

CONTRIBUTORIA

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ARTICLE **ART, POLITICS & PROTEST**

I was a teenage tagging vandal

I wrote my name on my city and you should too



By
Danny Smith



Nobody likes tagging, the squiggles and glyphs you see in drip pen on bus shelters and blank doors. It's dismissed as "scrawl" or "scribble", part of an urban blight that will affect the house prices and encourage the crack dealers. Good. You're not supposed to get it. It's not for you. That's an uneasy concept to adjust to in a world of targeted marketing and bland utilitarian culture but that's the way it is. But don't get egotistical; it doesn't exist solely to piss you off either, although that is a delightful side effect.

I grew up in the 80s, just as the more commercial tendrils of hip-hop culture permeated over the ocean into the British consciousness. And I loved graffiti as soon as I saw it, probably in the background of a music video or the classic films, Breakdance the Movie and Breakdance 2: Electric Boogaloo. For an awkward kid who spent most of his time either reading or drawing, suddenly one of those

things became cool, not just ordinary cool, *American cool*, which for a seven year old was the coolest type of cool there is. From then on I would fill any scrap of paper with bold felt-tip lettering, making words like RAP (which was cool) and COOL (which was incredibly cool).

Around that time my mum let me watch a film called Turk 182! The film is about a guy who goes on a graffiti campaign to embarrass the mayor and get recognition for his injured firefighter brother. Looking back it seems an embarrassing cash-in on the graffiti craze, whitewashed of all ethnicity and given more noble cause than the received wisdom of it coming from marking gang territory. Its no coincidence that the tag Turk 182! is incredibly similar to that of one of the first and most prolific graffiti writers, Taki 183. After that film my mum made it very clear that there was good graffiti, the bold colourful complicated “masterpieces”, and the bad sort: the scribble.

But that’s not the way it works. You don’t get to understand the big complicated “wildstyle” without exploring the letter shapes, without intimate and integral knowledge of how letters flow and fit you can never even read the more socially acceptable bigger pieces.

A good tag is beautiful, calligraphy in its most basic version of the word, from the greek *kallos*, meaning beauty and *graphos* meaning writing. But that’s not where the similarities end. Like traditional calligraphy there is a set of styles and forms, a grammar of shapes. even the equipment used is similar, the broad flat

nibs of a calligraphy pen are the same as the flat nibs of the preferred marker pens, and for the same reason - the variance of line weight of the letters.

Tags themselves are far more dynamic, often written quickly and with a flourish, with an energy that can't be contained to paper. The stark angular shapes and lines that dip and slink into circles or hover into stars mimic the dynamic and mediated lines of the city. There is a tension in a tag, an uneasy balance between hours practising in notebooks and the heart-beating rush of performing the act.

Putting your name on something is the simplest act of ownership there is.

Hunter S. Thompson wrote the seminal campaign book *Fear and Loathing On The Campaign Trail '72* and said that “politics is the art of controlling your environment”. In the most basic way tagging is an expression of that. We don't get much of a choice of the environment we grow up in, maybe a little more as we get older, but buildings will get built, huge advertising displays will block the sky and roads will be concreted over your favourite shortcut. None of this you can stop or even affect.

Putting your name on something is the simplest act of ownership there is. A way of marking out your space. But it's also a way of communicating with others, others who perhaps feel the same as you. A wall covered in tags isn't a contested piece of real estate, it's a community, a choir of ink fingered voices, a family.

Graffiti is a way of appropriating the space we are given, like free running, or skateboarding, or urban exploration, turning the imposed concrete and glass habitats into playgrounds, obstacle courses or galleries. The shit-strewn gulleys and wasteland of my childhood became my shit-strewn gulleys and wasteland. The advertisement's power dulled by layers of unsolicited contributions. And the walls became noticeboards buzzing with information just because I discovered how to see it.

And it's illegal. It's hard to deny there is a rush to it, of going out and breaking the law. Evenings spent climbing and skulking, running flat out, heart climbing out of your chest. But this is good, we have two generations of kids using graffiti to negotiate their own way through the gaps between morality and legality, learning that NOT obeying is an option. In a society where the politics of conformity is the only agenda being offered, even the most minor acts of vandalism are civil disobedience.

Tagging is scrawl as much as any painting in a gallery is a daubing. Marshall McLuhan said, "the medium is the message" and in the case of tagging the

message is “fuck you - I exist”. If you don’t like it, it simply isn’t for you, and that is all you’ll ever see. But, look harder, smarter, and those scribbles become a symphony of voices, displaced, dispossessed searchers looking for their own space. Tiny masterpieces of form and performance and evidence that there are people out there who are willing to not conform, to break the law even to get their voices heard.



About the writer

“My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order.”
Danny’s work has appeared in *Vice*, *Fused* and *Area* magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He’s worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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