



Graffiti Futures

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Abstract

Historical graffiti survives in much greater quantities than has hitherto been understood. For those with eyes to see it, the technologies to restore it to visibility, and the patience to learn to read it, graffiti can be found everywhere. Graffiti is also a phenomenon of current consequence that continues to produce and constitute archives of immense historical importance. But there is nothing singular about it, and its global history – which might be said to run from Upper Paleolithic hand stencils (40,000 CE) to the present – could never be written. For those who study graffiti are quickly confronted with the contingency of our own concepts: starting with ‘writing’, and including ‘art’, ‘public/private’, ‘property’, ‘authorized/unauthorized’, ‘literate’ and ‘literacy’, ‘authenticity’, ‘spontaneity’, ‘signature’, ‘author’, ‘criminal’, and ‘popular’. Our task – which is already immense – is to develop site-specific protocols that will allow us to identify, read, and preserve without judgment the astonishing archives that are comprised by graffiti as it occurs at local sites, within local writing economies or ‘graphospheres’.

Keywords: *Futures, Graffiti, Histories, Local, Theory*

It's history from a hundred points of view.
Henry Chalfant

In a journal entry for 4 May 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth recorded a day spent with her brother William and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the hills above Grasmere. Before leaving they inspected a rock into which were inscribed the initials of Sara Hutchinson, the woman Coleridge loved but did not marry; Coleridge had just added Dorothy's initials as well as his own to the inscription. ‘We parted from Coleridge at Sara's crag’, wrote Dorothy, ‘after having looked at the Letters which C carved in the morning. I kissed them all. Wm deepened the T with C's penknife’ (see Worthen 2001, 181-183).

The initials of William Wordsworth, William's fiancé Mary Hutchinson, and William's brother John were also subsequently added to the ‘rock of names’, which stood midway between the households of the two famous poets and marked the point, a

two-hours' walk from each, where its members often met and parted. Preserved by its inaccessible location, and by the lichens that covered its face, the rock survived until the late 1880s, when the Manchester Water Authority sought its removal as part of plans to build a dam and a new road around Thirlmere. Nation-wide protest failed to stop the blasting, but members of the Wordsworth Institute were allowed to collect the shards containing the initials and cement these into a pyramid close to the rock's original site. In 1984 the fragments were detached from this support and reassembled on a newly-constructed rockface at the Wordsworth Museum in Grasmere, in accordance with their original configuration as recorded by photographs (see D. Wordsworth 1991, 191-192).

It was not the first time that the companions had carved their initials in the landscape, and these inscriptions were part of a wider practice – which also informed Wordsworth's poetics – of calling out local landmarks, using them as objective correlatives of their own feelings, and naming them in recollection and anticipation of times spent together there: 'Sara's Eminence', 'John's Grove', 'Mary Point'. In April 1801 William wrote to Mary: 'You will recollect that there is a gate just across the road, directly opposite the fir grove ... You know that it commands a beautiful prospect; Sara carved her cypher upon one of the bars, and we call it her gate. We will find out another place for your cypher, but you must come and fix upon the place yourself'. Mary did so, for Dorothy later recorded resting near the chosen site: 'We sate by the roadside at the foot of the Lake close to Mary's dear name which she had cut herself upon the stone. William ... cut at it with his knife to make it plainer' (Worthen 2001, 22-24). As John Worthen argues, the naming of places had quickly become part of the everyday lives of the friends as they settled into the area and made it their own – so that when the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was suddenly lacking material in October 1800 Wordsworth and Coleridge 'quite naturally' proposed to fill it with a section called 'Poems on the Naming of Places'. 'It would be too easy', Worthen observes, 'to dismiss such activity as the transient pleasure of a group of educated and high-spirited people who could afford to spend their days clambering round the Lake District, naming things'. As he sees it, and as they doubtless saw it themselves, their purpose was more serious: 'they were engaged in what we might now call emotional mapping: identifying the ways in which they belonged both to each other and to the place' (Worthen 2001, 24-25). Worthen is no doubt correct here – but it is also the case that one person's emotional mapping is another person's graffiti. If Wordsworth, Coleridge and their companions were able to mark a moment, articulate their place, and enhance their pleasure in a landscape by *signing off on it* then they were only doing what graffiti writers have always done.

The rock of names is unusual in the study of historical graffiti in being so well documented. In other ways it is not atypical and, as a small case study, provides an efficient demonstration of the issues that form the conceptual nexus within which we encounter graffiti today, and within which the contributors to this volume have worked. But the first thing to note is that this is a cautionary tale, for it demonstrates that the concepts that allow us to identify graffiti are the same ones that prevent us from arriving at a stable or single definition of it. Graffiti writing is an observable fact, it is a phenomenon of current consequence, and, as the following essays demonstrate, it continues to produce and constitute archives of significant historical importance. But there is nothing singular about it, and its global history – which might be said to run from Upper Paleolithic hand stencils (40,000 CE) to the present – could never be written. Our task – which is already immense – is to develop site-specific protocols that will allow us to identify, read, and preserve graffiti as it occurs at local sites, within local writing economies or 'graphospheres' (see Bazzanella, Sarti, Schmitz-Esser, and Schulz in this volume).

