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Graffiti Writing as Dirty Aesthetic Education: Redrawing Political Inclusion with a Spray Can

ANDREA L. BALDINI

Abstract. *In what ways may aesthetic education foster critical consciousness and facilitate transformational action? This article addresses this question by examining an unusual case study: graffiti writing. By contesting the notion that the art of the urban signature inherently signifies moral degradation, I argue that graffiti writing functions as a form of what I call* dirty aesthetic education*. This is a pedagogy that teaches practitioners how to transform public space through artistic techniques, aiming to critically challenge dominant hierarchies of visibility and power by any means necessary—sometimes involving legal transgressions. Mastering graffiti as a form of aesthetic expression, in effect, requires the capacity to redefine, although momentarily, the boundaries of public self-expression, which is essential in countering the exclusionary tendencies inherent in the neoliberal city. This pedagogy of the street embodies therefore an education in political activism and everyday resistance.*

1. Introduction

How can aesthetic education foster critical consciousness and enable transformative action? At first glance, graffiti may seem an unlikely candidate to address this question. Often dismissed as criminal defacement, graffiti is still widely seen as promoting disorder rather than learning. This is a view rooted in James Wilson and George Kelling's controversial broken-window hypothesis (BWH), which claims that visible signs of disorder, like graffiti, lead to more serious crime. From this perspective, graffiti represents aesthetic and moral decay rather than a form of aesthetic education.

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This article challenges that assumption. I argue that graffiti writing can be understood as a form of *dirty* aesthetic education: a raw, rebellious, and often unlawful practice that cultivates critical awareness and the ability for transformative action in its practitioners and, by extension, in those who learn to appreciate the essence of this spontaneous form of urban creativity. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of the *distribution of the sensible*, I show how graffiti subverts dominant hierarchies of visibility that privilege corporate and political interests, thereby excluding marginalized voices from public expression and political participation.

From my perspective, graffiti as a manifestation of dirty aesthetic education constitutes a fundamentally transformative act, one that aesthetically intervenes in exclusionary contexts *by any means necessary*, even if only temporarily. Learning to write graffiti involves more than crafting visually compelling artifacts; it teaches individuals to critically engage with and alter the environments in which they live, sometimes through unlawful tactics. In this sense, graffiti functions as a pedagogy of the street, teaching lessons not only in visual expression but in political activism or, more precisely, in everyday resistance.

Dirty aesthetic education, as I define it, disrupts traditional notions of cultural refinement. It operates from the ground up. It is spontaneous, confrontational, and inseparable from the urban environment. While classical aesthetic education is often linked to elite cultural forms such as classical music, fine arts, literature, or theater, graffiti offers a radical alternative: It trains practitioners to read the city critically, reclaim public space, and challenge the visual order of neoliberal urbanism through aesthetic means. In what follows, I explore how this subcultural pedagogy reimagines aesthetic education as a tool for political inclusion and spatial justice.

In this study, I focus specifically on graffiti writing—the movement that emerged in the northeastern US during the 1960s—characterized by stylized calligraphic signatures or pseudonyms. This excludes political graffiti, *latrinalia*, or representational street art, which tend to employ different visual strategies and enjoy broader public acceptance. A distinctive feature of writing culture is its organization into *crews*: homosocial groups where members learn spray techniques, spatial tactics, and countersurveillance through informal mentorship. Peer recognition is a key motivator in these communities. The desire for respect drives writers to refine their craft and take risks. Even those who prefer anonymity acknowledge the status of those who earn it.[1] Despite its often-formulaic aesthetics and lack of overt political messaging, I argue that this subcultural pedagogy fosters critical consciousness and transformative action through its transgressive engagement with public space.

Before summarizing the article, I want to briefly clarify my methodology. While rooted in Anglo-American aesthetics and philosophy of art, the study

is multidisciplinary, drawing from fields such as cultural studies, criminology, sociology, legal studies, urban theory, and visual culture. More importantly, it is informed by over a decade of "hanging out" with writers. This is a Geertzian mode of immersion involving informal conversations, shared experiences, and ongoing collaborations.[2] Rather than conducting formal interviews, I have engaged with practitioners in everyday settings, both online and offline, to gain insider knowledge and develop an account that makes sense to writers themselves.

Section 2 reviews literature, focusing on works framing graffiti as moral degradation, particularly through the lens of BWH. Section 3 challenges this view, presenting graffiti as political resistance that contests the dominant distribution of the sensible and reclaims public space. Section 4 defines dirty aesthetic education, emphasizing its role in fostering critical awareness and resistance to urban injustice. Section 5 explores the specific pedagogical functions of this unconventional, subversive form of education.

