



NEIGHBOURHOODS TALKING: *Graffiti, Art and The Public Domain*

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This paper is about ways of seeing. It is also about art and aesthetics, communities and public space. For several years now I have been collecting photographs and stories of public spaces in my neighbourhood which I have gotten to know quite well on long walks. Walking is a great way to get to know where you live and to find out what goes on there and who else inhabits public space. It is also a great way to dissipate fear; by getting to know your neighbourhood you make it your own, you replace fear of the unknown with detailed knowledge and joyous encounters of the everyday. I prefer walking around to buying an alarm system and I love living in an area where lots of other people walk around too. Graffiti stories are one of the things I collect on my walks, graffiti is evidence of activity in my neighbourhood that I don't usually get to see happening. I wish to propose some ways of seeing graffiti because ways of seeing, as John Berger notes, are powerful things. Not everyone sees things the same way; some ways of seeing may even have the power to make a 'problem' go away. I want to ask if different ways of seeing graffiti might even make this 'problem' go away.

Graffiti is everywhere.

Graffiti seems to be everywhere. Colour and line sings from walls and doors and pavements, from signal boxes, fences, light poles, and benches. Inside and outside the trains, on the platforms and under them, names and messages are written in paint. Cartoon characters grin, stenciled zebras and elephants charm, penguins fly towards freedom. Political images menace with dire warnings for the future, love is declared and denied; whimsy and resistance cohabit in a jumble of statements and images. There is the blunt political message, the obtuse hieroglyph of the graffer, the repetitive signature of the tagger, the spontaneous outburst of the occasional scribbler, the artistic intentions of the muralist, the clean lines of the stenciler. There is flamboyance, playfulness, anger, artistry and critique. The coincidental magic of their juxtaposition makes my world a gallery as I wander through the public spaces of my neighbourhood.

I am as entranced by the squiggles traced in paint on rusting poles as I am by the squiggles worked by insects into tree bark in the bush. I have a similar fascination; who laboured to make these marks? What accidents of time and weather and traffic and decomposition make this composition of texture and colour and line so compelling? What story of inhabitation is being told in these little scratchings? What code will decipher the hieroglyphs of my neighborhood, human or otherwise?

Humans labour up and down their open spaces in the neighbourhoods in which they live. Like ants on a tree. They travel, recreate and work; they go through life cycles. They commute, play and exercise; interacting with their environment and leaving hieroglyphic traces that also mark the landscape. Footprints wear into walking tracks, bicycle tyres cut ridges through the parks, walking trails get paved and then graffitied, gardens are planted, shelters fashioned, rubbish drifts, disperses and is collected, posters attach to every available surface, trees are planted, pruned and removed — graffiti is painted.

The grey paint on a power pole is flecked with rust, the fine white flourishes of a tagger's name (BerkA) dance with the paint and red eruptions of iron mixed with damp. The detail of paint on rusting pole is as accidental, seasonal, ephemeral, coincidental, as any pattern on a tree. The picture as dependent on weather, seasons, interaction and age as any on a tree. The graffiti tells me about activity in my neighborhood, about the movements of someone and their ecstatic recognition of a canvas — just as the tree bark tells me about the vicissitudes of the seasons and the activity of the ants. Someone came by here and left a mark.

I'm full of questions. Who are these someones who work in the dark? Who are Rollerdan, Scooter-Joe, Jane-X and the Sloco Crew? Why does Naomi declare her love for Rollerdan when he loves someone else? What great love inspired the medieval repetitions of 'Vixen I love thee' on the fences up near Lygon Street? Why does Zorka add his flourish to a jumble of other tags on the soft green paint of a signal box? Who thinks to write their name on every single slat on a bench, and carefully chooses pink to contrast with their heritage green? Who feels moved to comment on the war? To paint mermaids under bridges, cartoon characters on signal boxes? Who stencils elephants and weeping children onto laneway walls?

Someone recognised the potential for thin white lines on rust-flecked grey. Someone added to the cacophony of colour and line on a signal box. Somebody planned and carefully executed that full colour drawing. Some bodies move about in public space, performing a dance of bravery and rebellion, risk and artistry. At night. To communicate... something.

I find it democratic. It incites my curiosity and fills me with joy. There are people in my public spaces and they are communicating with me. My world is full of signs, but most lack the spontaneity of this public art. Most are sanctioned and very deliberate. They require authority or great sums of capital in order to be disseminated. They convey rules or sell products or tell

me about private property. Billboards, road signs, street advertisements. But they don't have the chaotic democracy of the people's voices.

