

hard hitting modern perspective on

To fully comprehend the agenda of the graffiti artist, it is vital to understand the history of hip-hop culture and wall art, the key terms used by the artists and the difference between hip-hop graffiti and other forms of vandalism.

Hip-hop is a ghetto concept. It evolved out of the rap music made in New York's Brooklyn and Harlem districts in the late '60s and early '70s. Donald Clarke states that rap music was a reaction to disco which was all the rage in elite, expensive bars throughout the United States (1959). Rather than save pennies to attend these dances, ghetto musicians chose to use inexpensive means to create a new sound. Rather than performing on stage, these people took to the street corner where they used lyrical rhythms and „beat boxing“ to express their feelings towards the condition of ghetto life. Eventually, turntables were employed for „scratching“ (the sound created when a stylus of a record player is repeatedly passed through the grooves of any record), which gave hip-hop music an original edge that separated it from traditional forms of lyrical music. Microphones became integral once the sound needed to reach mass groupings, however, it wasn't simply used to amplify the rapper but also symbolized the early hip-hop ideology.

By 1979, rap music had achieved international acclaim with the Sugar Hill Gang's song, 'Rapper's Delight' topping the charts. Hip-hop music has never looked back and has managed to continue growing to what is now a multi-million-dollar industry world-wide. Inner-city communities finally had a musical language that spoke a new truth to generations of silenced, over-gentrified communities. Along with the advent of hip-hop music, came a new phenomenon in graffiti; a form of visual expression which was by no means new. The term „graffiti“ comes from the Italian word „graffito“ that means scratching made on a surface. The word is related „both linguistically and in content“ (Tobin 4) to a style of mural painting referred to as „sgraffito“ scene of a Dionysiac Mystery Cult, painted in 50 BC in Pompeii is an ancient example of these mural techniques (Janson 250). In recent times, graffiti has evolved to include any marking made in public and has recently become the source of many property owners' anger. Since 1989, graffiti has wound up costing the United States government over 4,000,000,000 dollars per annum and this figure is escalating (Beatty and Cray 1990). How much of this damage can be attributed to members of the hip-hop culture is difficult to say, however, there are tell-tale signs to identify the graffiti which surrounds the movement. The HHG „writer“ (or hip-hop graffiti as Donald Brewer kindly refers to them) is very dogmatic in his/her approach to graffiti.

Since the dawn of early man, public walls have been used as a prime surface for the creation and communication of ideas.

Artistic symbols like the ones discovered in the caves of Lascaux, have been used by groups to identify, exemplify and edify philosophy for roughly 15,000 years.

These scribbles appear everywhere from prehistoric caves to modern-day urban alleyways and are visible in hundreds of different sizes and styles, colours and forms. One of the most exciting genres of wall art hit New York City in the early seventies and has been growing and evolving for the last twenty-five years. Hip-hop graffiti and those responsible for upholding the hip-hop culture use a vast array of tools (namely the spray can and microphone) to communicate the goals of this movement. [...]

It will be the function of this article to define the role of the graffiti artist in a historical perspective and to argue the validity of this new art form in an aesthetic, art-minded manner. [...]

HIP HOP

GRAFFITI



gestaltet von Florian Beyerlein – gekürzt – original auf <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/element.html> – by Kevin Element

Most importantly, the writer will undoubtedly leave a name or „tag“ behind to mark his activity (188). The tag is a highly complex, calligraphic symbol that has little to no meaning except to identify the writer. Often a writer will tag a crew name, like AA (Aerosol Alliance) or NES (Northern Eyegasmic Syndicate), which qualifies them as being a member of a larger collective and to boast the large membership of the movement (Chalfant 14). Some might argue that this type of writing would also embrace the marks made by gang members trying to mark territory, however, the mastery and obvious technical ability of the writer shows them to be quite different. Different spray can nozzles and brand names are used to ensure that tags don't drip. A drip is a sign that the writer has not yet mastered his tools; these inexperienced people are commonly called „toys“ (Chalfant 13). Size and complexity is another way to determine if graffiti was made by an HHG artist. In the early 1970's, a writer by the name of TAKI 183 appeared in New York and began to scribble his tag everywhere. This began the war to get „up“ or to have your tag and crew name written on as many surfaces at once as possible. Soon the letters became bigger than life as writers began using markers, shoe polish, home made pens, grease pencils, paint sticks and spraycans (Brewer 188).

