

Marketing with graffiti: Crime as symbolic capital

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Abstract:

Graffiti is extensively used within marketing. Products such as cars, sodas, and clothes are fueled with the symbolic capital of illegal graffiti. Graffiti artists transform settings such as hotels, bars and boutiques into daring experiences. Building on ethnographic observations and interviews in Sweden, this article shows that graffiti artists and commercial companies cooperate in maintaining a narrative where graffiti is presented as essentially illegal. This narrative enables graffiti writers to exchange symbolic capital for economic capital and preserve their identity as authentic graffiti writers. The idea that subcultures are distinct from, and thus compromised, when appropriated by the mainstream is questioned. Instead it is established that graffiti artists adopt a pragmatic perspective towards commercial work.

Keywords: Graffiti, Marketing, Commodification, Crime, Symbolic capital, Subcultures

1. Introduction: Contested meaning

Graffiti is a phenomenon of contested meaning. Some regard graffiti as a costly social problem while others appreciate it as a vital art form. While the debate on how to control graffiti in public space proceeds, graffiti is abundantly used in marketing to generate profit (Waclawek, 2008; Lombard, 2013). Graffiti artists are regularly hired to transform products and commercial spaces into interesting and exciting objects and milieus. At the same time – beyond restaurants, offices, malls and hotels decorated with graffiti – municipalities spend considerable sums each year to eradicate what is perceived as vandalism.

Building on an ethnographic study, utilizing participant observations and interviews with graffiti artists in Sweden, I examine how graffiti artists navigate between the social worlds of subculture and commerce.

In previous research, the discussion of graffiti's position between the poles of art and crime is a central theme (Ferrell, 1996; Kramer, 2010; Kimvall, 2014; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009; Young, 2012). By framing this article on marketing I address an understudied practice, where graffiti is used to create value instead of being treated as costly

vandalism. Commissioned graffiti done for commercial companies has often been perceived as something that "sell out" the subculture to the mainstream and make the graffiti writers lose control over their culture (Macdonald, 2001; Ferrell, 1996). Painting illegally would thus be a way to maintain ownership over the subculture. This article instead finds that graffiti writers are pragmatic when it comes to working with commercial companies. The narrative of graffiti as something essentially illegal is crucial when utilizing graffiti within marketing. Paradoxically it is the idea that graffiti is destructive that makes it productive.

This article discusses how professional graffiti artists construct, preserve and utilize tensions between subculture and mainstream rather than resolving them. The question this article investigates is: How is the narrative of illegal graffiti used to manage authenticity and identity when graffiti artists sell their art and competence within marketing?

First I will consider that the literature on graffiti has begun to question what Young (2012) calls the dichotomy between art and crime. Then I will briefly describe how I pursued the study. In the analysis, I will show how the idea that graffiti is essentially illegal is used to construct symbolic capital

that is traded into the general economy. In the concluding remarks, I will discuss the relevance of this article for integration of subcultures into the economy, and suggest more research on career opportunities produced by behavior labeled deviant.

2. Literature review: The taboo of being commercial

The meaning, use, and value of graffiti, has always been under contest (Kimvall, 2014). While graffiti often is perceived of as essentially illegal it is simultaneously demanded within marketing. Bourdieu & Delsaut (1993) distinguish between two ways to raise demand for a product: technical and symbolic. The label, or signature, of a designer or artist will almost magically transform the status of an item by communicating symbolic value from the originator to the item. This “marking” of the product make it scarce and desirable, as well as “holy” and “legitimate” (Bourdieu & Delsaut, 1993: 120).¹

According to Bourdieu (1984: 93-94) there prevails an illusion that taste is something natural and direct. Instead he points out that taste is socially structured, and structuring. According to a social constructionism perspective value is the result of a negotiation of symbolic meaning. The meaning and value of graffiti, is not something graffitiists, or marketers, decide by themselves. Becker (1963) discusses how people in artistic service occupations such as musicians identify themselves as superior to the “squares” they serve. Individuals who share interests may develop common practices distinct from others that make them constitute a separate culture. Contemporary society can thus be conceptualized as consisting of several subcultures. Becker (1963) is known for the labeling theory according to which those who are perceived as “deviant” are labeled so by the dominant group. But in Becker’s analysis of jazz musicians we can also read about how the “outsiders” construct the “squares” in the mainstream as dull and boring. Hence, the construction of subculture and mainstream is a dialectical process. None of these concepts are stable, instead they are being socially constructed through constant *boundary work* (Hannerz, 2015).

