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# *From the Street to Art Galleries : How Graffiti Became a Legitimate Art Form*

David Diallo

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- 1 From June 30<sup>th</sup> to September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006, the prestigious Brooklyn Museum organized *Graffiti*, an exhibition that presented the canvasses of renowned graffiti artists who had contributed to the blossoming of this expressive form. Through the works of Michael Tracy (Tracy 168), Melvin Samuels, Jr. (NOC 167), Sandra Fabara (Lady Pink), Chris Ellis (Daze), and John Matos (Crash), the exhibition examined the artistic legitimacy of a mode of expression frequently presented as a mere defacement of public space. The city of Paris similarly paid homage to these pioneers in *T.A.G.: Tag and Graffiti* (from March 27<sup>th</sup> to April 26<sup>th</sup> 2009) and *Graffiti: Born in the streets* (from July 7<sup>th</sup> to November 29<sup>th</sup>), two major exhibitions which took place, respectively in The Grand Palais and in the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art. Such presence of paintings performed illegally on the streets or on subways in foremost institutions of the international art scene results from a legitimating process that started in the 70s, with the first exhibitions of graffiti in New York galleries of contemporary art. The artistic redefinition provoked by this transplantation became more pronounced in the early 80s with major exhibitions organized in prominent art museums which presented selections of works by artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Lee Quinones, Lady Pink, Zephyr, Daze, Rammelzee, or A-One.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 In this article, I explain why graffiti, unlike rap music and break-dance - other closely related hip hop practices - acquired an artistic status almost right away. I examine the evolution of this form of expression and consider the determining elements of its transition from illegal juvenile practice to artistic profession. Firstly, I go back to its origins and study its development and ties to the hip hop movement. Then I analyze in detail the legitimating process that made it travel from New York City walls and trains to institutional sites of diffusion like art galleries and museums.
- 3 If, etymologically, the term graffiti refers to the inscriptions and the drawings written on the murals and the monuments of ancient cities (Reisner, 1971), it commonly refers to

decorative handwritings and paintings that proliferated on the walls of large urban centres in the late seventies. (Silver and Chaflant, 1984) In spite of the disconcerting profusion of hypotheses regarding its geographic origins, this teenage practice seems to have started in Philadelphia with pioneers Cornbread and Cool Earl. It increased in scale in New York where a vast number of names painted furtively with indelible marker pens or spray cans on various surfaces invaded public space in the early seventies.

- 4 The blossoming of graffiti writing increased to such a scale that in 1971, the *New York Times* published an interview with Taki 183, a young graffiti writer whose tag, written on the walls of buildings, mail boxes, phone booths, or train stations had eventually drawn the attention of the media.<sup>2</sup> The article, published on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1971 and entitled “Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals,” briefly explained how this writer, whose alias referred to his address (he lived in the northern part of Harlem, on 183<sup>rd</sup> Street), took advantage of his job as a courier to write his name wherever he could during his working hours.
- 5 This recognition by the media established Taki 183 as the trailblazer of the movement in New York. He was followed shortly by writers like Joe 136, Barbara and Eva 62, Eel 159, Yank 135, Julio 204, and Frank 207 who started to write their aliases and places of residence on numerous walls across town. (Silver and Chaflant 1984)
- 6 If the handwriting was somewhat basic in the early days of graffiti, the conspicuous development of the practice rapidly prompted writers to be original and more creative. The tags soon evolved from a mere signature to sophisticated *bombings* or *pieces*. Bombers, as the young authors of these meticulous works used to call each other, performed stylized paintings that required more technique, more time, and that were divided into several stages. In swapping the tip of their spray cans, they started with the outline of their signature, filled it in with colours, and then frequently added a background. A mannered work at the decorating stage, as well as the size of a piece, considerably contributed to the fame and to the prestige of its author.
- 7 Moreover, new styles and letterings appeared during this seminal period (from the end of the 60s to the mid 70s). The majority of the graffiti designed at that time were essentially written either in block letters – straight letters with a shade effect –, leaning letters – an oblique lettering –, bubble letters – a superimposition of swollen letters invented by Phase II which were very popular in the early 70s –, or arrow letters – a widespread lettering the ends of which invariably ended with an arrow.
- 8 The *wildstyle*, a complex style of lettering that was usually unreadable for inexperienced eyes was also extremely popular. In the meantime, *pieces* were diversifying and numerous *bombing* techniques appeared. The “top-to-bottom” technique, for example, consisted in painting a whole surface while a “whole car” graffiti painting covered a whole wagon.
- 9 Early on, writers had started tagging their “pen-names” on New York trains and stations to get greater visibility and so that their pieces could travel across town (Alonso 1998, 3; Dese et SDG 1993, 63). For that last reason, bombing trains was undeniably the most appreciated practice.
- 10 After 1973, the cars of the urban transit system became the favourite medium of a competition where youths from New York’s five boroughs had to write their names on as many trains as possible. These acts of bravado were gradually outshined by aesthetic challenges where the *bomber* who designed the most beautiful piece on a line was temporarily crowned *King* of that line. This period, ranging from the late 60s to the early 70s, marks the beginnings of graffiti writing as an organized and structured practice. The

