IS GRAFFITI ART?

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ABSTRACT

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Illegal graffiti is disconnected from standard modes of visual production in fine art and design. The primary purpose of illegal graffiti for the graffiti writer is not the visual product, but “getting up.” Getting up involves writing or painting one’s name in as many places as possible for fame. The elements of risk, freedom and ritual unique to illegal graffiti serve to increase camaraderie among graffiti writers even as an individual’s fame in the graffiti subculture increases. When graffiti has moved from illegal locations to the legal arenas of fine art and advertising; risk, ritual and to some extent, camaraderie, has been lost in the translation. Illegal graffiti is often erroneously associated with criminal gangs. Legal modes of production using graffiti-style are problematic in the public eye as a result.

I used primary and secondary interviews with graffiti writers in this thesis. My art historical approach differed from previous writers who have used mainly anthropological and popular culture methods to examine graffiti. First, I briefly addressed the extremely limited critical literature on graffiti. In the body of the thesis, I used interviews to examine the importance of getting up to graffiti writers compared to the relative unimportance of style and form in illegal graffiti. This analysis enabled me to demonstrate that illegal graffiti is not art. Lastly, I probed the public’s reception to legal graffiti art used in galleries, public and private murals, and advertising. Although these legal modes of production are art, the public balks at full acceptance due to its associations with the problematic nature of illegal graffiti.
“If it was legal, then it would just be art.”  KLIP ONE

“I’m a vandal”  RESP1

R.I.P. HEIST ONE
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I. CLAIM, METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE

The late HEIST was the most daring and prolific graffiti writer Toledo, Ohio has ever known.\(^1\)\(^2\) One of his pieces is prominently displayed on an overpass visible from 475 West that circles around the city (Figure 1). According the RESP1, who is a member of the graffiti crew founded by HEIST called the Rebel Alliance, HEIST completed this work, commonly known as a “throw-up,” by climbing onto the overpass on a thin railing, hanging on with one hand while he painted with the other, whilst traffic passed at full-speed below him. This piece is unlikely to ever be painted over, by the city or anyone else, due to the danger of such an endeavor.

HEIST’s overpass piece is extremely simple in form, consisting of three stylized letters, “H-E-S,” in solid blue with a black outline (Figure 2). He adds the letters “R-A” to represent his crew. Despite its appealing and elegant simplicity, the aesthetic value of the piece is entirely secondary to the concept of “getting up.” All writers strive to “get up,” which is to write their names in as many locations as possible. HEIST not only got up, painting and writing his name all over Toledo, but he did so at great risk to himself in seemingly impossible situations. HEIST commanded so much respect among his RA affiliates that upon his death it was decided membership to the crew would be closed as a tribute to his legacy.\(^3\)

HEIST’s experience and work illustrate what is at stake for the illegal graffiti writer. The risk and creativity in choosing the spot to write one’s name confers great respect among the community of writers, which they refer to as “graff.” Although many writers claim that illegal graffiti, which they call “bombing,” is a selfish act, due to the destruction of property and the motivation for fame, the rituals present in acts of illegal graffiti forge community bonds among the writers themselves above and beyond the personal gains of each individual.
When graffiti has moved from illegal locations to the legal arenas of murals, fine art and advertising; risk, ritual and to some extent, camaraderie, has been lost in the translation. The writers also lose the freedom to practice graffiti in the time and place of their choosing.

Because of these differences, legal graffiti places pushes aesthetics and style to the forefront. Legal graffiti inherits much of its form from illegal art, but the content of getting up is missing. Thus, legal graffiti can be called “art” or “design,” while illegal graffiti, although it is visual production, does not even qualify as art.

The distinction between illegal graffiti and standard modes of visual production in fine art and design has created misunderstandings among viewers of the general public as to its purposes and origins. Oftentimes, legal authorities and the media have mistakenly conflated illegal graffiti with gangs. When graffiti-style work is practiced in legal settings, the gang stereotype carries over in the minds of viewers, creating tension and conflict between the public and legal graffiti artists. Additionally, legal artists and designers must deal with objections of “selling out” from purist illegal graffiti writers, who wish to keep graffiti illegal and thus free, both financially and in methodology.

For this study I have used primary and secondary interviews as the main basis for my claims. My approach is only semi-anthropological, partly because I lack the distance from the subject customary in anthropological studies due to my personal relationship with many of the graffiti writers. Furthermore, my background is art history firmly grounds this study in the humanities rather than the sciences. I also employ primary sources from my own experience with graffiti, especially in Toledo, Ohio, as well as secondary sources mainly from the news media to examine the roles of illegal graffiti writing and legal graffiti art among the general
public. I do not attempt to use a particular theoretical approach when analyzing the research, but rather let the subjects speak for themselves, while still training a critical eye on their statements.

Most all of the literature published up to the date of this thesis has been either non-critical biographies and histories of graffiti movements and styles, or anthropological and sociological approaches to the subject that focus on criminality. Joe Austin’s book, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*, remains the only serious critical publication on graffiti culture that does not work from the assumption that graffiti is mainly a criminal act of vandalism. His book differs from my thesis in two important ways. Firstly, Austin concentrated only on New York City and its history of graffiti writing, while my study looked at graffiti in America and internationally. Secondly, Austin stopped short of making the claim that graffiti is not art, which was evidenced by his use of the word “art” in the title. Since Austin writes from the perspective of a popular culture analyst, the issue of whether graffiti is art was not a concern in that publication.

For this thesis, how graffiti functions or does not function as art is the most important issue. As graffiti moved from illegal to legal arenas, the question of whether graffiti is art has become even more important as those within and outside of the graffiti subculture struggled to affix a role for graffiti in their lives. The origins of graffiti lie in illegal works, so its role must be first understood in that context.
II. ILLEGAL GRAFFITI

Getting up has been the most important motivation in the illegal graffiti scene from its very beginnings. For illegal graffiti writers, getting up not only involves writing one’s name in as many locations as possible, but also risk, freedom and ritual. As a result, the form and style of graffiti are not important factors to getting up. By getting up, writers gain the respect and camaraderie of the community of graffiti writers. Because the main motivation of graffiti is getting up and style and form are entirely secondary, graffiti writing disconnects from standard modes of art production, even from murals, which illegal graffiti most closely resembles. By comparing illegal graffiti to legal graffiti-style works, the unique non-artistic character of bombing becomes apparent.

The first graffiti writers, CORNBREAD and COOL EARL, were active in the late 1960’s in Philadelphia, writing their names everywhere they could. The form that they originally used to write their names is today called a “tag.” A tag is writing one’s name in a single line with permanent marker or spray-paint. Tagging is usually done in one quick and practiced movement resulting in a simplistic but often elegant form (Figure 3). CORNBREAD had a distinctive tag with a crown over it, which was later co-opted by New York writers and called the Broadway Style (Figure 4). This graffiti movement eventually migrated to New York City. The first writer that got up enough to capture the attention of many New Yorkers was TAKI 183.

TAKI, a youth of Greek ethnicity whose real name is Demetrius, saw some tags around his neighborhood by JULIO 204, FRANK 206, and JOE 136. These earliest New York writers wrote their names with the number of their streets in Manhattan. TAKI’s job as a messenger transported him all over the city through the subway system and he scribbled his tag everywhere he could (Figure 5). The New York Times ran a story on TAKI in 1971, making him the first
writer with citywide fame. TAKI was actually interviewed for this article, which chronicled the upsurge in graffiti in the city’s subways. Although the author of the *Times* article did not quote TAKI using the phrase “getting up,” TAKI made it clear that getting up was his purpose. TAKI said, “I just [wrote my name] everywhere I went. I still do, though not as much… You do it for yourself. You don’t go after it to be elected President.” The concept of getting up was established by TAKI, influencing many other young people to begin writing.

Although the first graffiti writings were just simple tags, like TAKI’s, styles quickly progressed to what writers call a “piece,” short for masterpiece, and used by writers to designate more complex works with multiple colors and big letters that appeared on the outside of subway trains. These pieces first started appearing in 1972, only a year after the *Times* article (Figure 6). These pieces still consisted of solely the writer’s name, but the letters were thicker than tags, using outlines with color and pattern filled in as shown in Figure 6. Although the pieces became more and more complex, to the point that the letters became practically unreadable, getting up remained the primary motivation for graffiti. Although graffiti writing has spread all over the United States and the world, and many writers have taken to painting permission walls, bombing still commands the most respect among graffiti writers. Toledo writer RESP1 sums up the attitude of many graffiti writers:

Permission walls are fine, but bombing is definitely more of what graffiti is. Bombing is part of getting up [and] bombing is part of being a real writer. Doing things illegally, things that are challenging [are] a part of it all, [as well as] getting better spots [and] doing better things. You wouldn’t really be a writer without doing those things. If you just did permission walls you would just be a muralist, which doesn’t really have anything to do with graffiti. The definition of graffiti is applying something, a mark or whatever, on a surface, basically when you are not supposed to; so when you are supposed to do it, it defeats the purpose, goes [sic] against the grain of what graffiti is…

RESP1 points out some of the most important issues that are at stake for the illegal graffiti writer, such as freedom and risk. If writers are only painting by permission, they are
limited in their freedom to pick their locations. When he speaks of “challenging” and “better spots,” he refers to the challenge of painting in difficult situations, as HEIST had on the overpass above 475 West. Many other graffiti writers express similar views to RESP1, such as SAMPL, a Miami writer who claims that “[b]ombing is a rush, [you] can’t explain it. You just get out there [and] do your thing… [You must] be ready to run at all times, cause [sic] the cops might be right there. Bombing is as pure as graffiti gets in my opinion. The rush of doing something that’s illegal; [it] doesn’t get better than that.”