2. Between Institutional Subversion and Broken Windows: A Review of the Literature

Systematic discussions of graffiti are nearly nonexistent in the literature on aesthetic education.[3] This is rather unexpected given the growing volume of publications on this art form. One of my objectives here is to address this gap in order to promote a more structured discussion on the matter. Graffiti and various forms of urban art, including street art, are in effect increasingly popular.[4] Undeniably a global phenomenon, the art of urban signatures and its cousins are shaping both the surfaces and the lives of our cities, warranting greater attention from scholars focusing on aesthetic education.

While rare, some scholars highlight graffiti's pedagogical value. G. James Daichendt, for example, argues that the creative dispositions of graffiti writers can enrich studio environments both in and out of schools.[5] As forms of aesthetic education, graffiti and street art challenge traditional artistic paths, emphasize nontraditional media like spray paint, promote collective creativity over individual genius, and suggest alternative modes of exhibition beyond the gallery system.

Daichendt refers to graffiti's potential as a sort of aesthetic education in a conventional sense: Writers rigorously explore issues of form, line, color, and spatial composition. As Shanghai-based writer Paul Dezio elucidates in his recent guide on how to paint graffiti, the practice has undergone a multifaceted and contentious evolution of stylistic advances, ranging from the stick letters of TAKI 183 to more complex styles.[6] This history demonstrates graffiti's ongoing and intentional emphasis on formal features and visual cogency, which, as we will see, underpins the possibility of its political relevance.

In a pioneering study, Tracey E. Bowen examined Toronto graffiti writers with formal artistic training, concluding that educators should reconsider rigid attitudes toward evolving student-driven practices.[7] Graffiti and street art, she suggests, function as forms of aesthetic education by subverting the top-down hierarchy of traditional academia, where instructors define artistic legitimacy. These practices also prompt a rethinking of expressive boundaries in public space and can help students appreciate how visual interventions like murals can enhance urban aesthetics.

Both Bowen's and Daichendt's studies largely overlook tagging and the broader practice of *getting up*, favoring larger, more intricate murals. Yet tags (monochromatic, swiftly executed signatures) are one of the foundational styles of graffiti, alongside throw-ups (two-color bubble letters) (Figure 1) and pieces or burners (elaborate, multicolored works). Though often dismissed as simplistic, tags are revered by practitioners as the domain of true virtuosity.[8] "Getting up" refers to the sustained act of marking multiple locations to maximize visibility and fame, a central objective in graffiti culture. Instead, Ishtiyaque Haji, Stefaan E. Cuypers, and Yannick Joye explicitly condemn tagging—and by implication, getting up—as morally corrupting.[9] Drawing on an Aristotelian framework, they argue that architecture shapes moral perception by embodying values that foster introspection, empathy, and ethical behavior. From this perspective, tagging disrupts the moral sensibility that urban design seeks to cultivate. To support their argument, they cite a 2008 study aligning with BWH, the criminological explanation



Figure 1. SBAM, throw-ups.

suggesting that visible signs of disorder, such as graffiti, signal neglect and encourage further antisocial behavior.[10] These authors frame graffiti not as a form of aesthetic education but as a manifestation of social and personal degeneration.

There are at least two problems with Haji, Cuypers, and Joye's quick dismissal of tagging and getting up as signs of moral decline. First, BWH lacks strong empirical support. Even the cited 2008 study acknowledges its ambiguous epistemological basis.[11] A single study cannot substantiate such a complex proposal. Second, BWH has been widely critiqued, especially by Bernard Harcourt, who argues that the distinction between "order" and "disorder" is socially constructed.[12] What is framed as neglect or deviance may instead represent artistic expression, rebellion, or alternative social practices. Without a clear definition of disorder, BWH rests on unstable and often arbitrary assumptions.

Let us set aside for the time being whether BWH is empirically sound. Whatever the answer, the most relevant issue is that perspectives like Haji, Cuypers, and Joye's prohibit us from recognizing graffiti writing's social and political value. In the following part, I shall argue that writers oppose exclusionary tendencies contained in contemporary spatial control policies.

3. Graffiti Writing and Political Inclusion

Haji, Cuypers, and Joye's rejection of graffiti writing, particularly tagging and getting up, as senseless criminal vandalism is prevalent. In a 2018 interview with *Bristol24/7*, installation artist Luke Jerram vividly described how many people perceive tags (Figure 2): signs comparable to what a dog does



Figure 2. Fra32, *Tags*.

when marking its territory with pee.[13] This harsh remark was a reaction to a declaration of the local public transportation service, MetroBus, stating that the removal of graffiti on its recently inaugurated m2 route was not intended. The news came shortly after a new multimillion-pound bridge meant for m2 buses was extensively tagged.