The simple tag evolved to become what is referred to as a „throw up“. A throw up is a bicolor tag written in bubble or block letters which are filled in with one colour and outlined in another. This is by far the fastest way to achieve large scale work. The next logical step in the evolution of hiphop graffiti was the „piece“, a highly composed mural depicting a word or words, background, characters, quotes and messages (Brewer and Miller 1990). These murals have come under a lot of critical scrutiny since their invention in the mid '70s. Twenty years later, HHG has been communicated to all major cities in the U.S, Canada, Britain, Europe and the world. [...]

In his book, Varieties of Visual Expression, Edmund Feldmond considers the social function of art and expression. He states that "all works of art perform a social function, since they are created for an audience" (48).

The desire for attention may be unspoken, however, it does exist for all artists. This is especially true for the HHG writer, who spends ample amounts of time and money expressing a vision which is always put forth to the public eye and is rarely hidden. In regards to the grand scale of his work, TheSier, an American writer says, "people want their art seen! They make sure of it...they want big bold phatcap pieces" (Farrell 7). (NB Phatcap refers to a large spray can nozzle,

and often is used to describe the size of a mural).

Feldman continues to argue that artistic expression performs a social function when:

1) it influences the collective behaviour of people;

2) it is created to be seen used in primarily in public situations;

3) it expresses or describes collective aspects of existence as opposed to individual and personal kinds of experience. (48) [...]

In the second issue of Xylene, a graffiti 'zine out of Vancouver, a manifesto was published by an anonymous author. It states:

[The major meeting in New York in the year 2000 is] to bring [writers] out of stagnation and figure out how to bring [HHG] art to the next level and stay true to the game. Elimination of negative ideas by reeducating writers who teach hate, racial segregation and self-ideologies... In the next 20 to 30 years the people who had fucked us up... will be slotted into power and they think graffiti art is cool?... The spray can is a symbol of our generation. It is an icon... [Hiphop art] is an art form with so much soul and integrity that it will crush the art world into early retirement and that the art on the streets are the real life galleries. The art galleries with deep connections with the art mafia, have been slaving you for the past 50 years of your precious life... Art is very, very powerful and should be for the masses not the elitist... [so] we have a situation here where the blind (society) has been leading the blind (graffiti). We must break from the art world and create our own separate identity. So fuck this post-modernism, bullshit-fuckcrap! [Graffiti] will be on every surface except your television. (Xylene 18)

I have selectively chosen what I felt was the most significant for my writing due to the excessive use of dogmatic information which applies only to the writers and their community. In a proverbial nut shell, most of what HHG is striving for is summed up in the manifesto. They refer to their work as a game, one that when won will exclude graffiti from the annals of art history and push the scene further. They hope to keep the graffiti out of the hands of an artistic community which has become perverted and over commercialized in the last fifty years.

By keeping this work true to their goals the graffiti artist envisions a world where art is made for the people and not an advertising agency ready to sell out to television and other mass media. The goal then is to liberate those with a voice much quieter than others and keep art true to human exploration and expression. [...]

At a time when political dissent and artistic endeavour is controlled by those with power, it is not hard to see why those stifled by the system might choose to use graffiti to express themselves. Since Pompeii, the written word has been seen in public places to describe the discomfort of an individual or group. Now, at the advent of the twenty-first century, it is not alarming to see these messages brought forth in full colour, highly complex murals. The HHG artist has an agenda, one which those in government would like to stamp out with a make believe „war on graffiti“. Sure research is being done by sociologists like Devon Brewer to cut down on the scarring of public surfaces, but one last question comes to mind when thinking on this issue: should it be? HHG artists ask for no money, no permission and no respect from the greater art community. They have found a new voice, one which sings of freedom, rebellion and original thought. Should this be stopped? I think not. The graffiti artist is the last breed of artist, the one that has made the full cyclical return to what was the advent of visual creation, the cave artists. As once stated in Xylene,

"This is the alpha and omega in chaotic theory [...] the graffiti artists are the urban shamans and the streets are our modern day-caves." (Xylene 18).

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