For SAMPL, graffiti is about the process not the product. The risk factor sets illegal graffiti apart from not only permission walls, but all other artistic processes. KLIP ONE illustrates how risk makes him feel when bombing:

The reason graffiti is graffiti is because of the risk. [It’s] the feeling you get by hitting the streets at two AM with a bag full of cans rattling to your footsteps. If it was legal, then it would just be art. KLIP ONE

For many writers, like KLIP ONE, the risk factor is an essential element of graffiti. The risk can come from the possibility of getting caught, of being in the subways with a dangerous third rail, or hanging from a rope to paint a freeway overpass. This risk is part of the unique feeling of writing graffiti. As the writer KAWS said, “[n]ow I just try to think of ways to push the limits of exposure and risk…. The adrenaline rush alone makes the risk worth it.” The rush of performing an illegal act in a dangerous spot undoubtedly cannot be duplicated by painting a permission wall.

Many writers feel that newer graffiti “artists,” who perform mostly legal murals, do not fully appreciate the spirit of illegal graffiti. Implied in KLIP ONE’s statement is the idea that illegal graffiti is beyond art, hence one of the main reasons illegal graffiti practitioners call themselves writers rather than artists. So a legal wall can be called “art,” while an illegal work is something entirely beyond other art forms, in the effect on both the viewer and on the artist.
According to SB1, “[i]f all you do is legal walls then you are a toy. You can be nice with a can of paint, but if you do not experience the essence of writing--writing your name or word illegally, then you are inexperienced which is the very definition of a toy.”14 The element of risk carries great importance among many of the older writers because the willingness to take risks speaks volumes about the character of a writer. GIN, from Los Angeles, explains this: “[b]ut I mean it takes a lot for someone to go out in the city and bomb, … it takes a lot of heart, it takes a lot of balls [sic] and I think the writers today lack that; I think they just want to bomb safely, legally, and not have any problems; not have to deal with any static.”15 GIN believes that the risk factor in practicing illegal graffiti imbues a certain amount of status on a writer. It takes courage to face the risks involved in illegal graffiti, whether it is dealing with the fear of arrest, or the peril of painting in a difficult or dangerous position.

Freedom is another important element of illegal graffiti that is implied by RESP1 and SAMPL. For many artists, graffiti is about freedom, freedom to express one’s self at the time and place of the writer’s choosing. Stealing paint and picking one’s own spots to bomb were once essential ingredients of this freedom. For some writers, expressing this freedom is a political imperative of disenfranchised youth. DAIM, a writer from Germany, explained the possible political implications of illegal graffiti: “[w]hat graffiti depicts is hardly political, but the act of doing it itself can be seen as political, because a lot of youths worldwide who have to fight against laws and prejudice to lead a self-determined and creative life show society that they're unhappy with what it has to offer.”16 This freedom cannot manifest itself in a legal piece, because one is told when and where to paint.

SAMPL talks about the “rush” in illegal art. The prominent early writer, SEEN, reasoned that legal graffiti artists are “painting their pieces with a different head.”17 In illegal works, the
adrenaline rush from performing quickly to avoid apprehension by the police, bestows upon them a unique energy that is missing from legal art. Legal pieces may have complexity that illegal compositions cannot match, but bombing has intensity and verve that is manifest only in those works. Illegal graffiti has distinct rules of aesthetics owing to its quick nature, and is judged according to lesser artistic standards among writers than permission walls. For instance, according to ACME, “there has to be a difference [in] the levels of respect given to either [permission walls or illegal work]. I expect a higher level of work from legal walls, more thought, and as much as I love a great production, if I see two pieces of the same standard, the illegal one would get more respect.” For ACME, the risks taken in an illegal work trump the possibly more visually appealing legal wall. Thus, as far as aesthetics can be considered a factor in illegal work, the risky process involved in creating it carries far greater importance than the finished product.

When examining illegal graffiti, the importance of the idea of “getting up” cannot be underestimated. When ACME mentions “levels of respect,” he is speaking of getting up. All writers strive to get up. Getting up earns a writer fame and respect among other writers, which carries more importance to most of them than money or acceptance by the rest of the world. However, the concept of getting up has developed more complications and nuances beyond the straight definition, and remains a point of contention among many writers.

At its most basic and essential level, getting up is writing one’s name on as many surfaces as possible. Because of this, tags and throw-ups, which seem crude and un-artistic to outsiders compared to pieces and more complex productions, exemplify a writer’s commitment to getting up. When KEL 139, a New York writer, was asked in an interview about tags and throw-ups, he said that they are “[t]he signatures of graffiti, the marks that get you noticed and
help determine your place in the food chain.”

Writers have to complete the important first step of writing a tag, before they can graduate to throw-ups and more complicated pieces. Once someone has gotten up through many tags and throw-ups they gain the respect of other writers. These tags and throw-ups can prove the devotion of a newer writer, possibly earning him or her enough respect to merit an invite to crew membership or apprenticeship with a more skilled writer. Thus, gaining fame by getting up brings the writer into the community of writers and solidifies his or her relationship to the scene, rather than supplying personal gratification. In recent years, the disparate graffiti scenes that exist all over the country and the world have been brought together by the Internet, but the emphasis on getting up has remained the same.

For some writers, posting one’s work on the Internet does not contribute to getting up. For instance, when BUS ONE from Los Angeles was asked if the Internet could be used for getting up, he replied: “[h]ell no it’s not a part of getting up. Yeah, it’s nice to see your shit [sic] on the net but I have never considered it a way to ‘get up’. The Internet is cool because it allows writers’ work to be seen all over the world. But if it was a way of getting up then new graff dorks [sic] could paint fucking pieces in their backyard and send 'em in. There is no getting up there.”

In other words, writers do not respect being recognized on the Internet in itself because it is too easy. On the other hand, the Internet provides an opportunity to display work that represents getting up, such as photos of one’s work at illegal sites.

The Internet serves a similar function to the picture books that writers have carried around since the early origins of graffiti. Writers would take photographs of their work, which they call “fliks,” and collect the snapshots in a book to show other writers. This was a way of making an impermanent work last longer than it would otherwise. Now the Internet acts as a picture book to allow a writer’s fliks to be seen by the entire world. Of course, many writers are
much more enthusiastic about the Internet than BUS ONE. SEEN, a prominent early writer from New York, believes that the Internet is getting up, but at the same time, like many older writers, he misses the excitement of seeing his work pull up on a train. SEEN says that the Internet “is definitely a form of getting up, but for us old school folks you just remember the good old days of sitting on the platform as a train pulled up, and your boys shouting and giving you props [sic] and seeing it roll away heading to another part of the city.” SEEN demonstrates here how illegal graffiti had become a rite and a unique experience for the initiated. Legal walls skirt the important part of the ritual of seeing one’s work for the first time in the light of day after working in darkness all night. Additionally, SEEN emphasizes that it is a communal ritual, that his boys are “shouting” and giving him “props,” which is short for “proper respect.”

Not surprisingly, some artists refuse to acknowledge permission walls, deriding them as merely murals, and not even qualifying as graffiti at all, as RESP1 does. All writers do not share this opinion by any means, but even those who accept permission walls understand the necessity of illegal work. NOSM offers the following distinctions:

If you're a true writer, from the bottom of your heart, you're always going to do something. Do a tag; 'cause [sic] that's the way you start. A lot of people start and just do legal work; I respect that, too. It's graffiti, of course. I had the experience of painting trains, bombing, tagging and now that I've done it, I don't want to miss it. It's definitely more fun than doing a big production. People who blaze trains, "That's graffiti!" I mean to do a nice wall, with a big production, that's nice. If you only do that, you need something to explode. I need a balance.

The sensation NOSM experiences in illegal graffiti satisfies a requisite that legal art cannot fulfill.

For some writers, the very act of illegal graffiti operates therapeutically as an elixir for the ills of a hectic modern life. SINER, from L.A. contends that, “when the pressure is built up and you’re stressed out over just everyday living, having to go to work and shit [sic], you really
feel like taking that aggression out on a train and shit [sic], releasing some tension going and
painting a train, and just going and painting a spot.” Consequently, for SINER, illegal graffiti
works as an outlet for stress and aggression, a channel that legal art does not provide. Thus, the
process is more important than the product.

