

As a graffiti artist, I am interested in why people write graffiti. I feel it is important to explore this topic because, for many people, graffiti is just mindless vandalism. Many do not recognize graffiti as a legitimate art movement, but it is a thriving network and sub-culture. For young people living in cities, graffiti helps one build an identity and find an individual voice within such a crowded environment where it seems that powerful corporations censor everything. I hope to shine light on the artistic, social, and political values of graffiti.

This graffiti isn't traditional, for I built the wall and the whole thing was done legally. I also used airbrush (instead of actual spray-paint) because I worked inside. I want to present graffiti in an environment that it would definitely be seen as a work of art. My installation works as a "refined" piece people can admire artistically. I also made a *zine* to showcase one of my tags as a way to visually present different possibilities used with the same letters.

This installation depicts different aspects of graffiti as a legitimate art-form. I want the viewer to see the beauty and artistry presented on the front of the wall, while also taking into consideration the role that "tagging" plays on the back of the wall and in the *zine*. I hope that people will understand the creativity necessary in order to write graffiti, whether it is in designing an intricate piece or coming up with new ways to tag. In accepting graffiti as art, people will begin to think about what graffiti writers are trying to communicate.

Jaden

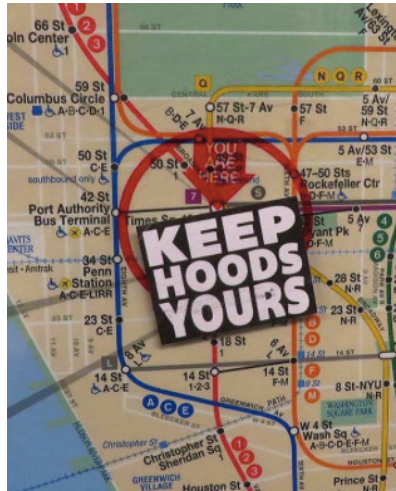
## Graffiti Terms:

**Tags-** A stylized way of writing one's letters. Tags can be written in a number of different materials such as marker, spray paint, industrial crayons, paint mops, and even dust.



**Slaps-** Stickers with tags or drawings, commonly done on postal stickers.







**Throw-ups (throwie)**- Using spray paint, throwies are usually bubble lettering that is filled in with any color and outlined.





**Pieces-** Complicated and large with multiple colors, pieces can be done in a number of different styles.





**Rollers-** Done with a paint roller to create block style letters, rollers are usually bigger than throwies and pieces.





*I grew up seeing graffiti on every street corner of my home city, San Francisco. As a child, this strange writing in bright colors, above and below eye level, large and exaggerated, or small and simply defined, was fascinating to me. From a young age, I would try to read these letters and write in the styles I noticed, but I did not begin writing graffiti on the streets until I was in high school. Growing up with graffiti as part of the city culture I was used to, I didn't put much thought into what it meant to me and why I wrote it. When my mother found markers and paint cans in my room and in all my bags and confronted me looking for some explanation, I had to start thinking about what I was doing here. What are my intentions with writing graffiti? Is it art or just plain vandalism? Why do I feel the need to do it and feel offended by my mother's distaste for it? How could something that is supposedly so bad, feel right to me? These are just some of the questions I have been faced with the further I get into writing graffiti. With the rest of this paper, I intend to explore these questions and find out what graffiti means to me as an artist.*

Graffiti may seem normal now to see on any city street, but for every person who sees it, the question of why people do graffiti must have at least once crossed their mind. Graffiti started in the 1970's in Philadelphia, and exploded as an art form in the 1980's in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other major cities around America. It has since spread around the globe, and is a worldwide topic of heated discussion. Some call it an "art movement," and some call it "vandalism." I grew up with both these opinions jumping at the back of my mind as I saw and wrote graffiti, though I was never presented with valid points to either side of the argument. With graffiti being something I am drawn to, I knew I needed to seek out my own stance in this debate. I obviously leaned towards graffiti as being an art form that one must have an eye for and specialized skill to practice. Although writing graffiti has never felt wrong to me, I did not know how to explain, ethically, my disposition for doing it. I've come to realize that there are really three general philosophies behind graffiti, although reasoning must be different for each graffiti writer. Graffiti is about the ego of the writer, the impulse to rebel in a conformist society, and pure artistic expression with the desire to create something aesthetically beautiful for anyone to see.