Attempts to define graffiti – whether as a criminal, artistic, political, expressive, or ‘simply human’ practice – have been many, and they continue to yield the conceptual tools that allow us to grasp its significance as an archive (see, for example, Castillo Gómez in this volume). Nevertheless, no definition fits all cases, every definition can be found wanting, and even the most unexceptionable of them can appear outmoded or extravagant when generalized. And they prove particularly unwieldy when applied to historical graffiti. We might, for example, define graffiti as unauthorized writing that appears in public places. This was the working assumption of the first archaeologists of Pompeii, who judged that the presence of ‘unofficial’ inscriptions on walls meant that the building in question was ‘public’ rather than privately owned. In fact, we do not know that the Romans wrote only on public walls (much evidence now suggests the contrary), or that such writings were ‘unauthorized’ (whatever that means in the context of Pompeii), while to use graffiti as the index of public spaces is to assume without warrant that Roman attitudes to property, as well as to graffiti, were the same as our own.

If we bracket out the variable of a given culture’s legislation and understanding of public and private realms we might define graffiti, more simply, as unauthorized writing. We would need to allow writing on any surface as well as in every place, since graffiti is of course not confined to buildings or to urban environments, but is found on cars, trains, pavements, sidewalks, trees, rocks, way-signs, posts, fences, artworks, books, and other moveable properties. The graffiti writer looks at their own world in terms of possible locations (see, for instance, Bazzanella in this volume), and their reasons for choosing a particular site will be enormously varied. They may aim to have their pieces highly visible, or visible only in certain lights or under certain conditions, or even stay hidden; they may be trying to enhance, trump, or detract from the visual logic of what it is already there; they may intend their own graffiti to last, or expect them to vanish or decay; they may want to be known as the author of the piece, or prefer to remain anonymous; and they may want to reach a wide audience, speak to a coterie, address a single other person, ghost or god, or commune only with themselves. Already, and before we have even considered its myriad forms and contents, the motives behind graffiti are too numerous to tell (see also Schulz in this volume).

Were we to be as ecumenical as possible, prepared to accept that graffiti is unauthorized writing at any location, in any medium, and on every imaginable surface (including human and animal bodies), we are still facing two problems. The first is what we mean by ‘unauthorized’, when ‘authorization’ would have to be the sum of every institutional affordance that is in place to protect all these surfaces from writing – but which is, in each given instance of graffiti, ineffectual. The second problem is larger still, and one that graffiti itself throws into sharp focus, for in order to define it we will have to know what writing is, not only for ourselves, but more particularly for the varied local cultures with which graffiti historians are concerned. And here, if our understanding of writing as a formal system does not extend, at the very minimum, to include drawings, images, designs, tallies, and other marks, we will already have abandoned and therefore altered and impoverished much of our archive. A standard, phonocentric definition of writing, as the register of spoken language, would even preclude the designedly illegible wild style signatures that, for today’s taggers and their detractors, constitute the ‘pure form’ of graffiti in our contemporary urban environments. For while its practitioners call themselves writers and their letter-based art form writing, and sometimes insist that this is what differentiates them from other artists of the street, what a wild-style writer actually produces is not writing as is commonly understood, but an indexical mark that is repeated as a signature effect. Jean Baudrillard admired wild style precisely because, as he thought, it has no ‘meaning’: while it looks like writing as that serves semiotic functions, wild writing is in fact using its own ‘emptiness’ to create a blockage in the messaging system of the contemporary mass media. Wild style is

thus, argued Baudrillard, a sort of anti-writing – an importantly resistant and ‘savage cultural process with neither goal, ideology, nor content at the level of signs’ (1993, 80).

Even if their own corpus is primarily writing in the narrow sense, graffiti historians will need to keep in mind and situate their archives within (even as they may want to differentiate them from) a much broader understanding of writing. Although the list cannot be closed, we might note that in our own moment graffiti include sticker bombing, fly posting, wheat paste-ups, stenciling, ‘subvertising’ (which amends corporate advertisements), illegal sculpture, and certain forms of land and laser art. Graffiti interacts with and is supported not only by its own materials and locations, but also by other artforms (especially music and dance); other media (photography, fanzines, the internet); and highly various geographical (and therefore physical, political and institutional) environments; as well as by local communities and cultures (including corporate sponsorship, the entertainment industry, art school, art galleries, and the world of fashion) – and all these could be said to be part of its ‘writing’ in the broader sense. While it is true, as Schmitz-Esser argues in this volume, that ‘writing skills are a necessary prerequisite for making graffiti’ (*infra*, 91) (a claim that draws important attention to the fact that graffiti is *never the work of an instant*), it is a claim that can be generalized only if writing is understood in its most expanded sense. Indeed, although graffiti is sometimes used as an index of ‘literacy’, and is taken as evidence that certain groups could or could not ‘write’, its most valuable lesson to the historian is that it demonstrates the theoretical poverty of such categories. For everyone makes marks: it is the privileged challenge of the graffiti historian to learn how to read them.