These signs tell me about business, about fashion, they generate needs for compliance or consumption. They tell me where I can and cannot park. How to come and go. How I should look, where I should shop, the kind of body I fail to have. They tell me about all the things I do not have but should aspire to. They tell me about my lack: of power, of capital, of legitimacy.

But on the walls, and over some of the billboards the disenfranchised engage in public debate without the power of the media, without the need for capital in order to speak. They make political comments without the backing of political parties, public art without the blessing of the art establishment; they send messages without the contrivances of advertising - outside of the market economy and outside of the law. They make public spaces their own. And their speech is in excess, it's more than what we need to sell goods and direct the traffic, and more than what is allowed by strict adherence to the 'law' and order of things.

We can build a picture of the irrepressible life-force of our city by attending to the ephemeral, incidental and 'low' art of the laneways, waterways and railway lines; poster fragments flapping in the breeze, declarations of love or hate scratched into bus shelter walls. Philosopher Georges Bataille was always keen to look at what others preferred not to see. It was there, he thought, that we could find the most important things about ourselves and our society. I think he might have been entranced by the proliferation of graffiti in contemporary cities, for its randomness, virulence and contingency. I think he would have thought that graffiti has much to tell us - about what we are afraid of, of what we wish to become, of what we must expel in order to create a certain 'order'. What do our walls tell us about the kind of society we have made?

I want now to relate some of these graffiti stories, collected in the City of Yarra where this work is based, in order to suggest some ways of seeing graffiti in public space.

Angel - Graffiti, Art and Aesthetics

A large park in inner suburban Melbourne – North Fitzroy. On the concrete wall of a cricket practice pitch a man and woman labour with paint, a ladder and brushes. A pale, blue-eyed angel with full lips and richly feathered wings looks quizzically out from the wall, now a sky blue and green background to her magnificence. She is beautiful. Away from the angel a woman paints yellow rectangles to frame two round faces; the larger face serene, bald and slightly 'Eastern' in appearance, the smaller looks comically surprised. Its frightened eyes and big ears sit below hair that stands on end. The faces have been there a long time, and the artists were asked to retain them in their mural design by residents in the street where they are painting. I am told the faces were painted by local children. Do the children still live in this street? Or have the faces they painted long ago become part of the landscape of 'the local' that comforts in its familiarity and whose recognition of detail is a sign of belonging? One of the signs we collect in our neighborhood as we map the uniqueness of our 'home'?

Up on the ladder the man fills in the last of the background, layered shades of blue and white giving texture and depth to the 'sky'. I am intrigued. Is this 'graffiti' happening by daylight? Am I in the presence of some graffiti artists, those nocturnal creatures with an assumed name whose anonymity has me so intrigued? It's like seeing Batman at the milk bar in tights and a cape, or Buffy's vigilante vampire-love Angel in broad daylight! Or has some City official commissioned a mural for this unlikely place? The painters look unassuming and not at all furtive. I just have to ask them.

A little softly, for I am putting myself out in public. Oh, dear. I begin: 'Um. Hello? Excuse me?' He turns reluctantly from his paint, she looks round but makes it clear it is him I should speak to. 'Um. What are you doing?' I've started with the bleeding obvious. 'I mean, has someone commissioned you to do this? Did someone give you permission?' I feel ridiculous, like a prudish school-girl who is too scared to wag class and have a smoke herself. But it is the question I want to ask. Did someone give you permission, or are you breaking the law? Are you defacing public property or making art?

This is one axis along which the question of graffiti turns. Graffiti is vandalism because public property is 'defaced'. If someone gives permission for a wall to be painted, we have art, a billboard, signage or advertising. If there is no permission, the wall has been graffitied. The unsolicited nature of graffiti art makes it an act of destruction rather than of creation. And it links the crime of graffiti to the institution of private property, and the state regulation of public space. So graffiti is not vandalism because graffiti is necessarily ugly, graffiti is vandalism because it is not allowed. Do we find graffiti ugly because we know it is not allowed? That is, does its ugliness come from its lawlessness, and even more importantly perhaps, its disrespect for private property? Or do we see things we think are ugly as graffiti and things that we like as art? What happens when graffiti is beautiful (classically, easily recognised as beautiful) or when art is not?



