Spraycans at Dawn

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'Spraycans at Dawn' [graffiti], *Evening Standard*, 29 July 2003.

[This article did not go down well with the editors at the Evening Standard (who imposed changes) or apparently with the readership, so I was not invited to write again. This is the unaltered first version.]

Graffiti is viewed by many with unalloyed revulsion, and I find the feeling rising up in myself when confronted with obscene phrases and pictures scrawled on playground slides and climbing frames, or names crudely etched into bus and train windows (this being a response to the more efficient clean-up of writing in marker-pen and paint). Yet I cannot simply hate even these markings because they are part of a spectrum in graffiti that extends to elaborate, carefully planned, colourful, large-scale murals which beautify rather than degrade their

surroundings. A few, at least, of the kids tagging trains have, inadvertently or not, entered training for a far more serious pursuit.

Most art is competitive but graffiti is nakedly so. Writers vie over the prominence of their works, their size, complexity, technique and above all their ubiquity. Elaborate etiquette regulates this rivalry; tags—the writer's adopted names—are sometimes ranked by the numbers included in them, and competition is joined by overwriting a rival's work. When I accompanied a TV team to watch the well-known writer, Prime, make a piece on a quasi-official site, the most interesting and shocking act was his first—taking a large roller to the painting already there, entirely blotting it out.

If convention governs the terms of rivalry and respect between writers, it also quite rigidly governs the look of graffiti. Simple or elaborate, graffiti is founded on the name, and is a do-it-yourself version of that larger vandalism of the environment, advertising. The tag is a logo, publicising the anonymous and the powerless. Its large, multi-coloured variants sparkle with gold and silver paint, and use every visual trick to throw themselves into movement in emulation of the flashy animated logos that open movies. Ownership of a tag is as jealously protected as that of a brand, with pieces sometimes bearing the copyright sign. The competition between writers over size, prominence and distribution is a direct reflection of that between advertisers. Given this affinity, it is no surprise that advertisers have tried to use graffiti, offering writers inducements to work for them (infamous graffiti writer, Banksy, has had plenty of offers), or simply doing it themselves, especially using stencils.

Most large graffiti pieces are made illegally, at night, in a hurry from designs already worked out on paper, and with a limited range of colours. While graffiti crews who work collectively do travel, sometimes internationally, much of the work is local. The inhabitants of an area decorate an environment over which they usually exercise no power. They generally do so in places that are run-down and publicly owned.

The fascination of these pieces does not lay in the designs alone but in their interaction with a particular place (the art world calls this 'site specificity'), with other works, adjacent or over-written, and with the surface on which they sit (the texture of brick, concrete, wood or

metal, new or old, dry or damp). All these pieces will decay, be buried under the marks of rivals or subsequent generations, be removed by the authorities or demolished with the walls on which they are painted. Their life is changeable, generally brief and, in the unremunerated sacrifice of labour for self-expression, poignant.

Sometimes graffiti is brought indoors and paraded as gallery art. There was a fashion for this in the 1980s, recently revived, of which the most successful exponents were Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Both of these artists had made graffiti but, carrying with them a few of its techniques, evolved highly individual and unconventional styles of painting. It is more troublesome to simply get graffiti writers to decorate a canvas as they would a wall. The resulting paintings are done leisurely, with unlimited resources on smooth expanses of canvas by artists who are no longer competing for space or altering a particular environment. All urgency, much of the interest and the very point of street graffiti is lost. Besides, the ethos of graffiti—to make temporary and sometimes unwanted gifts to a public—is at odds with the commercial imperative to make permanent, moveable works for sale.

The current art-world crush on graffiti in New York is connected to the concerted effort, initiated by Mayor Guiliani, to drive graffiti from the streets and particularly from the trains. Dedicated graffiti crews had risked serious injury and worse to decorate these trains, infiltrating the sidings and on occasion decorating carriages or even entire trains from top to bottom with extraordinary murals that would for a single day travel through neglected neighbourhoods, often to considerable public acclaim, before their erasure by the cleaners. Denied their usual environment, graffiti writers end up in galleries or making legal pieces advertising trainers and soft drinks. (There is an opportunity to see examples of this history in a survey of thirty years of New York graffiti in the exhibition, *Bombers*, currently on shown at Jeffrey Charles Gallery and Whitechapel Project Space.)

Just because graffiti tends not to inhabit the gallery comfortably does not mean that it is not art. I was once asked to be involved as an expert witness in the trial of a graffiti writer that in the end, fortunately, never came to court. He had been found decorating the walls of an abandoned swimming pool, long used as a graffiti site, and the local council seemed determined to make an example of him. The defence was to be made on human rights grounds: to argue that he was pursuing self-expression through making art, and that the state had no right to interfere, especially if it involved no damage to property. You can use a pencil to scrawl an obscenity on the wall of a public toilet or to make a complex, skilfully made and thoughtful drawing—an accomplished work of art. Exactly the same can be said of the spraycan.