The enduring animosity towards tagging paradoxically contrasts with the increasing public endorsement of certain street art superstars, notably Banksy. The public has discovered in his progressive political message, combined with an engaging aesthetic, a justification for appreciating works that, from a legal perspective, still constitute vandalism, just like any other tag.[14] Banksy's popularity has climbed to a level where even officials admire him and are willing to violate the law to safeguard his work! In 2023, for instance, the Italian government directly intervened to preserve a 2019 Banksy piece in Venice, despite local legislation allowing such interventions solely for works above 70 years of age.[15]

Among academics, Sondra Bacharach draws a sharp distinction between graffiti and street art, echoing common public perceptions.[16] She argues that graffiti is esoteric, created for fellow writers, while street art is exoteric, meant for broader public engagement. Moreover, she views street art as politically motivated, aiming to raise awareness of specific sociopolitical issues, whereas graffiti writing is, in her view, narcissistic: focused on self-promotion and gaining recognition within the subculture.

This distinction appears far from infallible. First, it is unclear how a practice that involves the occupation of public surfaces and seeks maximum visibility could be deemed esoteric. Indeed, fellow writers may provide a privileged audience for one's work. But it is irrational for an individual to leave a highly public mark—risking fines, arrest, or worse—solely to engage with a limited audience. Graffiti is also aimed at the general public. The most esteemed locations for writers, which confer the greatest street cred, also encompass venues where one's work is seen by the largest audience. During a location scouting mission with Fra32, the renowned Australia-based writer pointed out a fairly unremarkable cement structure, isolated from its surroundings, as a potential candidate for graffiti. He instantly explained to me the reason for such a decision: "Everyone driving on the highway will have to see my piece!" This looks to be a departure from the objective of creating a completely esoteric message.

Second, it is inaccurate to imply that all graffiti artists do not have the primary goal of transmitting a sociopolitical statement. Significant instances of avant-garde exist within the graffiti movement, where artists have embraced, if not an explicit agenda, at least a political subtext. Consider the now-disbanded North American graffiti team Utah and Ether, who collaborated on projects around the world for years before splitting up. In an interview, they noted that their purpose was not only to earn street cred: "With our art," they assert, "we hope to create a dialogue with our audience

and to challenge their conventional viewpoints concerning graffiti, whether it's concepts of public versus private property, or the blurred lines of what constitutes as legal and illegal, etc."[17]

Another intriguing example is the Düsseldorf-based artist collective Zelle Asphaltkultur. They regard their graffiti as "conceptual political art." They seek to communicate "a message that is [. . .] spontaneous, sassy, and critical by presenting the ugly truth."[18] Take for instance the piece *Die Möglichkeit eines Lagers* (Figure 3). Created in 2011, this contentious mural was executed on the exterior of a derelict freight terminal that served as a place for Jewish deportation. The work ignited a fervent controversy because of its sensitive location, and such public response was a primary goal for this collective.

Nonetheless, I would like to take the issue a step further by claiming that all graffiti, including tagging and getting up, has a political dimension and an activist undertone even when writers appear to have no stated goal outside the graffiti game, which is rather typical. This claim is central to understanding graffiti as dirty aesthetic education. To clarify, I turn to Rancière's influential concept of the distribution of the sensible. This refers to the set of social norms regulating what can be perceived in public. This notion is crucial for reframing politics not as resource management or dispute resolution but as the contest over who is seen and heard in public space.[19] For Rancière, therefore, the politics is the fundamental aesthetic practice "in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as [it identifies] the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience."[20]

In this light, all graffiti—including tagging and getting up—are political in a fundamental manner. They are thus because, as marks placed on urban



Figure 3. Zelle Asphaltkultur, *Die Möglichkeit eines Lagers* (2011).

public surfaces, they alter the prevailing distribution of the sensible. As a result, spray-paint calligraphers are instantly involved in the processes of inclusion and exclusion that form the essential aesthetic moment of politics. Tags, throw-ups, and pieces subvert, in other words, existing rules governing the uses and functions of public areas. They consequently challenge the constraints of public self-expression, simultaneously contesting the limits of political exclusion.

Undoubtedly, challenging some societal conventions may be essential for a practice to embody an activist spirit in Bacharach's sense, but it is far from sufficient. Consider a foodie who, as a result of their snobbery, violates social conventions on appropriate public dining by loudly shouting and swearing at waiters and other diners. Of course, they are breaking some social norms, but it would be difficult to categorize such behavior as rooted in political activism or aimed at highlighting significant sociopolitical concerns. We require something more in this context. I must clarify the nature of those norms that graffiti writers primarily challenge.

