

Name

Mojolaoluwa Idowu

Email address

jolaidowu@gmail.com

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Art History and Sociology

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American Citizens: The Politics of Graffiti and Public Space in Chicago

Project description

My project explores how graffiti writers in Chicago interact with public space in order to determine the sites of their work. Through the process of my project, I came to the conclusion that writers utilize a framework of foot traffic, hard to buff areas, public spaces, and risk in order to determine prime tagging/writing spots. However, in the search for this framework, I also discovered contradictions to these rules pertaining to commissioned and legalized graffiti. Graffiti commissioned by the Chicago municipal government and corporate entities does not incorporate traits that interest graffiti writers such as risk, and increases other traits such as hard to buff. The conflation of the formal qualities of graffiti with the social site produces a version of beauty that relies on state antagonism in order to satisfy its social value. However, through commissions by the City of Chicago and companies, graffiti's beauty becomes defined by the state and corporate understandings of beauty, and is removed partly from the social aspect of its beauty.

Project affiliation (BA thesis, capstone, independent research, etc)

BA Thesis

Name and Department of course instructor/faculty supervisor for project

Andrei Pop, Art History

## Intro

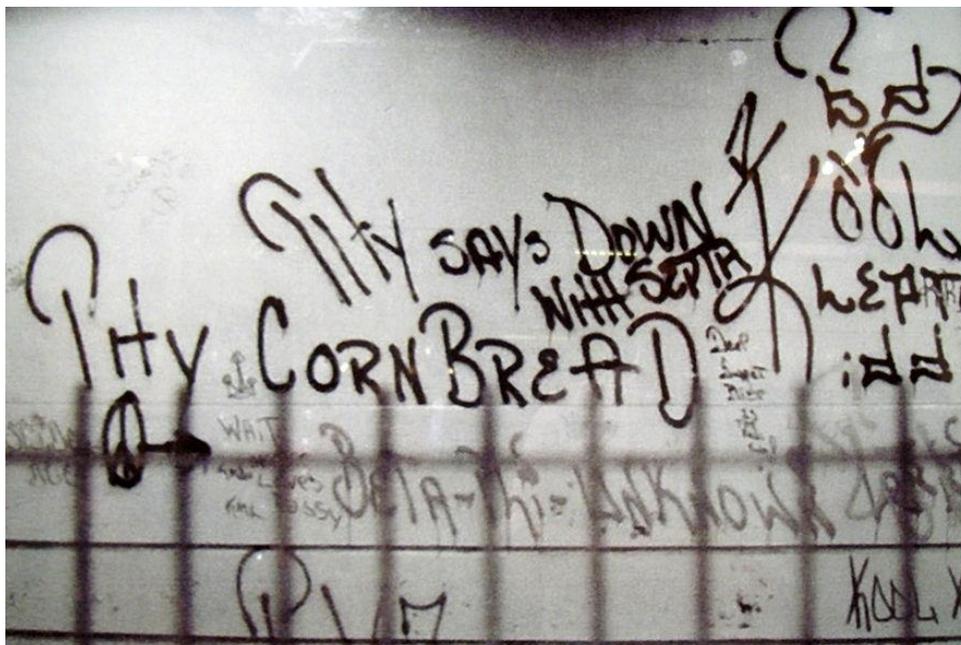
We knew, fuck them, fuck the fucking cops, fuck all the adults that talk shit about us, we got our shit together better than you do. We don't need your school, your art school, we don't need your lectures, nothing. We don't need to hear you talking about what's civil, what's not. We got our shit together. We're talented guys, we're gonna make it. (Maybe include this quote). – John

This essay explores the nature and politics of the site, in relation to graffiti in public space. The essay begins with a history of graffiti and graffiti in Chicago. Then, the paper transitions to the definitions of graffiti and street art so the reader can distinguish between the two terms in the essay. My argument begins with a theoretical framework that provides the reader with an understanding of how the concept of public space is utilized in the paper and that situates the essay within Art History and Sociology. Then, I explain the Methods of my ethnographic research. The Data and Results section describes the ethnographic data and analysis of the four factors that inform site selection for graffiti writers: foot traffic, hard to buff, public space, and risk. The essay ends with a discussion of graffiti and the influence of city bureaucracy on the success, beauty, and culture of graffiti.

## History

### *Origins of Graffiti*

In 1967 on the streets of Philadelphia, the name Cornbread began to appear on the walls of the city. The name confused and enticed many Philadelphians to discover the personality behind this spray-painted phenomenon that had become a part of the city's landscape. According to legend, Cornbread was a Philadelphia high schooler trying to impress a girl by writing his pen name on city walls. Little to his knowledge, his personal and romantic actions will be cited as the beginning of one of the most important cultural and characteristically urban practices: graffiti. Cornbread's story reflects many of the themes surrounding graffiti: fame, visibility/invisibility, youth, and most importantly the role of the city as a site of identity formation. Though the act of writing on walls has existed for thousands of years, the distinct practice of Graffiti emerged in the 1960s from under-resourced neighborhoods in America's cities. Today, it acts as an influential global practice and subculture, with an international networks of writers. Graffiti is not only writing on a wall, but has a particular history and association with urban youth and poor people of color that has continued to define the art, its audience, and the innate energy that surrounds the practice.

Figure 1<sup>1</sup>

New York City is often times cited as the home and origin of graffiti because of the art form's strong and inseparable connection to hip hop culture. It is unknown if the first graffiti writers in New York were inspired by Cornbread or if the medium emerged from its own separate trajectory.<sup>2</sup> Either way, it is the similarities of graffiti across urban cultures that makes it a truly American grassroots art movement. As Hip Hop emerged as the soundtrack of New York in the seventies, and breakdancing became its way of movement, graffiti acted as the visual identity of youth searching for power in an urban environment where they were targeted and controlled by city officials, including, but not limited to, police. Without the resources to engage in fine arts or arts education, and the inability for these youth to posit their concerns effectively through public discourse and politics, graffiti acted as a way for youth to rebel against their invisibility. Writers risked not only their freedom, but also their lives in order to assert their identity in the city space.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Cornbread Tag on Wall." *Cornbread, Légende Vivante Du Graffiti*, All City Blog, 11 Nov. 2016, [www.allcityblog.fr/115090-cornbread/](http://www.allcityblog.fr/115090-cornbread/).

<sup>2</sup> Gastman, Roger, and Caleb Neelon. 2010. *The history of American graffiti*. New York: Harper Design.

<sup>3</sup> I choose to use the word "writer" in addition to artist, because "writer" is the common title given to graffiti practitioners in my interviews. However, many of interviewees work both illegally and legally, and therefore, also consider themselves artists. The difference between a writer and an artist encompasses differences in resources and purpose. The interviewees who consider themselves artists engage in more commercially viable mediums such as street art, painting, or sculpture. They also mobilize their graffiti skills to acquire legal commissions. However, this paper utilizes an art historical lens, and therefore, argues for graffiti as an art. Based on the reasoning stated above, for the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to define graffiti practitioners as "writers", graffiti practitioners in the context of public art as "artist", and graffiti as an "art".

Figure 2<sup>4</sup>

Though graffiti can include visual motifs, its most recognizable form is the tag: quick signatures of someone's graffiti name/ alias or a phrase. Other modes include: throwies, a bubble outline of the tag, and pieces (masterpieces), large scale works of intricate lettering, colors, outlines, and spray densities. Pieces can cover from an entire train car to a city wall. Throughout the relatively short history of graffiti, writers have developed unique styles of writing their names and/or motifs. The increased attention to detail in the practice arose with the introduction of spray cans as a tool that allowed for the efficient and quick production of work. As a result, intricate and abstract lettering that includes arrows, curls, connections, and twists soon appeared in cities.<sup>5</sup> Before the criminalization of graffiti in New York City in the '80s and the use of "buff squads" (city workers hired to paint over graffiti or remove the work with a chemical wash) graffiti covered New York and other major American cities during its golden age of the 1970s. Graffiti writers "bombed" trains, street corners, and billboards. Certain writers became famous for their prolific work, and their tags became representative of their hidden identity and dangerous actions. Though graffiti is a quantitative game, and respect and fame correlate with the number of tags by a writer, the art form is also informed by other measures such as risk and foot traffic, which determine prime locales for writing. This complicated system of judging beauty and accomplishment in graffiti and acts as the topic of this paper.

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<sup>4</sup> 1973. Response to Mayor Koch's war against graffiti: by Seen and JSon: det.: whole car. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822000962744](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000962744).

<sup>5</sup> Danysz, Magda, and Mary-Noëlle Dana. *From Style Writing to Art: A Street Art Anthology*. Rome, Italy : Gardena, Calif. : London: Drago ; world distribution, North America, SCB Distributors ; Turnaround distributor, 2010.

Figure 3<sup>6</sup>

### *Graffiti in Chicago*

Graffiti in Chicago reflects the larger trend and association of graffiti with transgression and youth. Crews, a group of writers who travel the city to write, were the target of police who acted as the ground enforcement of the opinion that graffiti is a spatial threat to the “beautification” of Chicago. Graffiti energized young kids to cross borders, and leave a souvenir of their “trespassing” in the form of their tag or larger scale pieces. In response Chicago has developed one of the most potent graffiti removal forces, a model for other cities, such as Los Angeles, New York, Warsaw, and Prague.<sup>7</sup> According to the Municipal Code of Chicago, the possession of etching materials, spray paint, or marker that is not water soluble is unlawful.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the City offers graffiti removal as a free service in order to reduce vandalism, which “lowers property values, diminishes a community's sense of safety and degrades the quality of life of our residents” according to Chicago Mayor, Rahm Emmanuel.<sup>9</sup> The City of Chicago has also implemented measures to reduce access to graffiti materials through the infamous outlawing of spray paint within the city borders, a law first introduced in 1992. Chicago has continued its fight against graffiti in the subsequent years after the ban, and recently in 2014, Emmanuel announced a 1 million dollar budget increase for graffiti removal services, in order to reduce removal response

<sup>6</sup> Artist: MacWeeney, Alen, Gender: Male, Birth: 1939, Birthplace: Dublin, Ireland. 1977. Graffiti, New York, NY. Photograph, Medium: Archival Pigment Print.

[http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/SS7730276\\_7730276\\_12685000](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/SS7730276_7730276_12685000).

<sup>7</sup> "Graffiti Removal Program." Graffiti Removal Program. Accessed March 09, 2018.

[https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti\\_blasters.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti_blasters.html).

<sup>8</sup> “(a) It shall be unlawful for any person to possess etching materials, a spray paint container, liquid paint or any marker containing a fluid which is not water soluble and has a point, brush, applicator or other writing surface of three-eighths of an inch or greater, on the property of another or in any public building or upon any public facility. It shall be a defense to an action for violation of this subsection that the owner, manager or other person having control of the property, building or facility consented to the presence of the etching materials, paint or marker. (b) It shall be unlawful for any person to possess a spray paint container, liquid paint or any marker containing a fluid ... on the public way with intent to use the same to deface any building, structure or property. (c) It shall be unlawful for any person to transport, carry, possess or have any spray paint container, liquid paint or any marker containing a fluid which is not water soluble ...with intent to use the same to deface any building, structure or property.” Chicago, Illinois, Municipal Code art. 8, § 4-130 (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Mayor's Press Office. "Mayor Emanuel Announces Improved Response Times To Graffiti Removal Requests." City of Chicago. May 28, 2015. Accessed March 09, 2018.

[https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti\\_blasters/news/2015/may/MayorEmanuelAnnouncesImprovedResponseTimestoGraffitiRemovalRequests.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti_blasters/news/2015/may/MayorEmanuelAnnouncesImprovedResponseTimestoGraffitiRemovalRequests.html).

time to 5 days or less. In the summer of that year, the city also announced an amendment of the municipal code that increases the minimum fines for graffiti from \$750 to \$1500.<sup>10</sup>

Despite, the increased consequences surrounding graffiti in recent years, the role of graffiti in public discourse within and beyond Chicago has shifted to graffiti as a possible positive addition to the cityscape. The role of graffiti among youth and the increasing popularity of street art as an attraction for tourism dollars has led the city to invest millions of dollars in public art. As legal opportunities for writers and commissioned walls grow, more and more writers are transitioning from non-paid illegal works to paid and commissioned pieces by not only the city, but businesses and community organizations. This has led to controversy among writers over the changing role of graffiti as a commercial practice.

Figure 4<sup>11</sup>



Though Chicago acts as the site of this paper and its general context, research was carried out at the scope of a single neighborhood: Pilsen, a neighborhood on the South West side of Chicago known for its large Mexican American population. Interviewees were selected from artists who had previously worked or are currently in Pilsen. In the 1840s, Pilsen began as a neighborhood for Irish immigrant workers. Many Mexican families settled in Pilsen after they were displaced South by the Stevenson Highway under Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1955 and the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1960.<sup>12</sup> In Pilsen, similar to other cities and cultures, graffiti acts as a way for young kids to express themselves without expensive resources. However, the art of graffiti was pitted against another art form that has a long history in Mexico and a strong cultural significance: murals. Murals have a legacy in both Mexico and the U.S. as an art that preserves history and is popular for commissions. In Pilsen, murals have been cited as a tool against gentrification through its role as a lasting cultural signifier of the Mexican-American population. The role of graffiti has received less attention as a cultural signifier, but increasing popularity and commissions has transformed graffiti into an art that holds a similar urban relevance to murals. Though graffiti has been positioned in opposition to street art and murals, in the past years graffiti has become absorbed by legal forms and definitions of public art.

