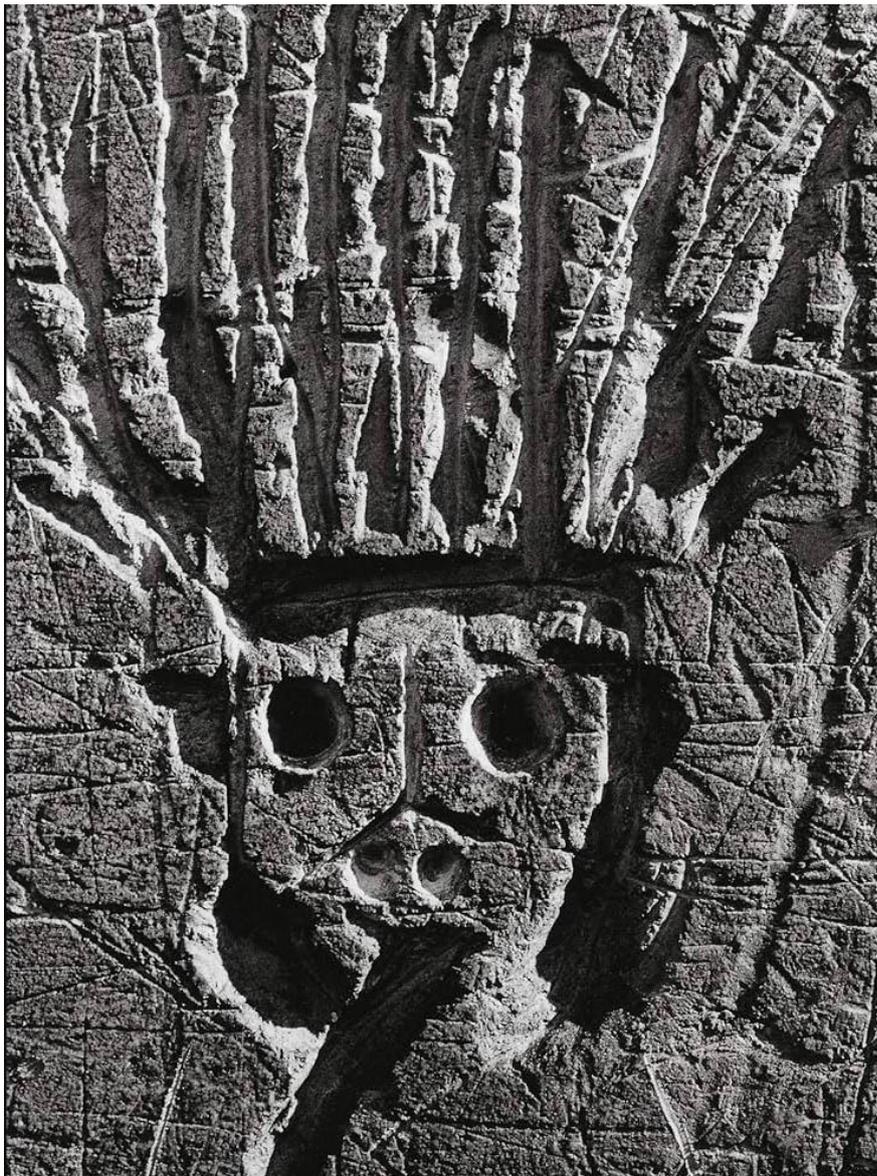


## Graffiti in the Power of Photography

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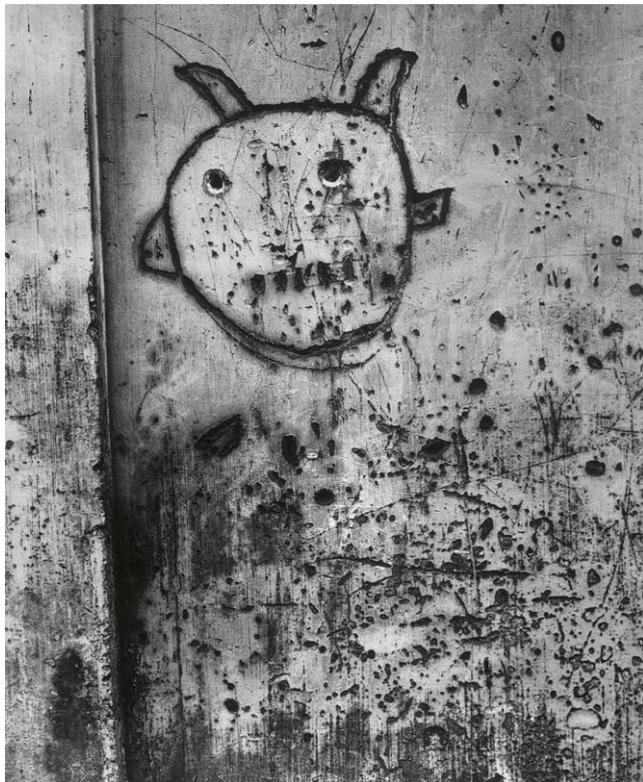