A graffiti writer's ego is the driving force behind them wanting to create and put their work everywhere. Graffiti is a game played between writers; a competition of who has the most ups. Ups are the spots a writer has hit with their letters. If a writer is "up" all over their city, it is likely that other writers have noticed, and depending on how interesting their letters are or how daring the spots they hit are, they are probably respected by these other writers as well. Many writers that play into this game write to feed their ego, they want everyone to know their letters. In the graffiti documentary *Infamy*, a writer who goes by the name of "Earsnot" explains how tagging is so efficient for getting known. When a writer hits a tag and gets their up, people will notice and read it. He also talks about the rush of excitement and pride he gets as a writer when a stranger recognizes his letters.<sup>1</sup> This feeling is quite possibly the reason that all writers start writing; it is what gives writers that initial drive, which then grows into a fiercer motivation to do more and more graffiti. Especially for many kids that may not feel valued in school or at home, realizing that complete strangers know their name is an ego boost that feels good.

Besides the purpose of writers wanting to gain recognition and respect from other writers, they also use graffiti as a means of communication. A writer might want to communicate that “my style is better than yours” or just “I was here” by hitting a certain spot with their tag. Other writers are always noticing and on the lookout for these new additions to walls, it is a graffiti writer network of sorts. The topic of how writers communicate comes up in an interview of Zamar, a writer from San Francisco, conducted by Eric Vasallo. After speaking with Zamar, Vasallo explains how “these street writers created the original Facebook, networking via real walls not virtual ones. They would know what each other was up to by noticing updates on the “wall” and literally reading the writing on the walls that they would “tag.” You could know which crew they were a part of or not and what their territory or main area was and what they represented.”<sup>ii</sup> It is easy for writers to keep track of each other, all they have to do is walk down a street and look at the different tags there. This sort of communicating seems more authentic and interesting on the streets than on a virtual platform. This also brings of the question of if people can post what ever they want on Facebook and Instagram, why is it so frowned upon for people to do this on the streets? If graffiti comes off as visual litter to some people, they don’t have to look at it, just as one may choose to ignore what comes up on their social media feeds. With the same intention when choosing to post something on a social media platform, writers simply want to be detected by others around them.

When a writer writes their letters on something, it creates a connection between the writer and that place by making it a part of them, giving them a stronger sense of identity. Writers are inclined to get up the most in places they feel attached to. A graffiti artist called “Enem,” in an interview conducted for the documentary *Infamy*, mentions that putting up his letters everywhere was not only about getting this recognition from strangers, it was also to show them what was his and only his. He says, “I had a bus route that ran by my house. I had to let people know that that was *my* route...ain’t nobody bombing around there like I’m bombing.”<sup>iii</sup> With many writers being young people, and not really knowing what it’s like to own things, it is appealing to them that graffiti could give them something to own. Graffiti is a device for claiming territory, which many people may associate with gangs, but with writers, they are not claiming spots for moving drugs or to demonstrate power, they are simply identifying with their surroundings. I’ve noticed that young people, myself included, get very attached to the places they have grown up seeing, so writing their letters and claiming these places as part of them shows people their connection with their neighborhood or city and therefore their childhood.

Graffiti is an art form that especially draws in young people, because it addresses many aspects of growing up and building an identity for oneself. In the graffiti documentary, *Piece by Piece*, the graffiti artist “Reyes” shares, “someone told me something when I was a kid, and they said being a graffiti artist is the most quintessential thing you can do growing up to have an identity. I thought it was kind of silly when he said it, but now when I look back in hindsight, it definitely combines a lot of different elements of life, and balance is important.”<sup>iv</sup> Graffiti has the capacity to ground kids, giving them a sense of character, while also being an outlet for expression and creativity without restrictions. It is also important that these kids, who most likely would not be involved in art otherwise, are able to participate and practice expressing themselves creatively. For many young people living hectic city lifestyles, having a community of



graffiti writers offers them the feeling of security, and hopefully, they build healthy relationships with their peers and mentors.

