

Original Paper

21st Century Graffiti Dialog

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Abstract

Case studies with photos from 2012-2016 police and court reports tracked Dallas, Texas metropolitan area transit graffiti incidents. Comprised of primarily strings of Roman alphabet letters resulting in incoherency, graffiti engaged with and resulted in various law enforcement responses. These art forms were compared with global graffiti interpretations ranging from anti-language to multiculturalism. Graffiti writers set up dialog with society.

Keywords

graffiti, public transportation, anti-language, anti-social

1. Introduction

The inherent dysfunctional, destructive behavior which graffiti represents attached like an octopus to Dallas metropolitan area transit infrastructure. Via this miscreant self-expression, artists became entangled in law enforcement contexts and statutes, policy and regulatory schemes. With anti-social behavior as their mode of expression, artists incised, drew, and wrote on both outdoor spaces and train interiors. Artists' rebellion sought to expropriate public spaces for their own. Police reports comprised of public records from 2012-2016 tracked Dallas, Texas urban area transit graffiti incidents. Sociologists and anthropologists contributed interpretations of world-wide graffiti.

2. Method

Data comprised of images and reports were obtained via an open records request (Texas gov't code §552.001 et seq.) to respective law enforcement agencies: Dallas police department (DPD) and their gang unit, plus Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART). The time period encompassed September 2012 through June 2016. For those reports pending investigation, details beyond name of suspect, arrestee, charges and victim were withheld (Tex. gov. code §552.108). Suppression of juvenile names under Texas family code §58.007 applied. Court case information was public.

3. Literature Review

An ethnographic study on O'ahu, Hawaii, USA, between 2006-2012, identified an indigenous graffiti style. Concurrently described as "writing", these expressed political viewpoints. Deriving from centuries of colonialism and present disputes over sovereignty and property ownership, the artists affirmed ancestral as well as contemporary expressions via protest (Kato, 2018). Graffiti equaled a linguistic landscape, according to an author focusing on how language functions in the designed environment. Here, it facilitated communication after the artist leaves the scene (Wee, 2021). Another interpretation situates graffiti as a private language among street posters and commercial signs, within the linguistic landscape (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008).

Compared with elements and components of language, graffiti lacked any. Rather, aberrations of language through unintelligibility, with distorted words and letters, resulted in classification as anti-language. This evaluation was applied to global graffiti (Jorgensen, 2008).

Social scientists' evaluation of graffiti involved integrating graffiti with its environment, among other factors. A compilation of European graffiti through the modern lens rendered graffiti a junction of urban, political, and art sociology. While defining graffiti as culturally deviant, the author also recognized it in gallery exhibitions and as a national heritage. Relating to its property destruction, vandalism and pollution iterations, various methods of government regulation were analyzed. Public demands for erasure and other security enforcement factored in. Recognition of graffiti as a valid cultural expression did not resolve these conflicts (Vaslin, 2021).

An anthropologist applied totemism to gang graffiti, based on Los Angeles, California, USA observances. This model allowed progression beyond tagging gang graffiti as territory markers. Through this analysis, gang graffiti served to inject gangs onto the architecture and enveloping landscapes. Totemism as applied to gang graffiti analyzed how such graphics through deliberate antagonism were linked to environment. Recognizing the human-built landscape and architecture, gang graffiti nevertheless asserted pan-human ownership of, or entitlement to it. I.e., gangs asserted a social identity tied to geographies (Phillips, 2021).

4. Results



Figure 1. The Graffiti Etched on Light Rail Window (DART, 2014a)

On June 5, 2014, a Trinity Regional Express (TRE) supervisor reported several train windows scratched, or incised, Figure 1. This represented a particularly insidious form, as it destroyed expensive windows which then needed to be replaced. Initially unknown, the suspect was found by DART police via searches with the content of the graffiti on social media. Artist's Instagram and facebook accounts showed his suspect's name, portrait, and photos of several defaced TRE train windows. Damages equaled \$10,531. A June 8, 2014 incident witnessed by a citizen resulted in arrest of the same suspect for incising other DART train windows with a razor blade. Damages were estimated at \$4,508 (DART, 2014a). Three DVDs were recorded as evidence. Defendant plead guilty on both and received two 30-day sentences, one for each (DCCC, 2014a).