Brassai was fixed upon elevating the low and the unregarded to the heights of artistic expression by bringing them into the ambit of his own world. His photography of crudely carved graffiti from the 1930s onwards, long predating the spray can and the marker pen, was an extreme

example of this activity. The subject was highly marginal—the gouging of crude faces and other simple forms into plaster and stone, mostly by children using penknives or whatever sharp implement came to hand. Brassai offered a fine description of the processes which acted upon any new piece:

The elements soon get to work, attacking the roughcast that shrinks in the frost, expands in the heat, swells in the damp. Wind, fumes, gas, and rain deposit soot and dust. The surface begins to flake, layers of paint peel off. Humidity occasions patches of rot and sometimes sprouts a world of vegetation. These, at first almost invisible alterations, spread quickly. Accidental scratches, a child’s doodle, scribbles, an over-energetic brushstroke or two, a few bits of print rubbed out or painted over, some torn scraps of poster, and the “picture” is finished.<sup>1</sup>

The subject, then, was never an individual creation but a collective one, involving a variety of forces, out of which a strange harmony might emerge. Even so, for Brassai the vast majority of graffiti had no merit, and he made a careful selection from the available mass, on aesthetic grounds.<sup>2</sup> The walls were recorded with Brassai’s usual intense observation, commitment and technical skill, and a high level of control over development and printing. Brassai would make notes about the location of particular graffiti so as to return when the quality and orientation of the light would be right; and would repeatedly return to the same site over decades to show how the walls had altered.



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<sup>1</sup> Brassai, *Graffiti*, trans. David Radzinowicz, Flammarion, Paris 2002, p. 12. The first edition is *Graffiti de Brassai: Textes et photos de Brassai et deux conversations avec Picasso*, Les Editions du Temps, Paris 1961. It should be noted that this essay was written under the conditions of Covid-19 lockdown, and without access to the usual range of library resources.

<sup>2</sup> Brassai, *Graffiti*, pp. 147-8.

Why expend such time and expertise on this subject? The grounds were clearly laid out by Brassai in his first publication of these photographs for the arts magazine *Minotaure* in 1933.<sup>3</sup> They had a strong affinity with aspects of Surrealism and with a wider engagement with the idea of the ‘primitive’ in the modern art of the time: on this view, graffiti were unconsciously made found objects, and unconscious desires also held sway over the photographer’s selection of which ones to record.<sup>4</sup> The subjects found on the walls of ancient caves in the Dordogne or by the Nile or the Euphrates, Brassai wrote, are also found on the incised walls of Parisian streets: animals, monsters, heroes and phallic deities in a realm where ‘everything is in the process of being formed, transformed, deformed, while remaining quite still [...]’. While artistic ‘masterpieces’ are weighed down with the sap of their maturity, in graffiti one sees ‘with all the sensual joy of the voyeur’ the instinctive bud of creation’s first fertilisation.<sup>5</sup> The similarity between some of the graffiti faces and the tribal masks admired by both Picasso and Breton was no accident.

This suspect and now largely defunct category of the primitive had a firm grip on the culture of the time, particularly amongst those dissident and bohemian strands that sought to undermine bourgeois mores, morality and traditions. Children fell firmly into the category, being as yet untrained and uncivilised, believers in animism, the occult power of images, and the destructive powers of iconoclasm and defacement. Their world view, in which clouds moved only because they wanted to, was blissfully free of mechanical and conventional notions of causality and time.<sup>6</sup> For Brassai, their carvings into walls, as they laboured against the resistant material (unlike their supervised ‘sweet’ drawings on paper), lent their unconscious desires ‘grandeur’ and artistic quality.<sup>7</sup>

There is a complex play of high and low here in which cultural hierarchy—connected to that of civilised versus primitive—is simultaneously affirmed and undermined: maturity versus youth, the masterpiece versus the ‘tiny wild fruit’, yet at the same time, claimed Brassai, a complete reordering of aesthetic canons.<sup>8</sup> The authors of the graffiti may have been children, but Brassai aspired see as they did, following Baudelaire in the ambition to recapture childhood at will.<sup>9</sup> It is this vision that explains the paradox that this wall-bound revolt against instrumentality, civilisation and technology could be captured by one of their advanced products. He writes of Proust’s views of photography:

The camera’s cold gaze, endowed with a scientific exactitude that erases all of human vision’s power of imagination and of sentiment, can intervene [...] only in the rare moments when our eyes, left to themselves, reduced to their role of lookouts for the

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<sup>3</sup> Brassai, ‘Du mur des caverns au mur d’usine’, *Minotaure*, nos. 3-4, December 1933, pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> See Marja Warehime, *Brassai: Images of Culture and the Surrealist Observer*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1996, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> The *Minotaure* article is translated in Hayward Gallery, *Brassai: No Ordinary Eyes*, London 2001, p. 292.