With the many different aspects of why graffiti is appealing, every writer has their own reasons behind why they started writing. I asked one of my best friends, and the person I used to go out writing with, why he started writing. Like me, he grew up seeing graffiti everywhere, especially because he lives in the Mission district of San Francisco, known for its alleys full of graffiti and murals. He also grew up skating and biking with a lot of older guys who wrote graffiti, so he had experimented with graffiti before he started writing more seriously by getting more ups and making a name for himself. When I asked him specifically about his reasoning behind why he started writing, he said, "I started writing something freshman year because I had found a marker and it was fun. Then it became more intentional when I broke my hand but wrote anyway. I guess it was like I could beat odds by doing what I supposedly couldn't." For him, writing started out as something he did almost out of circumstance, because he was just surrounded by it, but then it turned into something more deliberate, and with a rebellious intention. With his broken hand, it was unexpected that he would be writing, though that was the exact point in time that he really started becoming obsessed with the action. His broken hand just made writing more interesting of a task for him because it was a challenge he could overcome. The message that he was sending was that he was going to write no matter his situation. With this message, he was defying the expectation that he would not be writing with a broken hand, and the deeper and more set expectation that he would follow the norms and laws of society.

Doing something out of the ordinary and unexpected is one of the things that make graffiti so attractive to writers. Zamar, a well-known graffiti artist throughout San Francisco, who is famous for his squid/conch shell character, explains this phenomenon. He explains, "[graffiti] comes off as shocking because it's a ripple in the system -a glitch in the matrix of sorts. It's there and it's not supposed to be. It causes panic and feeling of loss of control."<sup>v</sup> Having this effect of panic on people is the main intention of some graffiti writers. It is a reminder to everyone out there on the streets and in public spaces that not everyone is willing to follow the expectations set around keeping personal expression to oneself unless permitted. This ideology behind graffiti is not just to spite the society that has set this expectation, but it is also to jolt people out of the trance that they don't realize they are in. Graffiti writers want to wake these people up and make them realize that it should be accepted for people to express themselves in public spaces, and banning graffiti is putting restrictions on peoples' free speech.

In such a crowded world, where it seems that big corporations control everything, people see from fashion trends in magazines and on billboards to current events in the news, writing graffiti helps people find their independent voices. In a post by Jeremiah McNichols from the blog *Thinking Pictures*, he states that graffiti is in protest against everything every successful advertisement agencies stand for: the commodification of public space, the standardization of the built environment, and the permission-based, central control of communication in the form of visual display.<sup>vi</sup> Writers, noticing this consciously or unconsciously, engage with this system of communication or, more accurately stated, brainwash of the mass population by adding in their own voices. They are making the, once, barrage of messages into a conversation, which is obviously not what corporations controlling big industries want.

Writers have the ability to differentiate themselves from the crowd by creating their own message. During an interview for *Forbes Magazine*, BNE, a graffiti artist who turned his letters into a logo to start a whole organization for getting access to clean water sources in developing countries, explains why he chose graffiti as his medium for expressing his message: "It's more like [graffiti] chose me. Graffiti and skateboarding both seem to attract kids from broken homes. I fell in love with both right away. I was rebelling against authority since first or second grade, so both of these things were a perfect fit and I gravitated to them naturally. I really liked that to skate or do graffiti, I didn't need another person or a team... all I needed to skate and do graffiti was the streets. Even as an adult I can still have fun in the streets for free."<sup>vii</sup> BNE loved that graffiti gave him independence and his own way of expression as a kid. There are no defined rules with graffiti, a writer can do and express whatever they want with the art form. The writers make a conscious decision to put a piece of themselves on the street for anyone to see. Whether the viewer understands it or not, the message cannot be censored and is purely and directly from the writer. This sort of expression is addictive to writers because they are not asking permission from anyone; they are making themselves heard by a society that doesn't want to listen to anyone without political or economic power.