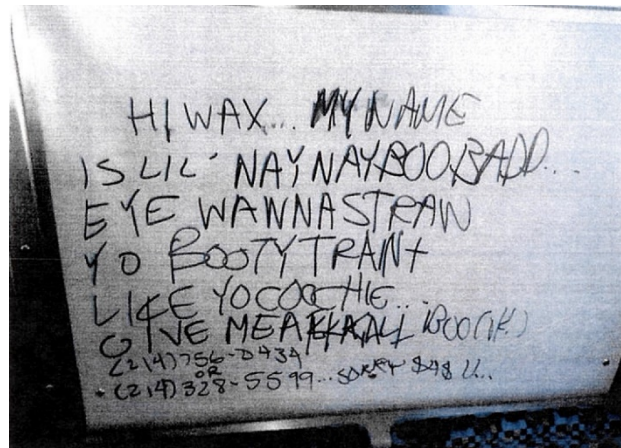


Figure 2. Marker on a Light Rail Car Interior (DART, 2014b)

Multiple sharpie writing defaced a sheet metal seat blind panel in a train interior, Figure 2. This resulted in an arrest due to a citizen report. Subsequently, bond was cancelled, and the case dismissed July 16, 2015 “in the interests of justice”. Dismissal reason specified mental illness, being found incompetent to stand trial, but having been “restored to competency through the outpatient competency restoration program” (DCCC, 2014b).



Figure 3. Pavement Graffiti in Residential Neighborhood (DPD, 2013)

Routine patrol by the Dallas Police Department (DPD) came upon wet graffiti to a residential street at 2:00 a.m. This was extensive and encompassed four times the square feet of pavement shown in Figure 3. The city administrator in charge of streets declined to prosecute on property damages, although he assessed the damage at \$700, exceeding the \$200 statutory threshold, Tex. Code Sec. 28.03(b)(3), and 28.06(b), (DPD, 2013).

4. Discussion

Undoubtedly writers recognized and attacked their human-built environment. This occurred methodically, and often repeatedly, as noted in the police reports. Albeit the form tracked anti-language, nevertheless it initiated a communication. Words being obscured by incoherence and illiteracy, their message consisted primarily in rebellion through defacement of public property. The Dallas graffiti lacked any decipherable historical statement such as the O'ahu style expressed. The aberration, and distortion of words comprising its anti-language represented a deliberate destruction of normalcy, paralleling the spray paint, brush paint, or indelible marker. The one recognizable word: "Wicked" was also accompanied by random, meaningless letters.

Gang symbols, while recognized by and in police reports, did not escape the anti-language definition or otherwise transform into recognizable language. Together with the other images, they comprised the linguistic landscape of the Dallas transit system.

These images persisted ephemerally beyond the artists' presence until DPD or DART erased them. Gangs' self-injection into the environment became equally time limited. Images transmuted the environment into fear. This fueled the angst, deterrent stance within this unresolved urban conflict between self-expression, vandalism and cleanup.

In the realm of mental health, court rulings of incompetency and mental illness corroborated with social disorder being associated with emotionally disturbed people (Kelling, 1999). Throughout this scenario, defendants so adjudicated pay no restitution as ordered by the court. State-ordered competency evaluations as well as civil commitments for treatment were also a consequence of these arrests (see DCCC 2014c). Thus evolved the conversation between writers and society.

5. Conclusion

Although the link between graffiti and gangs had been noted, artists' engagement in these illustrations did not hinge on gangs, even within this writing, graphic symbolic style. Juveniles, adults corrupting juveniles, social media freaks, repeat offenders, and people in need of mental health services comprised these artists' demographics. The problematic repercussions of their common deliberate disruption of social order confronted law enforcement, from transit cops, foot patrol, and cruiser patrol, to the bench. As a result of the dialog initiated by the graffiti, various and multifarious societal responses emerged. Thus, anti-language evolved into asynchronous dialog. The transit system represented ordered society, and simultaneously disseminated the anti-society message, at least until it was erased by clean-up crews.

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