Corporations and political leaders have a monopoly on visual communication due to the dominant distribution of the sensible governing what can be perceived in public places of modern metropolises.[21] In other words, the marks and signs we see while strolling down a city's streets are essentially commercial and political advertising. Everything else is *de facto*, if not *de jure*, prohibited from existing in public space. Some people may be surprised by how strict visibility regulations are: you might be fined for your child's chalk drawings on a public sidewalk or for eating ice cream while walking down the street.[22]

The distribution of the sensible in the contemporary neoliberal city negatively impacts political engagement for reasons that seem unjust. It excludes basically everyone except the affluent and the powerful from freely expressing themselves in public. And those barred from leaving their mark in public are in a fundamental sense the politically marginalized. The regulations concerning disorder indicators, influenced by BWH and the studies mentioned above, intentionally focus on disadvantaged communities while aiming to exclude visibly homeless individuals, impoverished persons, and other marginalized social groups from gentrified urban areas.[23]

Graffiti artists critique the unfair status quo and, through acupunctural interventions, can temporarily alter current socioeconomic systems. As previously said, the transgressive act itself has intrinsic worth for practitioners; the thrill-seeking, risk-taking, and status-building parts are primary motivators for writers, rather than accidental. A tag put on one's own bedroom wall, like one placed in a gallery, does not have the same significance as one in the public domain: It loses its purpose as a record of a rebellious act and a tribute to its author. However, this achievement requires successfully violating spatial limits, with more obvious or challenging spots, often known

as "heavens," conferring higher rank. And these violations, regardless of a writer's intentions, are techniques for challenging the distribution of the sensible.

In light of the aforementioned, I will immediately address the ethical and legal issues with property damage associated with graffiti creation. It is unnecessary to eliminate all tensions in this context and uncritically endorse graffiti. Indeed, there are numerous occasions where the suitability of applying a tag on the exterior of a private residence or vehicle may be called into question. However, the dominant moral geographies—the *doxa*, as Pierre Bourdieu termed it—that consider an urban surface to be appropriate only if it is either "clean" or adorned with commercial advertisements are anything but natural.[24] They are a function of a specific ideology that favors profit and commercial interests in comparison to spontaneous expression.

The notion that graffiti inherently represents property damage is a social construct rather than an objective reality. Why should the application of paint on a train, which does not impact its functionality or safety, be regarded as damage? The historical documentation of medieval graffiti indicates that these inscriptions were not universally seen as such in the past. In contrast, they were produced by the wealthy and rarely criminalized.[25] Laws specifically addressing unsanctioned writings on walls are very recent, originating in the 1970s. The infrequency with which contemporary property owners perceive profitable works by famous street artists as liabilities instead of assets offers profound insights into the ideological underpinnings of this critique. Overall, I believe that a minimal ethical justification for graffiti challenges the prevailing moral geographies of urban spaces, revealing their contingent interpretation of damage while calling for legal reform.

Conceptualizing a moral defense of graffiti in this manner uncovers a significant connection to the ethics of care. An important perspective defines it as an ethic rooted in voice and relationships, emphasizing the necessity for all individuals to have a say, to be attentively listened to (on their own terms), and to be treated with respect.[26] By reclaiming space by any means necessary, graffiti reaffirms the relational character of public areas, allowing individuals to leave their imprint and connect with others through creativity. Graffiti functions not solely as vandalism but as a medium for individuals to connect with others.

In this section, I have then salvaged graffiti writing from its condemnation as immoral vandalism that incites violence and criminality. I have proposed that this urban art form functions as a practice of resistance against the exclusionary tendencies of the prevailing distribution of the sensible in contemporary neoliberal cities. These social norms generally marginalize people that lack money or power, particularly affecting the most vulnerable urban communities. The activist aspect of graffiti signifies educational opportunities that have been previously neglected. In the subsequent

section, I examine these in further detail while providing a more comprehensive definition of what I have labeled *dirty aesthetic education*.

4. Redescribing the Distribution of the Sensible Through Dirty Aesthetic Education

Aesthetic education is often defined as a pedagogical endeavor aimed at cultivating one's taste. According to this perspective, we as art educators "invest our professional lives in the security of the expectation that by our efforts our students, through their time with us, will grow as artists and consumers of art."[27] The aim of aesthetic education, from this point of view, is then to foster individuals who can render enhanced aesthetic judgments compared to their prior assessments and to nurture creators whose productions will be regarded as aesthetically superior to their earlier works.

Some scholars disagree with that view. Among those, Ted Nannicelli has recently proposed a notion of aesthetic education that downplays the significance of taste.[28] He asserts that the principal aim of aesthetic education is not to directly refine one's taste but to cultivate specific perceptual-cognitive abilities to enrich aesthetic experience and elevate aesthetic appreciation. This perspective defines aesthetic education as a type of meta-learning, wherein guided exposure to specific experiences is anticipated to enhance broader competencies that would enable the learner to enrich their future aesthetic involvements.

None of these accounts, however, can truly comprehend the potential of graffiti writing as a form of dirty aesthetic education. Writers' training, of course, entails numerous hours dedicated to sketching letters and other designs in their black books (Figure 4), which serve as paper reservoirs for their ideas and a means to obtain feedback from fellow spray-can calligraphers. This will likely result in an improved taste in design selection, production, and color scheme application, or enhanced perceptual-cognitive abilities, depending on your preference for one of the two models previously discussed. So, in this sense, dirty aesthetic education remains aesthetic in the classic definitions I mentioned before. However, this is not the entire tale.

