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# 03

# **Vandals in motion:** the “where” of graffiti in the streets.

**Erik Hannerz**

I dare say that the lines I trace with my feet on the pavement walking to the museum are more important than the lines I will find there hanging on the walls inside. And it pleases me enormously to see that the line I trace is never straight, never confused, but has a reason to be like this in every tiny part.

*Hundertwasser (1980: 111)*

## Introduction

It's a Thursday night, and I'm following "Thomas" out for what he calls "a quick round". We meet outside a subway station that already bears marks of Thomas' hand and start walking down one of the side streets. Every ten meters or so, he stops, picks out one of the cans from his small plastic bag, or a pen from his jacket, and writes his tag. Big or small, on doors, facades, windows, boxes and street signs, in black and in white. I lose count rather quickly. It is an interesting walk; he is constantly a meter or two ahead of me and we don't talk that much; more so, neither of us seems to know where we are going. I ask him what he thinks about the fact that most of these tags will be erased by this time tomorrow. He just shakes his head saying that that's part of the game and a reason to keep going. At the moment, this is what graffiti is to him: he has focused on doing trains before, but his main priority now is the streets. "It's more fun this way," he says, "you really have to work hard to get any result at all, if you do fifty tags few will notice it, but if you do that a couple of times a week, every week, for a year, then people will notice it." Also, this way of writing is possible to combine with family life: he can be out writing three times a week for an hour or so each time and then go home to his partner and child and get some sleep before going to work. We part ways and I look at my phone; we have been out for 45 minutes.

Since 2014, I have followed graffiti writers in and around Stockholm and Malmö, Sweden as they discuss, prepare, and do graffiti, with the intent of investigating how they perceive and make use of urban space. During this time, when I have lectured to students and the public about graffiti, the most common questions I have been asked concern the "where" of graffiti: Why do they put tags on apartment houses, or doors? Why don't they just use the open graffiti walls? Why do they have to mark their territory like

dogs, etc.? This is also a central concern to different forms of crime prevention that seeks to push graffiti away from certain spots through guards, cameras, increased cleaning, and at times through encouraging them to use other spots such as designated open graffiti walls (Kramer 2010; Hannerz & Kimvall 2019). Previous research on graffiti (cf. Cresswell 1992; Ferrell 1996; MacDonald 2001) has partly addressed this through stressing that graffiti writers construct their subcultural identities through a combination of visibility, risk-taking, and style. Hence, the city streets, trains and tracksides become attractive through how they can be used to realize these ideals. Yet, the meaning of the places, how they are marked out, what they enable, what they have come to mean, as well as their potential differences, are essential.

A number of works on graffiti (Halsey and Young 2006; Ferrell and Weide 2010; Brigenthi 2010) as well as on other subcultural groups (Borden 2001, Kidder 2017) suggests an intimate relation between how the city is gazed and how it is used. Instead of a dichotomous relation between art and vandalism, or the young versus the older, or legal versus illegal, this means investigating a dialectic relationship between meaning and materiality, how the activity of writing, and the motion of writing, is intimately linked to a particular image of the city.

In this chapter, I will draw upon the argument made by Ferrell and Weide (2010: 48f) that graffiti writers navigate the city through an experienced knowledge of the urban landscape and that graffiti therefore "cannot be understood outside its urban context". I will expand on this by pointing to how the navigation and gaze of the city is tied to a particular image of the city, and that graffiti writers' use of the city has to be seen as plural. The empirical data draws on six years of ethnographic research with over 250 Swedish graffiti writers, in and around Stockholm and Malmö, Swe-

den. I have focused on plurality and pursuing differences as to how and where participants do graffiti, but also include the beginners, inexperienced and anomalous (Hannerz & Tutenges 2022). A vital part of the ethnographic work has been to investigate how the same participants perceive and make use of a variety of places – such as city streets, trains, trams, highway walls, tracksides, legal walls or professional work as muralists—as well as how they move when doing so (cf. Bloch 2018). Aside from fieldwork and interviews, I have also worked with a variety of maps. As part of my fieldwork on the doings of graffiti, I would, with the informed consent of my informants, start an exercise app on my phone which would then create a detailed overview of how we would move and stop during the activity. Inspired by the work of Kevin Lynch (1960) and Helena Holgersson (2011), I also asked participants draw their own maps of the city as well outline their latest venture out writing graffiti.
These data point to substantial similarities between participants in relation to different kinds of places. Trains and city streets, to name but one distinction in my data, differs significantly with respect to how participants perceive, prepare, move, and do graffiti and document their works. These patterns are also stable across different activities by the same individuals, pointing to an intimate interrelation between meaning and materiality.