It is a striking fact that if Sara Hutchinson was responsible for her own initials on the rock of names, as well as on the gate where she left her cipher, then it was a woman who was the probable initiator of the graffiti culture that helped to articulate the friendship of the Lakeland poets. More importantly, the evidence of this practice runs counter to the claim from which much of the value of historical graffiti is still being derived – that graffiti is a unique (individual, counter-cultural, anti-institutional, non-commodified, or ‘authentic’) expression of individual experience. For the inscriptions on the rock of names are primarily expressive of group sentiment as this circulates through and blends and fractures individual identities. It is likely that Sara began the game with her own initials; sometime later Coleridge added Dorothy’s initials as well as his own, while William improved Coleridge’s signature by re-carving its middle initial. Dorothy approved and kissed the inscriptions, documented them in her journal, and experimented with alternative layouts for them, with different groupings, on a separate piece of paper. These groupings included the initials of Mary Hutchinson and John Wordsworth, neither of whom had been present to carve their own initials, although these were also added to the rock of names.

As we have seen, William also urged Mary to join the graffiti writers, offering Sara’s cipher as a model to follow, and his own help in choosing a site: when Mary did cut her name upon a stone, William deepened the letters. Already it is hard to say who created which inscriptions – and it is worth underlining this fact since even at a simpler level it is not enough remembered that graffiti initials may stand for the name of someone or something other than the person who carved them (see Schmitz-Esser, in this volume). In a more theoretical sense, however, we might say that no one writes alone. Behind William Wordsworth’s poetry lie the journals of his sister Dorothy, the observations and conversations of herself and the other members of the ‘Gang’ of which these are the register, and the comments they exchanged in their frequent letter correspondence. Similarly, behind every graffiti inscription is the encouragement, advice, example, and provocation of another.

The question of who ‘wrote’ the rock of names (who inscribed what, for whom, with what degree of their own desire or consent) is further complicated by the fact that local memory attests

that the initials were subsequently deepened and ‘improved’ by local amateur stonemason John Longmire even before they were blasted apart by the Manchester Water Authority and twice re-assembled by the Wordsworth Trust. As Derrida argues in *Mal d’archive* (1995), preservation is so deeply involved with destruction as to be indistinguishable from it. But the more important lesson here is that it takes a community to create, as well as preserve, even the most ‘artless’ and ‘autonomous’ inscription. However small the group within which it is produced and read, graffiti is an ‘instituted’ form: its inscriptions may be ‘unauthorized’ in relation to certain institutions – and they often revel in and draw their strength from this fact – but they are no more ‘individual’, ‘authentic’, or ‘free of rules’ than any other form of writing or drawing (for an alternative view see, for example, Lohmann and Schulz in this volume).

Often, indeed, they are less so: if you want to test yourself and surprise your colleagues by tagging in your nearest large city you will first have to study the graphic forms of other writers in order to develop your own. (Whoever thinks graffiti is ‘spontaneous’ has never tried it: graffiti writers usually carry a ‘black book’ of designs as they do not expect to have the time to develop these on the spot; and even if you are going to confine yourself to a single tag you will want to practice it over and over until you feel ready to throw it up at speed.) Then you will have to buy or steal markers or spray paint, with nozzles of different sizes (if these are not available you will have to discover what alternative media are being used in your neighborhood), and before you start you would be well advised to serve what amounts to an apprenticeship in the protocols and street rules of your local scene, including where you may and may not put your tag in relation to those of others – and all this before you have made a mark of any kind! Of course, once you have sufficient training you will be able to quickly throw up your tag (if you have your paint or markers with you) when the opportunity comes – but this does not obviate the months of preparation that lie behind that moment. So, while it is sometimes felt that graffiti ‘attract’ other graffiti, as if they had a tendency to appear in spontaneous clusters, what is really at stake is the development of the highly organized microcultures that institute graffiti and render it legible (see Lohmann in this volume).