1. The vocabulary of Bourdieu & Delsaut imply affinity with Walter Benjamin’s ([1936] 2012) concept of aura which I will not be able to develop here. Noteworthy is that Benjamin follow Marx in that human perception is a historical, and thus social construct.

Building on Becker (1963), Lachmann (1988) argues that the meaning of graffiti as well as what is perceived as crime is dependent on labeling by others than the practitioners. This perspective does not acknowledge the agency with which subculture members do boundary work (Hannerz, 2015). According to Lachmann much of the previous work on graffiti has ignored the differences within graffiti and has championed all graffitiists as either artists or vandals. Lachmann (1988: 229-230) states: “writers are involved simultaneously in an art world and a deviant subculture. In my study, I have investigated how writers simultaneously are involved in the marketing industry and in a subculture; many of my informants are involved in an art world as well.

Halsey and Young (2002) question the possibility to even treat graffiti as a unified culture. They depict the general discourse on graffiti as characterized by unchallenged assumptions about age, gender, social stratification and crime.² In this article I will challenge the assumption that legal and illegal practices of graffiti are in conflict with each other. I will especially address how graffiti writers who do illegal as well as commercial work manage the boundaries between these practices.

Kimvall (2014) investigates how different contexts can make the same graffiti images be understood as either art or vandalism. Kimvall (2014: 156) points out that his study does not include graffiti in advertising, a kind of material that “very well may contain other statements and relations”. My focus on marketing is to be understood in a broad sense, as practices with the purpose to valorize a product, brand, company or city. In many cases this is not done with traditional marketing such as advertisement and posters. It is more common to utilize commissioned walls and art shows in cooperation with sponsors. This article study the co-operation between graffiti artists and companies from the perspective of graffiti artists. I do not investigate when commercial companies use graffiti images without consent

2. Since my space is limited I will not develop the most relevant theme of gender. As Macdonald (2002) has showed Graffiti is conjoint with qualities that connote masculinity. I suggest that the frequent use of graffiti in marketing of cars should be understood as connecting shared symbolism of cars and graffiti, i.e. masculinity, freedom and velocity, this would also fit to the connection to crime analysed here.

from the artist. Guerilla marketing is also beyond what I will address here.

According to Wright and Larsen (2012:125-126) “graffiti have received little attention from marketing researchers”. Within sociology, the major studies on graffiti touch upon marketing, but none of them have it as their main focus (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009). According to Macdonald (2001: 151) subcultures are perceived as the sources of future trends within marketing. But she, as well as other scholars describes the use of graffiti outside of its perceived authentic setting as a “sell out” (Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001). According to this perspective, writers risk losing control over *their* culture, which would result in it being “tame[d]” (Macdonald, 2001:176). According to this interpretation subcultures are distinct from, and consequently compromised, when commodified and appropriated by the “mainstream” (Lachmann, 1988; 246; Macdonald, 2001: 174).

Halsey and Young (2002: 170) state that the image of graffitiists as teenage boys is persistent but not adequate. According to Kramer (2010) previous scholars have neglected to distinguish between writers who paint with and without permission. Macdonald (2001) finds that upon becoming adults writers discard illegal activity and enter a more mature masculine identity of responsibility and rationality. Lombard (2013:102) on the other hand finds that graffiti writers often will “compromise in one area to obtain rewards in another”. This is quite in line with how Becker (1963) describes Jazz musicians who adopt to the demands of the audience. They are pragmatic and compromise to be able to put food on the table. Lombard (2013) does not find that this is a big concern for graffiti artists. It is a give and take between artist and companies that is accepted. The idea that commercial work would be exploitative and degenerative for the subculture is dismissed (Lombard, 2013).

Waclawek (2008) as well as Lombard (2013) do investigate marketing with graffiti and find that the criminal status of graffiti persists even if increasingly used within legit contexts such as advertising. Lombard (2013) states that similar to the art market in general, the taboo of commercial work has faded. Waclawek (2008) finds that there is still a debate within the graffiti culture whether commissioned graffiti compromise authenticity. This article investigates how graffiti

artists manage these tensions.