<sup>6</sup> The work of Jean Piaget on child psychology had a great influence over French culture from the 1920s onwards in books such as *The Language and Thought of the Child*, trans. Marjorie & Ruth Gabain, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1926.

<sup>7</sup> Brassai, *Graffiti*, pp. 9, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Hayward Gallery, *Brassai*, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Preface to *Camera in Paris*’, in Hayward Gallery, *Brassai*, pp. 280-1; the reference is to Charles Baudelaire’s famous essay on modernity. See *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Johnathan Mayne, Da Capo, New York 1986.

dangers that lie in wait for us, operate mechanically, according to optical laws, in the total vacuity of our consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Brassaï was an admirer of that high culture which engaged in meticulous observation, and was an obsessive reader of Goethe and Proust, among many others.<sup>11</sup> Proust, in particular, with his extraordinarily detailed descriptions of both his aristocratic milieu and the vicissitudes of his main character's internal life, seems an unlikely companion—but remember how frequently his high-society characters, urged on by a multitude of desires, come to inhabit, at least temporarily, the demi-monde that Brassaï also documented.<sup>12</sup> And then there was Proust's fascination with photography, especially portraits, which for him had a near-magical effect as doubles of those they represented, and in a similarly animist way were also subject to the power of defacement and abuse.<sup>13</sup>

The graffiti, then, are both high and low: crude, unskilled and conventional, they are replete with an ancient or even primordial quality. While Brassaï as their meticulous documenter is their servant, through his very close observation, the subjects are transmuted into a realm in which his personality comes to the fore, just as precise description and internal life are synthesised in Proust.<sup>14</sup>



Martha Cooper, *Blade pink and black with dolores*, 1980

<sup>10</sup> Brassai, *Proust in the Power of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2001, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> On Goethe, see Warehime, *Brassai*, pp. 17, 99. On both, see Annick Lionel-Marie, 'Letting the Eye be Light', in Hayward, *Brassai*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>12</sup> Proust's great novel cycle, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, was published between 1913 and 1927 by Grasset, Nouvelle Revue Française and Gallimard; Brassai, *The Secret Paris of the 30's*, trans. Richard Miller, Thames and Hudson, London 1976.

<sup>13</sup> See Brassai, *Proust*, especially chs. 12, 13.

<sup>14</sup> On personality, see 'Preface to *Camera in Paris*', in Hayward Gallery, *Brassai*, p. 284.

If we think of the symbiosis of photography and graffiti since the days of Brassai, how do that history and the current scene reflect back upon his work and the views that lay behind it? To simplify the issue, we may triangulate Brassai against the present of street art and social media, and the 1980s moment of New York train graffiti, brilliantly photographed by Cooper and Chalfant in a book that was for decades the bible of budding street artists.<sup>15</sup> To take the 1980s first, while many of the artists were young, this was less the realm of childhood than of adolescence and youth, and the notion of the primitive has evaporated. Carving has of course given way to painting, and the battered fabric of urban walls is seen more as a problem than an opportunity, so that the smooth steel surfaces of trains are an ideal canvas. Cooper and Chalfant work to excavate graffiti from under the condemnation of mainstream society, and especially from the labels of crime and vandalism. Especially in relation to the work made on trains, the panicked attention of the state had become so intense that most pieces had a very brief life—sometimes barely a day—and the need to document them was urgent, especially because many of the artists did not have the skills or the equipment to do so well. In making their images, Cooper and Chalfant take the art and its makers seriously, no longer as an outpouring of the desires and maladies of the collective unconscious but rather as skilled, individual expression. In this sense, graffiti seeks to enter the still intact realm of bourgeois individualism through the traditional route of signature style. Nevertheless, its bid for acceptance remained largely unrealised, and the success of a few of its artists, such as Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, in the gallery scene was then short-lived.

In New York at that time the scene was inflected by the city's harsh divisions of race and inequality. Graffiti was associated with hip hop and sometimes with gang culture.<sup>16</sup> Elaborately decorated trains, as they passed through Black neighbourhoods, were celebrated, at least by some, as rebellious acts made in dangerous conditions, and in defiance of the police and the city authorities.<sup>17</sup> Brassai had claimed that graffiti was made only by boys.<sup>18</sup> Despite the cultural affiliations of New York graffiti, its makers were not confined to one race or class, but it was an almost exclusively male pursuit—of intense competition for ubiquity and prominence, with underpinnings of violence.<sup>19</sup>

Plainly, the condition of street art in the present is very different again: graffiti as a form of vandalism and disaffection has been overlaid by increasingly elaborate and prominent paintings, showing great technical skill, and often made with the collaboration of landlords in the service of gentrification, and fairly often as advertisements for global corporations. While many of these show awareness of, and even pay homage to the older practices of graffiti, they have become stylistically and in terms of subject matter much more diverse. Social media give these various products long life and global visibility; a few of the artists have achieved great fame and wealth, and art collectors are happy to hang, say, a Banksy alongside a Dubuffet. Artists now have longer careers and are no longer confined to the young, and women such as Swoon, Miss Van and

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<sup>15</sup> Martha Cooper/ Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, Thames and Hudson, London 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1982, ch. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Castleman, *Getting Up*, ch. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Brassai, *Graffiti*, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Castleman, *Getting Up*, p. 67; Nancy Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2001, pp. 95-6.

MadC have a much more prominent place.<sup>20</sup> The art world—even museums—value street art, as the tastes of the super-rich come into strange alignment with those of ordinary folk, even while the chasm between their life experiences grows ever wider.<sup>21</sup>



Herakut, 2012

Now not only primitivism but the distinction between high and low seems to have passed away as street artists are fully realised as individual agents of subjective expression. Across the sweep of this development, the relations of street art and photography seem to have moved in complementary directions: ever more elaborate skill in the former, and automation in the latter. In street art towards the ever greater expenditure of materials and skill, with complex pieces—often of figures and faces—painted over entire walls in great detail and nuanced colours.<sup>22</sup> One element fixed upon by Brassai does survive: an extravagant, even baroque, latter-day surrealism, in which animal, human, monster and cyborg metamorphose into each other. But what is new is a veritable parade of visual ‘icons’—from historical figures to cartoon characters—in a perpetual

<sup>20</sup> Nancy Macdonald, who provides a path-breaking account of graffiti and masculinity in *The Graffiti Subculture*, says that women have more of a place in the street art scene but admits that this is hard to quantify. See ‘Something for the Boys? Exploring the Changing Dynamics of the Graffiti Subculture’, in Jeffrey Ian Ross, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, Routledge, London 2016 pp. 191-2. For prominent female figures, see Nicholas Ganz, *Graffiti Woman: Graffiti and Street Art from Five Continents*, Thames & Hudson, London 2006.