The educational essence of graffiti writing is fundamentally Rancièrian, as one can expect from the discussion of graffiti's political nature in the previous section, mainly concerning the foundational aspect of politics: the distribution of the sensible. Acquiring knowledge about graffiti entails learning "both to see and to unsee, to hear and to unhear, to feel and to unfeel in equal measure."[29] The educational journey of a toy, as an inexperienced writer is called in jargon, begins with the cultivation of critical consciousness regarding the existing order of visibility, recognizing that this order is not intrinsically natural, as emphasized by Harcourt's critique of BWH or Bourdieu's

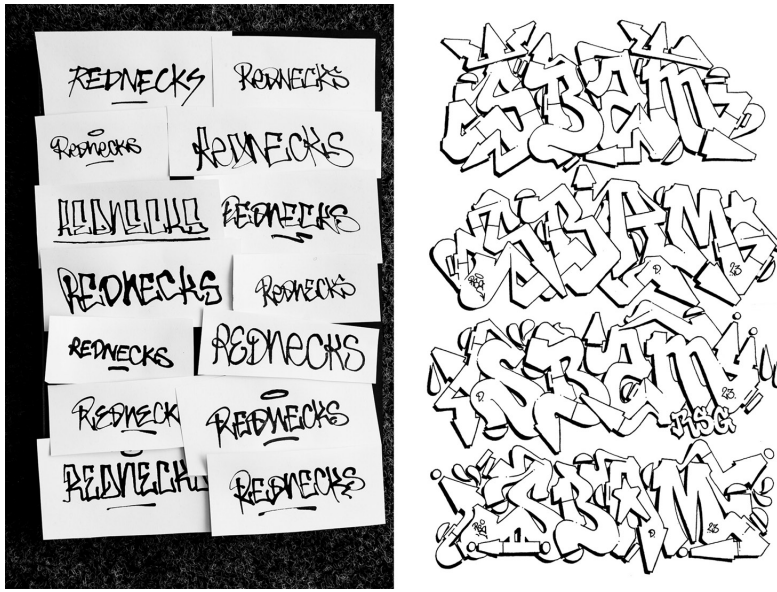


Figure 4. SBAM, Sketches from black book (various iterations of SBAM's crew name on the left; various iterations of his tag in wildstyle on the right).

discussion of *doxa*. It is a product of a specific political arrangement. As it is constructed, so too may it be deconstructed.

It is indeed accurate, as others have shown, that various art genres can significantly influence our "fundamental aesthetic organization of the 'sensible raw materials' of our experiences."[30] Nevertheless, in the majority of instances, such an influence seems to be mediated through a sequence of cognitive or imaginative processes. Graffiti writing establishes a direct link between aesthetic education and the reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible: This gritty form of urban pedagogy literally provides individuals with a crowbar and ladder to hack the visibility system that inhibits public self-expression and promotes exclusionary tendencies. Transformative action is inherently integrated into the learning process: Acquiring graffiti skills entails learning to alter the distribution of the sensible, although temporarily.

Thus, we uncover an additional meaning of the term *aesthetic* in relation to the concept of dirty aesthetic education: It is aesthetic not solely due to its focus on refining taste or cultivating perceptual-cognitive skills that enable learners to enrich their aesthetic lives. It is aesthetic to the extent that it addresses the social construction of the sensuous realm, the mechanisms of its current operation, and the means by which one can influence them by actively redefining the parameters of what is visible (and, more broadly,

perceived) in public. This notion is fundamentally linked to the basis of politics according to Rancière.

The often-unsanctioned influence of writers on the real world necessitates, as researchers have shown, that training in graffiti writing includes strategies of countersurveillance.[31] In response to a growing imperative to safeguard communities from manifestations of disorder, authorities have started to use military technology and methodologies to apprehend graffiti artists. Barbed wire, CCTV surveillance, and acoustic sensors are among the technological devices adapted from combat that have been implemented in the real war against graffiti. Writers had to adjust to this circumstance, devising tactical adaptations to oppose the increasing militarization of public spaces. This encompasses the transition to more rapid and less elaborate writing styles, chiefly tagging, which presents reduced danger for the practitioner, and the emergence of novel techniques like stencils, which are prepared in advance within the confines of one's home or studio.

The analysis above elucidates my characterization of graffiti education as dirty. It is so insofar as it trains its students—among other things—in executing criminal activities such as trespassing, evading detection, and vandalizing properties. These skills are integral to the pedagogical journey of the graffiti writer, prompting Banksy to famously state: "People look at an oil painting and admire the use of brushstrokes to convey meaning. People look at a graffiti painting and admire the use of a drainpipe to gain access."[32] The sentence, however ironic, conveys the significance of these illicit skills, which serve as a vital tool for the political potential of graffiti.