3. Methodology

– analyzing the symbolic meaning of graffiti

The study behind this article includes participant observations in 30 settings in Sweden where graffiti artists exhibited or executed their art. The majority of these settings were arranged in cooperation with commercial companies. The observations took place at parties and events, in restaurants, bars, hotels, galleries and the streets of three cities. In addition to informal interviews held during observations, formal interviews with graffiti artist who sell their art for purposes of marketing resulted in 13 hours of recorded conversation. The latter were performed as in-depth interviews with open-ended questions in conversations around the topic of graffiti and marketing (Johnson, 2001). There are plenty of examples of marketing in print and film where graffiti is utilized that are well worth examining. However, the observations in this study primarily focuses on events where graffiti on canvas is exhibited in commercial spaces in cooperation with sponsors. This enabled me to study the interaction between graffiti artists and their customers in marketing, as well as interaction with the shared audience of graffiti art and marketing.

During the study I analyzed the symbolic meaning of graffiti from four perspectives: *who* is the graffiti writer or artist, *where*, *how*, and *what* does the graffiti writer paint. In my data these categories are crucial for the social construction of graffiti. They can also be labeled: *agent*, *space*, *execution*, and *result*. These dimensions are themselves symbolic constructions that influence each other. For example, a physical *space* where graffiti is *executed* will be interpreted in juridical terms according to which *agents* have the authority to apply colors to its surfaces. Further, whether the *result* (i.e. the way colors are combined) will be perceived as graffiti or not depends on a combination of all the other categories. The way these dimensions are interpreted determines whether the executed result is perceived as street art, marketing, graffiti, etc. Following Bourdieu (1984), agents will make different distinctions of all these dimensions, and typically struggle over them. This will produce value in the form of symbolic capital that can be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Since these categories are not stable I do not depart in a pre-formulated definition of graffiti. Instead I study how graffiti is socially constructed through boundary work (Hannerz, 2015).

The study was performed in Sweden according to the code of conduct in social sciences as formulated by Vetenskapsrådet (2014) where the requirements for individual protection are the point of departure. Hereby *The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) for experiments involving human subjects* (2013) has also been met.

In my analysis I will first address the *execution* of graffiti for marketing purposes and *what* symbolic meaning the *resulting* graffiti has in marketing spaces. Then I will investigate *who* the graffiti artist is according to the narrative that are used to construct boundaries between graffiti and practices perceived of as distinct from graffiti, such as marketing. The third part of the analysis will further discuss how transgressing constructed boundaries between graffiti and marketing facilitates the construction of symbolic capital.

4. The practice of marketing with graffiti

4.1. Executing symbolic crime

Graffiti artists offer both material knowledge and symbolic value to practices of marketing. This reflects a distinction between technical and symbolic items (Bourdieu & Delsaut, 1993). When a graffitiist is hired to transform the façade of a building or the lobby of a hotel, the technical *execution* consists of the know-how and of rapidly transforming the appearance of a large surface. Among my informants, speed and ability to work on a large format are emphasized as qualities characteristic for graffiti artists. However, my data shows that the symbolic qualities are even more important than the technical skills. The meaning of the *resulting* graffiti piece is intertwined with the symbolic image of the graffiti artist. This is how a graffiti artists in my study reflects over valorization of graffiti:

If someone that doesn't know who Nug is has bought a canvas for loads of cash and are told from a graffiti writer that Nug is dope, you know because he has painted so many trains (...), that only boosts the piece of art for them. (---) It is his reputation, much more than the visual that sells.

This can also explain the common practice of graffiti artists being asked to execute their art in front of a public, then the performance as well as the artist themselves are commodified. This is also the case at art shows when visitors can meet the graffitiists. At a party I visit the guests are presented with the possibility of acquiring "raw" paintings

embodied with graffiti. Sponsors simultaneously infuse their brands and products with the symbolic capital brought to the event by the graffiti artists. My field notes read:

Two cars covered with graffiti and corporate logos are parked on the street outside the venue. Inside some thirty dressed up visitors mingle with graffiti artists in premises temporarily decorated with canvases executed by the same artists. One participating artist says to me that real graffiti is done illegally. According to this artist the paintings exhibited are not graffiti, but: "tell the story of graffiti". A present photographer is working on a documentary film on this graffiti artist. I ask the filmmaker if it will be problematic for the artist to appear in a documentary at one time painting a train in balaclava and in the next scene appearing without disguise at an art show. The filmmaker states that it is up to the artist to decide, and that he thinks that the illegal aspect will benefit the artist's career.