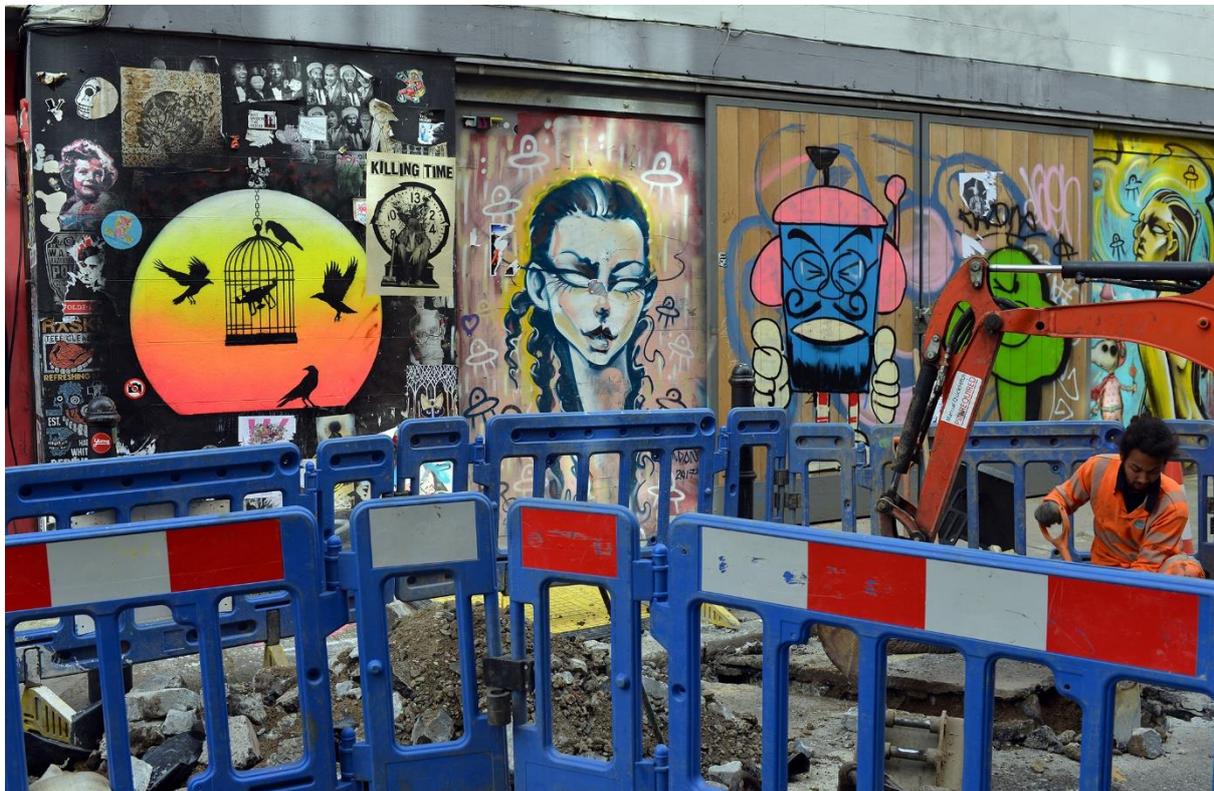
<sup>21</sup> On this alignment and street art, see my essay ‘Elite Art in an Age of Populism’, in Alexander Dumbadze/ Suzanne Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford 2013, pp. 39-49. For one prominent museum show, see Jeffrey Deitch/ Roger Gastman/ Aaron Rose, *Art in the Streets*, Skira Rizzoli/ MOCA, New York/ Los Angeles 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Since the 1980s, some deskilling of graffiti has taken place with spray paints and nozzles designed specifically for the purpose but nevertheless the physical activity remains a low-tech craft practice.

mash-up which dramatises the action of capitalist culture as a whole, creating in many viewers a miasma of disaffection, boredom and déjà vu.

In photography, by contrast, the move is towards an increasingly automated and deskilled process in which all that concerned Brassai, or even Cooper and Chalfant with their more advanced film cameras, even the moment of decision over when to press the shutter, is now in the 'hands' of the apparatus.<sup>23</sup> The resulting torrent of published images and their integration into the surveillance and manipulation platforms of social media monopolies grants the illusion of eternal life to the freshly made products of street art, no matter what happens to their physical fabric.

In the light of this present, then, Brassai's work appears as an eloquent if flawed artefact of its time, sunk in a world in which (in his view) men acted and women were decorations, and when fantasies of the 'primitive', wondrous or fearful, haunted progressives and conservatives alike.<sup>24</sup> It also appears as an emanation of a bohemia which pried open a world beyond bourgeois instrumentality, hierarchy, morals and religion, feeding into the liberties of the present.



East End London, 2019: photo by the author

The capitalist victory over graffiti and street art, while far from complete or universal, is on the fullest display in areas such as the East End of London undergoing gentrification. Brassai lived to see the baleful 'modernisation' and gentrification of Paris in the 1950s, and mourned the

<sup>23</sup> Some recent phones, including the iPhone record continually so that the 'photo' 'taken' by the user is a machine-assembled artefact composed from many images before and after the virtual shutter button is pressed.

<sup>24</sup> For Brassai on gender roles, see 'Preface to *Camera in Paris*', pp. 280-4.

demolition of ‘slum areas’ that for him constituted the city’s magic to make space around monuments: ‘Given the choice’, he said, ‘I would rather they demolished the monuments, and left the streets alone.’<sup>25</sup>

The acceptance of street art in the fine art world—which even recently would have been thought a bizarre development—points to a paradoxical triumph of bohemia and monopoly capitalism in which the bourgeoisie and their culture have sharply declined.<sup>26</sup> If the dark, gritty, mutilated surfaces of Brassai’s walls appear definitively antique, it is because the power of the ideological pole that they were set against has waned.

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<sup>25</sup> Lionel-Marie, ‘Letting the Eye be Light’, p. 157. On the modernisation and gentrification of Paris and its relation to street photography, see my book *Paris Pictured*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2002, published in German as *Paris in Bildern 1900-1968*, Dumont, Cologne 2002.

<sup>26</sup> See Franco Moretti, who notes that ‘Capitalism is more powerful than ever, but its human embodiment seems to have vanished.’ *The Bourgeois Between History and Literature*, Verso, London 2013, p. 1.