Because the laws penalize adults for graffiti much more harshly and permanently than
minors, many writers only write illegally up to their 18th birthday. After that, some become
graphic artists, easel painters, or web designers. But writers must take the first essential step of
painting illegally to secure the respect of their peers in the graffiti world. DURO THE THIRD, a
writer who now works as a web designer, admitted:

Seriously, my crew barely does graffiti anymore because it’s something you start doing
when you have a lot to prove, and with little responsibility. But later on in life when you
have bills to pay and you got your rep or whatever you got, its not as important anymore.
I mean I did what I set out to do, I met all the people I idolize and they are all my friends,
so I am not fighting for fame anymore.24

For DURO THE THIRD, the desire to fight for esteem evaporates once someone has gotten up.
For him, once the respect is earned, it never fades away. DURO considered his mission in
writing illegal graffiti accomplished because he had become comrades with those writers in the
culture who were once his idols.

Others from outside the graffiti world, such as gang members, often bestowed upon
writers respect because of the courage needed to write illegal graffiti. This admiration was of
great consequence to writers who lived in gang-infested areas of big cities like New York and
Los Angeles. Gang members who would pick a fight with anyone who entered their territory
often deferred to writers. Just the fact that a writer showed no fear while walking in the domain
of many different gangs at night, which was seen by gang members as an act of almost insane
bravery, gained them respect, which in turn allowed them to be protected from gang violence.25
This tremendous fortitude, to face prosecution by the authorities and risk a beating at the hands of gang members, confers upon the writer a heroic status in the graffiti community. Because of this, laws that intend to stop graffiti with heavy penalties and even jail terms often backfire. PLEX ONE from Los Angeles argued: “These draconian medieval anti-graffiti commissions have elevated the status and respect bombers and writers compete for. CHAKA is the perfect example; he is a counter-culture folk hero.”

CHAKA, whose real name is Daniel Ramos, was the most prolific tagger in Southern California according to the L.A. Police Department. The police claimed that he had written his name at least 10,000 times to the tune of more than $500,000 in damages. City officials considered his conviction a big victory in the war against graffiti in Los Angeles, while graffiti writers viewed it as a new challenge that raised the bar in the war for respect among writers. Consequently, the anti-graffiti laws were self-defeating.

Cities that crack down on graffiti writers may obstruct a few, but those who choose to take the increased risks will in turn win increased reverence among writers. In New York City, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) tried to bar graffiti writing on subway trains by any means necessary. Starting in the early 1980’s, MTA officials surrounded train lay-up yards with barbed wire and commissioned new graffiti resistant trains, cleaning them immediately after graffiti was discovered, which seriously shortened the time that a graffiti piece would run and be noticed by others. This program was dubbed the Clean Car Program and it very effectively curtailed graffiti on the subway system.

Writers that remained active during the “clean train era” took great pride in facing seemingly impossible odds to continue bombing the trains. They in turn have garnered great approbation in the graffiti community. VEN ONE describes the almost religious zeal that he put
into defying the MTA: “I kept it going through the roughest of time[s] because someone had to be the martyr of this clean train thing. I love and loved graffiti on subways. There was no way I would let the MTA kill our culture completely.”

Unfortunately for the writing community, the MTA did win its war on graffiti, but despite their victory in the subways, graffiti managed to move to the streets to stay afloat. However, for those writers who believe graffiti’s essence was subway writing, graffiti died in the late 1980’s. Some writers still hold on to that dream; for example, on the DURO ONE website there are these lines: “[m]any have said that we lost the battle with the MTA system! But I say foolish words that is [sic]! Open your eyes, see the world, live your lives, and fight for freedom of expression!”

Hence, for DURO, the seemingly lost battle with the MTA has not stopped writers from striving for freedom through graffiti.

Although many writers move into commercial professions, they often will not prepare graffiti-style work for clients. Many writers revere graffiti’s unique aspects as their own, and try to prevent graffiti from becoming commercialized. FUZE ONE insisted that: “[g]raffiti to a lot of people is about sending out a message, and getting in people’s faces. I think it has no place on television: keep it in the streets.”

For FUZE ONE, letting graffiti become commercialized strips it of its power to provoke; it becomes merely another marketing tool for the business world rather than the defiant flag of a counter culture. Without this message, of “getting in people’s faces,” graffiti has lost its essence and no longer qualifies as graffiti at all, but merely design.

For other writers, illegal graffiti battles against the grip that corporate images have on contemporary society. A writer named BRAVEHEART 168 has written about graffiti artists that “[t]heir art, their beauty was a means by which they communicated the real truth to one another and every citizen willing to look and listen; not the old propaganda force-fed by commercialism and the media.”

In that sense, graffiti functions as the medium by which individuals can take
back their streets from the billboards and other sorts of advertising that clog the visual landscape of an average modern metropolis.

Now that outdoor advertising floods contemporary cities even more than in the early days of graffiti, the advertisements themselves have become a target for bombing (Figure 7). Bombing billboards has increased in popularity partially because the increased risk of getting arrested while painting a well-lit advertisement ups the ante for respect. At the same time, writing one’s name on a corporate message reclaims the streets for individuals from faceless multinational corporations. For some, mass advertising is an invading force and writers are the underground resistance.

The themes of “taking over” or “taking back” arise continually, especially among early New York writers. Some would plan the takeover of an entire train line like a military operation, with tags, throw-ups and pieces filling in for bullets, bombs and bunkers. In New York, writers formed specialized crews that would overrun carefully chosen lines of the subway. KEL 139 remembers one such operation with The Death Squad crew: “PART ONE, The Death Squad's grand master… single-handedly planned the most elaborate takeover of any MTA line in history. He brought many top writers out of retirement to follow his crusade on the old Broadway line.” KEL’s use of the word “crusade,” with its religious and military overtones, specifies the significance of these actions. They were not just writing their names, they were on a mission.

Forming crews and dominating train lines fostered a sense of camaraderie among the New York writers of the subway train era that still pervades their recollections. Camaraderie was and still is an essential element of illegal graffiti and it distinguishes illegal art not only from legal art, but also from the rest of the contemporary art world. The graffiti writer, who strives for
his or her crew as well as for himself or herself, presents a stark contrast to the solitary genius model common since the Renaissance that still survives in the postmodern art world.

The elements unique to illegal graffiti, such as risk, freedom, adrenaline and camaraderie, combine to create a unique art form, almost entirely divorced from permission walls. Permission walls could be called more properly “graffiti-style” art work, rather than graffiti. So, although legal work may retain some aesthetic elements inherited from illegal graffiti, it lacks the substance and underlying character inherent in illegal works. Nonetheless, because of its formal relationship to illegal graffiti, legal graffiti art has experienced problems gaining acceptance as art among the general public.
III. LEGAL GRAFFITI ART

Almost from the beginning of the illegal graffiti art movement, many from within the graffiti subculture and without it have tried to channel it into legal avenues, such as permission walls and galleries. Permission walls and gallery art in a graffiti style continually run into problems with public perception not only due to its connection with illegal graffiti culture, but also due to incorrect assumptions among some in the general public that graffiti is connected to criminal gang culture. As a result, many authorities try to limit the expression of legal graffiti in the same way they have done with illegal graffiti. Even when legal graffiti art is accepted as a legitimate mode of expression as it has been in the fine art world, it suffers from a perception that it is merely “low art,” or “popular culture,” hampering the ability of graffiti artists to have successful careers in galleries.

The fate of a permission wall in Toledo, Ohio illustrates some of the problems that legal graffiti has experienced among city officials. The mural was painted in an alley at 136 Huron Street, on the premises of a building owned by Andrew Appold. The mural project arose from a lengthy collaboration between Appold and members of the RA (Rebel Alliance) graffiti crew in Toledo. It consisted of abstracted multicolored names that represented each member of the crew, as well as some human figures and various other signatures announcing that the mural was from the RA crew (Figure 8).

The mural stands as an amazing achievement, but even more startling is the fact that it lasted practically untouched for almost three years. Graffiti artists are accustomed to their pieces being painted over, even when they are legal, but only the smallest part of the mural was ever defaced, due to a personal grumble between one of the graffiti writers and someone else outside of the RA crew. And it did last, until the International League All-Star game in the summer of
2006. One day, on the week of the game, Appold and a friend woke up to find that the mural had been completely painted over in a dull gray (Figure 9).

Appold was surprised because no one had informed him of the intention to remove the mural, much less that it would be painted over that day. In fact, who exactly was responsible for the mural’s removal remains a mystery to Appold. He does maintain his own theories though, in terms of the deeper machinations behind it.