<sup>10</sup> Mayor's Press Office. "Mayor Emanuel Announces Improved Response Times To Graffiti Removal Requests."

<sup>11</sup> Photo taken by author.

<sup>12</sup> Pupovac, Jessica. "History of Pilsen." WTTW Chicago Public Media - Television and Interactive. June 08, 2017. Accessed March 09, 2018. <http://interactive.wttw.com/my-neighborhood/pilsen/history>.

## Street Art v. Graffiti

### The Oxford Dictionary

Graffiti : “Writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place.”<sup>13</sup>

Street art: “Artwork that is created in a public space, typically without official permission.”<sup>14</sup>

John, a former graffiti writer and current street artist/ painter describes the difference between graffiti and street art as based upon an understanding of street art as a part of a studio practice. The legitimacy of the studio in the art world as a symbol of formal artistry gives street art access to legal networks of art distribution and practice, where the writer can acquire commissions and paid work. John describes the difference between graffiti and street art as:

“[Graffiti’s] the main goal was kind of like a very individualistic plotting of territory and getting your name up. You know, when you’re a young guy and you have an attention complex, it’s a perfect past time to get into. And I definitely had an attention complex. Street art, it seems to me – the separation I would make, street art is more – it’s public art. It’s I think it’s a broader segment of society that’s got more of an attachment to a studio practice than, say, graffiti writers. A graffiti writer’s studio is usually like their peace book, their black book, the sketchbook that they carry. That’s like a graffiti writer’s studio. And they walk around with it. I mean, I’m talking about my youth, or like how I started.”

John’s distinction between the resources of a graffiti writer (a notebook), and street artists (an actual studio and physical space) highlights the different levels of privilege he associates with each practice. Graffiti, as an art form that arose out of disadvantaged neighborhoods, developed on the premise that many writers do not have the access to the same artistic institutions and pipeline as street artists. Graffiti is a result of a particular social condition, and responds socially to the world through its use of public space. Writers utilize graffiti to assert their voice in the public sphere, where power dynamics prevent their inclusion in artistic spaces. Graffiti must insert itself in space because of its illegality and its aversion laws and norms. Many writers do not have the power and capital to legalize graffiti in a way similar to advertisements and billboards. Because underground writers do not participate, and can be said intentionally avoid, formal artistic institutions, the street acts as the gallery and site of distribution. Fans, documenters, and writers post photos of new work on chat pages and websites, while personal information, such as names and numbers, are passed around within graffiti’s global network. As an illegal medium and subculture, graffiti writers have established a system to circumvent authorities while also disseminating the documentation of their art across the world.

However, graffiti’s purpose is not only limited to the artistic prestige that can be found on chat pages and discussion boards and which many writers seek through large scale and intricate pieces, but writers are also motivated by urban fame. Currently, graffiti’s rules act to preserve the origin and purpose of graffiti against changing forces and marketization. This structure is what John cites as one of the main differences between graffiti and street art:

“I would also say that being a graffiti writer is probably a little more organized. It’s actually a more organized subculture than street artists. I’m sure that street artists network with each other and they’re all in touch with each other. But one of the things that really attracted me to being a graffiti writer was this idea that I knew I was participating in something that was being practiced on an international scale.”

<sup>13</sup> "Graffiti | Definition of graffiti in English by Oxford Dictionaries." Oxford Dictionaries | English. Accessed March 11, 2018. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/graffiti>.

<sup>14</sup> "Street art | Definition of street art in English by Oxford Dictionaries." Oxford Dictionaries | English. Accessed March 11, 2018. [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/street\\_art](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/street_art).

It is true that graffiti has certain conventions, as do many other forms of art. The Tate Modern's website definition of street art as: "Where modern-day graffiti revolves around 'tagging' and text-based subject matter, street art is far more open. There are no rules in street art, so anything goes. However common materials and techniques include fly-posting (also known as wheat-pasting), stenciling, stickers, freehand drawing and projecting videos."<sup>15</sup> However, graffiti is also an unspecific medium that involves forms of writing, painting, and even sculpture. Graffiti writers can also have different ways of interaction with the government. As will be discussed later, the rules of graffiti become complicated in the tension between writers who want to maintain graffiti's underground quality, and others who are using their talent to enter galleries and legal art spaces.

Street Art is distinguished from graffiti because it is understood by writers to be sanctioned, a definition in contrast to the one provided by Oxford Dictionaries. Street art has community involvement, and as a result, has a different relation than graffiti to its audience and city/state bureaucracy. This is evident in the fact that street art has been supported by Chicago's public art projects at a faster rate than graffiti. According to graffiti writer Carlos, because graffiti writing utilizes abstract lettering and diverges from the norms of art, graffiti is less acceptable to the public:

- Interviewee:* Yeah. I mean, street art is really icon-based. A lot more figurative, illustrative. Non-confrontational. So very easily digestible content, right?
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Interviewee:* And, if we're looking at mainstream expectations of what art should be or could be, it falls very much in line.
- Interviewer:* Mm-hmm.
- Interviewee:* Graffiti comes from resistance, aggression, response to neglect. [Chuckles] All the things that people don't want to think about when they're thinking about art.<sup>16</sup> [Laughs]
- Interviewer:* Do you think that kind of – the confrontational part of graffiti, where do you think that lies? What about graffiti is confrontational?
- Interviewee:* The fact that it's done unsanctioned.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Interviewee:* The fact that it's a coded visual language and it's hard to decipher to the naked eye.
- Interviewer:* Mm-hmm.
- Interviewee:* It's all very "Oh, well, I don't understand it, so I don't like it."

Despite their differences, both street art and graffiti art reimagine space in a variety of ways; they question who has the right to build, transform, or destroy: the government or individuals? In this question, urban space acts as the bond between both art forms. When I asked the interviewees if street art or graffiti in a gallery is still street art or graffiti, they responded no; they must be connected to public space. Both art forms are meant for the public, and do not exist without a public audience. In Nicholas Riggle's "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces", Riggle, a philosopher, defines street art as "... if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning."<sup>17</sup> He then goes on to define graffiti as, "(1) Graffiti is illegal writing, usually a pseudonym, on a public surface. (2) The material use of the street is not essential to the meaning of a piece of graffiti. (3) Given the definition of street art, then, graffiti is not street art." Riggle writes graffiti is not street art, because the material is not essential to the meaning. It can be anywhere and still mean the same thing. However, as this essay will argue, graffiti writers defines their success, not only by formal qualities, but also by placing writing within specific sites that meet a certain criteria. Therefore, graffiti can be considered street art according

<sup>15</sup> Tate. "Street art – Art Term." Tate. Accessed March 11, 2018. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/street-art>.

<sup>16</sup> Carlos has a view of contemporary art as clinical that many artists would disagree with. For the past century, avant-garde movements have responded to or provoked conflict and aggression.

<sup>17</sup> Riggle, Nicolas Alden. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 243-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40793266>.

to Riggle's definition. The inclusion of graffiti and street art in the Year of Public Art shows that despite their differences, their networks of distribution and practices are becoming increasingly similar. Graffiti holds the same potential for a studio practice, and its popularity in both governmental and private commissions increasingly aligns graffiti styles and forms with street art.

## Thesis

This project investigates the decision making process and ideology of graffiti writers in relation to how they interact with and understand public space. In other words, I seek to develop a framework to answer: how do graffiti writers determine their access and use of public space? Graffiti utilizes the city as a canvas and material, which impacts the political and historical weight of the work via the sentiment attached to urban spaces. Though graffiti is constructed as ephemeral, the interaction of the work with its audience and city laws transforms the city wall into a symbolic site of the push and pull relationship between the hegemony of bureaucracy and the individuality of its citizens. Therefore, can citizens administer personal ownership and influence upon a public space?

I analyze this question through the lens of beauty and judgment in relation to the politics of the very surface and tool of graffiti's illegality: the urban environment. As in all art forms, the graffiti writers interviewed for this paper had different opinions on the formal attributes that make a beautiful tag or piece. However, a consensus occurred across the interviews on the qualities of a good site, and how this contributes to the beauty of the piece. Though graffiti asserts itself as counter and outside of bureaucratic municipal structures, many of the traits, in addition to formal values, that characterize its beauty and success are administered by the city, such as foot traffic, public space, its attribute of being "hard to buff", and risk. Graffiti requires governmental institutions in order to regulate its membership and maintain its essence of risk and illegality. Therefore, both graffiti utilizes and subverts the norms of the city simultaneously. However, the current popularity of graffiti as a public art for commissions and paid work displays the increasing totalization of graffiti by state structures. This removes graffiti from its illegal context and the traits associated with the beauty of the site, and repositions the art form as a public art practice within the norms of society.

## Theoretical Framework

### *The Art World and Post Structuralism*

In "Street Art: The Transfiguration of Commonplaces", Riggle cites graffiti as the antithesis to the formalist approach of modernism, because of the unavoidable use of social space in graffiti and the need for social analysis in its writing.<sup>18</sup> In response to modernist art historical writing, since the 1970s the social history of art has established itself as an influential tradition in modern and contemporary art history. Historians such as T.J. Clark and Linda Nochlin have adapted social structures and sociological methods in their writings, as has sociology utilized art history as a subject and influence of study. One prominent sociological text that engages with the arts is Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*. In the book, Becker maps the social relations between the many individuals that construct an art piece and poses the question of what makes something art. Though Becker is a sociologist, he must to engage with formalism in order to describe the world of art and how formal qualities are segmented by different career fields, such as the people who make paints.<sup>19</sup> Becker argues against the claim that art is only informed by sentiment and skill, and asserts that art is involved in a social system that dictates its

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<sup>18</sup> Riggle, Nicolas Alden. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces."

<sup>19</sup> "Formalism describes the critical position that the most important aspect of a work of art is its form – the way it is made and its purely visual aspects – rather than its narrative content or its relationship to the visible world." Tate. "Formalism – Art Term." Tate. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/formalism>.

process and judgment.<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu also argues for art as a series of social relations in *The Rules of Art*.<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu draws upon the history of art and literature to argue that the content of a work is influenced by the writer's or artist's social history and social standing. He specifically utilizes the word *habitus*, which are dispositions that organize how a person interacts with and perceives the world. Therefore, art is never autonomous, but interacts with other social institutions. This social system includes the politics of cities and the influence of laws on art. Becker's text informs the relationship between the graffiti and the government in this essay.

Art Historian Rosalyn Deutsche also investigates the relationship between public art, residents, and the government. In *Evictions*, Deutsche protests against contemporary space as equal, to argue that the use of public space for public art requires the exclusion of certain populations. Deutsche utilizes social science methods in order to propose that conflict in public space does not undermine democracy, but rather is necessary for a more equitable society. Deutsche insists that "Spatial forms are social structures... It is recognized as social only in the sense that it meets the purportedly unified needs of aggregated individuals" (52).<sup>22</sup> The identity of the city has been repurposed to align with the utilitarian needs of the collective, which robs spaces of personal emotions and sentiment, in order to construct them as politically neutral sites governed by an unbiased, objective system. This ideology diminishes the role of those who transform and utilize the city according to personal preferences, such as graffiti writers who assert their place in public discourse through an intervention in space.

Deutsche describes these silenced populations, such as graffiti writers, as subject to evictions and exclusions, which the state rationalizes as a way to "homogenize public space by expelling specific differences ... to restore social harmony" (58).<sup>23</sup> The concept of "the public" is utilized as an "imprecise and embracing rubric" for adhering the city to the dominant practices of city governments. Deutsche explains that while governing forces, such as governments and capital, are allowed to represent collectivity, already displaced groups from the public sphere are viewed as individuals rebelling against the collective or the public, and the circumstances of their exclusion are reiterated by structures of power. Therefore, "As the globalization of space creates centers of decision making and power, it must expel people" (76).<sup>24</sup> Graffiti writers intervene in public space against the control of prepotent groups who define the visual character of space. As a result of their actions, graffiti writers are expelled indirectly from the public through the use of buffering, which eliminates works from the public eye. Writers are also subject to punishment through the mobilization of laws. Therefore, in consideration of graffiti, it is important to qualify the works in relation to their consequences of loss of freedom, and even the loss of life in the dangerous process of writing.