pioneers who had inscribed their pen names (which kept them relatively anonymous) on the city walls defined its legitimacy standards. They especially granted great value to various stylistic conventions at the lettering and design levels and established norms of reference of this pictorial mode of expression in determining the “proper” way to accomplish it (Bourdieu 25). Emulating and revisiting, between 1969 and 1975, the painting techniques with spray cans and the basic style introduced by Cornbread, Cool Earl or Taki, pioneers of the New York graffiti movement like Phase II, Futura 2000, Seen, Kaze II or Fab 5 Freddy effectively launched the history of graffiti writing. They established, whether formally or not, implicit and codified rules (sites of practice, bombing techniques, styles...) that rapidly became essential and considered as such by the first amateurs and aesthetes. They also lastingly defined the aesthetics and cultural legitimacy of an expressive form the creative principles of which had gradually matured.

- 11 In the beginning, graffiti writing was loosely linked to a hip hop movement considerably marked with the street gang culture that characterized disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The original link between this movement and street gangs is generally hinted at in works dedicated to it. If Pierre Evil devotes a whole chapter to it in his book on gangsta rap and explains that hip hop is a direct by-product of gang activities, rituals and rivalries (Evil 55) and if Charles Ahearn explores this link in his history of the hip hop movement (Ahearn 2002), most of the writings, even though they do not dodge the subject, generally discount it in favour of aesthetic aspects which legitimize its practices to the detriment of a notable “semi-criminal” aspect. However, as Charles Ahearn indicates in the first pages of *Yes Yes Y'all*, a book tracing back the origins of hip hop, the graffiti movement incontestably emerged from a street culture dominated by juvenile gangs (Ahearn 3). Besides, many hip hop characteristics, such as the pronounced emphasis on the place of residence of rap musicians or their cliquish ideology find their origins in this culture (Diallo 10).
- 12 According to Charlie Ahearn, who was one of the first to document graffiti and its closely related practices in the docudrama *Wildstyle* (Ahearn, 1982), there is not the slightest doubt that graffiti was one of the first components of the hip hop movement. While channelling gang-related violence through artistic battles, hip hop practices preserved the marked community spirit of street gangs, and, conjointly, a pronounced sense of territorial identity. As Ahearn and Alejandro Alonso (Alonso 1998) have remarked, these residues particularly show through graffiti as well as rap or break-dance. One of the main remainders being an exacerbated spirit of competition. Similar to the battles between rappers or B-boys that became famous on account of the media interest that they aroused (Hanson, 2002; La Chappelle, 2005), the spirit of competition is omnipresent in graffiti. It can be found under the form of tacit contests where the goal of each writer or crew is to *burn* potential rivals and to make sure that they hold a prominent symbolic status in the milieu of graffiti.
- 13 Several graffiti painters have confirmed the closeness between graffiti and other hip hop practices brought to light by the first historians (Milon, 1999). Dj Grandmaster Flash, for example, claims that he used to bomb trains in the early 70s (SBG and Desse, 43), very much like KRS-ONE who, in 1992, published his paintings in mainstream magazines like *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*. French graffiti writer Darco introduces himself both as graffiti artist and break-dancer (Osganian, 8). Phase II, one of the pioneers of the New York graffiti movement, lays the stress on the importance of graffiti and of “flyer men” in the promotion work of rap musicians like Grandmaster Flash for whom he designed flyers in

1977 in a style that he had dubbed “hip hop style” at the time (Desse and SBG, 155). Finally, Lee, the high-profile writer of the late 70s who starred in the docudrama *Wildstyle* insists on the absence of any separation whatsoever, at the beginning of the movement anyway, between dancers and writers and claims that many of the prominent rappers of that era were also graffiti writers. (Desse and SBG, 166)

