of a new piece along their own trainline, yet remain perfectly knowledgeable about the latest stunt by their favorite writers from the USA, Germany or France, whom they are able to follow on social media almost in real time. The immediacy of not only the medium but also of the communication makes it possible for a piece or tag to spark respect, admiration, or controversy online before the local citizens have even woken up to see it. Yet social media also means that the object is continuously being produced. The meaning of the work – its context, his-

tory, and relation to a larger body of work by the same individual – is being immediately co-produced with its mediation: The consumer becomes part of the production, adding information, providing feedback, and interacting with other writers in the commentary field of Fotolog and then later Facebook and Instagram.

To reiterate: the medium creates its own social environment that enables certain things and hinders others.

## Conclusion

In Selina Miles' documentary *Martha – A picture story* (2019), there is a poignant scene where Martha Cooper, photographer and co-author of the book *Subway Art* (Chalfant & Cooper 1984), arrives in Europe on a book tour. It is the year 2004, and twenty years have passed since the release of the book that has now innumerable times been described as a subcultural bible, a book that defined and introduced subway graffiti to a global crowd. Yet, when arriving at the venue in Berlin, Cooper seems to be rather unaware of her status as a subcultural celebrity: she notes with obvious surprise, that whereas she had struggled for recognition in the photography world, in the hip hop and graffiti-subculture “everybody seemed to know who I was”. In the next scene, a seemingly embarrassed Martha is dragged on stage and meets a cheering crowd after having been simply introduced with “This is Martha Cooper!”.

*Subway Art*, together with *Spraycan Art* (Chalfant & Prigoff 1987) and the documentary film *Style Wars* (Chalfant & Silver 1983), did not just define and disseminate what graffiti was and how it was done: it also came to define the layout of how graffiti should be (re)presented. Its full-page spreads – with Henry Chalfant's decontextualizing studies of specific artworks and Martha Cooper's contextualizing

photos of graffiti in the urban landscape combined with thumbnail photos of pieces, portraits of writers, and portions of text – have been endlessly repeated and imitated in graffiti books and zines, record covers, and unintendedly, yet somewhat ironically, in the way Instagram presents the overview of a single hashtag or account.

Considering subcultural graffiti from a media historical perspective sheds a slightly different light on the history of graffiti. It entails a shift from individual creative innovation towards collective processes, as well as a decentering of artistic creation in favor of production in a wider sense, as well as interest in technology, distribution, and reception. Focusing on media – the mediation, distribution, modalities, and social environment of subcultural graffiti – offers new possibilities of exploration, possibilities that we in this chapter have only had room to briefly touch upon. Instead of looking at development from the (normative) standpoint of artistic refinement, which from the rudimentary tags and throw ups has led the master pieces and full production walls, a media historical perspective suggests a development where the seemingly simpler throw up developed out of the piece. We have thus suggested the development of Jacobson's concept TTP-graffiti (Tags, Throw ups, Pieces) to TPTP-graffiti (Tags, Pieces, Throw ups, Productions) as an analytical concept, defining the subcultural graffiti developed since the 1970s, that is formally different from the, in other aspects, closely related field of street art.

Returning to Mitchell's idea of nesting, and thus of moving away from McLuhan's chronological sequencing and technological determinism, we have, throughout this chapter, shown how the history of subcultural graffiti as media constitutes a history of addition – in the sense that no established graffiti media have ever ceased to exist. Some media may have lost their position as a central instance within this

specific subcultural structure. For example, in terms of media as mediation and distribution, the graffiti zines slowly lost their function as the crucial graffiti news channel and primary platform for display, with the birth of the Internet and the development of social media – but they did not cease to exist as a medium: they remain as an alternative analogue format of underground distribution, or more condensed or exclusive material remediations of a particular writer or phenomenon. Tags are still written and consumed through walking the streets but can also be experienced as nested within another media, as through online videos. With the clean train era in New York, and elsewhere, the subway cars have gone from a necessary distribution network to idolized and even fetishized objects of desire (Hannerz 2023a). A panel piece on a subway car in New York City will perhaps never run the line, but it still has the potential of reaching millions of viewers through a hashtag on Instagram. The benches on subway stations such as 149th street and Grand Concourse that were used to watch pieces passing by – what we have referred to as media as a social environment – are now complemented by the distribution of photos of these pieces online, creating a form of cyber-benching. Graffiti has, in Mitchell's terminology, been nesting within a number of different other media: photography, books, videos and later various digital camera technologies. In fact, graffiti could be claimed to have been using the most typical, later fetishized, substrate media and distribution system – the subway system – as a nest.

The intricate contemporary media infrastructure is made possible through both technical developments and subcultural developments within graffiti. The buff, long since extended from the trains to include the inner city and the tracksides, is no longer a threat to graffiti. It constitutes the foundation to the re-fusion of the production, distribution, and consumption of graffiti. Consequently, cities such

as Berlin, Copenhagen, Melbourne, New York, Paris, Rome, or Sydney are closer to us than ever. The single piece or tag that was previously seen in the streets, at tracksides and on trains, which the majority most likely shrugged off as ugly or meaningless, can, through the right accounts, reach a concentrated audience of thousands of interested writers and graffiti fans. Accordingly, the history of subcultural graffiti as media points to graffiti's incisive and ceaseless creativity. Of exploring, exploiting, and transforming existing technologies into subcultural resources.

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