However, though graffiti is risky, writers push against the dominant forces of the government. Michel de Certeau and *The Practice of Everyday Life* provides the framework to consider ways in which citizens utilize "tactics" to circumvent the dominant role of "the city" in everyday life. De Certeau defines "strategies" as tools used by institutions of power, or the "producers" of society. Residents are positioned and controlled as "consumers" of the city as a unified whole. This "whole" is produced by institutions of power which organize to define the macro-level and identity of the city through law, city planning, schooling, etc. However, people utilize "tactics" in their everyday life to subvert the structure of the city, such as de Certeau's example of the urban walker that takes short cuts despite the rigid grid of cities. Graffiti can also be considered a tactic to dismantle the dominant aesthetic of the city as determined by the powers that be. De Certeau thinks of everyday life as using the rules of culture already in existence, without ever being completely determined by such rules. However, as this paper will demonstrate, the power earned through "tactics" can only survive for so long in contradiction to the norm, before they are absorbed by city structures.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Becker, Howard Saul. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. 1930-2002. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn. *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Chicago and Cambridge, Mass.: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts ; MIT Press, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

## Public Space

The empirical question of this study seeks to understand the relationship and thought processes of graffiti and public space. Public space is where citizenship comes alive and is experienced. The placement of the citizen at a site where they can see and be seen, allows for the creation of direct and indirect relationships that define public discourse.<sup>26</sup> As spaces become public and are subject to interactions with individuals and groups, they become more than geographical sites, and assume both a collective and personal history for each of the city's residents and visitors who encounter the place. Proshansky describes this sentiment of a space as "place identity": "a pattern of beliefs, feelings, and expectations regarding public spaces and places and, even more importantly, a dimension of competence relevant to how adequately the individual uses these physical settings as well as the appropriate strategies for successfully navigating through the settings" (167).<sup>27</sup> In other words, place identity involves a certain level of expectations for a place, which is subverted by the appearance of graffiti.

Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" provides a necessary and robust contemporary analysis of the public sphere. Fraser describes publicity as: "1) state-related; 2) accessible to everyone; 3) of concern to everyone; and 4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest. Each of these corresponds to a contrasting sense of 'privacy.' In addition, there are two other senses of 'privacy' hovering just below the surface here: 5) pertaining to private property in a market economy; and 6) pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life, including sexual life" (71).<sup>28</sup> Fraser describes the theory of Jürgen Habermas, one of the leading theorist of the public sphere, as one defined by talk: "It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state (57)".<sup>29</sup> Habermas's and many other texts describe the public and the limitations of the public as based on language, discussion, and argumentation. Though graffiti utilizes language, it expands the definition of public space to include a spatial dimension: the urban environment, with its walls, alleys, poles, etc. Habermas's focus on talk aligns with a civic republican view of publicity in which private interest are replaced by the common good through discourse: "merely private interests were to be inadmissible; inequalities of status were to be bracketed; and discussants were to deliberate as peers. The result of such discussion would be "public opinion" in the strong sense of a consensus about the common good" (59).<sup>30</sup> However, Fraser argues that private interests are not transformed into the common good, but that individuals leverage their power through discourse and debate so that private interests become the common good. Therefore, Fraser argues for a reorientation of the contemporary plurality of publics that is non-hierarchical, and allows for non-neutrality within the public sphere. Discourse should not be normalized according to certain tones and behaviors determined by powerful actors through laws, surveillance, and control. But people should be able to speak "in one's own voice" (69).<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that Fraser does not intend for the plurality of publics to only mean diversity in the number of publics, but people can and should participate in multiple publics, allowing for intercultural communication.

In response to the restrictions on the "public", Nancy Fraser also argues for counterpublics, such as graffiti. Rather than there being just one public sphere, Fraser insists that "On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics" (61).<sup>32</sup> Many under-resourced and disadvantaged groups have utilized counterpublics in order to find their voice in a space different from the ones

<sup>26</sup> Di Masso, Andrés. "Grounding Citizenship: Toward a Political Psychology of Public Space." *Political Psychology* 33, no. 1 (2012): 123-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41407024>.

<sup>27</sup> Proshansky, Harold M. "The city and self-identity." *Environment and Behavior* 10, no. 2 (1978): 147-169.

<sup>28</sup> Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 56.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

dominated by capital and the social norms of white masculinity. In these spaces which Fraser coins as “subaltern counterpublics”, people of color and women are able to formulate their identity in relation to the public sphere, rather than within and in accordance with the state’s control and surveillance of identity. Counterpublics function as a response to dominant forms of being. In the same respect as de Certeau’s theory of everyday life, counterpublics utilize the guidelines of culture, without being completely determined by such guidelines. Graffiti acts as a counterpublic, but takes on a spatial dimension, as said previously. This leads to a different relationship to the government and capital than other counterpublics, because graffiti intervenes and asserts itself in public space: the realm of human interaction and discourse. Graffiti disturbs the aesthetic and political form of the public by transforming the physical landscape of the city and poaching on the dominant power of state and capital over public and private space.

However, perhaps, the solution of counterpublics is too simplistic. David J. Madden proposes not only counterpublics, but publicity with democracy as a solution to the privatization of public space in *Revisiting the End of Public Space*. Madden writes, “It seems likely that North American cities will increasingly be the sites not (or not only) of enclosed atria and guarded shopping malls but rather of publicity without democracy—a concept of the public that speaks of access, expression, inclusion, and creativity but which nonetheless is centered upon surveillance, order, and the bolstering of corporate capitalism” (188). “Strategies” implemented for a safer public also function to exclude “undesirables” from interacting with public spaces. These people are usually the target of surveillance by governmental bodies and institutions of power. Therefore, Madden writes that the answer to these strategies is not more public space, which either segregates the public or advances the goals of a surveillance state, but rather a reorganization of public space.<sup>33</sup>

## Methods

The data presented in this paper is sourced from 13 interviews with 10 graffiti writers/street artists, 2 curators of street art/graffiti, and 1 documenter of graffiti. The project began as a comparison between graffiti writers and street artists and their respective frameworks for site selection. Therefore, both populations are represented in my interviews. Three of my respondents identified as women, with only one of the female respondents identifying as a street artist. These interviews were formal and conducted at either a café, the interviewee’s residence, the interviewee’s studio, or a university classroom. Each of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour long, and were recorded if permitted. I took notes to accompany each of the interviews. The transcription services of Verbal Ink were employed to transcribe 9 interviews. As a result of the fact that graffiti is regarded as deviant behavior and the lack of the readily available access to graffiti writers and street artists, I utilized ‘snowball’ sampling, where respondents direct me to future respondents. I recruited respondents by researching graffiti writers and street artists around Chicago. I emailed either their representation or the writers/artists directly in order to schedule an interview. My respondents were based in the Chicago area, and had previously worked in Pilsen.

I utilized an interview guide for the project. My questions focused on: 1) Their interests in graffiti/street art, 2) The difficulties and benefits of both forms, 3) Where artists/writers choose to display their art, 4) Their relationship to the city in relation to their work, and 5) The uniqueness of the city wall as material. The questions were developed to provide information about 1) writers’/artists’ attraction to their work as public mediums, and 2) the determining factors of site selection for both practices. Foot traffic, “hard to buff”, public space arose as common trends of site selection in the interviews, under the concept of “risk”. As the project began to take form around the concept of beauty, I changed my interview guide to include questions on: 1) The city’s beautification efforts, 2) What makes a beautiful mural or graffiti work? The data was coded according to three premises: the first level of coding the data was for interesting themes or quotes; the second level of coding the data was for how graffiti writers and street artists utilized and consider public space, and the third level of coding was for how graffiti writers and street artists navigate beautification efforts. After coding according to these three premises, I developed the categories for the paper and grouped quotes according to the categories.

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<sup>33</sup> Madden, David J. "Revisiting the End of Public Space: Assembling the Public in an Urban Park." *City & Community* 9, no. 2 (June 2010): 187-207.

Coded quotes were organized by 1) the profession of the interviewee and 2) the writer's or artist's pseudonym. The restructuring of the project's focus on graffiti required another level of coding that distinguished between quotes relating to 1) graffiti and 2) street art or murals. All interviewee names were changed in order to protect the respondents' privacy.

## Data/ Results

On a winter day in January, I had stepped out of my ride from Hyde Park onto the corner of 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Halsted, in the neighborhood of Pilsen. As I looked down 16<sup>th</sup> Street in either direction, I observed rows of street art and graffiti lining the underpass which bordered the Metra (Illinois Central) train tracks. My goal for this excursion was to take a picture of every piece of public art that I saw. About an hour into the project, I bargained with myself to take only some pictures. Little did I know that the task I had assigned myself was immense. Art, writing, and private interventions into public space were everywhere in Pilsen. On walls, near stores, in alleys, on doors, on lampposts and garbage bins. Another layer of the city existed in the form of works of graffiti and street art, and this differed from the controlled public spaces administered by private businesses or governmental bodies. Rather, the transformation of the city space acts as both evidence and remnant of the intervention of individuals, rather than organizational or bureaucratic agencies. However, it is important to note that the social aspect of graffiti is inextricable from the formal qualities of the work. Therefore, these next sections explore the use of expectations, architecture, and site specificity in order to highlight how graffiti as a form has a complicated relationship to public space, which is characterized by both its reliance and antagonism to the cityscape.<sup>34 35</sup>

## Foot traffic

Grffiti writers seek locations with a high level of foot traffic, and categorize places with this attribute as prime tagging or writing spots. Spaces such as trains, buses, and commercial walls that are transitory and interact with a variety of people, have a long history in graffiti with some writers solely work within these spaces. The definition of foot traffic in a graffiti context can be segmented into both static and temporal interactions. Temporal interactions refer to trains, buses, and other moveable objects. Graffiti on these objects adopts their migration patterns. Static interactions refer to city walls and city objects, in which the work is restricted to a singular geographic location. However, in both these instances, it is important to note that the audience is not still. Unlike a gallery or museum where viewers encounter the artwork in the context of an artistic institution and as individuals with a specific artistic purpose, the audience of public art may not purposefully approach a site as a result of the artwork. Rather, the site holds many different functions concurrently, which inadvertently attracts viewers to graffiti for a variety of reasons. The audience then is responding to the multiple socio-political norms of a singular public space. However, graffiti writers have a particular interaction with public space, because of the illegality and invisibility of their practice. Graffiti is two dimensional, and does not take up space as a mass, but rather reorients and changes the surface of the object. However, the ability to notice graffiti is affected by its invisibility both in form and as a legitimate artistic practice. Therefore, the increased foot traffic and eyes on a project help writers mitigate the invisibility of graffiti to its audience.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Each section is divided between the data or interviews, and the results or analysis.

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that even those all these attributes are important for site selection, some graffiti writers favor certain elements over others. For example, writers who work within abandoned buildings favor risk over foot traffic. Therefore, the quality of a site is defined across a spectrum, and each attribute listed below can hold a high or low importance.

<sup>36</sup> This is not always true, as there are documenters, writers, other artists, and even civilians who purposefully seek and notice graffiti. Though magazines and zines existed, with the advent of chat rooms and the efficiency of digital graffiti documentation and distribution, images of works are able to be shared almost instantaneously,

As an illegitimate and illegal artistic practice according to governmental bodies, the city seeks to remove graffiti from public space. The ephemeral nature of graffiti increases foot traffic and the number of viewers in a short time period. Though graffiti operates outside of governmental structures, writers still act on a desire for fame and recognition. They seek to assert their identity in public space, as a way to intervene in the lives of the city's residents and gain viewership. Multiple interviewees refer to this need as ego, or a writer's self-importance. In my interview with graffiti writer Juan, he says:

*Interviewer:* What do you think attracts people to tagging their name over and over again?

*Interviewee:* Ego.

*Interviewer:* You think it's ego?

*Interviewee:* It is. Every graffiti writer is egotistical somehow. Why? Because like everyone wants to see their name out there and other people to see their name out there, you know what I'm saying? Why would you do that? For an ego. You want people to know that that was you painting out there, that you did that up there, that you did that graffiti, that you busted that tag, that you did that burner over there. Yeah, that's why. Like it's different for everyone though, you know? But everyone does it, I feel, because for their ego.

The previously cited reasons for foot traffic, to confute invisibility and ephemerality, can be attributed to the need of writer's work to achieve recognition, which increases the esteem of a writer. This fits with Juan's use of the word "ego" and the need for acknowledgment by larger structures of power. The desire to reach out to strangers reflects the invisibility of many of these young people by society. Juan speaks of his desire for others to know his work and circulate his name:

"Taking off subway like station signs and putting new ones in and things like that. Putting out messages. Some people put out messages. I was just putting up my name, and that was it. Just wanted to keep getting up, as they say, maybe keep getting up, keep your name in the scene, keep your name out there in people's mouths. That's what it was."

To consider graffiti both a culture and a practice also means to consider graffiti as involving human actors who are driven by certain motivators related to social worth and value. However, these motivators involve a level of risk, for foot traffic increases the possibility of the writer being caught by authorities during their process of writing. Therefore, writers must balance their need for invisibility with foot traffic in order to make their work, rather than their bodies, visible. Ken speaks of how the writers think about their own invisibility in relation to the visibility of their work and how this works upon the audience:

"You know, you come up with your own name, you come up with your own, you know, set of letters that you know you're gonna wanna write and, you know, if you do your job right people will start to take notice and wonder who this person is, but it's that satisfaction of knowing that you did this certain act that are reaching strangers that you don't know, that are talking about your shit, right?"

As the public audience begins to notice and question the identity of graffiti writers, the audience must associate works and fame not with the personhood of writers, but with their art. The ability of writers to be graffiti writers in public is affected by graffiti's illegality. Writers must live with the satisfaction that someone somewhere is talking about their work, without knowledge of the connotations or content of comments. They must satisfy themselves with this type of recognition, that is not based on the judgment of their work, but rather the act of seeing or discussing the work, no matter the viewer's tone. Furthermore, the invisibility of writers forgoes the possibility of acknowledgement for and by the writer. Judgment is influenced by the government's aversion to graffiti, and writers are limited in the discussion of their work in the public sphere, because it is illegal and

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making it easier for a more purposeful audience to intentionally approach and interact with works from across the world.

deviant from the norms of public space. However, when graffiti is displayed in the public, how does it affect and interact with its audience?