The angel is beautiful. Classically beautiful. She has big eyes. Full lips. Soft hair falls on fine, bare shoulders. Her wings are sumptuous and soft. This must be art - or pornography? And the painter does not think much of my question. He does not care about permission because he is beautifying an ugly wall. It turns out he is painting, unsolicited, on a public wall - but he is not concerned because he is making something beautiful. He is making art. And he expects that others will also see it that way.

I press on with my daggy questions. 'If you don't have permission, then what do the people in the street say? Has anyone objected?' He's a little impatient with me. Fair enough too, I guess. He's got painting to do and I'm annoying him. But he answers, 'No'. He tells me everybody likes it. That they think he is making the wall look much better. That they asked him to preserve the two faces. They like the angel. 'And why would they object?' he continues, 'This is art. It's not like all that ugly tagging. I'm not doing graffiti.' He points at the other un-commissioned artworks in the area, hieroglyphics on signs and fences, a jumble of cascading signatures that wrap around a light pole. I am to be convinced by the vast contrast between the artistic merit of his work and theirs.

But I'm not really, because there is still the question of permission. And a question of aesthetics. Because I find the tags quite beautiful myself, if one looks at them outside of their lawlessness, if one stops worrying about defacement, if one does not see them (as some state governments have) as an evidence of a lack of policing (they are just little squiggles of paint!), if one stopped assuming that graffiti, drugs and gangs all go together, if one does not feel the need to take the defacement personally, if one sees the interesting calligraphy, the skill and tenacity required, if one marvels at the industriousness of these intrepid travelers working at night.

Somebody else is unconvinced too. A municipal officer arrives and tells the painters they must stop. Because they don't have permission. Because this is public property. Because it costs the council a fortune to keep these gardens clean. I ask what the council policy is and it is complex really, and quite benign. The painters can apply for a permit to the City's Arts Officer but in the meantime they have to leave it. It turns out the City is formulating a new policy. They can't afford to repaint everything. I hear later that the cleaning crews make their own aesthetic decisions about what stays and what goes in an environment of limited resources. And that some councils are frustrated by assumptions that all graffiti in the public domain is their responsibility. I find out much later that the painters never made an application for a permit. But the mural was completed and still remains, largely untouched by both cleaning crews and other graffiti writers.

The painters expect a favourable reception for their art, which they do not understand as graffiti because for them graffiti is ugly and what they are doing is beautiful. It is art. They expect, and they are probably right to do so, that people will like their mural. In much the same way that the childishly drawn faces have become part of the map of the local and the loved for the residents of this street, the Angel is likely to begin to be owned by the public in a real and lived way, along with the genteel grandeur of the old grandstand and the green expanses of the park which are so recognisably North Fitzroy.

But tags and even carefully worked pieces are less likely to gain this acceptance. Is this because of whom we assume painted them, and why? Because they were not painted by 'artists' or 'children', but by angry young men? We assume. Or because we do not have a framework for liking their particular aesthetic, for it being so firmly placed in 'youth culture', or 'sub-culture' and not in 'art', even if naive? Or is it because these works are not pictorial in nature but have to do with words? They are writings but are not decipherable. Is it that we do not like not understanding what they say?

Mary Douglas has shown us how arbitrary our ideas about clean and dirty are. Dirt, for Mary Douglas, is not a thing in itself. Dirt is, rather, 'matter out of place'. The same soil that is desirable in abundance in a garden bed, offends, even in small quantities, inside a house. Dirt offends against order. It tells us about the order of things. When we serve just-cooked food we salivate with delight. As soon as we have eaten our fill those same plates and any uneaten food becomes 'unsightly' and 'unsanitary' - 'dirty dishes' needing to be washed and put away. Order is not restored until this act has taken place. For Douglas ideas about about dirt are analogous to, and express, a general view of the social order. Our actions in 'restoring' order are creative; we actively shape our world as we tend the borders between clean and dirty, order and chaos.