Building on the preceding discussion, I can now offer a more precise definition of dirty aesthetic education. This pedagogy instructs aesthetically in two key ways: first, by cultivating perceptual and cognitive sensibilities akin to traditional models of aesthetic education; second, by equipping practitioners with the skills to intervene in the distribution of the sensible, which is the aesthetic foundation of politics in Rancière's thought. What sets this model apart from more conventional forms is its inclusion of criminal techniques necessary for the illicit appropriation of public or private space. Put succinctly, dirty aesthetic education is a pedagogy that teaches practitioners how to critically transform public space through artistic means, challenging dominant hierarchies of visibility and power *by any means necessary*, including legal transgression.

This framework helps position graffiti within the broader continuum of unauthorized public markings. While it shares space with everything from petty vandalism to politically charged murals, graffiti occupies a distinct aesthetic and pedagogical space. Its uniqueness from those other practices is a deliberate investment in formal composition: decisions about style, color, and spatial placement. Unlike random acts of destruction, graffiti uses transgression as a means of aesthetic meaning-making. Its illegality is tactical, not

for its own sake: It is a way of intervening in who gets to shape the aesthetics of the city.

As a form of dirty *aesthetic* education, graffiti trains practitioners to disrupt the city's visual order through style. Its subversiveness also depends on traditional aesthetic skill, as mentioned: Together with spot selection, choosing colors, composing letters, and implementing specific layout contribute to its battle for visibility against commercial imagery, which would otherwise overwhelm those rebellious signs. Graffiti, at its core, is an aesthetic practice built on rigorous, peer-driven attention to form and executed *by any means necessary*.

While its criminal nature may initially seem to disqualify graffiti as a form of aesthetic education, this very tension is what makes it so conceptually rich. Beyond its legal paradoxes, which I have already addressed in the previous section, graffiti offers powerful lessons in connectedness, collective authorship, and urban belonging. It is precisely through its radical engagement with public space that graffiti emerges as a distinctive educational practice. In the following section, I turn to a closer examination of its pedagogical functions.

5. Dirty Aesthetic Education's Pedagogical Functions

In order to clarify dirty aesthetic education's pedagogical possibilities, let me introduce a distinction made by Dutch philosopher and educator Gert Biesta in his critique of quantitative assessment in schools. In his view, education serves three functions.[33] These are qualification (teaching knowledge and skills), socialization (having students participate in a specific social, cultural, and political order), and subjectification (teaching students to think independently). Whereas the first function of education is primarily economic, the second is to preserve culture and tradition. The last one "shapes individuals into critical or at least self-reflexive citizens who are not only good at what they do (qualification) and do what they have to do (socialization) but also think about what they do or should do and why. They can then actively adjust their behavior or at least attempt to do so."[34]

The educational path of a graffiti writer mostly satisfies the third function of education in Biesta's account. This does not imply that the other two are nonexistent or irrelevant. Of course, graffiti's dirty aesthetic education is also a journey of qualification in which practitioners acquire a set of creative skills, as already mentioned. And at least some of these have a professional application in occupations and careers that provide financial rewards. Graffiti, as a creative gym, "enables a unique combination of motoric and psycho-social abilities, which opens up many perspectives and careers for the so-called writer."[35] In effect, we find many former or active graffiti writers among creative professionals.[36]

There is also a lot about socialization that writers learn via their pedagogical journey, which the activity forces on them. Though many graffiti writers' key acts, such as trespassing or vandalism, may be deemed antisocial, the crew's social lifestyle is central to this subculture. Through years of collaboration in spray-painted escapades, members of a crew form bonds that are commonly referred to as familial.[37] For example, in a fanzine commemorating RSG's twenty-year anniversary, one of its members, SBAM, writes about his teammates (Figure 5): "They rescued me every time I [got] drunk, vomited, collapsed, [got] into a fight, or ruined a party . . . they were there and it was a lot of fun, and they became family."[38] And it is no coincidence that some institutional initiatives have attempted to exploit graffiti for community development purposes.[39]

Nonetheless, it is in the third function that this dirty aesthetic education excels: subjectification. The fundamental lesson that graffiti imparts to its practitioners—and by extension, those who appreciate it—is the ability to resist conformity to established societal norms and expectations, cultivate



Figure 5. SBAM, "When No One Is Watching."

a critical awareness of these constructs, and change them. Within this educational framework, writers are instructed, primarily in an informal manner by their peers, on how to manipulate the regulations established by the prevailing system of visibility. Graffiti's dirty aesthetic education offers then "an open space where the game can be played according to different rules for a little while."[40]

At this point, a critic might present the subsequent objection: Although the act of creating graffiti is fundamentally political in its challenge to conventional ideas of visual and spatial ownership, its manifestations often remain conventional and formulaic. The lack of relevant content and absence of formal originality in numerous graffiti appear to undermine assertions of critical consciousness or opposition to conformity. Although political graffiti or representational street art may evade this critique, the specific form of graffiti writing I am addressing must confront this issue.