### *Expectations and Space*

Figure 5<sup>37</sup>



As previously discussed, graffiti influences and transforms expectations of the cityscape through its interactions with its audience. Viewers who encounter graffiti must conduct specific forms of intellectual labor to engage with and recognize the work, as written information is not present about the author or the making process. In the tag above, there are three parts that form the image: the tag, the lamp post, and the surrounding scenery. The tag and the lamppost form the foreground of the image, while the surrounding scenery serves as the aesthetic and social background and grounding element of the image. In graffiti, the writing is the art form, but the cityscape serves as its canvas, specifically the surface of urban objects, and generally, the geographical and urban sentiment of the site. Each part of the image is a facet of the other, with their meaning and forms interacting with one another to a point in which they are irremovable from one another. When Riggle wrote his article on Street Art, he pointed to the inextricable link between the social world and formal qualities in public art.<sup>38</sup> The city surface which holds the social, political, and economic connotations of the site becomes both the material and the medium which produces the work, in that the work is always constructed in relation to the cityscape. Therefore, the form and effect of graffiti extends past writing, forming a *gestalt*<sup>39</sup> that includes the social and temporal interactions of viewers and the work. The *gestalt* of graffiti, which incorporates the city, highlights that writers are able to form a relationship with the urban environment and urban bureaucracy that is built not purely on antagonism, but also on reliance.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Riggle, Nicolas Alden. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces."

<sup>39</sup> Gestalt: something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts. "Gestalt." Merriam-Webster. Accessed March 16, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gestalt>.

As described by de Certeau, the city bureaucracy and officials establishes the dominant character of the urban environment.<sup>40</sup> Graffiti writer Carlos reflects on how expectations of the city prevent people from noticing him while he is tagging:

- Interviewer:* And how did you decide where to tag? Was it like a very – did you have a process of where you wanted to do tagging or was it just wherever?
- Interviewee:* It was more of a bunch of impromptu – more trying to find the right opportunities to get away with doing it, so then you start to pick up a keen awareness of public space and also how people behave in public or selective viewing, so I just started to know I could do tags in front of people and they wouldn't see it just because they wouldn't be expecting to look for it, to begin with.
- Interviewer:* Oh. So you could tag on the sidewalk and people would kind of not pay attention?
- Interviewee:* Mm-hmm.
- Interviewer:* So, when you tag in front of people, was that, I guess, a sort of place that was more viable or more sought after than, I guess, somewhere else where people couldn't see it?
- Interviewee:* Yeah, 'cause you're getting more foot traffic.

As Proshanky argues in his work on place-identity, people have expectations of space, which are heavily influenced by urban socio-political structures that control overarching and large scale decisions of public space.<sup>41 42</sup> These decisions are structurally controlled and normalized. The structure has varying degrees of success, and it is not uncommon for it to be subverted by persons involved in the government for personal gain. However, despite the variations in the process of urban change, the City of Chicago is a complex system that involves requirements relating to zoning, courts, aldermen, and sanctions. In this system, objects are built and torn down according to certain rules, which affects the everyday visual system of urbanites who interact with certain structures and objects every day, whether passively or directly. These city residents have certain expectations for the spaces they encounter. However, the intervention of graffiti complicates these spatial and temporal expectations, such as when they encounter something in the city, through the conflation of two distinct dimensionalities: writing and “sculpture”. Juan puts it this way:

“Yeah, so to me that was awesome because now like I'm forcing them to interact. Like they're wasting their time now because time is precious. Now they took time out of their precious life to interact with this piece whether they liked it or disliked it. When they're disliking it and they're tearing it, they took time from their day to sit there and scrape and write over it. Even if they like go over there and draw over it, like even if they want to dis my piece and someone went and started writing over it, I got them to react. That's what it is. I got them to react.”

The combination of an urban object and graffiti intervenes in the space, drawing the interest of the viewer. For those who choose to stay and look at graffiti, the schedule of the viewer and their actions, whether walking or sitting, has been interrupted by the artwork. As a lamppost and a three-dimensional piece, the formal qualities of the lamppost align with the questions of sculpture. The placement of the tag on the pole confronts the eyeline of the viewer as an intervention, because of its aesthetic and social difference from the lamppost as a two dimensional work. In this relation between the object and the audience, graffiti writing has established a new “front” of the piece, and has broached the question of frontality in urban art. The flatness and specific orientation of the two-dimensional writing establishes a distinct area of the urban object; this area becomes the front.

In *Passages on Modern Sculpture*, Rosalind Krauss's writings on sculpture can offer insight into how graffiti functions as an object and writing. Krauss analyzes the question of frontality in sculpture in relation to

<sup>40</sup> de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

<sup>41</sup> Proshansky, Harold M. “The city and self-identity.”

<sup>42</sup> de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

*Laocoon*.<sup>43</sup> Krauss writes, “Most important, the medium of relief links together the visibility of the sculpture with the comprehension of its meaning; because from the single viewing point, in front of the work, all the implications of gesture, all the significance of form, must naturally devolve. Relief thus makes it possible for the viewer to understand two reciprocal qualities simultaneously: the form as it evolves within the space of the relief ground and the meaning of the depicted moment in its historical context” (12). Unlike the work of a relief or painting, which establishes an eyeline and a front from which the viewer can grasp and interact with the work, sculpture as an object of three dimensions involves multiple sightlines and complicates the question of the front and back, which are both visible to the audience. The redirection of the eye of the audience and the direction of the cityscape is an important intervention and result of graffiti. Graffiti’s transformation of the “front” of an object indicates the dimensional tension between the object and writing. For urban objects with many pieces of graffiti writing, graffiti establishes multiple fronts, in which each piece of writing has achieved its own frontality in relation to the urban object.

For graffiti, the work does not unfold for the audience in only a moment. As a piece of writing and sculpture involved in a hidden and distinct process, time functions simultaneously as both present and historical. The process of the graffiti writing reveals itself through an inference concerning the placement of the body in space at the graffiti site. The removal of the author in the form of a physical being that the audience can directly interact with, forces the audience to rely on the work as the evidence and presence of the author. The work as the product and entity that intervenes and claims space, becomes both the actor and subject to the audience. This points to the fact that the judgment of graffiti involves many things not demonstrated by the immediate reception of the piece, such as risk and authorship, but rather elements that are a part of the process of the work. Therefore, in order to understand the *gestalt* of graffiti and its complexity, the audience must think of the work as a function of time. How was the writer able to get to the site, if it is billboard? How long will it take for the work to be buffed? These elements are not revealed in an instant, but rather, they demonstrate that graffiti involves an engagement with the past, present, and future of the piece in the process of judging beauty and success. For example, the coded lettering of graffiti creates a culture of those “in the know”, and those “out of the know”. Those in the know are able to attribute the certain tags, throwies, and pieces to a writer based on the content of the words and the style of lettering. The work is not always attributed to a writer in the literal sense (since even those “in the know” often don’t know the writer antecedently), but the “writer” is assumed and created through a social-aesthetic system that connects pieces together. This system extends to different parts of the city also creating a spatial network in conjunction with graffiti. Therefore, authorship emphasizes the fourth dimension of time, because the audience must act as active participants and utilize their interactions of the past to build a corpus for the writer in the present, which informs their interactions in the future with the writer’s work.

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<sup>43</sup> Krauss, Rosalind E. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. New York: Viking Press, 1977.

Figure 6 <sup>44</sup>Figure 7 <sup>45</sup>

Time becomes important for the framework writers utilize to decide the placement of artwork in public space, as many of these traits depend on the extension of a moment or artistic remnant as an indication of graffiti as a larger process. Graffiti incorporates the possibility of the work being viewed in passing and as instantaneous, but is also meant to follow the viewer after the initial consumption of the piece. In relation to graffiti, it is important to note that expectations are viewed in accordance with the state through the involvement of graffiti in the public sphere and the sentiment of public spaces, but also in contrast to the state, through the intervention of the two dimensionality of graffiti writing in the cityscape.

### *Site-Specificity*

In *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Miwon Kwon writing helps to provide insight into how to understand the site in graffiti. Kwon analyzes the politics of site specificity in art. Kwon thinks “site-specific art initially took the site as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a

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<sup>44</sup> Photo taken by author.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

unique combination of physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls and rooms; scale and proportion of plazas, buildings, or parks; existing conditions of lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; distinctive topographical features, and so forth” (11).<sup>46</sup> For site specific work, the artwork is dictated by the qualities of the site, absorbing itself into its location. As a result, the location becomes its prompt and its medium. Kwon contrasts site specificity to the absorption of the pedestal in modern sculpture to express sculpture’s “indifference to the site” (11).<sup>47</sup> However, in graffiti, the work relies on the site, and writers consider the connotations of the space they are tagging, making their work inextricable from the sentiment and social context of place.

The artist Richard Serra describes the intricacies of space and sentiment as: “The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their locations. The scale, the size, and the placement of sculptural elements result from an analysis of the particular environmental components of a given context” (74)<sup>48</sup>. The form of graffiti refutes the white cube of the art gallery and art museum. The white cube is a space that offers an illusion of control over viewership, by directing the eyes of the audience to pieces against room’s blankness. The fact that graffiti does not take place in the gallery, but in public space, complicates the writer’s interaction with the audience. Though in contemporary art there is an understanding of the political and social implications of the audience in the work, for writers such as John, this is a distinguishing factor of graffiti. John says:

“Wow, this is all mine. And there’s also the – it’s always in the back of your mind that you’re doing something – it’s not just for you. It’s for everybody who is gonna see it. I think that there has to be a give and take in public that doesn’t exist in the studio. I think when you’re in the studio, you can do whatever you want. Someone else will decide whether it belongs somewhere else, you know. Whether it be a curator from a gallery or a museum, someone else is gonna make that decision for you. When you’re doing something on a wall, you’re the one making a decision. You’re curating something for the public. You’re the one that is making the decision that everybody else is gonna be forced to look at what you did. So, with that said, I think that there is a certain amount of responsibility to not – of like, I wouldn’t want to offend anybody with any artwork.” - John

Though the contemporary art scene is much more complicated than what John describes, he insists that the writer cannot be isolated, and must consider others when dealing with subject matter and public space. John acknowledges that graffiti serves others, and insists that public art makes a decision for what everyone must see. However, the writer is not a totalizing force over space; public space pushes back. The writer can write and plan

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<sup>46</sup> Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. An example of the intricacies of site specificity is Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), which was removed after many years of protest from its location in Federal Plaza in 1989. Kwon writes, “At the same time, despite the artist’s ardent efforts to maintain a certain “uselessness” for his sculpture (or actually because of this), *Tilted Arc* was instrumentalized by its opponents as a symbol of the overbearing imposition of the federal government (the sponsor of the sculpture) in the lives of “ordinary” citizens and “their” spaces. In the end, the removal of *Tilted Arc* was characterized as tantamount to the reclaiming of public space by the “community”—narrowly defined as those living or working in the immediate neighborhoods around Federal Plaza” (80). The audience who lived or worked in close proximity to Federal Plaza acted as representative of the public sphere. They characterized the sculpture as a wrongful intervention, despite this being the purpose of the author. Serra utilized public space, and as a result must engage with public discourse, where many people deemed his work as “useless”. This essentialist argument of public space and what public space should be used for, reflects the politics surrounding graffiti. Graffiti broaches the argument of the city’s purpose and audience. However, Graffiti must always act in relation to the dominant form of the cityscape, such as city planning, police, etc. Serra and writers must compete with definitions of public space that focus on purpose and non-interventionist uses of space.

his artwork, but the multiple interactions of public space such as leaning against the wall by passers-by, buffing, and even actions not directly related to the wall such as snow or a truck in front of the work, changes the image by altering the organization of public space. In these cases, the ephemeral nature of place and people in the public becomes a factor that influences the work and transforms the pure intention of the author.

As a result of the different sentiments interacting with the site, it is important to emphasize the characterization of the site as not only geographical, but also as what Kwon calls a discursive space.<sup>49</sup> An alteration in one of the elements of graffiti completely transforms the effect of the whole. As an art form involved in public space, graffiti becomes irremovable from the influence of public spatial discourse and its institutions, such as community groups and municipal governments. However, the influence of these agencies is not singular, and many different sites can influence the image of the tag, because of the fact that the tag is reproduced throughout the city. Kwon writes, “Contrary to the earlier conception of site specificity, the current museological and commercial practices of re-fabricating (in order to travel) once site-bound works make transferability and mobilization new norms for site specificity” (38).<sup>50</sup> The ability to transfer public art from site to site is a common element in contemporary public art according to Kwon. The tag is multiple in its nature through the transitory nature of its “presence”: illegality, mystery, etc. Writers can tag multiple places, and multiple tags can exist in the city at one time. Therefore, graffiti must engage with the sentiment of public space and participate in the discourse of not one, but its various sites.