Graffiti generates considerable anxiety in many communities, as something that is 'out of control', that signifies disorder and urban decay, a poorly funded police force, a run-down transport system, or the presence of gangs or drug-related activity. Graffiti is often seen as a 'community safety' issue by state and local governments. Here graffiti represents an attack on property values and on personal safety; graffiti indicates the breakdown of 'law and order' and the threat of youthful rebellion against the 'order of things'. Whilst many would complain that graffiti makes the urban landscape look awful, much of the same artwork, in a gallery or museum, might well be deemed to exemplify contemporary art practice and aesthetics. Graffiti is art that is 'in the wrong place'. It is this misplacing of paint and posters that offends against order; art should be in a gallery or museum, signatures at the bottom of a letter or to seal a contract. Instead, graffiti artists sign their names anywhere and everywhere, and are seen to violate the social contract.

When the painter of the angel appeals to aesthetic criteria to distinguish his un-commissioned painting from 'graffiti' he draws another line in the sand. He places himself on the side of order in this case by appeals to the aesthetic criterion that makes his work 'art'. But the jumble of signatures on a nearby light pole that he contrasts with his own painting is highly stylised, multi-layered and electric with energy. In a gallery his 'realist' angel might not attract as much reverence (for better or for worse) as this 'Blue Poles' on a light pole. The order of artistic merit has been reversed on the street, at least for those for whom the angel is infinitely preferable to the tag. In a twist surprisingly amenable to Bataille's ideas about the affinity between the sacred and the profane, 'high' art becomes 'low' when you put it out on the street, and when it is made by the accidental activities of many rather than the creative 'genius' of one individual alone.

Bright Spark - Neighborhoods Talking

From abstract art we move to the concrete of North Fitzroy. 'Dunit' and 'Ned3h5' are graffiti painted on a footpath beside the Merri Creek in a small park below Rushall Station. The path passes under a railway bridge and walkover whose red brick pylons and steel superstructure are decorated with a profusion of paintings. Ha-Ha's stenciled cats slink across the bridge high above the road. Down below, away from the road and the railway line a tent sits hidden in the vegetation, near to where someone had set up camp here a couple of years ago. A cartoon alien has the words 'Art not crime' written on his round, green belly and there on the footpath is 'Dunit', in yellow, white and blue, with a light bulb for an 'i'.

It's early in the morning and I have my camera. I'm crouched on the footpath, pointing my camera at the tar. I'm taking pictures of the cracked and peeling paint, of the yellow, white and electric blue of filament and globe - and all of a sudden this empty park seems to be full of curious onlookers. In public, your activities are scrutinised by others. And just as I felt enabled to question the painters of the angel, now it is my turn to be interrogated.

Firstly, I am accosted by a bright young woman with boyfriend and dogs. 'I thought you were in pain!' She tells me. 'I thought you were distressed!' She has rushed to help me, mistaking my crouched position and intense concentration for being doubled over in despair. One mustn't act too unpredictably in public space, people will almost always assume the worst. I explain that I'm just taking photographs, point out that we've met before (her sister is a friend of mine) and try to avoid responding to questions about my relationship to the camera. It seems my behaviour is excused if I am 'a photographer', but is a little worrying if I am not. This has happened before; leaning over a footbridge to look at the water in the Merri creek someone stopped to make sure I wasn't jumping! It is reassuring that people will still put themselves out to offer assistance to someone in need, but it says something about our levels of fear that disorderly behaviour in public space is assumed to be a sign of madness or of danger. I feel ashamed for my harassment of the Angel painters, but delighted at this interaction - it is what I love about public space, and about graffiti - neighbourhoods get talking.

Next, a man with a dog. He has definitely seen the camera so my sanity is not under question but he does want to know what I'm doing and why. 'I'm taking photos of the paint', I tell him. 'I really like the colours and lines.' He is really interested now. 'I know who did that', he says and now he has my interest. I love this piece of graffiti! I pay more attention. He is not a young man and I'm photographing classic 'hip-hop' style graffiti. I ask him how he knows the writer and he hastens to correct me. He does not know who did the original painting but he knows the person who filled the coloured words with black crosses. Someone who hates graffiti and so 'crossed out' the piece. Someone who defaces graffiti in order to denounce it.

It had never occurred to me that the black crosses were not part of the original design. They are neatly contained within the confines of the piece and evenly distributed across it. Someone graffitied some graffiti because they hate graffiti. But they have done it so respectfully, and so neatly. Is this because they are an artist too and cannot help themselves? Or because they dislike any form of messiness, even when vandalising public property, or public art? Or because, by staying inside the lines they are merely defacing graffiti but not the concrete path? It's intriguing. Who takes up a paintbrush to denounce painting?