The most compelling response does not avoid the charge but directly challenges its premise. Rather than contradicting critical awareness, stylistic conformity in graffiti demonstrates it. This may seem paradoxical, but it reveals how stylistic commitment in graffiti writing is not about aesthetic conservatism but about participating in a disciplined form of aesthetic disobedience. In previous work, I've argued that the subversive value of graffiti is holistic: If even one act of graffiti is politically meaningful, then the wider network of practices, tools, sites, and temporalities through which graffiti operates shares in that meaning.[41] Subversion in graffiti is diffused across its cultural, sociological, and material dimensions rather than being isolated in the works. That is, the very consistency of style becomes a mode of visibility and recognition within a decentralized, transnational counter-public.

This holistic view distinguishes graffiti from what is often termed *latrinalia,* scrawled restroom messages such as "I hate the government" or "Baby I love you," which are typically dismissed as spontaneous, apolitical expressions of individual frustration. Unlike these ephemeral markings, graffiti writing is situated within a coherent, collective tradition of resistance. Tags, throw-ups, and pieces number in the millions, forming a global network of symbols and gestures that cannot be so easily dismissed. As such, graffiti is not a disposable youth fad but a longstanding visual intervention in the ideological ordering of urban space. Its very scale and consistency force the public and authorities to reckon with its challenge.

The "art form's collectively sustained duration, its historically complex social and institutional development, and its aesthetic sophistication" have transformed graffiti into a serious and nondisposable movement battling in the territorial struggle for exposure and attention.[42] The movement as a whole is a forceful message about order and disorder, and who has the authority to decide what is and is not acceptable, rather than a reflection of an unkempt mind or a meaningless popular trend among young people

that will fade away. And the extreme reactions that global authorities have enacted in response to its perceived threat to public order and a conception of urban space as the front stage of tidy commerce attest to the practice's overall political significance, regardless of a single writer's specific intention while *getting up*.

It is in effect true that writers are often unaware of the political implications of graffiti and their acts. However, the practice works for them in this case: The intention, in other words, to become a part of the practice has repercussions that members do not always consciously appreciate. The absence of psychological intentions in individuals performing acts of defiance has been well documented. In practices of everyday resistance, where people seek practical achievements rather than structural transformations, participants are likely to act without a specific agenda in mind.[43] And graffiti could be considered just that, a form of everyday resistance.[44]

The formal consistency of the practice significantly influences the perception of these activities, therefore framing them not as idiosyncratic manifestations of peculiar individuals but as a collective expression of a broader movement that critically contests prevailing notions about the utilization of public space. This elucidates how adherence to a style may be a facet of the subjectification process. Embracing style writing, I maintain, is per se an exercise of critical consciousness and opposition to social conformity: As Fuel, a former leader of the DDS crew stated in an interview, doing a graffiti "is basically proving that people have overcome certain fears and constrictions about how they are told to live."[45]

Take, for example, a throw-up by Wanto (Figure 6), a renowned Japanese bomber, that I captured atop a pillar in Tokyo's Shibuya Station, which is



Figure 6. WANTO, *Throw-Up in Tokyo* (photo by the author).

one of the busiest intersections in the world. To the critic, its block letters might appear visually unremarkable. Yet its placement transforms it into a bold spatial intervention: It asserts visibility where invisibility is structurally imposed. More than an isolated act, it links to a broader counter-imaginary—a shadow Tokyo inscribed in alleys, underpasses, billboards, and support beams. Wanto's work reflects not mindless defiance but a practiced spatial literacy, attuned to the city's (in)visible infrastructures.

This impression deepened as I encountered similarly modest yet unmistakable throw-ups by Wanto in the back alleys of Shanghai (Figure 7) and Seoul (Figure 8), painted across shutters and passageways. Despite their formal simplicity, their recurrence across distinct urban landscapes magnifies their critical charge. What may seem minimal is in fact strategically mobile: Each inscription is a cipher in a transnational code of resistance.

These markings are not just personal assertions of senseless rage. They rather signal participation in a dispersed, global movement of aesthetic disobedience—a form of resistance enacted not in galleries but on the infrastructural fringes of cities. Far from redundant or banally repetitive, Wanto's throw-ups disrupt spatial hierarchies by rendering neglected surfaces newly visible, insisting that expression belongs to anyone claiming space through creativity. The cumulative presence and holistic connection of such



Figure 7. WANTO, *Throw-Up in Shanghai* (photo by the author).