According to these arguments real graffiti is illegal. Thus, *executing* images with spray paint in a *space* where it is not allowed is graffiti proper. But at another exhibition, I meet a graffiti writer who joyfully concluded that there are graffiti events in Stockholm every week now. I find that in contrast to the previous statement this writer also considers canvases to be part of graffiti culture. This argument implies that it is enough if the *resulting* aesthetics and the *agents* belong to the field of graffiti to justify the label "graffiti". From this, I abstract two different uses of the label graffiti: the first is narrow and based on execution; the other is broad and based on reference. In the canvases that "tell the story of graffiti" (i.e. refers to illegal graffiti), we often see letters, subway cars and characters inspired by cartoons. Sprayed and dripping paint are crucial parts of this aesthetic. The spray can materializes graffiti's symbolism as something illegal, which this quote by a graffiti artist exemplifies:

Yes, very strong symbolic value. It is such a classic thing, that if you are in the city and produce a spray can, people call the cops. If you instead put up posters that might include a tag, no one cares.

To paraphrase Bourdieu's (1986) observation that cultural capital of society's upper strata is embodied in cultural items such as books – spray paint is instead objectified *criminal* capital. The perception of an authentic *space* for graffiti

joined with the idea that real graffiti is *executed* with spray paint (or marker) are trends in the narrative of *what* graffiti is. During interviews, respondent validation was a natural and integrated part of my study. I presented my interpretation of statements, inviting informants to comment. An example of utilizing this practice is when an adult graffiti artist and I discussed the perception that graffiti is something juvenile:

Interviewer: Since you were touching on that the spray can is symbolically infused and that graffiti is perceived as something youthful, I wonder if this is connected to something you said that I interpreted as that people still paint illegally maintains the image of graffiti as something juvenile.

Informant: Well, it is probably so, then I guess that is a benefit, I believe so.

This is one example of how I was able to validate analysis during interviews. The symbolism of art done with spray paint is infused with the symbolism of youth and crime. The use of graffiti in marketing builds on this symbolism. Both graffiti writers and commercial companies benefit from the idea that graffiti is illegal even in the cases when graffiti is done on commission and with permission. Consequently, neither part is particularly interested in challenging the idea that graffiti is in essence illegal. The commissioned graffiti work is allowed to be graffiti and at the same time its authenticity is questioned. But as we will see it is important for the graffiti artists that their identity as authentic graffiti writers is intact.

4.2. Iterating the narrative of the outsider

The dominating narrative of graffiti as something essentially illegal makes it possible to, year after year, present graffiti as something young and rebellious. One graffiti artist states:

Now [graffiti] has survived, well it is almost 40 years (...) but it is still perceived as youthful. I think it is because it is still illegal that it still has an underground stamp and never really gets housebroke. If it hadn't been illegal I believe it would have died out earlier.

Grffiti in galleries, marketing, and on commission has been a part of graffiti culture since the 1970s (Kimvall, 2014; Lombard, 2013; Snyder, 2009). Despite this, as the quote shows, legit graffiti is still presented as a novelty or exception. This is especially the case when graffiti is executed in spaces perceived as alien to graffiti, such as in commercial settings. This narrative is exercised when

lifestyle and fashion magazine Perfect Guide (2014) writes:

Grffiti has looked away from the street and into the fine galleries – and now it wants to take over our wardrobes as well. The just enough rebellious Zara-dress is an artistic bargain at budget price.

In to this narrative illegal activity is an explicit or implicit reference also when graffiti is executed with permission. As an informant states the illegal aspect is always present:

It is quite obvious if I meet a journalist or someone that shall write about me and my exhibition, then it is always that [criminal aspect] they stress. It has happened that I had an exhibition with textiles, and in the newspaper headline it says that: "the convicted former vandal exhibits".

Grffiti artists often express annoyance over this obsession with crime, something that we can read behind the lines in the above quote. But they also benefit from and participate in maintaining this narrative. I encounter another formulation of the criminal and rebellious narrative when a commercial space invites me to witness "the last untouched form of art – protected by the strong culture of freedom and nonconformity". Here one of the graffiti artists is presented as coming from "the urban reality" of a rough suburb. According to this narrative graffiti is something alien to the commercial setting, even if we constantly are exposed to graffiti in these settings. This is a narrative that enables marketers to bring in writers from "the street", a mythic place outside of society, to vitalize the petrified establishment.