- 14 This original link between graffiti and the hip hop movement, which results more from the intersection and aggregation of different forms of expression performed by youths from the same place and milieu than from a structured and spontaneous movement, though it was clearly undeniable until the 80s, became less and less obvious and exclusive as the socioeconomic trajectories of rap music and graffiti went in different directions.
- 15 Even though graffiti writing and rap music were closely related in the beginning, their ties became gradually looser. While rap music rapidly developed into a commodity (West, 1993) and turned into the lucrative industry that we all know, graffiti infiltrated into the contemporary art scene and found itself exhibited in several Soho art galleries as well as in renowned institutions. This difference of trajectory finds its principle in a conjunction of distinctive strategies and of various logics.
- 16 It is important to point out that graffiti paintings, insofar as they “defaced” public buildings were considered illegal as soon as they appeared and that their authors ran the risk of prosecution. Graffiti notably triggered severe measures from the part of the New York City Hall and sharp criticisms from public transport users (Chafant and Silver, 1984). A repeat offender, according to the three times repeater law put in place by Mayor Koch, incurred a jail sentence (Levikow, 1997; (Anonymous) *Dirty Handz 3: Search and Destroy*, 2004). The ostentatious spread of graffiti in the public space, greatly favoured by the mobility of trains, encouraged City Hall to take, towards the late seventies, a series of measures meant to curb graffiti and to find a remedy for the deterioration of the urban landscape it was held responsible for (Lachman, 336). Alejandro Alonso, in his research on Los Angeles graffiti, explains that unlike New York, the concentration of bombings in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of East Los Angeles, Whittier, and Boyle Heights and their non-proliferation in other neighbourhoods triggered similar measures of a lesser extent (Alonso, 4).
- 17 On the other hand, in New York City, several costly measures were implemented, belatedly, to fight what the town council considered a sheer plague. Edward Koch, who was mayor at the time (1978-1989) launched a vast media campaign against graffiti with the support of high-profile athletes and entertainers. Boxers Hector Camacho and Alex Ramos underlined the pointlessness of graffiti with the slogan “*Take it from the champs. Graffiti is for chumps.*” Irene Cara and Gene Ray, two protagonists from the popular series *Fame*, exhorted youths to “*Make (their) mark in society. Not on society,*” in an ad campaign shot on location on subway trains, the favourite targets of graffiti writers.
- 18 At the same time, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority took costly measures to have the trains cleaned up. Between 1970 and 1985, they spent more than one hundred million dollars to fruitlessly erase graffiti paintings from its network with the *buff*, a chemical solution sprayed by high pressure water-cleaners. It also invested in draconian security systems to protect train depots. Graffiti writers would usually visit these depots at night to paint more elaborate pieces on stationary vehicles and to reduce the risks of being taken. To put an end to this practice, the MTA installed, on the mayor’s initiative, five-meter high barb-wired fences separated by a corridor patrolled by guard dogs.

- 19 This war on graffiti had a determining influence on the practice and on its artistic trajectory. According to Futura 2000, one of the most renowned graffiti artists, this repression undeniably transformed the New York graffiti scene. Subway trains were no longer exploitable as a means of artistic mediation and many writers turned to new media when they could (Desse and SBG, 62).
- 20 The media coverage started with the *New York Times* article had attracted the attention of other journalists on graffiti, of academics and of the contemporary art milieu. As early as 1972, Hugo Martinez, a sociologist at the University of New York who particularly appreciated the aesthetic character of the first bombings organized, with the United Graffiti Artists, a crew of graffiti writers, the very first canvas exhibition at the Razor Gallery. This exhibition, chronicled by Richard Goldstein in the *New York Magazine*, paved the way for the legitimating of graffiti as an art form. Young graffiti writers were suddenly in the limelight and were invited by downtown gallery owners to show their pieces on canvas. The Fashion Moda gallery and the Fun Gallery, located, respectively, on 3<sup>rd</sup> avenue in the Bronx and in East Village, and specialized in graffiti only, greatly contributed to the artistic blossoming of graffiti in the early 80s. They also played a determining role in its exportation to Europe where contemporary art sellers were equally receptive to this mode of expression in the process of becoming a legitimate art form.
- 21 This pivotal period marks the entrance of graffiti in the art scene. It drew the attention of art lovers (Ahearn, 1982, Chaflant and Silver, 1984), journalists (Cooper, 1988) and academics (Baudrillard, 1976) whose trailblazing works paved the way for a great number of authoritative monographs. The highly influential *Village Voice* published an article on graffiti when it burst into the Manhattan artsy scene with artists like Fab 5 Freddy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Futura 2000 and Zephyr to whom hipsters from the bohemian New York scene such as Debbie Harry (Blondie), Malcolm Mac Laren, or the Sex Pistols, were proposing various artistic collaborations (Poschard, 210). Moreover, networks like ABC and CBS started to broadcast documentaries and reports on graffiti that cast a different light on this practice and that significantly contributed to its legitimacy as an art form in putting forward, no longer its criminal aspect as it had usually been the case until then, but its aesthetic character.
- 22 This media coverage and the sudden change in status it entailed in addressing the question of the artistic value of graffiti gave rise to a central question, which, on its own, legitimated this practice as an art form. From the moment it had been socially established as such by several media, acknowledged as an aesthetic practice by a new guard of gallery owners and contemporary artists, exhibited and sold in institutional sites of diffusion, graffiti entered the milieu of “legitimate” art.<sup>3</sup> Unlike rap music, which had triggered a similar interest among journalists and academics, if not a more important one, graffiti benefited straight away from an institutional artistic recognition. This artistic redefinition could express itself insofar as it met precisely the expectations of an avant-garde fraction probably inclined to appreciate this expressive form on the grounds of its irreverent and transgressive character, of its formal closeness to classical painting – a legitimate art form –, or of its limited reproducibility that dismissed a potential mass distribution and consumption, incompatible with the conception of art that it defended.
- 23 In addition, the fact that graffiti started in New York, a city that holds a prominent position in the American art market and the critics of which have the power to decide on artistic value and to legitimate authoritatively new practices as art, rapidly put graffiti on