Carty Finkbeiner is back in office and the All Star Baseball game was downtown, and in a fury, a lot of Toledo was just painted over. During that clean up, knowing their would be a lot of people from out of town, I think they just wanted to put a big façade up to show how clean Toledo is. I believe it was for the All-Star weekend, and [with] us being downtown close to the ballpark in the vicinity, there was some graffiti on Commodore Perry that got painted over, and they just went down to the little alley and covered our area.33

Mayor Finkbeiner does not assume direct responsibility for the action against Appold’s property, but his influence behind the scenes probably cannot be denied. Graffiti removal in Toledo falls officially in the hands of the Department of Neighborhoods, a city organization that also performs other tasks dealing with issues of beautification and urban blight. According to the official website of the City of Toledo,

The mission of the Department of Neighborhoods is to work with the community to create and maintain clean, safe, attractive neighborhoods…. The Department of Neighborhoods provides financial and technical support for the renovation and construction of housing units, revitalizing neighborhoods by enforcing applicable codes and abating nuisances, by becoming involved with citizens, connecting them to their city government and collaborating with those private, public and non-profit entities whose purpose is to enhance the quality of life in Toledo.34

The removal of the graffiti mural on Huron could be included possibly under the category of “abating nuisances,” but the question arises then, who felt that the mural presented a nuisance? The Toledo city website provides a phone number for citizens to call with the
assurance “[t]he Graffiti Crew will paint over graffiti on private property with prior consent from the owner.”

So, why was Appold not informed that a complaint had been filed against his building and that the mural was to be removed by a city office? That question may never be resolved, but more important is the question of why this particular mural was singled out for removal at all. Was the fact that the mural was executed in a graffiti style the problem or was it simply a matter of the city trying to control what images are acceptable within its borders?

According to Mark Folk, Director of the Arts Commission of Greater Toledo, “[i]t was an urban meditation point…. Imagine you are walking down a street, turn this corner and then all of a sudden there’s this explosion of color that could be stared at for hours…. For those who knew or found out about it, it was a destination in the city.”

Appold himself had observed people from all walks of life who had happened upon this hidden gem:

I’ve had people from out of state, and I [would] say “how did you hear about this, just out of curiosity?” And they would say, “we were walking around and we saw this color and it was this beautiful thing.” And I think within the year and a half plus that the mural was there, I ran into easily 50 people that were complete strangers, and I have no idea of any affiliation [sic], who were admiring it, kids were back there sweeping up the alley, doing videos for dirt bikes, and rap videos were done back there. There were many people taking pictures of it, many people just strolling at the end of a nice summer night with their girlfriend just looking at it. I think it could have had a much bigger impact, but the beauty of it was that if you didn’t know about, you wouldn’t know about it, so it was kind of a hidden surprise of some sort. I don’t know if it was public art in a visible way, where it is recognized, you would just kind of stumble upon it, which made it more exciting.

But despite the fact that it was a hidden gem, the mural was a destination for art educators and artists alike. According to Folk, instructors from the Toledo School of the Arts, a charter school located a few blocks from Huron, regularly took their classes on field trips to study and appreciate the piece. Folk said that artists and instructors from the YAAW (Young Artists at
Work) brought their students there as well. Obviously the mural was respectable enough to be treated as art by local schools, but why not the city?

The city itself addresses these issues through city ordinances that deal with the creation and maintenance of public art. According to city code 167.06:

The City hereby declares its commitment to assume a leadership position in establishing a favorable and supportive climate for cultural arts in the community. Through its Art in Public Places Program, the City seeks to create a stimulating and humanizing public environment by the inclusion and integration of high quality artworks in its public buildings and public spaces. The City further seeks to encourage public education to enhance the community's understanding and enjoyment of the artworks and the artistic process from which they derive. This policy therefore is established to direct the inclusion of works of art and/or design services of artists in public places in the City.

Considering the context in the city’s culture in which the Huron Street mural was created, and the positive attention it has received from art educators and the general public, one would assume that it was the embodiment of the city code’s language in “establishing a favorable and supportive climate for cultural arts in the community,” and creating “a stimulating and humanizing public environment by the inclusion and integration of high quality artworks in its public buildings and public spaces.”

The Huron Street mural met many of those criteria: it was undoubtedly stimulating, was executed by local artists, and was certainly of high quality, especially compared to illegal graffiti works around Toledo. It was humanizing, because it brought the style and passion of a group of dedicated artists into a public space that could be accessed by practically anyone. Yet, whether by unfortunate accident or intentional action, the mural was painted over despite its seeming importance to the cultural environment of the city.

The mural on Huron seems to have run afoul of laws governing art in public places that exist not only in Toledo, but all around the country as well. Another city ordinance, dealing with
the creation of signs on the outside of buildings, provides some reasons why the mural may have
been removed. According to the code 1393.14. that concerns unclassified signs:

The following signs are also prohibited, which:
(a) Bear or contain statements, words or pictures of an obscene, pornographic, immoral
character or which contain advertising matter which is untruthful;…
(i) Painted wall murals or other similar artwork, except after considering the advice of the
Arts Commission of Greater Toledo.41

Appold never applied for permission to paint the mural, nor did he think about
“considering the advice of the Arts Commission of Greater Toledo,” when he began the project
with the RA crew. Like many business owners throughout the country, he had no idea that
having a mural painted on his private property required permission from any city department or
agency. Indeed, the Director of the Arts Commission, Mark Folk, and Appold have been close
friends for many years, and certainly Folk never saw the mural as a problem. Folk said in
reference to this ordinance that:

The [mural] policy is set up to make sure long term needs for a mural are taken
care of, upkeep and all that. The ordinance isn’t supposed to be a roadblock. At
the very least, [city officials and businesses] should be encouraged [to] contact the
ACGT to see if we can get something approved. The way it should work is if you
do something wrong, then you should be told the right way to do it, not just
punished.42

Since the media attention concerning the mural, city officials have been trying to clarify
their stance towards legal graffiti-style murals. According to Appold, “I’ve heard the mayor
plans on [assigning] a centralized location, area, or spot, someplace [that is] downtown and
visible, that would offer the talents of graffiti artists.”43 If the mayor in fact does push forward
this proposal, it may be a tourist attraction for the city, like the Wall of Fame in Harlem, or the
Phun Phactory in New York City.
Considering Toledo’s long declining economy, exercising excessive control over the images within its borders may have a detrimental effect, opposite of city officials hope to accomplish. Appold explains that squashing a visual culture like graffiti, especially when it is executed in a legal context, could prevent it from reaching its potential as a legitimate art movement and hamper the development of graffiti as art. Appold poetically opines that “there could be an area that no one cares about where you could plant a rose in the middle of the shit [sic] and it thrives, and for someone to pluck it away before it actually blooms, you know, maybe more roses could [have] come out of it [sic]. They wanted to come take the sprout, before it could be harvested.” Cities like Toledo continue to look at graffiti-style murals as a sign of criminal activity, instead of a “seed” of culture. The situation becomes even more problematic in a city like Los Angeles where gangs and police brutality are pressing social issues.

The Social Public Art Resource Center in Los Angeles (SPARC) has been sponsoring public art projects for years and has worked with seminal Southern California muralist Judith Baca. They have consistently advocated for public art as a unique medium that challenges paradigms and democratizes the artistic process. Naturally, the organization has been drawn to graffiti and has helped to preserve the few legal outlets available to legal graffiti artists in Los Angeles. One legal spot is the Venice Graffiti Pit, which had been an early hot bed of the best artists in L.A., until it was whitewashed in 1987. The area itself had always been popular with local skateboarders, and the walls had provided a fiercely colorful backdrop for many a 1980’s skateboard video. SPARC wanted to restore the area to its former glory with permission from the city’s Recreation and Parks Commission, which they received.

One of the murals on the new Venice Wall attracted the attention of authorities, who began the process to have it removed (Figure 10). This mural depicted a graffiti writer wearing
a T-shirt from the L.A. punk rock band, Black Flag, while a pig in a police uniform beat him.\textsuperscript{46} It was intended as a statement against police brutality, but the confrontational nature of the image exceeded the tolerance of the Recreation and Parks Commission, who covered the mural with a brown tarp. According to SPARC, “Not since 1932, when the infamous white out of Mexican master David Alfar Siqueiros’ mural \textit{America Tropical}, on Olivera Street, took place, has a public mural been covered by a government agency to prevent public viewing.”\textsuperscript{47} \textit{America Tropical} is still viewable today, despite severe damage. The Getty Conservation Institute has focused a restoration effort on this piece and several other Siqueiros works in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{48} Hence, censoring of images in public art is not unique to legal graffiti, but graffiti art carries with it the unique baggage of its association with the illegal graffiti movement and its mistaken association with criminal gangs.

SPARC’s website details several other cases of harassment to remove graffiti on private property, contrary to the desires of the buildings’ owners. MAN ONE and a group of L.A. writers found a wall on a North Hollywood thrift store that had been plagued by gang graffiti. Gang graffiti differs from graffiti writing because it is mainly used to send specific coded threats to rival gangs rather than for the purpose of getting up. Gang graffiti actually poses a danger to a community in a real sense, since it can lead to violence and murder. The graffiti writers obtained permission from the owner of the building in 1999, and proceeded to fill the 100-foot long by 15-foot high wall with their work (Figure 11). This piece used mainly figures, employing traditional graffiti names as very stylized signatures. A few months later, they completed a similarly ambitious work on another side of the wall (Figure 12). According to MAN ONE, city officials visited the owner of the building to ask about the mural.\textsuperscript{49} They concluded that proper permits were not obtained and ordered the removal of the pieces. The owner was apparently unaware of
the regulations, but was hoping to keep the mural, because gang members had stopped using those walls as their message board. Again, the laws controlling imagery in the city were self-defeating.