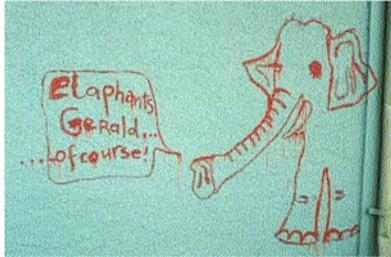
Later I notice another addition to 'Dunit's' art. It may have been there on this first day or perhaps it came later, but it's more of this conversation, in paint, in public space - about graffiti. 'Got a life and grown up' I read in the cross of 'Dunit's' 'i'.

What does it mean? Why does someone need to make this statement inside a piece of graffiti? Some of the letters are different from each other. Most are black but two are yellow. And two of these yellow letters have black letters beneath. Aha! I get it. Someone has changed 'Get a life and grow up' to 'Got a life and grown up'. Someone has answered the condemnation of the man with the black paint with two carefully chosen signs. And

added their own little yellow crosses, neatly distributed between the black. Was this the original writer, Dunit's, response, or has someone else again joined this conversation in the park? The neighbourhood is talking.

On Rushall Crescent itself, high above Dunit's light globe, the artist 'Tusk' stenciled two elegant elephants facing each other.

They were painted onto a Citipower substation housed inside a green painted structure with a peaked roof. Their old world charm seemed to fit with the quaintness of the surrounds: the pretty buildings, hedges and gardens of the 'Old Colonists' home behind. The building was painted over in green to obscure the elephants, I believe because someone in the street complained to the electricity company. But the elephants were repainted, quite soon after, by someone with much less artistic skill and experience of painting upright (and quickly) on large outdoor walls. These elephants are hand painted in dripping red paint, by someone who is not quite so good at painting elephants. Their outlines are wobbly, their proportions slightly wrong, but they are very happy, smiling elephants and they are talking to each other. 'What do you like to listen to?' asks one elephant of the other in a speech bubble coming out of its trunk. 'Why elaphants (sic.) Gerald ... of course!' is the reply.



I hear that Tusk is a little peeved that the badly drawn elephants have lasted much longer than his stylish originals. And on aesthetic grounds alone he is probably right to be cross. But the new elephants tell us something we couldn't know before; that is, how much someone liked Tusk's original. Someone was moved to replace them, with a new twist but paying definite homage to the person who thought to put them there in the first place. A conversation has commenced on the Citipower substation about aesthetics and public space and the character of the 'local'. About what some locals or regular visitors want. And that some locals like some graffiti. Graffiti gets the neighbourhood talking.

Playgrounds

Graffiti gets the neighbourhood talking but can make local governments quite nervous. Some municipalities have adopted 'zero tolerance' policies toward graffiti and graffiti writers. Others adopt a range of approaches, including reporting tools, cleaning, information and diversionary programs. Some offer free cleaning kits to residents affected by graffiti, or order residents to clean affected walls. Residents in receipt of these cleaning kits can exercise their own aesthetic criteria in deciding what to remove from their properties. Ironically, property owners ordered to clean their walls are being punished for someone else's crime. A 'zero tolerance' policy aims to be totalitarian; and tends to act in the interests of property owners and businesses ('ratepayers') who complain. But there are other 'stakeholders'; young people, visitors, tenants of public and private housing, ratepayers and businesses who do not complain. Some may like some graffiti, some may be painters of graffiti, some may know that their children see graffiti very differently to themselves — some are no doubt indifferent or resigned to its appearance. And there are all kinds of public spaces that councils do not control. Transport corridors and utilities infrastructure, power substations, railway stations, stormwater drains, the walls and fences of private property.

What tends to be forgotten when nervousness dominates responses to graffiti is that not everybody sees public spaces in the same way. For many young people graffiti is evidence of a vibrant music, arts and youth culture; something that attracts them to Melbourne and tells them something about the areas they visit. And graffiti also tells us something about public voices, voices that rise above those of the government and media to protest against a war, to challenge the nonsenses of advertising or comment on the shape our neighbourhoods are taking. Or voices that simply tell us of children who play, with paint and in public space — perhaps not as sweetly as we might expect children to, and at a slightly older age . . . It's too late for cubby houses by the time they hit the streets. But then we've left them so few wild places, and we watch them so closely, what is left to them but the laneways and railways and the fences and walls that keep them out? Where else are their playgrounds to be?

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