the way to institutional sanctification. As one art critic underlines in the documentary *Style Wars* (Chaflant and Silver, 1984), no other aesthetic movement since pop art had created such a commotion in the New York avant-garde. Graffiti, with its raw aesthetics and its daring appeared at the right place at the right time for art sellers seeking new aesthetics forms and practices. This interest was an opportunity for the progressive professionalizing of artists, regularly invited to show their pieces or to paint murals on canvas or for public or private institutions. <sup>4</sup> It certainly increased the life span of pieces, and put graffiti at the centre of a sterile debate on its artistic value.

- 24 If the media discourse on graffiti is still ambivalent today, one can find in the celebrating actions of its aesthetic qualities by commentators from the art milieu and from the academy the characteristics of a form of expression that Pierre Bourdieu identifies as being “in the process of becoming legitimate”. Like in the case of jazz music in the recent past, social sanctification through artistic, scholarly and highly performative discourses was one of the main stages of this legitimating process (Fabianni, 1999). If graffiti has remained firmly rooted in the public sites that have witnessed its appearance (public walls, means of public transportation), and if it has preserved loose ties with the hip hop movement, it is also appreciated, following the collective symbolic action it has been the subject of and the determining elements of which we have already emphasized, as a noble cultural product and is commonly exhibited as such in renowned art galleries and museums worldwide.

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## NOTES

1. For example, in 1984, *Arte de Frontiera - NY Graffiti*, an exhibition organized by the gallery of Modern Art in Bologna (and which later travelled to Milan) presented a selection of works by these artists to European art lovers. Besides, exhibitions like those organized in Netherlands in the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum (1983) and in the Groninger Museum (1992), or more recently, the exhibition New York New York (2007) organized in the Parisian art gallery Espace W, undeniably testify to the institutional sanctification of graffiti by museums and contemporary art galleries, many of which own graffiti paintings in their collections.
2. *Time Magazine* had already dealt with this subject in articles very critical of graffiti paintings entitled "The Spoilers", published on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1964 and "The Vandals: Society's Outsiders,"

published on January 19<sup>th</sup> 1970. These articles, unlike that of the New York Times, and like their titles suggest, clearly disapproved of the first tags.

3. The Tony Shafrazi Gallery, whose founder became famous for bombing Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* while it was shown in the Museum of Modern Art, and which presented the works of Basquiat, Haring or Sharf, as well as the Sidney Jaris Gallery; which opened in 1983 on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, greatly contributed to this sudden legitimacy.

4. For example, in 1983, the RATP (the French company in charge of the Parisian public transportation system) hired graffiti artist Futura 2000 to design an ad campaign. Several other similar collaborations were launched as part of the cultural policy initiated by François Mitterrand's first administration.

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## ABSTRACTS

In this article, I explain why graffiti was established almost immediately as a legitimate art form; unlike other hip hop expressive forms such as rap music or break-dancing. I examine the development of this graphic practice and consider the structural elements responsible for its transition from juvenile clandestine expressive form to artistic profession. I especially argue that institutional commentators (journalists, art critics, academics), as much as galleries owners and art sellers, were determining operators of graffiti's symbolic transformation into a legitimate art form.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** graffiti, tag, hip hop, rap, art contemporain, New-York, art légitime

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