In this chapter, I will approach the specifics of what Creswell (1992) has deemed the "crucial 'where' of graffiti" in relation to the city streets. I will start by discussing how the city is defined and gazed by the participants and thereafter move to how this gaze is embodied through how the city is felt, navigated and used. As is suggested by the anecdote that opens this chapter, the creativity of graffiti writing in the city will be pursued through a variety of movements, both in terms of the individual bodies and the graffiti itself. I will point to how in their gaze toward the city, as well as

in making use of it, graffiti writers seek to establish a sense of comfort and familiarity in relation to their surroundings. This creates a particular subcultural trajectory that is distinctive to the city streets. The activity of writing the city symbolically and physically recreates the very gaze through which it is read in the first place. As Emma Nilsson (2010) notes, investigating this reflexive embodiment—where the activity, as well as the acting body, takes place—involves looking beyond the particular to instead focus on how these are synthetized into a particular subcultural *terrain.* In order to arrive at how meaning is negotiated, not just in relation to space, but in how subcultural identities and activities occur *through* space (cf. Gieryn 2000: 468), we must first understand how graffiti writers perceive the city streets.

## The image of the city as the center

In his work on skateboarding, Ian Borden (2001) argues that teasing out the spatial aspects of the subcultural means investigating how participants *read* the city in order to identify, categorize, and make sense of the different urban materialities and how these can be used. In research on activity-based subcultures such as graffiti and skateboarding, this reading of the city is often referred to as a "subcultural gaze" that participants develop and through which their worlds and activities are structured, experienced and made meaningful. Gazing the city is then thought of as attending to the own body, both mentally and visually, in relation to its surroundings through which participants discover and order their own world (Borden 2001; Halsey and Young 2006; Brighenti 2010). In emplacing the subcultural, graffiti writers are similar to skateboarders or traceurs in parkour, in the sense that an otherwise abstract urban space is ordered and made sense of through its possibilities regarding how

it can be used. Urban creativity is thus based on a particular perception of the material surroundings (see Paulsson, this volume).

Kevin Lynch (1960) refers to this as images of the city. Lynch's point is how people order the city through the establishment of points of references and movements. Part of my fieldwork involved asking participants to define particular spaces, outlining their boundaries, their center, and what the basis was for this definition. As I noted above, I will here focus on those definitions that outlined what I will here refer to the city as the center. The other images of the city in my data include *the linear*, the *set apart*, and *the anomalous*, and these can be roughly analogous to particular kinds of places such as walls along highways and train tracks, trains as surfaces, and semi-legal and legal walls (Hannerz 2023a; 2023b; Hannerz and Kimvall 2019).

The image of the city as center differs significantly from these other images, first and foremost as it concerns the city as a whole, rather than a specific object or stretch of objects. Even though the exact boundaries of the image of the city as center differed between participants, it is defined through an apparent emphasis of the public, in the vernacular sense of the word: as that which is physically available and visibly accessible to anyone in the city (cf. Lofland 1998:8f; see Arvidsson & Bengtsen, this volume). This was obvious in how participants, regardless of the size of their city, stressed the presence of congested yet undifferentiated flows of people: congested as it refers to a substantial mass of people, undifferentiated as this mass was conceived of as being able to move in different directions, with different motivations, at different times of the day, along different routes and at different paces. The image of the city was thus seen as a moving abstract entity, something that could be entered or exited, yet that was demarcated by the limits beyond which these congested flows are perceived of as

declining. In this example, a participant describes the link between this undifferentiated flow and visibility:

> [A great spot] is that concrete box by the square that we passed, with the blue throw-up on it, that's definitely a good spot. But I mean really this whole area, and all the streets all around it, they are great streets because people will pass by them. And in Malmö, really, everything between say [area X] and [area Y] are important spots, because Malmö, thankfully in that way, is so dense. It is not like Stockholm or something, [...] Malmö feels small and dense enough that if it's fairly central then people will see it. (see figure 1) (Go-along, 6, 2015)

Similar to the quote above, the image of the city among the participants I followed was defined by what Lynch refers to as a *node*, as in a strategic foci, the core of a particular area of which it becomes the defining symbol, here referring to a square in Malmö that is at the center of the night life area. Gregory Snyder (2009) makes the analogy between tourists and graffiti writers in that they both seek out the beat of the city, the busy restaurant, and bar areas because of the density of people. Here this is represented by a node through which flows of people pass by, thus intensifying the exposure of the individual's graffiti (Ferrell and Weide 2010). Other examples of such nodes in my data are subway- or train stations. Still, even though visibility is at the core of this image of the city, it cannot be understood without the context—or if you prefer the image or gaze of the city—within which it is made meaningful.

In my data there are a number of different definitions of visibility. In relation to train tracks and highways, these refer to what can be seen from the vehicle passing by. With regard to trains, it largely refers to an indirect visibility of documenting the activity and then distributing it through

social media or subcultural media (Hannerz 2023a; 2023b). This complicates the previous research on graffiti's stress on a single subcultural gaze and a single definition of risk and visibility. Within the image of the city as the center, visibility referred to a saturation, of people being unable to miss your name, as is hinted at in the last part of the quote above. This further means that, whereas the trains and the tracksides were clearly limited either by the object itself or by the speed or distance of the vehicle to the wall (cf de Certeau 1984: 111f), the image of the city was rather defined by its entity, its conglomeration of what Lynch refers to as *paths*.

To Lynch (1960: 47f), paths refer to routes through which the flows of people move in a variety of directions around and through the node. In the excerpt above, this is exemplified through the main streets that both defined its boundaries and those that define its center, outlining an area of roughly six square kilometers in total (see figure 1.). Visibility, as well as the image of the city, is marked by density; it is thus at the same both direct and abstract. It refers to that which is there for people to immediately see and grasp. As is implied in the excerpt above, the flows of people are at the same time seen as unregulated and spontaneous: they can stop, turn around, look in different directions, approach, or distance themselves. Consequently, visibility here does not refer not to a single street or a single surface but, as above, to "everything" within these defined flows. Saturation is thus a necessary aspect so as to achieve visibility within the city.

More so, to Lynch (1960: 47), what defines a path is how streets and roads constitute the channels along which "the observer customarily, occasionally or potentially moves", stressing an affective aspect of familiarity, where visibility is defined through one's own body and movement. As one graffiti writer told me in relation to his writing:

> What matters is exposure. In part that a lot of people will

> be able to see it at these places, but also that these places are safe, it's the places where you are, that's where you look around, it's where you walk every day [...] it's not planned, it just what you feel like, or it can be, these, that you are on the way to a particular area where you know "here I haven't been in a while, I should go here". So that's one. Still, usually, it comes down to what you feel like when you are going out. (Go-along 12, 2018)

As is noted here, the immediate visibility and direct accessibility depart from the point of view of the own body and its habits as well as the affective experience of these. The city center is here described through the habitual and familiar with the own body as the point of departure, in part through choosing paths that you are already familiar with, where you move every day, yet also as these paths, through this habitual movement, are deemed as visible and accessible in the sense that many people move along them. The systematic aspect of visibility is here implied in the urge to fill up the city, to cover those parts where you have not yet been. As in the excerpt that opened this chapter, to get up—as in establishing a subcultural name—in the streets, requires a systematic activity of going out at least a few times a week so as to cover new areas and reclaim those spots that have been cleaned. The removal of graffiti is thus included as a habitual and taken-for-granted part of doing graffiti; in order to be seen, you have to be committed and systematic in your tagging (Hannerz 2023b).