In Los Angeles, a property owner must seek a permit from the Cultural Affairs Commission to complete a mural on their property. As stated in their regulations, “[t]he City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs does not condone any type of illegal graffiti murals or art, irrespective of artistic content,” but it is made clear that this prohibition only applies to graffiti painted without permission. The regulations do not specifically prohibit graffiti-style artwork.

Despite the city’s serious commitment to reducing gang activity, in the case of MAN ONE’s North Hollywood thrift store work they did not offer a compromise to preserve the murals. Even so, the regulations themselves run contrary to the spontaneity of graffiti-style murals, requiring permission for the actual design and content of each mural before work begins. Moreover, the regulations recommend that artists should “be open to changes and compromises and be willing to promise to make alterations that do not directly contradict the choices and needs of your style.” These compromises sap the energy out of an art form that relies on spontaneity and decisiveness, traits that were not lost in the transition from illegal art.

Authorities in Los Angeles have demanded the elimination of murals from private property not only on the grounds that the patrons failed to gain permission from the art commission, but also due to the appearance of graffiti-style aesthetics. A mural was removed from the property of a World War II veteran because according to Police Lt. Rick Mackey: “the graffiti’s presence violates the city’s zoning ordinance, which calls for ‘unsightly, hazardous or inappropriate conditions’ in the city to be removed. Graffiti falls in the same category as broken
windows, overgrown weeds and trash that must be removed once targeted by the city.”

Mackey went on to say that the wall “glorifies the gang culture, weapons and the destruction of property.” Mackey’s statements reveal the continual confusion on the part of city officials between gang graffiti and graffiti art.

Failure to recognize the difference between gang messages and graffiti art obviously hampers the acceptance of graffiti art by the wider public in Los Angeles and it could actually lead to more illegal graffiti. A legal aesthetic outlet for young people that allowed total freedom in content and form, could prevent graffiti vandalism from being as significant of a problem. There will always be those who must paint illegal spots, for reasons detailed earlier in this thesis, but legal outlets provide opportunities for those artists that strive for acceptance from those outside of the graffiti subculture. Discouraging all forms of graffiti, legal and illegal, would never stop writers from painting, but providing a safe environment for a new generation of muralists to grow and develop could lessen the perceived negative impact of vandalism to communities, and at least provide respectability for the art form. When graffiti artists attempt to produce visual imagery for galleries, not only do they experience the same problems with authorities as permission walls have, but face the additional hurdle of acceptance in “high” culture.

Almost from the beginning of the graffiti movement in New York City, the art world recognized the potential of graffiti as “art.” The relationship between the art world and writers has not always benefited the graffiti artists themselves. The New York gallery scene’s proclivity for the latest and greatest movements does not always translate into a long-term love affair with those movements, and graffiti stands as no exception.
The United Graffiti Artists of New York, founded by Hugo Martinez in 1972, opened the first gallery that featured graffiti artists, the Razor Gallery. The gallery introduced many in the first generation of graffiti writers to the fine art scene and supplied an opportunity for many of them to legitimize their work. The UGA eventually dissolved, but Martinez still runs a gallery in Chelsea that keeps an eye on graffiti.

By the 1980’s, the gallery scene in New York City warmed to graffiti. Many graffiti writers, such as FUTURA 2000 and CRASH, began to exhibit in venues like the Fun Gallery, founded by Patti Astor. The enthusiasm for graffiti-style art on canvas and other mediums soon faded in the early 1980’s. Some artists, who did not really participate in the graffiti scene in New York that I am addressing, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, were nonetheless able to keep working in the art world, probably due to their art school educations and ability to decipher the tastes of art connoisseurs and collectors. But most graffiti writers never considered those artists to be a part of their movement, but rather outsiders who happened to practice street art at one time. A few writers from the early generation of artists have enjoyed lasting success in the art world despite the lack of proper deference by fine art aficionados and the art press. FUTURA 2000 is probably the most well known, because his distinctive style and characters have been in demand as album art (Figure 13). DONDI, whose real name is Dondi White, had also successfully penetrated the edifices of the fine art world, but he tragically died in 1998.

While some purist graffiti writers would never compromise their principles to acquiesce to gallery artists, even those that paid their dues on the street, the authorities in many cities cannot seem to recognize the difference between illegal graffiti and more standard art mediums. In Los Angeles, the “In Creative Unity” or ICU group has had some of the same problems with
their indoor gallery shows as with their permission wall events. Their gallery on La Brea Avenue in Venice opened with a show recognizing the first anniversary of the L.A. riots. Beginning in 1997, the police harassed the gallery owners, raided the building twice in the summer of that year, and had been told by police to get out of town.55

The ICU gallery’s problems with the police reached a boiling point when they opened a show on July 26, 1997, entitled the “Wild, Wild, West” (Figure 14). According to the event organizers, the opening attracted writers from all over L.A., as well as art critics and notables from the entertainment industries and news media. The organizers kept security tight and made all efforts to conform to local ordinances, for they obviously expected harassment, considering their previous experience with the police. Even though the ICU claimed that no gang members arrived on the scene, police from the city’s anti-gang task force deployed around the building in riot gear:

The opening started at 7 p.m. and the police came initially at 10 and started to move in at 10:30 p.m. After they came and told us we had gang members at our party then they sent out for more police to come [sic]. They left and then came back with 30 or 40 cops, some people counted at least a dozen cars, and they had riot gear and a helicopter. They came through and said everyone had to get out, that the party was over and they hustled everybody out the back. They were turning away clients who arrived at that time, important show business people who came to support the opening. When these people and other business people saw the police they got scared and left. They were basically trying to end my business. When I asked the police about this they said, “You just can't do this around here. It sounds like you need a new space.”56

Whether the police were angry with the Coalition Against Police Abuse’s sponsorship of the event, were simply confusing graffiti art with gangs, or perhaps were able to preview the content, one of which was a painting of a sheriff as the devil, remains unclear (Figure 15). But the snags that the ICU has experienced exemplify some of the stumbling blocks graffiti artists encounter when trying to break into the legal “art world” outside of the illegal subculture.
Legal graffiti artists fight against ingrained stereotypes among authorities that often prevent the art form from percolating through the filter of the media without demonization. The *Los Angeles Daily News* ran an “investigative” piece in 2004, under the fear-baiting name “Terror in our Streets,” that seemed to swallow the police hard-line against all graffiti without critical digestion. While employing inflammatory rhetoric through words and phrases like “war zone” and “war on terrorism,” and blaming the gang problem on everything from movies and music to an addiction to crime, the piece quoted Superior Court Commissioner Jack Gold of Los Angeles:

> Gold, who has dealt with gang members for more than two decades, said he is seeing more young kids, some only 8 or 9, carrying weapons. The same is true of taggers who "have taken on the persona of gangs in terms of dress ... and weapons," no longer just spray-painting graffiti.
> Recently, Gold said, a fully automatic weapon was found in the home of a teenage SRS Norinco tagging crew member, who had been placed on probation.
> "The appeal of gangs and graffiti needs to be addressed at the grammar school level, and it's not." 57

This report makes no attempt to discern gang tags from graffiti writing, leaving the general public with the impression that no distinction exists. In Gold’s last statement from the above quote, the use of the conjunction “and” solidifies the connection, equalizing the harm from both graffiti and gangs. Another part of the series states “[f]or gangs, drugs were the primary trade, but other crimes - robbery, prostitution, extortion, graffiti, assaults and murders” were also part of the gang’s repertoire. 58 The *Daily News* apparently could not differentiate the severity of graffiti from those other crimes.

Even more curiously, Gold seems to view graffiti writing as a first step to gang membership, almost like the anti-drug warriors who have long claimed marijuana as a gateway to harder drugs. 59 According to another part of the “Terror” series, “[g]angs get strangleholds on
communities through intimidation, which is why police believe it is so important to wipe out every trace of graffiti. 

Though it is difficult to believe that police would confuse graffiti art practiced by the ICU with the tags of the gangs that have no aesthetic intention, the appearance of a connection is seemingly more important to Gold than any real gang affiliation of the graffiti writers. Graffiti artists who show in galleries face problems not only from legal authorities and the media, but also from illegal graffiti writers.