With the multiplicity of public space and the audience of graffiti in mind, I turn to the Claire Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”<sup>51</sup> in which she criticizes Nicholas Bourriard’s formulation of *Relational Art*.<sup>52</sup> Bourriard describes a dominant form of contemporary art that he calls relational art: “a set of artistic practices, which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (113).<sup>53</sup> Therefore, relational art bases itself on the experiences and definitions of the collective, rather than the isolated experiences of the individual. The meaning of an artwork originates and takes form in the public realm. The artist must be aware of the social in order to achieve a sense of collectivity in the audience’s interactions with their work.<sup>54</sup> In this act, the artist produces an audience bonded by the requirement of the exercise of collective memory required by the artwork. Bishop describes Bourriard’s paradigm as: “this audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be” (54).<sup>55</sup> As a result, the artist is bonded to the audience of the artwork, and the context/audience that the work produces. Bishop’s objection to Bourriard arises from Bourriard totalizing the relationships of relational aesthetics as inherently good, without a proper analysis of how these relationships fit into a spectrum. Bishop’s critique argues that collectivity and democracy are not always the same thing for all people. Rather, the push towards democracy often times leave others behind, as Deutsche writes in *Evictions*.<sup>56</sup> Bishop asks: “what does “democracy” really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?” (65).<sup>57</sup> The collective in relation to graffiti can be restrictive and work against the ideals of the graffiti writer as a person utilizing territory to assert identity. When speaking of the collective, one must be aware of the power structures involved in collectivity that Fraser describes. She argues that publicity has become a matter of the elite influencing the collective, rather than vice versa. Therefore, the collective can limit the writer’s ability to

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<sup>49</sup> Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bishop, Claire. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October*, 110, 51-79.

<sup>52</sup> Bourriard, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. [Dijon]: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Bishop, Claire. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.

<sup>56</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn. *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*.

<sup>57</sup> Bishop, Claire. (2004). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.

express themselves.<sup>58</sup> Graffiti will never be able to avoid the collective meanings of site, but it is important to note that interactions with the public are not always democratic. Therefore, writers are always in tension with the public and the public's expectations of public space, influenced by the city bureaucracy, which leaves no space for and illegalizes graffiti. Though foot traffic is desired, it also is characterized by the public which can reflect and be influenced by the state, which graffiti is constantly in relationship with via the site.

## Hard to buff

### *Data*

As a result, of the illegality of graffiti and the buff squad in Chicago, many writers choose places that are hard to buff. Hard to buff does not equate to places that few people interact with. Rather, graffiti writers maintain their desire for foot traffic, while placing their work in physically hard to reach places. Therefore, it is important to note that foot traffic and hard to buff areas are not incompatible characteristics, and writers try to target places in which the two traits coexist. This translates to tall or high spaces as ideal places to tag or write, such as billboards, the top of warehouses, etc.

Chicago has a particular history of effective buffing, which requires the placement of work in spaces that are hard to buff in order for the piece, and graffiti in general, to remain in public space. Many American cities had high densities of graffiti, in which graffiti used to "cover" the city. However, with the introduction of the buff, the removal of graffiti became a regular occurrence and the ephemerality of work was incorporated into the practice "as part of the game". Chicago currently uses "blast trucks" that apply high pressured baking soda to remove graffiti. The Chicago buff receives its distinctness from the particular brown paint of the "paint trucks" in the city.<sup>59</sup> In John's description of the paint buff, he states:

*Interviewee:* There was also I don't know if I'm saying this right – there's like this kind of depressing like – it's like a staple of the city, color of paint. It's like this –

*Interviewer:* The brown.

*Interviewee:* It's this brown paint that they use to cover graffiti that I always felt like that was just way more offensive than the actual graffiti. Because it was a combination of like – it was like a symbol of the powers that be going over young people. Like kind of shutting their voice off and amplifying their voice with blotches.

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<sup>58</sup> Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy."

<sup>59</sup> "Streets and Sanitation (DSS)." City of Chicago: Graffiti Removal Services. Accessed March 13, 2018. [https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti\\_blasters/svcs/mayor\\_daley\\_s\\_graffitiblasters.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti_blasters/svcs/mayor_daley_s_graffitiblasters.html).

Figure 8<sup>60</sup>

The buff acts as the physical manifestation of the contradiction between the state and writers. As John describes, the buff symbolizes the power of the city to silence graffiti in a tangible manner, rather than solely through discourse and laws. It demonstrates that governments can actualize their ideals as a result of their resources to control and transform physical space.

The incorporation of the buff in graffiti practice displays the inability of writers to fight this process. Writers such as Ken critique other writers who do not understand the buff or try to fight the buff:

*Interviewer:* So when it comes to, like, buffing your work, I mean after going through all this trouble, you've tagged, you've climbed something – and then it gets buffed...?

*Interviewee:* That's part of the game. I'm so used to it. I mean I just – I was really – my mistake growing up here is not documenting everything properly.

*Interviewer:* It's so fast here, too.

*Interviewee:* Yeah. And for a wall that took me, like, six or seven hours. Like, as long as I have a picture I don't really care. You could paint over it the next day. I don't give a shit. Other people are, like, lose their mind over it, but I'm just like, you know, how are you not used to this by now? It makes me think that you're a rookie if you're not used to it.

Writers must approach their work and practice with knowledge of the inevitable occurrence of buffing and removal. Each artwork has a life span depending on the timeframe provided by the commissioner of the work or Chicago's graffiti removal service. Works can stay up for a month, a week, or even a few hours. Other mediums, such as fine art, and even video, seek preservation. Art distribution and institutions rely on conservation technologies in maintaining the originality of artworks. However, graffiti as a medium in public space on the surface of urban objects and architecture is already at the whim of social processes outside of the control of the writer, such as property rights and real estate, where new owners can remove a graffiti work. Therefore, conservation in the strictest sense is almost impossible. The lifespan of graffiti is limited, rather than an extended static form of the work through conservation science. The removal or destruction of the work acts as the end of graffiti's process. Writers do get upset, as mentioned by Ken, at the removal or buffing of large scale or intricate works. However, the solution has been not for writers to ignore buffing, but rather to make it an intrinsic factor of their process that allows for a reuse of space.

<sup>60</sup> Photo taken by author.

The politics of conservation surrounding graffiti is changing as graffiti writers gain more popularity and legitimacy from Chicago and other municipal governments. Writers are receiving commissions and participating in legal projects all over the country. The invisibility of the writer and visibility of the state, put in place by the ideals of the state and its antagonism to graffiti, allows for city governments to control the narrative surrounding graffiti and public space.<sup>61</sup> It is less feasible for graffiti writers to participate in public discourse, because of graffiti's invisibility, and the possible legal repercussions from the city. Therefore, in order for writers to achieve visibility, they must associate with and leverage the visibility of the city bureaucracy, through public work projects.<sup>62</sup>

## Results

In *“Visibility. A Category for the Social Sciences”*, Andrea Brighenti writes “Thus power can be conceived as a form of external visibility (visibility of effects) associated with internal invisibility (invisibility of identification): the effects of power are visible to everyone, but what power is, in its essence, where it is really located, will not be disclosed”.<sup>63</sup> This quote provides the framework for considering visibility in relation to graffiti. The aesthetic visibility of pieces is open to anyone who happens to walk past the wall or urban object, but the invisibility of its process is known to a few. The city space acts as a perceptible canvas for people with power and capital, while other disadvantaged populations are ignored and silenced through a lack of resources and political power. This is a result of the larger social processes of governments serving the powerful in tangible and visible ways, such as zoning conditions, advertisements, and donation plaques. The government holds the right to broker space in the city as a result of the scarcity of space in urban environments. Space becomes a determining factor of granting the city government the ability to decide who has visibility in the urban space, while also deciding how they want space to reflect the goals of the city.

Buffing diminishes the actual visibility of the work through the use of brown paint to cover the tags and pieces on the city wall. Though buffing can take other forms, such as powerwashing, a common trait in Chicago is the use of brown or white paint to cover graffiti. Paint and powerwashing have different meanings and produce different effects on city audiences. Rather than remove the evidence of the existence of graffiti through powerwashing, the paint buff creates a relationship between the aesthetic of the city and the writer. Rather than literal removal, the paint buff acts as a layer of removal through addition by covering the physical legibility of the tag. Therefore, city officials diminish the assertion of graffiti in public space by making the paint buff the site of visibility. People utilize paint to signal the prevalence and legitimacy of their voice. The illegibility of graffiti by buff paint acts as a reminder of the control of the city government over space. However, graffiti relies on this privilege in order to reset the city wall as a canvas. The paint acts as a response to graffiti work, and functions to cover graffiti, rather than as an entity with its own content and context. In other words, the use of paint asserts visibility as a denial of the existence of graffiti.

However, the presence of graffiti is maintained because its presence is known by the use of the brown paint which holds the connotation of graffiti removal. Buff paint functions as a signal of the aesthetic and political differences between the government and writers. Ken utilizes the word erasing in his description of buffing: “There's nothing that would justify putting me in jail for writing on something that you're gonna buff anyway, that's erasable, you know?” Ken's statement on the consequences of graffiti could be argued, but his use of the word “erase” is important. “To erase” signals that the work is never truly removed from the site and maintains traces of its presence. This occurs both visually and socially, through the transformation of public

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<sup>61</sup> It is also important to note that the personal opinions of urban residents also help to determine negative collective attitudes toward graffiti. The state and residents form a symbiotic relationship in relation to the aesthetic and political attitudes of the city. Therefore, it is more complicated than the city forcing its opinion on residents, but rather existing governmental structures allow for a level of communication between the state and its residents.

<sup>62</sup> See “Beautification” Section

<sup>63</sup> Brighenti, Andrea M. 2007. “Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences.” *Current Sociology* 55, no. 3: 323–342.

space and “place identity” by graffiti. The buff signals that the city is not only an urban space, but can also act as a canvas for its residents where things must be “erased”.

In the context of graffiti, it is important to connect visibility to legibility. Graffiti is legible for other graffiti writers, but its conceptual lettering makes the work illegible for a larger audience. The letters of graffiti reside between abstraction and common lettering, affecting both the purpose of graffiti and its content. What does it say? Is it supposed to say anything? In relation to creating graffiti for the public, Carlos writes:

- Interviewee:* Yeah. It's like a fine dance in legibility, really.
- Interviewer:* Mm-hmm.
- Interviewee:* So I'm trying to put enough signifiers in here for graffiti writers to be able to pick up on but also trying to keep it legible for just normal civilians to be able to read.
- Interviewer:* Mm-hmm. So would you say that there's a language then? That's –
- Interviewee:* Oh, definitely. Like a graffiti vernacular?
- Interviewer:* Mm-hmm.
- Interviewee:* For sure.
- Interviewer:* And what are some – do you have an example of something that's graffiti vernacular?
- Interviewee:* So these kinds of serifs, that come off here. These break off. Sort of it's they're cracks...

Graffiti functions as a counterpublic that necessarily operates in secrecy as a result of its illegality, but also as a way to preserve its culture and interactions with others.<sup>64</sup> Writers insist that graffiti is not meant for everyone and tries to maintain its exclusivity, for which it relies on its antagonistic relationship with the state and the characterization of graffiti as dangerous and invisible. Writers also rely on the city and buffing to reset the cityspace for the creation of more works.

The city is always changing, and writers relies on the buff for change, as they do not want the city always covered in the same graffiti. On the other hand, the city utilizes the buff, because they do not want a high density of graffiti in the city. Surprisingly, many of my interviewees agreed with or understood these concerns, such as David who said:

- Interviewee:* Well, Chicago's getting a little better. I mean, this year's their self-proclaimed year of public art. I suppose – I was kind of expecting to see more of that displayed up to now, but I know Wabash Arts Corridor is doing something with public artists. It's getting better, but I think they could do a lot better. I think a lot of cities, like Los Angeles and New York, are kind of ahead of Chicago and embracing public art. It's getting there 'cause I think they're kind of slowly – I mean, I know there's a lot more attention on public artists nowadays, and I've noticed that. And I think – and the city's also noticing that too, but it hasn't budged on walls yet.
- Interviewer:* Why do you think they haven't budged yet?
- Interviewee:* 'Cause I think they just don't wanna cause a shitstorm of artists, all of a sudden, just ... turning it into another Detroit or something, you know. Not that Detroit is not that attractive. It looks beautiful. There's some really great work out there. But they haven't budged yet.

John also agrees with David's statement on the detriments of a city noticeably covered in graffiti:

“I mean, I get it. like not everybody wants to see graffiti all over the place. Some people want things to be clean.”

Therefore, as the city regulates space through the law and powers that de Certeau describes, the city also regulates the space of graffiti through a symbiotic relationship of resetting graffiti space. Graffiti writers rely on

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<sup>64</sup> Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere".

the government to cover up former works, in order for allow for new pieces and tags in the space. Therefore, graffiti writers can remain visible for some time, but can never obtain true ownership over property, because the government holds the right to cover writing if it is on public or private property not owned by the writer. Graffiti writers fight back by writing over the buff, but also rely on the buff to provide more space for writers. Graffiti and municipal governments have a tug of war over ownership and visibility, as writers and the city layer paint. However, similar to foot traffic, the ability to assert identity through graffiti in the city, relies on, utilizes, and is always in relation to the city bureaucracy which administers the city space.