Other participants joked about tagging as a job, something that they had to systematically attend to, sort of like taking the dog out for a walk. Following graffiti writers around also showed how tagging was habitually incorporated in their daily lives; they would do a few tags on the way to work, on the way to the grocery store, or when walking home from a

friend. This is the importance of Ferrell and Weide's (2010: 51) claim that writers reimagine the city as they navigate through it. The image of the city is what is there to be taken, at all times. The reading and writing of the city are thus experienced through walking the city.

## The terrain of the city as the center

In discussing the urban city, Michel de Certeau (1984: 94ff) points to the potential subversiveness of walking, of creating new sentences, new trajectories and uses of the city. Through walking, we actualize and reestablish a particular spatial order of possibilities and restraints, but at the same time, we also invent new uses, pushing boundaries, by drifting away from the ascribed way of moving: shortcuts, holes in fences, the disregard of signs interdicting passage, etc. In the excerpts above, walking is stressed as a vital part of gazing and experiencing the city, and in many ways the doings of graffiti within the image of the city as the center captures de Certeau's double entendre of obeying while at the same time disputing a spatial order. Regardless of whether I followed writers in Stockholm, Malmö or followed participants on trips to other cities around and outside of Sweden—and notwithstanding the spatial, architectural, cultural and juridical differences between these cities—there was a striking similarity in how participants gazed, used and navigated through these different cities. First of all, this involved some serious amount of walking, as is also noted by Andrea Brighenti (2010: 329), not just in doing graffiti but also so as to get a hold of a new city, or experience and recreate one's own neighborhood:

> I know of no better way than being out writing so as to learn and discover all possible areas and nooks, short cuts

> and detours, you're like entering the city and then you're attempting to get lost so as to find new areas to paint, and then you're able to navigate both on the basis of your own pieces, and pieces that you come across in the city, they become landmarks around the city through which you can see how you should walk (Go-along 5, 2015)

de Certeau's argument that walkers rewrite the city, that spaces are given new meanings and new shapes through the combination of individual footsteps that are intertwined through the paths they collectively form, is here given an affective form. Walking is said to involve reading the city, exploring and exploiting the city through a kind of drifting, above described as purposely looking to get lost. Yet at the same time, walking here establishes a particular subcultural space: how the graffiti of yours and others' become "landmarks" used to navigate and make sense of the surroundings, how it establishes a particular familiarity. My field notes are thick with this kind of description, where participants explain how they use walking, and thus also reading and writing the city, so as to order the unknown, or to reorder the known. For example, they would give me directions by saying that I should turn at a particular tag or piece, or tell others "you know by that big silver by Scoop" and the others would nod and say "ah ok" (see Chan, this volume).

This familiarity of space, of the habitual and typical, is what philosopher Anthony J. Steinbock (1995: 163) hints at in his conceptualization of the concept of terrain, namely that it refers to an affective experience, a particular kind of attention required by a reoccurring use of a particular milieu that we count on. Architect Emma Nilsson (2010) develops Steinbock's ideas by using parkour as an empirical example of how the subcultural is emplaced in a particular kind of place, and how participants build an accumulated experi-

ence carried as a continuous anticipation activated in, and by, particular features of the environment, through which the activity and the acting subcultural body can be realized (Nilsson 2010: 132ff; Hannerz 2023b). Within the city of their own, or one they visited, the graffiti writers I followed sought out, much like the Nilsson's traceurs in parkour, a particular kind of place they felt that they were temporarily in control of, where they could pursue the familiar but also challenge themselves, places where they would instinctively know what to do and how to do it. As Steinbock (1995: 165) notes:

> The familiarity of a terrain has [...] to do with the way things in a terrain typically behave, which in turn efficaciously sketches out a range of future comportment, prefiguring this rather than that, highlighting one practice, dimming down another.