Since the principal aim for the participants in my study is to practice art on their own terms, they find ways to both get paid and stay true to themselves and their subculture. To be true to the subculture's ideals with which they identify is associated with autonomy and self respect, something my informants do not want to compromise. This does not mean that graffiti used in marketing is necessarily seen as compromising autonomy in the way previous research has suggested (See Lachmann, 1988 and Macdonald, 2001). My informants are pragmatic and willing to compromise. One of the interviewed graffiti artists reflects over inviting a member of his graffiti crew to paint at an art show for a company:

It feels like it is sort of forbidden to do such things within art. There were also reactions from our crew that he would stand there painting live on an event. It was like: "it gonna be a lot of hipsters". But he will

not do anything different, he will just do his piece. It doesn't matter whom he does it for, I guess it is just to share what you love, and he has love for graffiti. (...) But some are like: "graff shouldn't be connected to that, or whatever". But if he is out bombing and then one evening he is drinking for free and does ONE piece, I don't see the problem.

To "just do his piece" and "share what you love" expresses how graffiti writers can rationalize about preserving authenticity simultaneously with painting on commission. This authenticity is obviously fragile, it is guarded by an parallel illegal practice. The graffitiist who arranged this event argues for a balance to be preserved between commerce and subculture. One commercial painting is OK, since the artist is true to authentic graffiti. To paint illegally is a way to show your loyalty to the subculture. But it is not in conflict with selling your art. Instead the illegal activity is precisely what makes it possible to sell graffiti. The illegal reference is what produces symbolic capital.

Some artists say that they would never change their artistic expression upon company request, others are willing to compromise but instead keep their authenticity in another sphere by continuing to paint in the subcultural context parallel to their assignments:

I think you only need to keep them separate in your mind. One thing doesn't need to exclude the other. The illegal part usually backs up the gallery part. (...) It is not the same thing (...) but they are not in conflict with each other, I don't believe it is wrong. (...) We got to drink some alcohol together and laugh, and he did a painting, that doesn't make it less real, on the other hand it wasn't a piece along the line or on a train.

Here we can see how a graffiti artist argue that illegal painting is something that contribute to the value of legit painting. The commissioned piece was not less authentic or "less real". But at the same time it was not "a piece along the line or on a train". Like we have seen before it is possible for a graffiti paintings to be authentic and not authentic at the same time, or as this writer says: "One thing doesn't need to exclude the other". The pragmatic statement about the different social spheres of marketing and graffiti formulated as: "they are not in conflict with each other", contradicts conclusions about "selling out" in previous research. These

statements are examples of boundary work (Hannerz, 2015). The graffiti artist constructs a difference between illegal and commissioned graffiti. But the artist also negotiates ways to remain in both these social worlds without selling out.

The majority of my informants execute illicit graffiti more or less frequently. When they do art shows or work with companies, they sometimes use their birth name and sometimes use artist name connected to graffiti. Many of them also have one or several additional aliases or tags used when painting without permission. The different aliases are used to control the information and presentation of their work. It is also a way to manage risks of legal proceedings. It is a play with roles and narratives that can result in a split identity:

To paint graffiti and at the same time be a person with your position within society, that is quite a conflict of identities. I experienced that for several years, am I my alias? And why can't I possess the same rights [as others] because I crossed a line far outside of the norm?

Accordingly, the distinction between subculture and mainstream that produces symbolic capital is not easy to manage. However, I do not find these borders as solid as previous research has suggested.

4.3. Conflicting space

A type of space where several of my informants have executed work is hotel lobbies. One graffitiist said that the hotel used his competence to distinguish themselves from their competitors in the same, upper-price sector. They wanted the atmosphere in their lobby to attract a certain type of clientele that appreciate creativity, cool drinks, DJing and interesting happenings. Another artist says:

I have painted several hotels (...) the latest year and you really notice a difference that these hotels demand street art now. (...) You notice that their thought is that they will make the environment cool, that it should be new and daring. And then they bring in graffiti artists. (...) They want to show that they know what time it is, that it isn't an old tired [hotel]. (...) Graffiti is hot at the moment, you can see this both in marketing, in hotels and in the art world.³

3. In this quote we see that it is hard to make a distinction between graffiti and street art, the informant uses both labels. This distinction is even vaguer in commissioned work than in unsanctioned.