Graffiti is an art form where pioneering new styles and tools for getting up is widely accepted and encouraged, it is actually a big part of being a writer, which means writers are constantly developing and pushing their letters and styles, and therefore their creative capacity. A business journal was published in 2009 called *The Journal of Business and Ethics* with a certain section devoted to understanding the relationship between creativity and ethical ideologies. This portion was focusing on the connection between creative people and what is accepted as ethical, stating that "Given their aptitude for divergent thinking, creative people are more likely to reject any moral thinking that calls for conformity or rigid following of rules."<sup>viii</sup> It is no wonder that people with the disposition for writing are very creative because breaking the rules is not a major conflict for them and is something they feel comfortable doing. Writers do not blindly accept the morals set for them by the law, which doesn't mean that they do not have morals, but instead they just have their own ethical boundaries that are more lenient than most people's. Their expression cannot be confined by norms of society; in fact, these norms are the very thing they intend to question through the practice of graffiti.

Graffiti writers do not need specific meaning for what they write because the act within itself has significance, though many graffiti artists have their own meanings to their tags or characters. This is where graffiti really is presented as art, because graffiti is used as expression of the artist's creativity with an intention to evoke something in the viewer, though unlike other art forms, graffiti offers the artist anonymity. The graffiti artist from San Francisco who goes by "Koosk" defends the importance of this aspect of the art form: "I feel the need to create from the shadows. I don't want people to know it's me because it allows them to create a mystery and a story in their head of who made them and what the strange characters represent."<sup>ix</sup> Koosk wants their artwork to stand on its own. Not giving the viewer any explanation or context for the artwork by the blatant display created by putting it up the street, offers the viewers nothing but their own experience with the art. The ambiguity of graffiti allows the viewer to merge with something they *can* connect with.



For creative young people growing up in urban environments, graffiti is the perfect outlet for expression. The act of writing is something that many kids are very engrossed in from the moment they start. Each writer identifies with graffiti for his or her individual reasoning, may it be to feed their ego or to make a statement against conformity or to manifest themselves artistically. Graffiti is a very dear part of writers' identity because of the community it offers. Most every writer starts out practicing as a kid, so it is easy for grownups, especially in more powerful positions, to dismiss graffiti as destructive and meaningless vandalism, which is a very close-minded thing to do. It is important for people to understand the significance writing graffiti has as a device for creative expression, although it is in breach of law. Instead of disregarding kids' captivation to graffiti, it should be recognized as a crucial part of the development of younger generations. Graffiti deserves to be acknowledged as art, not vandalism.

Personally, I cannot imagine who I would be without graffiti as part of my upbringing, I certainly know I would be a less developed person and artist, and less of a critical thinker. Within the past year, when I started practicing the art of graffiti, I've been accepted into a community where my race, class, and sex were not considered as a factor of my aptitude for writing. I am not saying that the graffiti community is without flaws, though it is impossible for discrimination to be present in a community where members are largely anonymous. I could be admiring someone's work who I have no idea about their appearance or background, but have most likely passed by on the street, is an element of graffiti that I can really appreciate. This openness to endless possibilities for who a writer may be taught me to never set defined expectations of people purely based on a couple aspects of them. Graffiti also taught me, as an artist, to think more creatively with the way I want to express myself and what I ultimately want to convey with this expression. From the moment I started writing, my style has constantly been developing, along with my skill, level of detail, and complexity of letters: what I could physically. Graffiti had always had significance to me, yet up until now, I did not realize the extent of this significance in my life. I was unaware of how much I have learned and developed into myself as an effect of writing. Now there is more personal intention for me as a writer. Although the innate meanings of my different tags are subjective to me, the act of writing sends a different message that challenges conformity and encourages others to do the same. We all must exercise our own ways of expression if we want to continue pushing the boundaries of what our society is capable of.

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<sup>iv</sup> *Piece by Piece*. Dir. Nic Hill. 2005. DVD.

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