Terrain here refers to the emplacement and embodiment of the image of the city center, yet at the same time the terrain also makes things happen in a particular way. It orders activities and expectations, and as such terrain cannot be equaled to part of a particular landscape; rather, and similar to how Bourdieu (1998) conceives of the feel for the game, the concept of terrain refers to an inscription of norms, experiences and emotions tied to a particular activity realized *through* space. Hence, a shift in place is not necessarily a shift in terrain since the norms internalized through the activity make it possible to realize and extend the terrain in new places. In walking the city streets, participants thus sought to identify and realize the terrain, where they would feel comfortable; walking the same streets that you had walked before, doing graffiti on the same objects and walls as before, while at the same time widening the saturation of the visibility of their name. Similarly, experienced writers would feel ill at ease

when unable to realize a particular terrain: a particular part of the city that did not feel right, or where there were too many people out, or too few, which usually resulted in continuing walking so as to realize the terrain somewhere else or simply returning home. More so, whereas some of my informants were able to switch, say between the terrain associated with trains and that of the city as the center, others could not really come to terms with the differences in terms of preparations, risks and the activity:

> I have done trains, but really, it's really a different thing, like all this preparations, two hours of scoping the yard, the constant stress on control, risks, guards. It's not the same. I cannot relax, it's so hectic. It is not for me, I prefer the streets. (Field notes, Stockholm 2021).

This is not the place to define the differences between the subcultural terrains of trains and the streets in graffiti; what matters is rather the feeling of familiarity and control, and the affective aspect of the activity (see Paulsson, this volume). Above, the particular activity of doing graffiti on trains is discussed through what it is not: the streets, and how this incongruence produces a feeling of being out of place. Returning to de Certeau, the pursuit of the terrain refers to the possibilities that can be explored through a particular place. The subcultural corporality in the city thus includes a particular subcultural gaze of the city, a familiarity with particular aspects of the environment that draws participants to particular aspects of the environment. As note Mark Halsey and Alison Young (2006: 278), it is through writing that the graffiti writer is connected to the city. Subcultural rules, ideals, and risks are realized through the experience of the material surroundings: they are felt and incorporated. To become part of the subcultural is thus to learn how to control your own body and the extensions of

it in, and as I have argued, through, a particular place (Hannerz 2015; see Flaherty, this volume).

## Writing the city as the center

To argue that graffiti writers enact a particular image of the city is to describe and capture how they perceive of possibilities and restraints and how they use these to navigate the city. The concept of terrain points to how this image of the city is acted upon; it describes

the familiarity established between the body, the activity and the environment (Nilsson 2010:134). In short, if the image of the city describes the affective conception of space, terrain rather points to the affective experience of it (Steinbock 1995: 163).

Below (figure 1) is a map of an actual route when doing graffiti. The yellow line refers to how we moved, and the red dots mark the graffiti being made. It is the same city as was described above in relation to the boundaries of the image of the city. Hence, I have added the defined boundaries of that quote –even though this was the movement of another writer—to point to how the movement overlaps with a shared, yet particular, subcultural image of the city. This particular map describes a 90-minute outing, even though we did stop for various other reasons during that time, such as picking up beer, retreating to a remote corner in a park to let things cool off, etc. When I have collected maps from participants, either through asking them to draw maps of how they moved the last time they did graffiti, or through following them physically, the terrain covers a similar multidirectional pattern. The paths taken overlap and at times involve turning around walking in the opposite direction on a parallel street. This is an obvious difference compared to other activities within graffiti, in relation to trains

**Figure 1:** Map of the doings of graffiti, the inner and outer circles marking the definition of the flows of people suggested earlier.

for example, in which the maps described a rather straight trajectory to and from the activity.

The terrain of the city center, and the image of the city upon which it is based, is here affectively enacted. The incorporated and embodied memory of space refers not to a single surface but rather an abstract and direct notion of the city. Notably, Bloch (2018) has argued for the importance of place in relation to subcultural narratives; however, my point here is less the plurality of narratives surrounding a single activity and more how different terrains enable certain subcultural gazes and activities than do others. The image of the city as based on the condensed and undifferentiated flows of people, and visibility as the direct available, is enacted through the spontaneous, habitual yet spontaneous aspect of the ac-

tivity. Participants would pick spots as they came into view through the motion across the city—as in a door, a wall, a box, a bench, etc. More so, the affective aspect of the terrain, the luring and motivating, is obvious in terms of direction. Even though the participants I followed would return to some spots and streets, the route taken was not planned for in advance but developed throughout the movement. Among participants this was referred to as a "round", as "in going for a round." This is captured in the map above. The pace, direction and intensity of the activity was negotiated on the go, as part of realizing the subcultural terrain, and based on the affective evaluation of a particular place or situation.