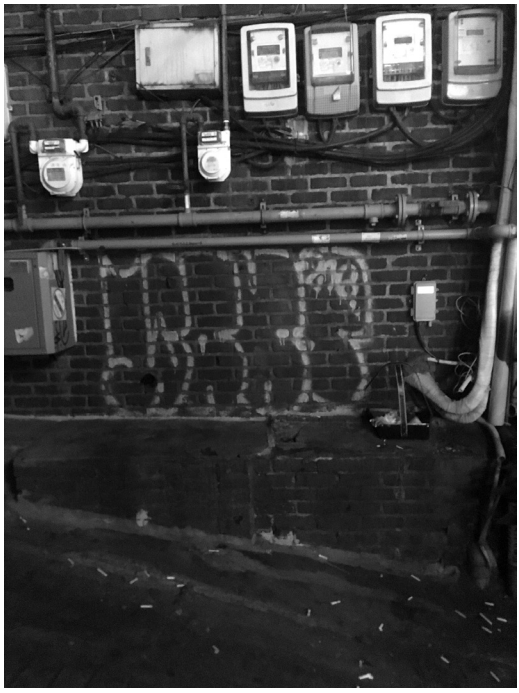


Figure 8. WANTO, *Throw-Up in Seoul* (photo by the author).

acts, repeated across cities linked by flows of capital and control, produce a kind of aesthetic sovereignty, even in fleeting form. Through repetition and shared formal codes, writers chart an underground cartography of defiance, challenging the norms that govern urban visibility and order.

Each time I encounter a work echoing Wanto's style, even by other writers, as I often did while living in Nanjing (Figure 9), I feel the same uncanny recognition—not just aesthetic familiarity but political continuity. These moments collapse geographic distance and reveal a network of resistance: This is evidence that others, too, are battling for inclusion.

This recognition affirms that graffiti writing, even in its less elaborate forms, is part of a coherent, transnational movement. Its stylistic consistency is not a limitation but a multiplier of subversion. It is about connecting strangers through a shared aesthetic grammar of refusal and a collective insistence on the right to be seen. It is a sign that one has chosen to join a movement resisting conformity to established societal norms and expectations while subverting them, albeit temporarily.

Viewing graffiti holistically challenges conventional approaches to evaluating art as isolated works. In graffiti, a writer's output should be assessed collectively, not individually. This explains why getting up has long been the



Figure 9. *Throw-Ups in Nanjing* (photo by the author).

core metric of value. Prolific writers, or *kings*, are esteemed less for singular style than for the volume of their work, which creates the dense network of visual presence essential to graffiti's broader political significance.[46]

I will conclude this section by exploring how the pedagogical dimensions of dirty aesthetic education might be integrated into formal contexts. While, as discussed in section 2, Bowen and Daichendt consider qualification and socialization, I focus on subjectification by drawing on Tyson Lewis's reading of Rancière.[47] Lewis critiques Paulo Freire's model of education as a linear progression from ignorance to knowledge, advocating instead for pedagogical practices that introduce aesthetic disruptions: images, texts, or experiences that provoke uncertainty and resist closure. These, he argues, challenge the distribution of the sensible, as exemplified in Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002).

A formal educational setting informed by dirty aesthetic education would mirror Lewis's Rancièrian framework, fostering acts and experiences that unsettle dominant perceptions. This could take the form of experimental seminars based in public spaces and rooted in graffiti-based practices. One such initiative is *Under Art Construction*, conceived by social worker Stefan Mohr, which featured leading European graffiti writers using the construction fencing around the future ECB headquarters in Frankfurt (Figure 10).[48] Though legally sanctioned, the project harnessed the disruptive aesthetic of graffiti to reframe public perception of a financial power symbol.



Figure 10. COR and Bobby Borderline, *Lady Justice* (photo by the author).

It illustrates how dirty aesthetic education can critically inform and expand formal artistic pedagogies.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued for graffiti as a vital expression of what I call dirty aesthetic education, that is, a form of Rancièrian pedagogy that disrupts the prevailing distribution of the sensible in neoliberal cities. By altering what can legitimately appear in public space, graffiti challenges the dominance of commercial and political elites, exposing the contingency and exclusionary logic of existing visibility regimes.

Dirty aesthetic education exceeds conventional notions of taste or cognitive refinement. It cultivates aesthetic skill while fostering a deeper awareness of politics and public expression, centering education on subjectification: the empowerment of individuals to interrogate and aesthetically transform their environments, even when doing so violates norms of decorum. It is a radical aesthetic-political practice that exploits graffiti's full potential without deferring to the sanitized expectations of Western, middle-class sensibility. In confronting the pedagogy of graffiti, we are compelled to rethink aesthetic education itself by recognizing the power of unruly art forms to instill moral, social, and political responsibility where institutional models often fall short. Go dirty or go home!

Notes

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