Although many writers would consider striving for acceptance in the outside world as sacrilege, others embrace the opportunity to gain notoriety among the general public as well as to take advantage of a chance to move onto a new stage with their art. MEAR ONE, who is part of the ICU collective, appreciates galleries as an opportunity, rather than a “sell out.” He says:

It's a different life than that of running around doing shit [sic] that you get no acceptance for. Basically you're going into a place, putting up your shit and you're getting mad acceptance for It [sic]. And you're getting money for it sometimes, or you're getting recognition: You're getting some sort of compensation for it. It feels real good to have people's support. People, who [don’t understand] or who don't even care, finding something they like in your work is nice [sic].

At the same time, of course, MEAR ONE realizes that an attitude against galleries exists, but he claims that the times are changing in favor of his route. He states:

I would imagine to do [sic] an art show back in the day, I'd get some negative response from the writers, and probably get a positive response from the buyers. But the way the scene has changed and moved forward out here, the writers [would] probably give me equal amount of support as the buyers and the critics and everyone. I mean people aren't criticizing my shit [sic] really. Pretty much I got a lot of people out here that are real happy to have a real graffiti artist, not just some wack fool [sic], but a real graffiti artist out here moving forward and basically pioneering this shit [sic]. No one else out here is really doin' [sic] this. So I'm sure a lot of people give me a lot of love for doing that.

For MEAR ONE, the respect he has earned on the street with his illegal pieces, the hardship he had to go through, the risks he had to take and the dues he has paid by moving through the process of tags, throw-ups and pieces, has entitled him to use graffiti styles in other ways,
without losing respect. Perhaps some in the graffiti scene have realized the limitations of a purist viewpoint for those that want to make art their life’s work. Someone who puts their heart and soul into something would want to continue producing, and art galleries provide the vehicle for a writer to use their experience from illegal graffiti without losing control over their images as they might in advertising.
IV. GRAFFITI ART IN COMMERCE

When a graffiti writer ventures beyond a permission wall or a gallery and shifts into mass-produced products and advertising, oftentimes they tread into a minefield from within and outside the culture. The general public will often balk at accepting graffiti-style advertising, recognizing it as disrespectful of a culture and devious to the consumer. Some graffiti writers scoff at the idea of permission walls and walls of fame, so it is not surprising that those same writers do not tolerate graffiti-style work in advertising. This attitude has not impinged many other graffiti writers and crews when selling their services to corporate clients. Many writers who had difficulties dealing with the complicated world of fine art transitioned more easily to commercial work. However, in both the galleries and advertising writers have faced the dangers of economic exploitation.

Large corporations, such as Pepsi Co., (Figure 16), have used wall painting for years to advertise their products but only recently have they turned to graffiti. Advertising agencies have been using graffiti-style art in the last few years so they can communicate with the always fickle and usually defensive 18-34 year old demographic. Graffiti, in the opinion of the ad agencies, bestows a sheen of authenticity on the advertising campaigns of big companies. However, as in previous attempts by corporate America to co-opt a youth subculture, the inevitable backlash sometimes causes advertisers to rethink their positions.

Zoom Media, in their summer of 2004 campaign for Dodge automobiles, used graffiti-style murals in some major cities to publicize the new Magnum crossover vehicle (Figure 17). The mural employs bold graffiti-style paint handling to portray the car and graffiti stylized, but still readable, letters to spell out the name of the car. Zoom had the murals intentionally painted in multi-cultural neighborhoods, using local artists, on space bought and paid for by Zoom.
Zoom Media was presented with the 2005 Multicultural Media Award from Media Magazine for the ads. When speaking of the Dodge graffiti mural campaign, Patrick West, General Manager of Marketing for Zoom gushes: “Graffiti is a hot topic now…and Zoom's graffiti mural programs have always honored the **authentic underground appeal** of the graffiti lifestyle. Dodge allowed our artists and **crews the freedom** to become part of the creative process, which only made our artists want to go above and beyond.”

It is interesting to note how many buzz words West managed to squeeze into just two sentences. He chose the words “authentic,” “underground,” “crews” and “freedom”, to suggest a real connection with the youth subculture of graffiti. West probably hopes that youth will discover the murals and assume that they represent graffiti culture, rather than just an advertising campaign. One wonders if West would have preferred “crew” to be spelled “cru” in all of his blurbs, for the ultimate in street credentials.

When the business media writes about the Dodge campaign by Zoom, they too take care to pepper their speech with the language of the graffiti subculture. *Business Wire* admiringly observes, “[t]he campaign's graffiti art was a perfect match for the risk-taking nature of the vehicle.” As I stated earlier in this essay, risk is an essential element that confers upon graffiti authenticity, and the use of the word “risk” is again meant to place the campaign within the culture rather than outside of it. However, the idea that a perfectly legal mural, that involves no risk on the part of the artists to life and limb, can elicit the spirit of illegal graffiti simply through the use of style and rhetoric might seem a ridiculous notion to young urban people.

Of course, many outside writers, such as Phil Patton from the *AIGA Journal of Design*, recognize that it is impossible to be fully accepted into a youth culture simply by copying its style and language. He claims, “the murals may not be authentic street art, but they are at least more authentic than the recent Chrysler print advertising.” Patton accepts that the advertising
will not fool its audience into thinking it belongs to actual graffiti culture, but at the same time he knows that the imagery will at least effectuate more interest than Daimler Chrysler’s usual style of urban advertising (Figure 18). This ad resembles a production still from a 1970’s “blaxploitation” film, showing the car in front of a man dressed in a sharp suit flanked by two suggestively posed women wearing sequin dresses, while another man approaches. At the top right is the word “respect,” implying that a man with a Chrysler earns the respect of men and the adoration of women. In comparison, the graffiti-style advertisement does seem more genuine than the unlikely scenario of Figure 18.65

Zoom’s indifference to the youth culture it supposedly communicates with is evidenced by its partial sponsorship of the 20th Annual NABS Fundraising Dinner and Gala in 2004 entitled “The Gangs of Graffiti Gala.” Apparently conflating street gangs with graffiti, visitors to the gala were encouraged to wear their “company gang’s colors.”66 Perhaps the gala might not have been such a success if actual gang members had crashed the party.

An even more recent campaign than Zoom’s Dodge advertisements by Sony to promote its portable game player has drawn ire from both community activists and urban officials. The ads consisted of stencils outlining cute little graffiti-style characters placed on walls in major cities (Figure 19). A big part of the dilemma for many communities was the lack of any identification with Sony on the actual advertisements. Jake Dobkin, a Manhattan resident, noticed the ads in his So-Ho neighborhood and responded on his Gothamist blog: “It seemed deceptive -- trying to sneak it by people, make them think it was graffiti and then realize it wasn't.”67 Dobkin went on to criticize the campaign:

It's fake. It's possible that some children will confuse these pieces for actual graffiti, but most adults will see them for what they are: advertising. Appropriating the authenticity of street art to promote a product is totally lame. Some marketing agencies might try to position these campaigns as "cool" or "real" or whatever, but don't believe them, Mr.
Major Corporate Executive. The 24 to 36 year old demographic you covet so much knows the difference, and we are not fooled.68

Dobkin clearly understands that the appeal or “cool” of an underground cultural movement cannot be successfully appropriated in a commercial context. Dobkin’s statements could ring true with many well-known graffiti writers. Perhaps even more fascinating is the response from city officials in Philadelphia to the Sony advertisements. Pedro Ramos, the city’s managing director was quoted in the Philadelphia Inquirer pointing out: “[t]he ads were illegal because they lacked proper zoning and licenses. They were phony, in that they were commercial advertising masquerading as something else. And they are disrespectful of the neighborhoods where Sony thought it could get away with this conduct.”69 Although Ramos ostensibly is speaking out against the ads to follow anti-blight initiatives by the city,70 thinly veiled in his statement is a similar sentiment to Dobkin, that graffiti embodies street culture and should not be used by a big corporation that misunderstands its origins. It is not entirely clear in Ramos’ words if the campaign disrespects neighborhoods simply by appearing in a graffiti style, or the fact that Sony has feigned legitimacy by attempting to steal from street culture.

Nonetheless, the response from many in the streets was immediate and unequivocal. Some defaced signs with references to Sony as “Fony” and even insults directed at the graffiti crew that designed the ads, the Tats Cru from New York City (Figure 20). Advertisements were often defaced just minutes after being posted. The Tats Cru, active since the late 1970’s, just in the last ten years has been selling their services to corporate clients. Their involvement in the controversy shows how little agreement exists in the writer community about commercialism and graffiti styles and the difficulties the writers face when translating their art into yet another legal realm.
The Tats Cru’s website articulates their philosophy towards graffiti in advertising. The first page of this professional looking Flash Media site declares: “THE TATS CRU employs graffiti mural art as commercially viable art form and markets customized aerosol art to businesses…. The TATS CRU furnishes advertising and design services to businesses reaching out to young urban consumers and companies seeking new and innovative ways to promote their services and products.” This savvy statement elegantly empathizes with potential clients by appropriating corporate speak, while at the same time offering no excuses for using graffiti as a moneymaking enterprise. Also, the fact that they substitute the words “mural” and “aerosol art” for simply “graffiti,” demonstrates their acceptance of the idea that discrepancies exist between the “graffiti style” work that they complete for clients and illegal graffiti. Indeed, they have spearheaded an effort through school systems in New York City to convince people that graffiti styles can function as art rather than simply “vandalism.”