In discussing vandalism and shoplifting, Jack Katz (1988: 54) notes how part of the thrill is experiencing a deviant air, of feeling and knowing that the transgression can very well take place, but the actual doing is left to circumstance and creativity. The act is thus already anticipated but dressed in spontaneity (Hannerz 2023a). Similarly, during these "rounds" there was an anticipated thrill in the uncertainty of being surprised by the material object, of being drawn into the activity. This embodied memory of space means that the activity can be initiated and stopped at any time. If things were perceived as precarious—a lot of people out, a car that seemed to show up at different intervals, or a passer-by staring too long—the activity would then be temporarily suspended or even aborted. If things were going fine and there was both motivation and paint the activity of these "rounds" could go on for hours with the participants choosing at each intersection where they felt like going next. The habitual aspect of graffiti in the city streets means that it requires a minimum of preparation, usually just bringing a marker or a spray can, which to these participants were just as evident to pick up when leaving the house, as was the cell phone, keys or cigarettes. This affective aspect of the terrain, the luring

and motivating, is also what guided participants when doing graffiti, in establishing sequences across buildings through the flow of the activity. The terrain and the habitual and affective activities associated with it are thus reproduced in new spaces through an undifferentiated and spontaneous use of the city—the surfaces chosen are not planned in advance but appropriated as they come in sight: it does matter if it is a door, a wall, a sign, etc. Similarly, the terrain enables different sizes and types of graffiti, as it includes an immediate analysis of time and space:

> I guess I have always belonged to that group of writers that writes spontaneously, that is I'm pretty fast in pulling out the marker, often I don't even have the time to reflect on whether it's a good moment or not, it just goes automatically, [...] my friends thinks that I'm a bit wack cause I don't look around that much, I just walk and write, and walk and write, pulling up the marker or the can [...] If I see a spot, if I wanna take it, I make sure no one sees me and then I take it, it's not that I see a spot and then chose to return there later, rather I see a spot and then I make sure to immediately take it and then move on. (Go-along 17, 2016)

The stress on the automatic is crucial, that is, being able to in an instant evaluate a particular spot and its possibilities and then acting upon it. But so is ownership in the conquering of new terrain by "taking it." In arguing against the assumption of the broken windows theory that offenders are reacting to dilapidated neighborhood conditions, Peter St. Jean (2007) instead stresses the offenders' proactive relation to their surroundings, that they gaze the neighborhood so as to seek out and capitalize on the possibilities certain locations offer, what he refers to as the ecological advantages: places that they can comfortably and legitimately access, and that

offer an easy get-away should the police arrive (2007: 20). When following participants out doing graffiti, they would explain that it was first when they approached a particular surface during these rounds that they would decide what to do, and thus how long time they would have to spend doing it. Tags, as described above, are made quickly within seconds (figure 2); pieces (figure 3) and throw-ups (figure 4) require more work and thus more time and depend on assessing the situation as well as what the surface enables. One of my informants remarked that this was like an instinct, that you would maybe start with a tag and this would then evolve into a throw up or quick piece, "if this felt right". Others described how they did not really know how long a piece would take to finish, but they would nevertheless feel instinctively if it was possible or not. Even though a piece in a particular spot was often planned in advance, the decision of which of the forms to use was most often, during my fieldwork in the streets, decided on the spot, based on whether things felt right, and an immediate evaluation of time and possible risks, all referring to previous experiences of the same spot, or of similar ones.

Accordingly, risks of detection were thus handled through the activity and the terrain rather than directly. The lack of direction and the constant walking and criss-crossing between streets were part of avoiding the police and witnesses, as are the swiftness of the activity and its spontaneous character, as you are then constantly moving about:

> You know, if you're just doing [tags] as you are moving when out walking, just plain simple and in a relaxed way, I think, with the energy you have is rather, as you're just out walking. You're not doing something foolish, if it looks like you're doing something foolish then maybe people react as to how you're walking or that you look rather shady […] It's just doing as you move and then just continue walking (Go-along 16, 2016).


**Figure 2:** Tag by Uzi (Stockholm, 2022).

**Figure 3:** Piece by Uzi (Malmö, 2019).

**Figure 4:** Throw-ups by Uzi (Copenhagen, 2023).

The subcultural corporality here refers, not only to the knowledge and movement of the body in doing graffiti, but also the movement as a whole. Risks are not only perceived and made sense of through the own body, they are also handled through the body, ideally to the point where the individual movement in writing and in walking passes as normal (Goffman 1963; Katz 1988). This was a constant factor when doing fieldwork, participants disciplining their bodies so as to blend in and go about their doings unnoticed: constantly moving about, making short stops, hiding the writing with their bodies, acting as if they are drunk if they are out on a weekend night, pretending to be talking on the phone, pissing, or waiting for a bus. The gendered and racialized aspects of this passing as normal are obvious here, as not all bodies are able to pass as normal at all times (Motts and Roberts 2014; Naegler and Salman 2016; Hannerz 2017; Fransberg 2021), yet different bodies enacted a similar gaze yet from different experiences. Female graffiti writers, for example, stressed that they played up their femininity so as to discourage passers-by from drawing unnecessary conclusions "Nobody sees me cause I don't look like a graffiti writer, I am just a girl." Further, a number of the excerpts above are from female participants. As notes Nilsson (2010), terrain refers to incorporated embedded social memories of previous emplacements.

## Rewriting the image of the city

The concept of terrain describes realizing a particular activity, and as such, a particular corporality through a particular kind of space. Yet, in so doing, the terrain mimics and rewrites the very image of the city on which it is based. The systematic aspect of the activity of covering such an abstract notion of place paves the way for the spontaneous aspect in

terms of the movement and choice of spots for doing graffiti. Still, this also has the consequence that, in contrast to graffiti on trains where the object is emphasized, the terrain of the city as the center does not focus on a particular object or form of graffiti but rather, as notes Brighenti (2010), the continuous sequences of surfaces that these objects constitute. Ferrell and Weide (2010) note that the reimagination of the city as a series of spatial opportunities in their study meant that participants would seek out the durable and avoid that which will be immediately painted over. It might be due to differences in terms of cleaning, but the participants I followed in Sweden rarely commented on this, especially when tagging. Rather, their activities showed little concern as to where they wrote and on what kind of surface. In short, they did not see the trees for the forest. As in the opening excerpt, when asked afterwards whether some of these spots would not be cleaned and removed within hours, participants would shrug their shoulders arguing that it was worth it anyway; someone would see it, and the cleaners would not be able to remove all the tags along a particular street at the same time. Instead, being out tagging was often described as a kind of flow where they would tag one spot and then continue directly from there to a new spot next to it, and then another, thus extending the writing so that the single tags were ceaselessly extended by a swift motion between each new spot (cf. Kidder 2011).

Brighenti (2010: 329) describes how there is a perpetual aspect to tagging in contrast to other forms of graffiti, as the single tags and surfaces are not perceived as separated or separating, but rather as symbolic representations of a whole. I would add to this by arguing that what matters here is first and foremost the terrain. As noted above while following participants when doing graffiti, the form chosen depended on a perceived flow and opportunity, participants mixing tags, throw-ups and quick pieces during the same

"round". Still, as is Brighenti's point, every single bit of graffiti added to the previous bits, and every round of graffiti added to and continued previous rounds, thus creating a dialectic relationship between the activities, the artefacts, the individual bodies and the subcultural structures of meaning that validate these relations; the sequences of tags in the activity are extended to interconnected sequences or series that run through the city.

The interdependency between the image of the city, as the direct and physically visible, and the terrain, has the consequence that each new surface and form of graffiti is given its meaning by what you have previously done. Your name, and thus your subcultural identity, gains its meaning through density, through these interconnected series that are constantly extended in time and space, condensed, cleaned away, lost and reclaimed, ideally so that the length and density of these series covers the plurality of alternative routes when moving within this defined public so that your name cannot be avoided. In many ways, this is similar to how graffiti as a whole is perceived by participants. Through writing you become your tag; other participants will refer to you through your tag; and your pieces and throw ups just as your tags add up to this whole. Accordingly, the terrain mimics and rewrites the image of the city as defined by the congested and undifferentiated public flow.

The emplacement of graffiti constructs nodes and intensifies paths, which when connected establish a subcultural whole. Consequently, visibility is being defined, executed and validated through the very motion through which it is perceived. This is also why Brighenti (2010) hits the nail on its head in arguing that writers, in relation to the city streets, are first and foremost "walkers", as a photo or a film, just a single tag, cannot capture this definition of visibility. Just as the image of the city as the public flows, it is only by moving through the city that you can experience and validate these series.

A number of studies on graffiti have noted the essential role of documentation within graffiti, as well as the role of subcultural media in publishing these (Austin 2001; Jacobson 2015; see Hannerz & Kimvall, this volume). Still, the representation of the subcultural individual within the terrain of the city—the experienced overall impact of the series of tags by the same individual —is not only hard to capture through a photograph, or film, it was rarely documented at all by the graffiti writers. This sets graffiti in the streets apart from graffiti on trains, for example (Hannerz 2023c). During both fieldwork and interviews, including going through individual writers' photo collections, this was clear: what was being documented in relation to this terrain were single pieces in certain places. The vast majority of graffiti produced within the terrain of the streets in forms of thousands of tags and throw-ups and quick pieces were rarely documented, in part due to the sheer quantity of graffiti, but also as the singular is given its meaning through the whole. Instead, similar to the activity, the systematic aspect of covering and saturating different parts of the city, of extending the series of tags in both time and space, can only be directly experienced and validated through walking the city.

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have argued that in order to understand the *where* of graffiti in the streets, we have to investigate not only the affective conception of space but also the affective experience of it. The first of these I have referred to as the image of the city as the center, which emphasized the public in the general and accessible. The latter I have referred to as a terrain, which describes the familiarity established between the body, the activity and the environment (Nilsson 2010: 134). I have shown how the interrelationship

between meaning and materiality establishes a motion that first of all is systematic and repetitive with an intense stress on the doings, an almost ceaseless motion of doing graffiti in a variety of forms through a variety of tools and colors that ameliorate the inclusion of every possible urban object: white on dark surfaces, and black on lighter; markers for smaller surfaces and spray paint for bigger. Second, I have pointed to how this motion is marked by a lack of a clear trajectory; rather, it is deeply affective; there is no predefined route or end, neither are the spots for writing singled out prior to the activity, since their appropriation becomes part of, or rather becomes, the motion itself. In my data this distinguishes tagging in the city streets from other forms of terrains, such as, for example, the train tracks and highways where activities are planned to a larger extent. Third, the combination of these two aspects of the motion through the city is that the affective experience of space mimics and rewrites the affective conception of space. Each moment of writing becomes part of a larger project through which participants establish their own paths and nodes through their writing over time. The temporal aspect of this motion, the halt of writing, merely means a temporary break from the activity; it will be picked up and continued another day, either in the same place or somewhere else. Fourth, I have argued the stress on walking also involves an indirect approach to risk, of always being on the move, meaning that should you be detected by an outsider and the police arrive minutes later, you will already be somewhere else, but also that the series created through space, and extended both geographically and temporally, rather effectively counters attempts to remove graffiti from the streets.

Accordingly, I have pointed to how the relation between the image of the city and the associated terrain is deeply meaningful to participants, that it constitutes an emplacement of graffiti within the accessible, within the

everyday spaces of the city that are everywhere around you. Rafael Schacter (2014: 149) refers to this emplacement of graffiti in the public as activities within "normalized spaces of the everyday" meaning that that place and action are interwoven to the point that it becomes habitual, but also permissive. Graffiti in the city streets differs from graffiti in other places, such as on trains or along tracksides, as its subcultural gaze and the terrain distinguishes it from other activities and terrains in graffiti: the activity is unconstrained in terms of location and the chosen objects, producing a subcultural gaze—the attention, both mentally and visually, to the details of urban space (Borden 2001)—and a terrain defined by a continuous motion through the city streets. This way, graffiti is, and should be, where you and everyone else are.

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