## Public Space

### *Data*

Public Space is another requirement for the site of graffiti. As previously said, graffiti writers prefer places with high levels of foot traffic and a low possibility of buffing. Private property, such as a house, can be considered the opposite of these traits, because a traditional private space such as a business or house where writers could be accused of trespassing has a restricted audience. For example, residential spaces mostly attract people invited by the residents or with a relationship to the residents, limiting the amount of foot traffic for that particular site. On the other hand, commercial spaces are technically private, because they are not owned by the state. But, businesses have a high amount of foot traffic, because many face the street and attract a variety of people because of their particular services. Therefore, the framework for graffiti site selection can apply to both public and private sites. Private property has a higher possibility of being buffed, because of the personal responsibility involved in private property, and bureaucratic expedience. The City of Chicago places private property buffs high on their list of priorities, and have increased the efficacy of buffing these spaces.<sup>65</sup> In fact, Chicago's graffiti removal program is targeted toward private property owners.<sup>66</sup>

The complicated nature of "private space" in the context of graffiti indicates that public space is not defined as the exact opposite of private space. Rather, the definition of public space incorporates spaces that can be defined as private, because public space in relation to graffiti utilizes criteria that extends beyond laws and personal ownership. Writers define public space not on the basis of what the government deems public, but on capital and power. Therefore, government institutions and major businesses are public; excluded from public space are schools and small businesses. This statement is not without exceptions, as writers define public space according to their own understanding of publicity and capital. For some writers, a small business might hold power and therefore be subject to tagging and graffiti. When speaking on public space, many interviewees spoke of the places they would not tag, and their moral philosophy of space and writing:

*Interviewer:* And is there anywhere that you feel that you wouldn't tag or you wouldn't want to?

*Interviewee:* Personal property. Wouldn't tag on anybody's house. Any religious buildings.

*Interviewer:* Would you tag stores?

*Interviewee:* Yeah, if they were chains and stuff. - **Carlos**

*Interviewer:* Yeah, is there any place you won't tag?

*Interviewee:* Any place I will not tag

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Interviewee:* A church. Any holy place. Not necessarily Christian. Anywhere that people worship, that's off limits. That makes no sense.

*Interviewer:* Superstitious?

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<sup>65</sup> See "History" section.

<sup>66</sup> "Graffiti Removal Program." City of Chicago :: Graffiti Removal Program. Accessed March 13, 2018. [https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti\\_blasters.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/graffiti_blasters.html).

*Interviewee:* No – you know, not even superstitious. Just people – I think people need their God, man, you know. And if they feel that someone is dissing their God, that’s so insulting. I don’t want to be a part of that. - **John**

*Interviewer:* And are there any places you usually don't [tag]? You try to avoid?

*Interviewee:* I won't hit up businesses or people's houses.

*Interviewer:* Mm-hmm.

*Interviewee:* I think that's kind of a dick move. If it's a building that belongs to, you know, a – it's hard to explain. I mean, I won't do somebody's front doorstep, you know. I mean, I've seen people do that, you know, tag somebody's front doorstep. It's like, “You asshole.” - **David**

These writers assert they would not tag churches and “personal property”. Juan says, “I wouldn't like go write on someone's house or anything because I wouldn't want them to write on my shit.” As a resident of the city and a participant in systems of ownership and capitalism, Juan values and respects personal property, because he can empathize with his possible targets, as he is someone who also owns things. He would not want anyone to transform and write on his stuff, so he does not do it to others. David agrees with Juan and describes tagging private property as rude. He said:

*Interviewer:* Why specifically would you not hit up someone's house or...

*Interviewee:* Well, it kinda leaves a big stigma. I mean, you don't want your name to be known as that dick that tagged some grandma's garage, you know. I'd think I wanna – I want it to be as public as possible or want more of a public place versus – or, you know, a mom-and-pop store, you know, some local business, I don't wanna tag their – unless they give me like permission wall, you know, then, yeah. But, I mean, if it's a corporate building or if it's really public, then, yeah, I'll hit it, but, I mean, if it's somebody's property that's a little more personal, then I probably won't.

David’s definition of public space is based on an analysis of power and capital. Corporations might be housed in private spaces, or their offices may not be the site of a high amount of foot traffic, but their power and capital puts graffiti into conversation with the underresourced and underserved verses those with power. Therefore, in terms of space, high foot traffic and public space can apply to a specific context, such as high foot traffic of shop-goers by tagging a community grocery store, rather than high foot traffic from the city as a whole.

Figure 9<sup>67</sup>

David's attitude is also influenced by existing social norms based on respect of personal property. Despite the contradiction of the state and graffiti, graffiti is not completely removed from collective social structures and the laws that reinforce them. For example, Ken defines tagging personal property as an act of vandalism, "If I was drunk maybe or if I hated the person that was living there I would write on their shit just to be a dick. That's what most vandals would do, you know?" The use of the word vandal is interesting in this context, because Ken had not used it in the interview before this point. In this statement, he differentiates between graffiti and forms of vandalism. The act of tagging someone's property is vandalism, because it is personal and vengeful, versus graffiti which is based on sites of collective memory. Therefore, writers emphasize the use of public space as the physical premise of public discourse in their work. They target places with a more elusive "owner". Spaces where multiple people are involved in the decision making and maintenance, such as trains or big box stores. Therefore, despite more practical reasons for public space, such as foot traffic and being harder to buff, the reasoning for graffiti in public space also derives from the belief that public space belongs to everyone, and writers have the "right" to insert themselves as part of the public sphere. Public space not only reaches a variety of people, but limits offense by expanding the site and field of interpretation. The fact that John said it makes "no sense" to tag private property describes the disassociation of graffiti from private property.

Ken's justification for graffiti in public space mitigates the characteristic of "destruction" ascribed to graffiti and its intervention in space, by citing the intentional publicity of public space. He reflects, "You know, in a very irrational way we can tell ourselves that it's public property, so it's for the public so we could do whatever the fuck we want to technically." The definition of public space by Ken as a place where people can do "anything" is contradicted by the public space that is dominated and controlled by power. Corporations and entities with a high level of capital transform public space according to their own needs, because they have the power to have their use of public space be legitimized by the government. Graffiti writers recognize the subjectivity of public space and utilize the city's method pertaining to change: transformation without collective input. As a result of the powers granted to city governments and their basis in representative democracy, cities can justify their totalizing view of the urban environment and their decision making without the input of city residents.

Juan speaks on the power of the city to transform according to the subjective needs of the powerful by employing the example of advertising. Juan said,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

“We get bombarded by advertisement all day everyday everywhere we are. We don't get asked permission for those public spaces taken over with these ads. No, these ad companies sell these ads to Coca-Cola, beer companies, cigarette companies, or whatever. And here we are. We see it. You can't walk down this block and not see an advertisement for something like that. Where do we say yes or no? We don't, you know?”

Businesses such as Coca-Cola leverage their power in order to define the aesthetic of the city and insert their products into the visual landscape of the urban environment. This is done in conjunction with and by permission of municipal governments. Places controlled by municipal bureaucracy or large businesses act as the physical representation of the entities that perpetuate their power to define the city according to their own ideals, rather than of the collective, with the participation of the under-resourced. The privilege of certain groups to affect the lives of citizens through advertising, and their insertion and domination of “public” sites (the city and trains, capitalism and chain stores) places these entities into public discourse. Writers then respond by utilizing “public space” as a forum for public discourse. By pasting tags and pieces in public space, whether for personal, egotistical, or political reasons, writers unavoidably claim ownership of public space in contradiction to the city and capital.

## Results

For graffiti pieces upon the city wall, the infrastructure and architecture of the building becomes the canvas in a different way than the lamppost of the previous example. The architecture as the canvas and border of the tag creates a textured layer both aesthetically and socially that both the viewer's eye and experience must confront and parse. The building becomes a function of the work, as the architectural form is irremovable from the piece, similar to the “sculptures” of the city. As a result, architecture becomes the space in which the graffiti writing is related and interpreted against. Graffiti cannot exist without latching on to another object, such as architecture or the lamppost. The different surfaces of architecture exist at points in space, shifting the factors of light, shade, perspective, etc. in relation to the placement of the viewer. To move around the piece as both an architectural form and a two-dimensional graffiti piece reorients the viewer at each instance and leads to a different interpretation of the work that is either subconscious or conscious. Parallel to painting, the architecture becomes the ground, which the work is viewed against. In *Passages*, Krauss offers a way to understand the “ground” in her writing on relief: “[Relief] forces the viewer to place himself directly before the work in order to see it, and thus guarantees that the effect of the composition will in no way be diluted. Further, the medium of relief depends upon a relationship between the sculpted figures and their ground. Since this ground behaves like the illusionistic background of a painting, it opens up a virtual space through which the figures can appear to move” (12).<sup>68</sup> For graffiti, the city wall acts as a relief and the wall is the ground.<sup>69</sup> The use of colors in graffiti highlights the distinctness of graffiti writing and the lamppost, because of the medium's common tool: the spray can, or in this case, the pen. The can pushes out a consistent stream of color upon a surface, which removes the texture of the painterly hand. The result of the color placed upon the object through the mechanical tool of the can creates the optical illusion of the flattening of the words upon the object, and pushes the surface to the background. The result is a further distinction between the object and the word(s), which highlights the dimensionality of each.

The writing must interact with architecture both literally and as a transformation of infrastructure. When an artist/writer paints or writes on a building, the work becomes dominated by not only laws of distribution, but

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<sup>68</sup> Krauss, Rosalind E. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*.

<sup>69</sup> Academics have investigated the use of walls in cities as a site for public discourse and artmaking. In classic or ancient studies, walls have been a subject in literature of domestic settings and public spaces in Pompeii and the written text on the walls. Walls have been present in urban studies in relation to writing and public space, such as Elizabeth Sage's text on “jaytalking” at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century on Paris. Guerrilla advertising and art making in the works of the Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, or even Adrian Piper, utilizes the cityscape and writing. In 1983, Holzer's use of words and public space led her to explore graffiti as a medium. During this year, Holzer collaborated with the “first lady of graffiti” Lady Pink on a series of canvas based paintings.

also the market of real estate and flows of capital. Many cases in the media detail disputes between residents and/or writers versus developers in gentrifying neighborhoods. Though the city wall has become a canvas, it is still a building, and holds disparate purposes. In terms of the aesthetics of architecture, architecture is a surface that gives texture to the writing because of its material, and the writing gives texture to architecture through the elements of color and image. The writer must consider the architecture of the building in creating a piece, as a canvas and border with its own formal elements constructed independent from the graffiti work. Interviewees claimed that graffiti ignores urban design and architecture, because of graffiti's quickness. On the other hand, street art has the time and resources to align their work and its content with the building canvas. However, graffiti also inherently considers architecture, because architecture and the built environment acts as its canvas. For example, writers must pay attention to the scale of the architecture as canvas, and also the context of the city: Is it a school, church, etc.?

Writers must also pay attention to the scenery surrounding the architecture. Therefore, the ground of graffiti writing must be understood as a site of interaction which includes not only the architecture/ location of graffiti, but also the surrounding infrastructure which acts as the setting and background. The surrounding buildings and urban design have both a contextual-spatial influence upon the direct architecture of the writing and a contextual-*souvenir* influence upon the audience. The contextual-spatial influence is the urban design of the surrounding site which has most likely influenced the design of the architectural location of graffiti; it is a historical influence. The contextual-*souvenir* influence encompasses the personal memory and sentiment of the viewer in relation to the site. The interaction of these contexts serves as layers of ground in conversation with the architecture.

Figure 10<sup>70</sup>



However, expansion of the ground of the piece, also expands the authors associated with the piece. This is most present with the architect of a graffiti site. A distanced tension exists between the writers and the architect/urban planner over authorship of the graffiti work and building, because graffiti writers transform the building in the act of writing, and the building influences graffiti. However, graffiti writers not only transform the authorship of a particular piece of architecture, but also the city. Writers posit a form of agency by transforming the purpose of not only an object, but also the city infrastructure. Graffiti pulls walls to the

<sup>70</sup> 1986. Tone, Now, Rob by Tone, Colour, and Robs.

[http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822000962504](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000962504).

foreground as a site of contention, where the city is not only walls, but can also function as a canvas. This challenges the common definitions of urban space by suggesting a plurality of use and interpretation.

For the city's condition is one that deals with the impermanence and transience of identity, the city operates as if the city wall must be blank in order to acknowledge different identities. However, the urban environment is not blank, and is dominated by both city and bought advertisements, establishing the power of the city government to determine identity and utilize institutions to shape the city as a neoliberal site in support of capital. The different identities of the city still present the dilemma of how to spatially and aesthetically represent plurality: cultural secularism or cultural pluralism? Should the government remove all signs of culture or let all signs of culture exist? And how does the government go about either project? The City of Chicago engages in both cultural secularism and pluralism by erasing graffiti, but also funding public art projects. In the frame of secularism, one dominant form of thinking can persist. However, through pluralism, space and structure become concerns, in terms of how to accommodate multiple interacting identities.

The city wall holds various roles producing various identities: the neighborhood wall, the wall of the state, and the individual wall. The city wall becomes a liminal space between the individual, group, and larger social forces such as the city and nation. Alison Mary Baker writes that "Dickens (2008) points out that liminal spaces in which contemporary graffiti practitioners exist create a space 'in between' the street and the gallery, 'a differential space through which the city is rendered a site of play and pleasure, surprise and critical possibility'" (3).<sup>71</sup> In these different roles, the city wall can be a tool of expression; where the public comes alive, and reinterprets space.