Another artist from the early generations of New York graffiti writers, COPE2, has also sold his services to corporate clients, such as Time Magazine (Figure 21). While COPE2’s mural presents itself as an advertisement, since the graffiti-style throw-ups surround a heading in a Roman typeface that asks questions about graffiti, the questions it asks subsist as a continuing point of argument in the graffiti subculture as well as the art and media establishments and my thesis. COPE2 understands, perhaps more than anybody, the way some in the graffiti community would react, but he faces the situation practically, arguing: “I miss the trains…but there's a market out there… I have to look at it as a business. It's how I make a living now.” COPE2 can say this because his street credentials are impeccable, having been arrested for vandalism numerous times in New York City, and his words may ring true with many graffiti
writers who hoped that money and fame awaited them in the art galleries only to be tossed out as the fad of the month.

COPE2 reportedly received $20,000 for his Time mural, his biggest paycheck ever for a single work despite extensive time spent in the galleries. Many artists had felt used, crumpled and thrown away by the art world, making the transition into the commercial world that much easier. In an interview on the *Kings of New York* site, TKID, a well respected New York writer states in reference to the art world: “a lot of graffiti writers are dead fucking broke [sic]… while the people that promoted them are fucking [sic] rich, wherever these guys are now, it’s just a flash in the pan to these people.” The cruel realization of the difficulties in sustaining a viable career in the art world has soured many artists away from those avenues altogether, at least in the fickle New York market.

Keith Haring, who obviously had enjoyed great success in the traditional art world, started life by drawing illegally in the subways, although not on the trains like the graffiti writers. In his mind, by selling his work through his marketing company he has kept his art accessible to all people. Haring notes: “By 1984 the subway thing started to backfire, because everyone was stealing the pieces. I’d go down and draw in the subway, and two hours later every piece would be gone. They were turning up for sale. My work was starting to become more expensive and more popular within the art market. Those prices meant that only people who could afford big art prices could have access to the work.”

According to Haring, selling mass-produced items guaranteed that his art could remain democratic, and in that way stepped closer to street art than canvases.

Although many writers will practically sell their work to any corporate taker with a big enough check, others feel that more respectable avenues are available to make money from
graffiti. Many see taking commercial work as an excuse to avoid getting a “real job,” while at the same time practicing the art form. But there are limits, as SHOK1 explains:

I have been living from my art for a long time now. I wish I didn't have to, but devoting a big chunk of my life to some empty job that I don't care about seems like a bigger "sell out" ... I would have been quite well off, but I can't bring myself to do things that I feel are cheesy and I’m too proud of the movement that inspired me and my own achievements to kiss arse [sic]... in the 80's, it was so fucking [sic] taboo to want to make money from the art, now hardly anyone seems to care. It’s cool to sell out. I still don't feel comfortable with it but it’s a means to an end - I hate money but it can buy you artistic freedom.  

SHOK1 understands that artists sometimes must give a little to take a lot, like an actor who plays the big action hero to get some independent and thoughtful films produced. He also understands fully the “taboo” that has existed for many years among illegal writers against using graffiti for commercial gain. The origins of illegal graffiti were grounded in risk and freedom, ideas that are fundamentally at odds with commercial work where no risk is involved and the artist is told what to create by a client.

For many artists, keeping a nine-to-five job just to stay pure is ridiculous, but others fully embrace the concept, becoming modern day wenren, who refuse to mix art with money. SIR DELUX explains this view perfectly:

I think the underlying motive; [the] essence of any art piece comes through on some level. I give credit to commercial artists who can visually 'wow' the viewer into a trance, and then sucker-punch them with a product logo or slogan. It speaks a lot about their skills and abilities, but a whore is still a whore. Even fine artists who write grants and/or look to sell their work in galleries are still for sale; their story is for sale.... I feel fortunate that I can create art without worrying whether or not I'll eat if it doesn't sell.

For DELUX, any constraint debases the essence of the art, whether manifesting itself in a gallery, a t-shirt or an advertisement. For him, and for many other writers all over the world, this attitude leads to a very restrictive type of purism that basically precludes making a living based
on graffiti writing styles. Somewhat ironically, as explained in earlier pages, the idea of getting up is very similar to advertising, but instead of promoting a product, they promote themselves. Writers will often co-opt iconography from large corporations or billboards, almost as a way to grab someone into noticing their work.

Sometimes the dueling forces of getting up and purism can clash in seemingly nonsensical ways. EROSIE of the Netherlands explains his experience:

There seems to be a strange thing with creative people from the street-field… As if they [would] do anything for free, for fame. Like cheap heroine-prostitutes doing anything for nothing [sic]. Is it low self-esteem? Lack of criticism? But I’m sorry to say, it’s not just the big companies who are to blame for this… for a change. It’s also the strange twist street art people seem to make when there is commercialism involved. If there is any chance to do some ugly marker-image on a pair of sneakers or a trendy bag or something, there is thousands of young street artists lining up to do it… for free even! It’s a double bonus for these companies! They not only get saved on their marketing-job [sic], they get a lot of trendy visuals to choose from… for free! Thanks fools! The cynical thing about this is, that it “erodes” [their] professional options. Why should people pay you for something they get for free at the neighbor’s?78

The naïve attitude of some that considered themselves street artists is certainly not prevalent among the writer’s comments used herein, but it certainly is possible that many young writers could confuse “getting up” with getting used by a clothes designer. Nonetheless, anti-money purism does seem to be prevalent enough in the graffiti world to avert some writers from making any money with anything even approaching graffiti in style or influence.

Others see commercial art and gallery shows as a technique to increase the acceptance of graffiti in the minds of the wider public, which for some writers is a positive outcome. This middle ground between the extremes of Tats Cru and DELUX is expressed by SWATCH1 from New York City: “[a]nd the more canvases on regular people's walls means greater acceptance by the rest of society.”79 Whether a writer believes in this concept oftentimes depends on how the writer feels about permission walls. SWATCH1 believes that legal graffiti is art, just a few steps
away from acceptance by the mainstream and galleries. Likewise, advertising and promotion through videos and magazines are ways to bring graffiti out of the streets and into respectability.  

But even SWATCH1 understands that people with seemingly the purest of motives can often exploit writers who wish to move into a larger arena. Henry Chalfant has made a career out of graffiti, first photographing subway cars in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s in New York, then producing the seminal documentary on graffiti, *Style Wars*, and finally moving to publishing and the lecture circuit. Although Chalfant is generally well respected in the graffiti community, even earning his own bio on the famous *At 149 St.* website, SWATCH1 understands that Chalfant is still profiting from someone else’s culture. SWATCH1 states, “I think Henry Chalfant did a great thing for graffiti, but has profited off writers for long enough.” Although Chalfant has contributed to SWATCH1’s goal of gaining wider acceptance for graffiti-style art, SWATCH1 understands that Chalfant is still an outsider, who ultimately does not deserve the money as much as the originators and innovators of the art form.

Ultimately it comes down to the split between who is part of the culture and who is not; the writers are within it because they take the risks and they hone their craft, while most everyone else stands outside of it, no matter how noble their intentions.
V. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The most important motivation for illegal graffiti is getting up. As a result, style, form and content of the images are entirely secondary to the elements of risk, freedom and camaraderie. Because getting up is the most important factor, trying to limit graffiti through harsher legal penalties only increases the risk for the graffiti writer, which in turn contributes to the respect from colleagues a writer earns when getting up. In other words, the most important implication for legal authorities of this thesis should be that illegal graffiti cannot be stopped or controlled. There will always be a segment of the population, especially among the youth, who revel in risk and search for freedom.

When some attempt to translate illegal graffiti into standard modes of artistic production, the motivation of getting up slides into the background while style, form and content of imagery move to the forefront. There is no risk involved in painting a canvas, and a legal wall hampers the freedom of the graffiti writer since they cannot paint at the time and place of their choosing. Therefore, legal art will never be a substitute for illegal graffiti, since the motivations for creating it and the feeling of the process for the artist are completely at odds with illegal graffiti.

Because legal graffiti shares more in common with standard modes of visual production than illegal writing, legal work should be labeled as art. Legal graffiti-style work can be safely encouraged in art schools, and doing so has no bearing on illegal graffiti, which has completely different motivations for creation. Thus, providing legal outlets for graffiti-style work will not limit illegal graffiti, but it will certainly not encourage it either. Perhaps more importantly, legal authorities should not be concerned that by allowing legal graffiti to thrive that they are shirking their responsibilities to limit gang activity, since both legal and illegal graffiti have no relation to criminal gangs.
When writers translate their illegal work into commercial professions, the roadblocks prove even more daunting than with galleries and permission walls. Not only do writers face a dismissive attitude from within the graffiti subculture, but also from many in the general public. Of course, the baggage that has followed illegal and legal graffiti such as association with gangs, is transmitted to advertising, but with the paradoxical embrace of the advertisers themselves. Therefore, graffiti artists must guard against economic exploitation when their work is sold or appropriated. At the same time, those who stand to profit from graffiti writers such as art dealers, advertising agencies and even writers such as myself, should be aware of the possible negative implications when using an underground culture for financial gain.
Figure 1. HEIST’s throw-up on 475 West. Photo by Russell M. Jones, March 2007

Figure 2. HEIST’s throwup. Photo by Russell M. Jones, March 2007.
Figure 3. Tags. Photo by Neil W. McCabe, September, 2006, *The Alewife*

Figure 4. Cornbread’s tag. Photographer unknown, *149th*
Figure 5. TAKI 183’s tag. Photo by Don Hogan Charles, July, 1971, *The New York Times*

Figure 6. Earliest pieces. Photographers unknown, 1972, *149th*
Figure 7. Throw-ups on a billboard. Photographer and source unknown

Figure 8. The Huron Street Mural. Photo by Russell Jones, 2006
Figure 9. Huron Street mural painted over. Photo by Russell Jones, 2006
Figure 10. Venice wall mural. Photographer unknown, SPARC
Figure 11. North Hollywood mural. Photo by MAN ONE, 1999
Figure 12. North Hollywood mural, opposite wall. Photo by MAN ONE, 1999
Figure 13. Futura 2000, album cover for *Psyence Fiction*, by UNKLE, 1998
Figure 14. Flyer for “Wild, Wild, West”
Figure 15. Artist unknown, from the “Wild, Wild West” show, *In Creative Union*

Figure 16. Corporate wall advertisements. Photographer and source unknown
Figure 17. Tats Cru, Dodge Magnum Mural, 2004, Tats Cru
Figure 18. Chrysler advertisement. May 2004, Automobile
Figure 19. Sony advertisement. Photographer unknown, Yardwear blog
Figure 20. Defaced Sony advertisement. Photographer unknown, Yardwear blog
Figure 21. COPE2, *Time* advertisement, photographer unknown, *Ad Rants*
APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What do/did you write?

2. Where are you from?

3. Talk about some of your background. When and how did you get started in graffiti? How old were you?

4. What/Who were you early influences? Did you have a mentor?

5. Who are the earliest graffiti writers in your town?

6. Who are the current writers in your town now? Are you in a crew? What crews do you respect in your town?

7. What are some of the best memories you have of writing?

8. What do you think of new styles of writing?

9. What do you think about permission walls?

10. Tell us about getting up.

11. What are the differences between bombing and permission walls? Do you think there is a fundamental difference? Are permission walls getting up?

12. How important are fliks?

13. What do you think about racking paint? Have you ever been busted?

14. Have you ever been busted for bombing or tags?

15. What do you think about graffiti being co-opted by the corporate world?

16. What is your current profession?

17. Would you use the same styles you use in graffiti for a corporate client?

18. Is graffiti art? Have you done canvasses, sculpture, or other sorts of non-graffiti arts?

19. What do you think about graffiti in the fine art world: galleries, museums, etc.?

20. What do you think about the Internet in relation to graffiti? What about magazines, zines etc.? Is the Internet part of getting up?
21. What do you miss about graffiti? What do you think the future of graffiti is?

Notes: The above questionnaire was used to interview the graffiti writers.
APPENDIX B. CONSENT LETTER

My name is Russell Jones and I am a graduate student at the School of Art at Bowling Green State University. This interview is part of my research for my Master’s thesis entitled “Illegal Graffiti or Permission Walls.” The purpose of my research is to learn about the history of graffiti in the Ohio/Michigan area and to understand what graffiti writers think about art, illegal graffiti and permission walls. This interview is a chance for you to share your ideas about the history of graffiti in your city/area and to help me to understand what graffiti means to you, the writer.

This interview will require about an hour or less of your time. The interview will be audio taped and I will erase the tapes within six months of the date of the interview or before my thesis is published, whichever comes first. The tapes will be stored in a locked drawer in my locked apartment until they are erased. Only I will have access to the drawer and only my wife will have access to my apartment. You can also submit written answers if you do not wish to be audio taped.

Since you may be talking about illegal activities, I will not record your real name; only the name you write in your graffiti will identify you in my research and in my thesis. All of the answers that I use from you in my thesis will be enclosed in quotes or paraphrased and will state your writer name. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any or all questions without penalty or explanation. By answering my questions you have consented this interview and to have your words used in my research. You are free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time. If you decide to participate and change your mind later, you may withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or explanation. By participating in this study you are confirming that you are 18 or older.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at 419-345-5093 or my email at ghoxt@yahoo.com or Andrew Hershberger, my project advisor, at 419-372-2895 or his e-mail at aehersh@bgnet.bgsu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Human Subjects Review Board at 201 South Hall, Bowling Green State University, 419-372-7716, hsrh@bgnet.bgsu.edu.
Graffiti writers prefer to have their aliases in all capital letters, as they do when writing graffiti.

RESP1, interview by the author, Toledo, OH, March 3, 2006.


Legal murals are usually called “permission walls” by writers.


Austin’s book was based on his dissertation at the University of Minnesota. The dissertation’s title, Taking the Train: Youth Culture, Urban Crisis, and the "Graffiti Problem" in New York City, 1970-1990, did not include the word “art.”

I could not find Demetrius’ surname or his present whereabouts in my research for this thesis.


“‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals,” 37.

RESP1.

SAMPL, interview by the author via email, June 10, 2006.

KLIP ONE, interview by the author via email, June 8, 2006.


SB1, interview by the author via email, June 17, 2006.


ACME, interview by the author via email, June 21, 2006.


Many older writers will take a less experienced writer under his or her wing and show the writer advanced and somewhat esoteric spray can techniques as well as explain the rules of the graffiti culture to them. Some writers consider taking on apprentices as a way to pass on the traditions of graffiti art before they retire from writing illegal graffiti.

SEEN ONE, interview by GUERILLA ONE.


Craig Castleman, Getting Up (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982), 92.
26. PLEX ONE, interview by WISE ONE, 
http://www.guerillaone.com/interviews_06_01_00/Plex/plex.htm (accessed December 20, 2003).
27. The MTA’s war against graffiti writers is detailed in countless sources, but most prominently in Joe Austin’s Taking the Train and Henry Chalfant’s documentary Style Wars.
30. FUZE ONE MSG, interview by GUERILLA ONE, 
32. KEL 139, interview by MARE 139.
33. Appold, Andrew.
34. “Department of Neighborhoods,” See Toledo: The Official Site of the City of Toledo, 
35. Toledo Municipal Court, “Nuisance Properties - Reporting Violations,” Toledo Municipal Court: Housing and Environmental Division (Toledo Municipal Court, 2004), 
37. The mural actually lasted for nearly three years.
38. Kaplan, 6.
40. The Huron Street mural was considered to be of “high quality” by the art educators who took their classes to see the mural and by Marc Folk, director of the Arts Commission of Greater Toledo.
42. Kaplan, 9.
43. Appold, Andrew.
44. Appold, Andrew.
45. “Restoration of Venice Graffiti Pit,” SPARC, 
46. The reference to Black Flag is most likely intentional. They recorded a song called “Police Story” whose lyrics are as follows:
This fucking city
Is run by pigs
They take the rights away
From all the kids

Black Flag also recorded a song called “Spray Paint (the Walls).”


51. City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, 2.

52. Ibid., 4.


54. Ibid.


56. Ibid.


60. Barret.


62. MEAR ONE.


65. Ironically, Zoom Media may have been inspired to start graffiti campaigns by the response to some of the agency’s college campus advertising campaigns. Zoom entered into a contract with Trent University in Ontario in 2000 to post outdoor and bathroom advertising throughout the campus. Trent approved the contract with no input from its students, according Sarah Lamble from the organization Students for Ad Free Education. Angry students responded
to the campaign, which included ads in bathroom stalls, by deftly exploiting a clause in the University’s contract with Zoom that required the advertising firm to incur all costs in the case of damage or vandalism to the ads. Students instigated an organized graffiti campaign that forced Zoom to cut costs by terminating their contract with Trent. (from Sarah Lamble, “An (unofficial) History of Zoom Media on Trent Campus,” Trent Action, September, 2005, http://trentaction.trentwomenscentre.ca/disorientation/zoomediaSept2005.pdf accessed March 1, 2006.

68. Ibid.
76. This is the Chinese word for literati. These Medieval Chinese painters often held jobs as civil servants so that they could practice a pure art, free from the influence of what was thought to be staid court tastes.
80. SWATCH1, interview by Brett Webb.
81. Ibid.
82. I personally occupy a middle ground between the outsider and insider. As an underground hip-hop dj, writers naturally see me as part of the movement, someone who intrinsically understands the issues they face. At the same time, I am not a writer, so one wonders if I have the standing to publish anything about these issues without seeming like a profiteer.