This is one example of how graffiti's symbolic capital is built around youth and transgression of norms, here described as "young, energetic and daring". Placing visuals perceived as illicit within the legitimate space of an exclusive hotel is perceived as daring because they are perceived as, in essence, belonging to another space.

Following Lachmann (1988) and Becker (1963), it is the meaning others apply to agents and their practices that will decide whether graffitiists can convert their symbolic capital into economic capital. This puts graffiti writers who make a living out of graffiti in a precarious position. Graffiti artists are offering their art and culture to agents who want to apply value to cities, businesses and products. In this process the symbolic meaning of graffiti is transferred to products. Consequently the products are transformed from dull and boring into urban and interesting. This infusing of symbolic capital is often executed at events in restaurants, bars, hotels and boutiques. An informant I frequently met in these spaces stated: "The art gets more dignified when you get champagne and exclusive canapés." At these events, hosts with plenty of social capital facilitate exchange of different forms of capital. Hosts with a social network that includes agents who have economic capital as well as agents who have desirable symbolic capital, such as that of graffiti, have an opportunity to collapse or clash social fields that are constructed as distinct and distant. A successful host can bridge, mix and play with the tension between spaces and agents perceived as in essence distinct. Perceived discrepancy is not a disadvantage, instead this conflict is cardinal when constructing graffiti as something valuable. Hence, to settle the debate on whether graffiti is art or crime is not in the interest of graffiti artists, nor for marketers and others who commodify graffiti. Commissioned work is made interesting by reference to illegal work, as an informant observes:

graffiti culture runs together in different groups. Within the cultural world I have always felt they love it and think it is very fascinating. There it is absolutely no problem if you have painted illegally, contrary, it is almost an asset.

This is an illustration on how illegal painting constructs the symbolic value of legit graffiti. I witnessed a similar opinion during an artist talk, when a 60-year old graffiti artist revealed

recently having put a tag in the restroom of a local café. This statement was by far the most appreciated and the audience delightfully erupted in applause.

My findings do not confirm that it is perceived as "sell out" for graffiti artists to work with marketing. My informants do not express concerns about losing control over their culture either (Macdonald, 2001). I have found that graffiti writers participate in constructing borders between social spheres. This does not mean that they refuse to participate in several spheres. One of my informants distinguishes between the "corporate" sphere on the one side and the "street level" on the other side.

I got irritated with the people I arranged [the event] with, which I always get when I work with people that are corporate or companies in some way. They don't really know the street level. (...) They don't get how the world functions, but they understand that you have to report statistics upwardly in the company. (...) But when you rock a party, and create art it isn't much statistics involved. Instead it is more a feeling, like: "was it a great night? Did people laugh and have a good time?"

The way the graffiti artist in this quote dismisses the corporate people echoes how jazz musicians in Becker's (1963) study scorned everybody who was not musicians since they were "squares" that did not understand the artistic expression. This informant expresses a tension when marketers use the symbolic capital of graffiti. This does not mean that graffitiists does not want to sell their competence. Instead this graffitiist expressed that the client did not understand how to make proper use of the symbolic capital offered. According to this graffitiist, companies risk to destroy the symbolic capital of graffiti that they want to invest in. The artist simultaneously performs boundary work, making a clear distinction between street and commerce. This doesn't mean that graffiti artists refrain from doing business with the corporate people. Among my informants I do not hear univocal support for Macdonald's (2001) conclusion that writers want to retain control over their culture by painting illegally and not letting outsiders understand it. Many informants also strive for acceptance and inclusion. Several of them state that they feel a calling to educate the general public about graffiti and art in general and graffiti in particular.

5. Concluding remarks: productive crime

It has been obvious during my study is that graffiti is a social phenomenon that is perceived as both creative and destructive. The debate on this is central throughout the history of graffiti (Kimvall, 2014). Graffiti writers join in a social community formed around creativity and excitement, most commonly referred to as art *and* crime (Lachmann, 1988: 231).