Drafting lines for ‘Benjamin the Waggoner’, a poem in which the title character refreshes himself at a rivulet that flows from the rock of names, Wordsworth later recalled the effort required to make the inscriptions on its hard surface:

Long as for us a genial feeling
Survives, or one in need of healing,
The power, dear Rock, around thee cast,
Thy monumental power, shall last
For me and mine! O thought of pain,
That would impair it or profane!
Take all in kindness then, as said
With a staid heart but playful head;
And fail not Thou, loved Rock! to keep
Thy charge when we are laid asleep.
(W. Wordsworth 1981, 118)

By the time he published the poem, Wordsworth had come to feel that such personal references ‘stopp[ed] [its] progress’ (Wordsworth 1981, 219, 300), and the passage was excised. But its surviving form gives evidence of Wordsworth’s contradictory thoughts about the inscriptions. The lines argue that the inscriptions will be meaningful as long as a signatory survives who can recognize them as a register of the profound personal friendships that bound ‘the Gang’ (as they called themselves): this is what gives ‘monumental power’ to the rock. But the passage also

acknowledges that the ‘genial feelings’ of the group are already changing, and may need future repair. Appearing to fix the moment and entail the future, the carved initials create a reserve of fraternal sentiments to the friends, in an anticipated or imminent future, will be able to refer back. However, the ‘impairment’ or ‘profanation’ that threatens the capacity of the rock to archive these feelings also casts its shadow over them. What needs archiving that is still present; and what human feeling can be ‘kept’ alive in a rock? The potency of graffiti inscriptions lies in the fact that they appear to have the power to capture the moment even as they monumentalize and therefore leave it behind: ‘Hic fuit’. But obviously something is unsatisfactory here, and Wordsworth’s passage ends with an unfocussed apology in which he asks to be excused on the grounds that the friendships were in earnest, even as the inscriptions, or the claims being made for them, were meant in play.

Graffiti and photography are both technologies that engage with the simultaneous loss and preservation of the moment. Although their techniques are so different as to obscure their connection, it would be fruitful to start thinking about graffiti as the photography of a pre-photographic era. Once it emerged, graffiti was quick to establish links with photography, and these remain very deep. In the first place, of course, photography preserves and archives graffiti, frames and aestheticizes it, and renders it subject to academic investigation and other forms of cultural work and appropriation. ‘I always knew that the photos would last longer than the pieces and I shot in the spirit of historic conservation’, noted Martha Cooper of the painted trains she photographed in New York in the 1980s (Lewisohn 2008, 37); and, had it not been for photographs, the informationally significant configuration of the signatures on the Rock of Names would have been permanently lost. Nevertheless, the argument is often and rightly made that while photography can capture graffiti as an image, it leaves behind graffiti’s site-specific embeddedness, and so robs it of the ‘aura’ that makes graffiti what it is. Although the commercial interest in graffiti, and the lucrative artistic careers of some graffiti writers can suggest otherwise, many of today’s graffiti writers feel that it is one of the few things in our lives that cannot be bought or owned: that it necessarily ‘belongs’ where it is as having become an immanent part of its environment, unframed, subject to all forms of wear and tear, and seen in different lights, from different and non-frontal perspectives, within a constantly changing visual context. The special aura of graffiti differs from that ascribed to ritual objects by Walter Benjamin in that it describes ‘belonging’ as process rather than as being; graffiti is site-specific even as (and indeed because) that site is subject to change, while it is the particular property of graffiti to be in the process of decay. Impossible to preserve as what it is (subject to the unfolding of the future), graffiti is a strong instance of archive fever.

But the joint work of Raffaella Sarti, Manuele Marraccini, Angelo Rubino and Matteo Dellepiane (Sarti *et al.* 2017), which culminated in 2017 in an interactive exhibition of the graffiti at the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, has demonstrated the consequence of new photographic technologies, which can not only record but also restore and even *enhance* historical graffiti, revealing visual elements that have never been seen before, even by the people who first made them. Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) captures surface shapes and colors, permits their mathematical enhancement, and enables the interactive re-lighting of them from any direction: together with 3-D photography, image tracing using vector paths, and 3D printing, it allows for the virtual manipulation and re-organization of visual information (see also Sarti and Marraccini in this volume). As Valentina Rachiele explains, visitors to the exhibition’s website could ‘handle’ the graffiti, rotating them along three spatial axes, modifying light sources in the RTI, and zooming in to look at details not normally visible to the naked eye. As she says, these technologies conflate distinctions ‘between real and digital, between real and

virtual, between real and enhanced' (*infra*, 207), but they also mean that photography is now able to capture some of the properties of graffiti that have hitherto eluded it: 'virtual visitors, who are not physically in Urbino, can wander through the rooms in the Palazzo Ducale and see the graffiti as if it were right before them' (*infra*, 209); they can also see them in every light and from every angle, compare them to each other, manipulate, copy and re-produce them.

Where historians have been tempted to regret photography's limitations as an archival tool for graffiti on the grounds that it 'frames' and so destroys what is essentially frameless, it now seems to be more than ready for the task of capture. Whether what remains in its net will still be called graffiti is an argument for the future.

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