However, we must remember the wall has become problematized in relation to certain identities. The city wall has been framed as a tool mobilized for violence by the state in order to suppress and control agency in the city. A popular example of this thinking is the Broken Windows Theory, and how the spatial properties of the city were seen as signifiers of crime in relation to certain communities: a postmodern ideal that social order and meaning is a matter of aesthetics and appearance.<sup>72</sup> The purpose of such theories is for the government to centralize bodies in a code of social aesthetics related to control of movement. Andrea Brighenti writes about walls and control that "Within this broad frame, one can appreciate the fact that walls are planned and built as part of a strategy aimed at controlling people and their activities by means of a control of space" (322).<sup>73</sup> The use of the city wall by certain peoples can be seen as a form of antagonism against the state and its mobilization of the wall as a site of suppression, rather than an artful practice. However, in response, graffiti writers utilize the city wall and its sentiments in order to retaliate and assert their identity by transforming the built environment.

## Risk

### *Data*

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<sup>71</sup> Baker, Alison. 2015. "Constructing citizenship at the margins: the case of young graffiti writers in Melbourne." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 8: 997-1014.

<sup>72</sup> "Broken windows theory, academic theory proposed by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in 1982 that used broken windows as a metaphor for disorder within neighbourhoods. Their theory links disorder and incivility within a community to subsequent occurrences of serious crime. Broken windows theory had an enormous impact on police policy throughout the 1990s and remained influential into the 21st century. Perhaps the most notable application of the theory was in New York City under the direction of Police Commissioner William Bratton. He and others were convinced that the aggressive order-maintenance practices of the New York City Police Department were responsible for the dramatic decrease in crime rates within the city during the 1990s." McKee, Adam J. "Broken Windows Theory." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. December 13, 2017. Accessed April 02, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/broken-windows-theory>.

<sup>73</sup> Brighenti, Andrea M. 2007. "Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences."

Figure 11 <sup>74</sup>

Risk is an inherent part of graffiti. As a result of graffiti's illegality, writers risk their lives and their freedom to subvert the built environment of the state. However, illegality pertaining to graffiti has certain particularities. When discussing writing in relation to the state, Ken speaks on graffiti's specificity, and distinguishes graffiti's illegality from other crimes:

*Interviewee:* But then there are other people – you know, it's just creating this identity and just like going out there and doing ballsy shit, but then you have something to show for it as opposed to like a criminal you can't really be like, "Yeah, I stole your fucking TV. Sorry, you know?"

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Interviewee:* Like, you know what it looks like, you know, I did the crime. But it's graffiti, it's like, "Oh, I got something to show for it. Check out that ledge I almost fell off of just to put my fucking name up or, oh yeah, you know, this tag on this garbage can, these gangbangers caught me and I had to run and hide and, you know, we did this whole fucking chase –" you know, there's always stories behind these weird, little things that people take value on.

*Interviewee:* It's so, like – it's enlightening to me 'cause someone risked their life for it and it's impressive to me. Other people would just be like, oh, that's some garbage, you know? But, you know, I put a value in it. A lot of other people would too 'cause they recognize that that's a pretty hard spot to get to, and you just think about the logistics and you're like, well, what did you fucking climb on? You know, how long did it take you, you know, those kinds of things.

Ken justifies his work as a graffiti writer, because of what he is willing to risk. Other “criminals” break the law, but they do not have a product or result that they can share with the public. Their crime is an isolated act, and seems to have no purpose past their own desires. The process and culture of graffiti makes it more than a crime; it is a rush, an adventure, and most importantly a conversation with the viewer and other writers. In other words,

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<sup>74</sup> Photo taken by author.

writers have “something to show for it”. The placement of a work at a certain place indicates that a person’s body was present at that location at some point in the past to make the work. The different actions taken by the writer to reach the site, whether it is jumping over roofs or climbing a building, becomes a site of speculation. Every one of these actions has a certain risk associated with it, ranging from jail time to physical injury. As a result of the invisibility of the graffiti writer, as stressed previously, the audience must assume the writer’s process. Therefore, the work becomes a site of discussion and something that can be shared and debated among others in the graffiti world. Though graffiti may be conducted in private, it acts in service and in conversation with the public and graffiti community. The fact that a writer will take risks in order to perpetuate graffiti culture is respected by other writers and people within the culture. In every new spot that has not been tagged, graffiti writers must consider the difficulties of the location in terms of physical injury and policing, in order to measure the originality of the location. How were they able to climb up there? How were they not caught? Viewers, particularly intentional graffiti viewers, think of these questions in relation to new works and new locales for writing.

However, the risk involved in graffiti makes it not for everyone and an exclusive art form. Juan comments on the graffiti’s illegality and claims that not everyone can be a graffiti writer:

“Like I said, not everyone can do graffiti. Not everyone's going to do it. You know what I'm saying? That's why graffiti also is very special. It takes some balls to do it. Not everyone's going to do it. So it's like it's cool.”

The illegality of graffiti and the enforcement of the law against writers acts as one of graffiti’s preventive factors. One must be willing to risk criminality and danger in order to be a writer. When talking to graffiti writers, they are aware of the risk involved in their practice. David insists,

“Well, I definitely don't wanna get in trouble. I haven't gotten caught yet, but, I mean, that's always in the back of your mind. But it's a rush. It's a rush. I mean, just kind of getting out there and kind of looking over your back, you know – it's fun.”

David knows that graffiti is a risk and cares about its consequences, which is why he constantly thinks about what could happen if he is caught. For him, the practice of graffiti is not carried out in complete ignorance or denial of the legal system. Rather than show no concern for the law, David is aware of the consequences involved in tagging, and they scare him. However, the rush of graffiti also entices him and mitigates his fears. The same risks that make him watch his back are also the ones that attract him to the art form. David’s experience displays that though graffiti’s illegality is apart of its unique character, it is also simultaneously a possible detriment to the writer’s life.

When speaking of illegality, it is important to highlight the role of the state: the actor and perpetrator of graffiti’s duality as both a “rush” and a risk. Governments defines graffiti as illegal, which is how graffiti derives its adventurous quality. The state positions graffiti in opposition to police, public space, and the law. By outlawing graffiti, city officials influence a structure of writing based on secrecy and invisibility for the purpose of the self-preservation of writers.

## Results

Graffiti is an art form of risk. Writers risk imprisonment, expulsion, fines, death, and place themselves in dangerous or difficult circumstances in order to tag their name or write a piece. Tony Chackal offers a way to understand risk in relation to art. He describes risk, in addition to danger and audacity, as factors of the illegality of street art (which also includes graffiti according to his definition of the term in the writing).<sup>75</sup> Chackal claims that illegality and illicitness are co-constitutive, because if one were to define illicitness by breaking social conventions, then a work that is illegal, is also illicit. Chackal writes: “Risk is specific to illegality. If artworks are illegal and carry penalties of community service, fines, and imprisonment, then all street artworks carry a

<sup>75</sup> Chackal, Tony. 2016. “Of Materiality and Meaning: The Illegality Condition in Street Art.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74: 359–370. doi:10.1111/jaac.12325

distinctive risk that sanctioned art does not” (365). The ability of the state to create and enforce laws on graffiti and graffiti writers means that graffiti has a tangible risk via legal structures. Therefore, governments can enact power to punish graffiti writers through the above-mentioned sanctions: imprisonment, fines, etc. Chackal writes about the danger and audacity of street art. He defines danger as, “...the daring and perilous measures artists take in the production process” (365). Graffiti writers risk their lives and undergo dangerous methods of subverting the city and avoiding police, such as climbing billboards or trespassing. Audacity “captures the cultural boldness of street artists and artworks. Audacity arises from uses of the street’s sociocultural context, such as placing a work critical of mainstream values in an area representative of them” (366). In general, graffiti writers utilize the city as a whole as their site of boldness, rather than one particular site. The relationship between writers and the city, and the continuation of writers inserting themselves in public space through tags, despite its illegality, is an audacious act. Risk, audacity, and danger are aesthetic features in that a work is risky, dangerous, and bold, in the same way it is balanced or abstract. These social elements involved in the labor of graffiti become visual qualities to define the intangible and informal traits of graffiti’s essence and beauty. Therefore, these words are aesthetic characteristics, in addition to being social ones. But they are not visible or static in the work, because of graffiti’s temporal quality as a process. The prevalent use of the word risk in relation to graffiti demonstrates the role of the government in the practice as a regulating and defining force. In this case, the laws against graffiti serve a purpose as major contributing factors to graffiti’s risk and the excitement and beauty that is a part of graffiti.

Therefore, though graffiti is antagonistic to the state, it also relies on the state for elements that contribute its practice: foot traffic, buffing, public space, and risk. Each of the factors are in relation to the dominant ideals of the state and subvert their purpose at service of graffiti. Foot traffic and the audience are affected by graffiti as an insertion into the place identity of the city. Writers rely on buffing to reset the city wall as canvas, and justify their work through the “publicity” of spaces that represent the power of capital and/or political institutions. And risk is defined by graffiti’s opposition to the law. All these elements contribute to the beauty and success of graffiti, as relating to a form of beauty that involves graffiti pieces as an insertion into the space of the state.

## BEAUTIFICATION

“I think that we felt that what we were doing was beautiful on multiple levels. We felt like a movement. We felt like – we also – it’s a folk art. When it comes down to it, doing letters and stuff like that – it’s an American folk art.” - John

### *City of Chicago and the Transition from Graffiti Writer to Street Artist*

In *Modern Civic Art*, Charles Robinson, a noted urban planning theorist, writes, “But they so band themselves and so commission sculptors, painters, artists, and landscape designers, for the glorifying of civic art- not just because it is art, but because it is civic. They are not asking the town to help art, but art to help the town; the artists, not to glorify their art, but by their art to glorify the city” (26).<sup>76</sup> Robinson asserts a version of public art that must be civic in that the art serves the state through a purposeful type of artmaking. This is a new type of public art according to Rosalyn Deutsche, which is characterized by an “interdisciplinary cooperation with other professions shaping the physical environment” (66).<sup>77</sup> This includes city planners, government officials, urban designers, etc. No longer is public art used to question the spatial politics of the site by the individualistic ideals of the artist. Rather, “The new public art, by contrast, moves ‘beyond decoration’ into the field of spatial design in order to create, rather than question, the coherence of the site, to conceal its constitutive social conflicts” (68).<sup>78</sup> Though graffiti functions as an illegal artistic medium, a new form of graffiti has arisen that operates in conjunction with the city government and city officials in order to achieve legitimacy in public space. These

<sup>76</sup> Robinson, Charles Mulford. *Modern Civic Art*. New York London: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1909.

<sup>77</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn. *Evictions*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*.

writers work with urban planners, space brokerage agencies, aldermen/alderwoman, residents, etc. in order to construct a piece that is incorporated within the dominant spatial politics of the city.

Figure 12 <sup>79</sup>



In 2017, as a response to the popularity and tourism dollar of public art, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel marked the year as the “Year of Public Art”. In association with the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE), Chicago invested 1.5 million dollars into artist led community projects such as the “50x50 Neighborhood Arts Project, the creation of a Public Art Youth Corps, a new Public Art Festival, exhibitions, performances, tours and more”.<sup>80</sup> In 2012, Mayor Emmanuel published the City of Chicago’s first plan for the arts since 1986: Chicago Cultural Plan of 2012. Through the solicitation of artists, cultural leaders, and neighborhood advocates, DCASE created seven goals for the future of public art in the city called the Chicago Public Art Plan<sup>81</sup>:

1. Update Chicago’s Percent for Art Program
2. Establish clear and transparent governmental practices
3. Expand resources to support the creation of public art throughout the city
4. Advance programs that support artists, neighborhoods and the public good
5. Strengthen the City’s collection management systems
6. Support the work that artists and organizations do to create public art
7. Build awareness of and engagement with Chicago’s public art

Many cities have expanded their public art projects over the years, and different cities currently have street art festivals (graffiti inclusive) that bring in thousands of visitors, such as POW!WOW! in Honolulu, Welling Court Mural Project, Bushwick Mural Project, and JMC Walls in New York City, and Wynwood in Miami. As a part of the 50x50 Neighborhood Arts Project, Chicago commissioned artists to create public art in all of

<sup>79</sup> Photo taken by author.

<sup>80</sup> "Cultural Affairs and Special Events. "Year of Public Art. Accessed March 17, 2018. [https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/yopa.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/yopa.html).

<sup>81</sup> "Cultural Affairs and Special Events. "Chicago Public Art Plan. Accessed March 17, 2018. [https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/yopa1.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/yopa1.html).