My conclusions are not compatible with the idea that subcultures are distinct from, and thus compromised, when included into the “mainstream” and being commodified (Lachmann, 1988: 246; Macdonald, 2001: 174). Like Hannerz (2015), I instead find that agents within the subculture use the idea of mainstream to construct subcultural authenticity, which in this article is conceptualized as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Adding to this perspective I find that graffiti artists invite the marketing industry as well as the art market to participate in the construction of authentic graffiti as illegal. This cooperation between social spheres constructed as distinct allow graffiti writers to construct value and retain the image of outsiders that this value is based on.

It is the narrative of crime as well as the conflicting spaces of “street” and “mainstream” that engenders symbolic capital.⁴ In marketing this symbolic capital is applied to commodities such as sodas, hotels, and cities. Then it is transformed into economic capital. This is in line with Waclawek’s (2008) argument that graffiti’s illegal status connotes danger and rebellious youths, something that is used by marketers.

I find that the perspective of compromised authenticity when performing commissioned graffiti either has faded substantially or is more complex than much of the previous research has concluded. This is consistent with Lombard (2013) who finds that the commercialization of graffiti increasingly is a collaborative process between companies and graffitiists. I do not find that graffitiists are typically in opposition with society (see for example Lachmann, 1988 and Macdonald, 2001). My informants do not express a strong concern about “ownership” over their culture when they sell their art and competence. Still, conflict is crucial for the meaning and value of graffiti. Graffitiists embrace norms as well as challenge them. Several adopt an entrepreneurial perspective on the economy and towards themselves.

4. I find a continuum between different constructions of graffiti, what Kimvall (2014) calls discursive formations.

Simultaneously, they challenge by whom, and how, public property can be used for communication. Their actions have political implications but most graffiti artists are not political activist. They do not practice civil disobedience for purposes of resolving the conflict between graffiti writers and property owners. Graffiti is not essentially illegal. Even if many definitions of graffiti depart in the unsanctioned character of this expression there are plenty of examples of activities we call graffiti that are not illegal. But the connection to illegal activity is important also for legit practices.

Like Halsey and Young (2002: 170) I find that the image of graffitiists as teenage boys is persistent but not adequate. My informants have a pragmatic relation to responsibility and law, many of them have professional careers, some are parents, but they continue to write illegal graffiti. This is not in line with Macdonald’s (2001) findings that when becoming adult graffiti writers refrain from illegal activity and adopt a mature masculine identity of responsibility and rationality. My findings are more in line with Lombard (2013:102) who argues that graffiti writers “compromise in one area to obtain rewards in another”.

This is not perceived as selling out the subculture. Contrary to Kramer’s (2010) statement that previous scholars have neglected to distinguish between writers who paint with and without permission I find that the literature on graffiti has not acknowledged that many writers do both.

My informants typically do not want to choose between these sides of graffiti, but the practices are different and place specific. Graffitiists are creative in managing their public image and they invest what capital they have to acquire a position within the society in which they are situated.

They play with and make use of the stereotypes of “their culture” rather than seeing these constructs as obstacles.⁵

My analysis shows that graffitiists split their identity into different roles when they make a living off their art. In previous research, graffiti writers are typically quoted by their tags, these aliases make many of them possible to identify (see Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009; Kramer, 2010; Ferrell, 1996; and several others). This may restrain writers from

5. This does not mean that writers have the same influence over labeling as their customers, or that they might not be exploited.

speaking freely about illegal activity and commissioned work at the same time. This might explain why these studies do not discuss the use of different tags for different contexts. This was common among my informants and enabled them to, depending on context, control knowledge about their activities as well as the perception they gave. This is a way to influence what Becker (1963) and Lachmann (1988) calls labeling. This might explain why I did not hear the univocal rejection of “selling out” that Macdonald (2001: 173-175) and others describe. An additional explanation may be that the taboo of “selling out” has eroded over time within graffiti as well as other subcultures. I suggest that this can be because of diminishing critical attitudes towards consumerism, coming of age of subcultural agents, and faster and easier access to subcultures because of developed media technology (Jacobson, 2015).

Previous studies indicate that the artistic practice (technical know-how) may benefit writers’ school results and careers in creative professions (Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009, Young, 2012). In addition to this, graffiti engender value in the form of symbolic capital. Against the intuitive perspective that crime is something that ruins future life chances, I find that careers are built on actions that are labeled deviant. I suggest that future research investigates how life chances develop with reference to activities labeled deviant. This may also be relevant to other cultural practices.

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6. References

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