Chicago's aldermanic wards. Emmanuel said, "In every neighborhood in Chicago there are talented artists, working across all mediums, who can add to the cultural fabric of their communities. The 50x50 Neighborhood Arts Project is a \$1 million investment in Chicago's neighborhoods, building on Chicago's legacy of public art and enabling local artists to share their work with the world."<sup>82</sup> The investment of Chicago in street art and graffiti radically changes the structure of graffiti, and its relationship to the city. Though the city has not legalized graffiti as a practice and culture, it has permitted, and even encouraged, graffiti as an art form under the control and patronage of the state or independent contractors. Over the years, laws against graffiti have become less lenient for writers with higher fines and possible jail time; however, more paid opportunities have arisen to the excitement of many writers:

"The way we felt about it back then is we both knew that this was gonna be kind of a temporary, that we were gonna go somewhere else. We were just looking to be professional. How to get paid, how to do business with people. Because we got paid for a lot of those walls. I don't think people realize that we weren't just realizing how to be painters or artists, we were learning how to navigate the world of just making a living. And how this shit works." - **John**

"That's great. That's my career. I mean I think there's a point where you can sell out and you don't want to sell out, but I don't know how you define a sell out. Technically if you work for a big ass corporation you're selling out, but that's fucking everybody now, just trying to pay the phone bill, fucking A. I think it's great." - **David**

For writers like David, paid graffiti has many practical benefits that allows him to make a living and a career out of the art form. Others, like John, had always seen graffiti as temporary and a platform for a more legitimate and lucrative form of artmaking. However, despite John's goals for graffiti and his art work, he is still conflicted over his relationship to the city:

"I got a commission from the CTA... It was like the fifth time that I tried out for that and they finally selected me. This was over a 10-year period, I kept on trying and they never accepted me. And then they finally accepted me and they're like, "You're gonna have to meet Rahm." And I'm like, "Why?" ... You know, little does he know – maybe he did know. I fucking hate him. I really do. I live really close to where Laquan Macdonald was murdered and I have to drive by it all the time. I'm just real sensitive about stuff... They grabbed me by my shoulders and like walked me to him... I'm like, "Can I tell you something, Rahm?" He's like, "Yes." I'm like, "I just want you to know, man, that I used to write all over this shit when I was a kid. I don't know if you know that, but I was a graffiti writer and the CTA was my number one victim."

While the popularity of graffiti has led the city to value graffiti commission projects, it has also resulted in an ethical and moral conflict for writers who have experienced arrest and attacks by the city. But, as previously mentioned, the state and businesses present opportunities for time, money, and creative expression without the worry of risk and illegality. Becker writes of the government and art in *Art Worlds* that, "It may give a direct financial subsidy, to be spent as the individual artist or the organizers of the art group see fit; or access to government owned exhibition or performance spaces which otherwise would have to be paid for; or materials or salaries for specific personnel or categories of personnel" (196).<sup>83</sup> Many writers want to preserve the essence of graffiti as illegal, but in contrast, many writers feel graffiti will continue to exist, because of the politics involved in commissions. However, writers will have to work according to city regulations, in exchange for resources.

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<sup>82</sup> "Cultural Affairs and Special Events." Mayor Emanuel Announces New Public Art in All 50 Wards as Part of the Year of Public Art. Accessed March 17, 2018.

[https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/provdrs/public\\_art\\_program/news/2017/june/50x50.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/provdrs/public_art_program/news/2017/june/50x50.html).

<sup>83</sup> Becker, Howard Saul. *Art Worlds*.

Graffiti has transformed what the city qualifies as beautification through its grassroots popularity. It has communicated with the city's power structures via the city wall to demand legitimacy of not only the art of graffiti, but the voice of its writers. By inserting itself in the city, graffiti has gained social capital through its supportive viewership. While the city employs paint trucks to cover graffiti in brown paint, graffiti writers have realized the potential for the beauty in their works in relation to the de-beautification of neighborhoods as a result of the buff paint. Today, graffiti exists as a legitimate art form, but only according to the needs and rules of the city. In order to demand the city's resources, graffiti must give up the social qualities that help to contribute to its beauty and essence; graffiti must exist as an aesthetic form. As a result, the political voice and identity of artists are diminished, and mobilized in support of diversity efforts by the city. The legalization of graffiti lowers its risks, and the purpose and underground culture of graffiti is transformed. While the city benefits from the public legacy of graffiti, the city also denies graffiti its subversive identity.

For some artists who have experienced years of risk in service of graffiti, the absorption of graffiti in state structures has always been the end goal. Writers such as Juan and David view graffiti as something that will be studied in art history as a contemporary art movement and will reside in galleries and museums:

"It's crazy how things have changed, how graffiti has changed, how all this is evolving. It's still evolving, you know? Like Mr. Aguilar, like he said, like he told me, they should just give up. It's never going to stop. If anything, it's become a new modern art. It's the art of our era, I feel. It's only going to keep growing. It's only going to keep moving forward." - **Juan**

"I think street art and graffiti is probably starting from the '80s, but if you read art history books, graffiti will be in there. That probably followed after Andy Warhol or Jhonen Vasquez would be in there. So I think it's just part of a movement, an art movement." - **David**

Through the legal inclusion of graffiti in the city by the state, Juan and David's statement could become a reality. Many writers now call themselves street artists, as a result of the changing structure of graffiti and the legitimacy of street art by the state. The state can mandate certain works and art forms, such as painting, and criminalize others, such as graffiti. This makes graffiti difficult, and encourages a transition to street art, such as Juan describes:

*Interviewer:* What are the difficulties in working in street art or graffiti?

*Interviewee:* Wow. Well, graffiti has all kind of fucking obstacles. You've got to go through all kinds of shit if you're trying to paint illegally. Obviously you got to watch out for everything, police, getting in trouble, doing it when there's no one around, all those kind of risks. Graffiti artists have a lot of risks, you know what I'm saying? But there's a lot of smart graffiti artists who are doing it the smart way and acting –

*Interviewer:* What's the smart way?

*Interviewee:* Just like painting it into street art, making it more than just letters. Or if they are making these letters, they're making these masterpieces with colors and all these things and people think it's meant to be there. You know what I'm saying? It's not.

Figure 13 <sup>84</sup>

Becker writes that “The merging of politics and aesthetics thus affects what can be counted as art at all, the reputations of whole genres and media as well as those of individual artists. The interests of states vary, and their interests in art vary accordingly.” (180).<sup>85</sup> This affects the idea of beauty: what aligns with the state interest is beautiful, what undermines state’s interest is not civic art, or beautiful for public purposes. The consequence of “bad art” is censorship through the city’s power over the legal system by mobilizing non-artists to deny artists, such as graffiti removal services: “In short, the state can affect the production of art works by acting, through its legal system, to protect the rights of non artists who claim to have been annoyed or inconvenienced by what the artist does, either by the result or the process” (194).<sup>86</sup> Governments argue that their ability to control the movement and actions of residents through law and enforcement constitutes protection of its residents. However, the actions of city officials in relation to public art can be seen as more self-beneficial. If city officials views art as supporting their interests, as in Chicago’s Year of Public Art, they provide financial support. Art that acts against the state are defined as not beautiful by the public culture and the public sentiment administered by the state. As a result of its legal power, the state can control and define abstract concepts such as beauty through its administration of the cityscape and the actions of city residents. These concepts are accepted by city agencies for official purposes. The government’s lawmaking power influences the actions of individuals, which limits the dissemination of deviant forms of beauty and artistic voices. Therefore, through the restriction of action, the state limits interpretation and debate to within the expanse of its definition of art and beauty.

## Conclusion

Foot traffic, Hard to Buff, Public Space, and Risk act as important factors of site selection for graffiti writers. Graffiti writers have formal concerns and a subjective formal criterion, these elements of site selection were a common trend across all my interviewees. Though these characteristics are social, they also function as aesthetic qualities, that the audience infers from the placement of a graffiti work. They are as important to the beauty and

<sup>84</sup> 1984 (exhibition). Exhibition: Rapid Enamel, general view. graffiti.  
[http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/ARNSIG\\_10313509773](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/asset/ARNSIG_10313509773).

<sup>85</sup> Becker, Howard Saul. *Art Worlds*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*.

success of a graffiti piece, as color, technique, etc. However, with the increasing number of commissions and legal paid work for graffiti writers, many writers worry that these elements of graffiti will disappear. As a result, the culture and essence of graffiti will be lost to the resources and power of city governments. Though graffiti will probably never be legal, city governments, such as Chicago, are showing an interest in graffiti because of its popularity. Therefore, graffiti has been in the process of becoming a legitimate art form. This characterization of graffiti as civic and legal is beginning to be reflected in the law as graffiti writers are winning cases to preserve their work. This contradicts the reset of the buff and presents the possibility of graffiti as a permanent art form.

Figure 14<sup>87</sup>



On February 12, 2018, a federal jury awarded 21 graffiti artists involved with the famous 5Pointz building in Queens, New York, 6.7 million dollars to be paid by a developer who whitewashed the work overnight.<sup>88</sup> This ruling can serve as a precedent for legal cases dealing with the protection of street art all over the country. The jury decided the artwork was protected under the Visual Rights Act, a 1990 law that affords artist legal protection of their work, regardless of who owns it. The court cited the writer's prestige and years of experience as reason for applying the Visual Rights Act, and this case was the first time graffiti works had been afforded such protections. This creates an interesting premise for future cases: can a tag on a wall rise to the same level of appreciation as works protected under the Visual Rights Act? The case demonstrates the increasing legitimization of graffiti and the reflection of this change in legal institution. Therefore, graffiti is absorbed in the norms of art, which includes preservation. But the question remains of how these changes will affect the culture of graffiti writers and elements such as foot traffic, hard to buff, public space, and risk that infuse graffiti with excitement for many writers.

<sup>87</sup> Zierock, Theo. The 5Pointz factory in Queens, New York, before it was painted over. Digital image. New York Graffiti Artists Triumph over Developer Who Destroyed Their Work. November 9, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/09/new-york-graffiti-artist-win-lawsuit-5-pointz>.

<sup>88</sup> Gabbatt, Adam. "New York Graffiti Artists Triumph over Developer Who Destroyed Their Work." The Guardian. November 09, 2017. Accessed April 02, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/09/new-york-graffiti-artist-win-lawsuit-5-pointz>.

Figure 15<sup>89</sup>



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<sup>89</sup> Dunand, Emmanuel. The building after it was painted over. A jury has decided that the artists' work was legally protected under the Visual Artists Rights Act. Digital image. New York Graffiti Artists Triumph over Developer Who Destroyed Their Work. November 9, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/09/new-york-graffiti-artist-win-lawsuit-5-pointz>.

Mojolaoluwa Idowu  
jolaidowu@gmail.com  
773-971-4655  
6290 N. Knox Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60646

## **Education**

### **The University of Chicago**

*Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Sociology*

Honors Included: The Dean's List (2014 – 2017), Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship

## **Relevant Experience**

### **Smart Museum**

*Docent*

February 2014 –  
Chicago, IL

- Organized specialized tours for groups of 10+ people from different Chicago-based organizations and schools, ranging from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to grown adults, by contacting the person who booked the tour about the purpose or goal for the tour and choosing art that related to these goals
- Notetaking on viewer interactions such as what art pieces a person interacted with for the longest period of time and what they said about the different artworks, which was used as an ethnography of the current state of the museum
- Assisted with Family Days by quickly learning activities in order to explain the Family Day to over 50 young children and adults

### **The Graham Foundation**

*Jeff Metcalf Intern*

June 2017 – September 2017  
Chicago, IL

- Assisted with the organization of the Graham Foundation archives and Stanley Tigerman by filing and documenting over 50 application files, which included noting all interactions, letters, and products from the file
- Greet guests of the Graham Foundation by noting attendees of events and answering questions about either the exhibition or history of the house

### **William Pope. L., Chicago, U.S.A.**

*Studio Intern*

January 2017 – June 2017  
Chicago, IL

- Assisted with studio projects by quickly learning tasks in order to help complete an artwork, creating 5 minute instructional videos about the assemblage of artworks, and handling art work of various sizes and fragility
- Reorganized three of Pope. L's archives, over 100 artworks, by proposing a new organization system, making the folders or binders, and cross referencing and editing the information of the different works in Pope. L's database

### **Hyde Park Art Center**

*Arts Administration Fellow*

November 2015 – June 2016  
Chicago, IL

- Maintained the membership database by sending membership renewal letters to over 20+ members per a week by utilizing the database to find members up for renewal, formatting and editing renewal letters, and sending the letters out with official stationary
- Assisted with the Bridge program by participating in critiques of the over 5 artists who participated in the program
- Organized the Bridge program exhibition by prepping the gallery, helping to select artwork, and hanging the artwork

### **Museum of Contemporary Art**

*Education: Family and Youth Programs Intern*

September, 2015 – December 2015  
Chicago, IL

- Assisted with the planning of Family Days by aiding in multiple activities of the day and visiting each of the leading artists multiple times to check in and ask if they need any assistance
- Documented family and youth program events, both video and photograph, to be used on the website and as part of a promotional video for Family Days

### **Doc Films**

*Programming Committee, Publicity Chair, and Assistant Projectionist*

September 2014 - Present  
Chicago, IL

- Assisted in the development of the quarterly film calendar through a discussion of film series themes, films, and special events with programmers for the over 50 films showing each quarter
- Programmed 7 films for the Doc Films *Afrofuturism* film series and two events (a speaker and Afrofuturism café) in Winter 2018, which was proposed by myself and reached an audience of about 50 viewers a night

## **Leadership Activities**

### **Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago**

*Chicago Style Committee Member*

February, 2017 -  
Chicago, IL

- Plan events related to Chicago Politics for over 50 people by researching current political issues and finding about 2 –3 speaker who each offer a different perspective on an issue
- Interact with speakers by drafting and editing emails to invite city officials and organizers to speak at Chicago Style events and greeting speakers at events
- Send invitations to different campus organizations by utilizing the marketing database to find relevant organizations interested in the event's topic, in order to ensure the sold out audience of previous Chicago Style events

## **Skills**

Microsoft Office (Certified), French, Video Editing (Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro)