

## No Tags. No Masterpieces. Graffiti as a catalyst of individual creativity

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### Abstract

Graffiti often receives attention as a social problem. Its potentials and positive influence on the individual or the society are often left aside in the public discourse. This article shows how graffiti, as a catalyst of creativity, shapes one's personal career. Graffiti enables a unique combination of motoric and psycho-social abilities, which opens up many perspectives and careers for the so-called writer. The paper aims to show and complete with suggestion the value added through graffiti, especially in the areas of education, participation and urban development, both for the individual and for the whole society.

**Keywords:** creativity, graffiti, self development, urban development, education, carrier

### 1. How it all started.

#### Development of one's own creativity.

It seems quite strange that after the first media appearance of TAKI 183 more than 40 years ago (Charles 1971), graffiti is still a deeply mysterious and ephemeral phenomenon which has been described in several phases, especially in scientific fields and the humanities in the 1980s (Mailer, Naar, Kurlansky 1974; Cave 1976; Baudrillard 1978; Bianchi 1984; Müller 1985; Stahl 1989; Akademie der Künste Berlin 1994) and has attracted the attention of artists such as Keith Haring, Jean M. Basquiat, Harald Naegeli and many more. But due to its supposedly closed and externally attributed illegal character, it has never received the social recognition it deserves as a unique catalyst in the development of creativity.

Since 2001, despite the unstoppable rediscovery of the street as a playground for art, functioning as a place for self-realization, society merely focuses on the finished creative work – the beautiful and intelligible. Until the public realized its mastery, this creative work is usually preceded by a long phase of development. The “where” and “what” are less important as only the finished work has a value and is perceived as creative. But creativity is not the product of a deed; it is the act itself that counts. In the case of graffiti, finding solutions to a problem happens on a very special and

unique path. The reduction of the creative act to the end product blocks the view of the actual potentials and abilities (Senf 1994). The foundation for graffiti is already being laid during adolescence via socialization.

Thus, the following questions should be asked: What role does graffiti play in the development of creative skills? Which skills are positively enhanced by graffiti in particular? Which suggestions could improve the position of graffiti in society?

### 2. The first steps give the momentum.

In most cases, the first contact with graffiti happens during youth, where the grownups test their limits and want to find their own identity (Figure 1). For the most part, the first spraying attempts are made in the group. The mutual incentive and the competition – whether it is for the largest works or the best spots – are important factors in the development of one's own abilities (Hacker 2005). Thereby, trains, facades and roofs, as well as other areas in public space such as traffic signs, billboards or toilets serve as means of communication.

Despite its dangers, the playful act is the fuel of creativity. One of the foundations of graffiti is the play with form, colors and content, which varies depending on the individuality of graffiti *writers*. Playing causes them to fall into a flow

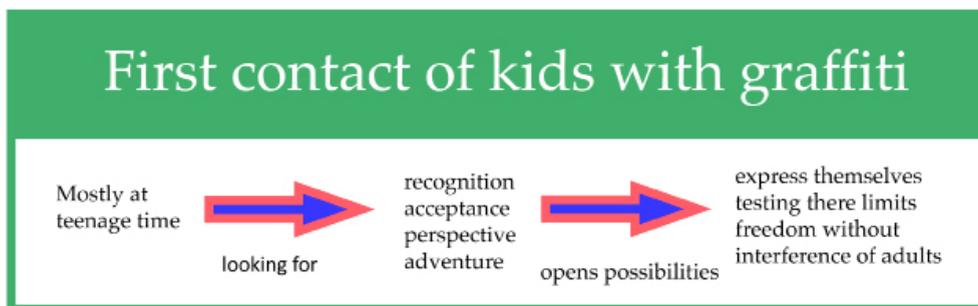


Figure 1: motivation and possibilities of children in graffiti. Illustration by author.

(Cíkszentmihályi 2010). This phenomenon describes a condition, in which the graffiti *writers* get so absorbed in the flow of their action that they forget about their surroundings. They are usually unaware of the variety of skills they appropriate and develop. For them, it is all about making graffiti and doing it the way they imagine it. The flow puts the graffiti *writers* in a state that is neither under- nor over-demanding of their skills (Figure 2). They continually work to extend the limits of and form psychological as well as physical abilities, which build the basis for the expression of creativity and artistic development. Over the years, experienced graffiti *writers* acquire a variety of competencies to tackle the complex challenges that they face. This creates the will to face a problem and to find ways to channel and

express one's own creativity, ideas, beliefs and opinions.

In graffiti, obvious cognitive abilities such as abstraction and anticipation are continuously trained, as it involves a complex interplay of various competencies. It is only by combining all the skills listed in *Table 1* that it is possible to cope with the many graffiti-typical external stressors and dangers, such as the pressure of persecution, internal and external competition, unnatural periods of activity, social exclusion and a social double life. To overcome the stressors and dangers, *graffiti writers* develop some important skills, such as a high level of teamwork or a well-trained analytical observation of their environment and public space.

<p style="text-align: center;">PSYCHOLOGICAL (Erler, Gerzer-Sass, Nußhart &amp; Sass 2004)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PHYSIOLOGICAL (Meinel &amp; Schnabel 2004)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strategic thinking</li> <li>- Abstract thinking</li> <li>- Efficiency</li> <li>- Assertiveness</li> <li>- Decision-making ability</li> <li>- Individual responsibility</li> <li>- Self-reflection</li> <li>- Flexibility</li> <li>- Conceptual thinking</li> <li>- Planning action</li> <li>- Teamwork</li> <li>- Anticipation</li> <li>- Mental resilience</li> <li>- Stress resistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conditional skills                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Strength</li> <li>o Speed</li> <li>o Endurance</li> <li>o Coordination</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Coordinative skills                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Kinesthetic differentiation ability</li> <li>o Responsiveness</li> <li>o Coupling capability</li> <li>o Orientation capability</li> <li>o Balance ability</li> <li>o Conversion capability</li> <li>o Rhythm ability</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 1: Overview of skills and abilities trained by Graffiti.

The acquisition of skills and competencies is done on the following two levels:

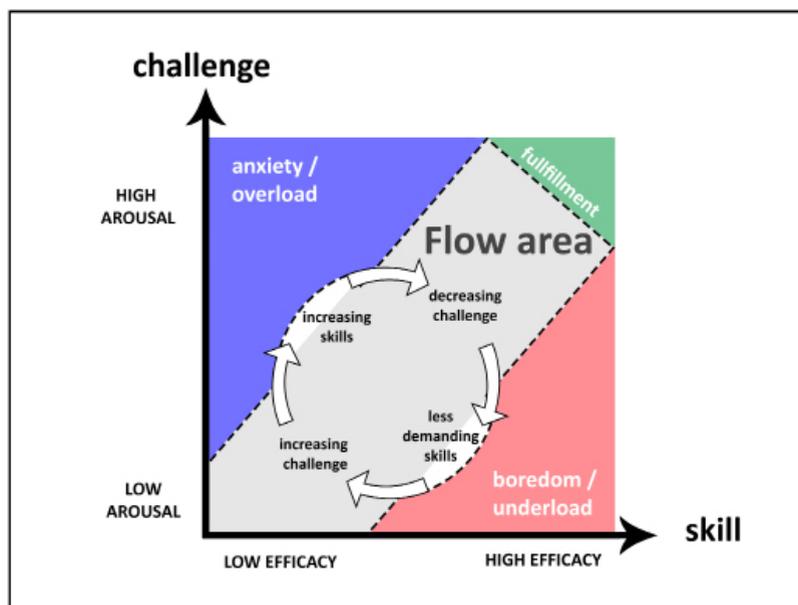


Figure 2: Flow theory by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1985; 1990). Illustration by author.

Of course, this variety of skills and competencies necessary to succeed in graffiti also affects the *graffiti writers* daily lives. This ranges from making a career choice, taking on entrepreneurial actions, to assuming social responsibility. Due to the high degree of transferability of his or her experience, a positive learning transfer of basic skills and competencies enables the *graffiti writer* to access other areas of activity and creation. These skills and competencies can be used in a variety of social areas – be it in the arts or cultural activity, social work, urban development and architecture or in crafts and entrepreneurship. The advancement of these numerous abilities makes graffiti an outstanding catalyst for the development of one's own creativity, which is characterized by its versatility and similar features to other domains (Csikszentmihályi 2010).

The non-academic character of graffiti is characterized by a low-threshold beyond socio-economic or regional origin. This promotes the uniqueness of each individual, because there is no institutional restriction in graffiti, while this may occur when it comes to striking the path of academic-artistic education.

### 3. United in diversity. Development of creativity.

How does it all start? How does the creativity evolve from the wish to express oneself?

Everything always starts with small steps. The first tags find their way into the public and show quickly who is serious about graffiti or just trying it out. At the beginning there is the name: a word that may have many sources, but still – with its first strokes and lines – becomes the *graffiti writer's* own possession. The tag becomes a symbol of one's own identity, similar to one's own handwriting. References to one's own identity or background can have as much influence as personal heroes or other role models. In the rarest of cases, the first self-chosen name is used permanently. It is just the ball that gets everything rolling. The tag always remains part of the *graffiti writer's* identity and is thus gladly remembered. But, just as the taste changes, so does the name over time. This may be due to external as well as internal factors. Often the old name simply does not fit, because the *graffiti writer's* own interests have evolved or redirected.

The tag is a means of dealing creatively with one's own identity and one's own external presentation, detached from one's own physicality. The freedom experienced in shaping one's own visual language changes the consciousness, increases the self-efficacy and the associated feeling of happiness. It creates a pull that does not let most people go. The tag is a reflection of the self, which remains hidden in everyday life and exists only in graffiti. The way and development of

tagging is influenced by personal impressions, as well as by dealing with the graffiti-specific dynamics and behaviors, such as the competition with other graffiti *writers* and crews, and the permanent readiness to escape.

Most of the time, doing graffiti is not just about the simple enjoyment of form and color, it is a stressful and formative way of getting yourself out in the streets.

Here, the personal imagery usually remains unmistakable. It is possible to change the handwriting or the style of the tag; nonetheless, certain preferences and personal traits persist. Turns, proportions or letters repeat themselves and can easily be recognized by someone with trained eyes. This recognition is based on the idea of one's own aesthetics, which is reinforced by the ongoing exercise of graffiti. Many graffiti writers are reaching the limit of their horizons and are starting to look for new challenges. This process is often started by the adaptation of role models and guides them in further steps to the acquisition of influences and techniques from other arts, cultural fields and social movements.

This increased knowledge does not merely happen via copying, but also by further academic education in creative fields, such as illustration, graphic design or painting. Even influences and techniques of graffiti writers enrich other fields such as political protest, graphic design, art production, advertising or art education.

These visible and obvious connections are only the tip of many other effects, non-visible at first glance, which are characterized by the strengthening of personality and individuality. Mutual learning, teaching and collaboration characterize the foundation of self-confidence. These forms of cooperation could be more integrated into social action spaces, if graffiti were to be freed from its social hiddenness and condemnation.

#### **4. Life goes on. Application and benefits.**

It is beyond question that many professional careers have been directly and indirectly paved by graffiti. But, it is precisely the multitude of unintended professional careers that reveal the possibilities of learning transfer and influence on society. Above all, these careers are characterized by a wide range of activities that are not aimed at a professional level in art and design. Graffiti gives each individual the freedom to produce what she or he likes and what lies in his/her range of possibilities. Outstanding, non-artistic

fields of activity are urban development and architecture, subjects with a pedagogical focus that can be found in the arts and cultural studies and social work (Beuthan 2011). Graffiti supports the special sensitization of writers for social and societal problems and challenges the early training of specific coordinative and psychological skills. Especially the eye-hand-coordination, the tactile feeling as well as the abstraction ability could be strengthened. Among other things, these are the basis for designing and transferring sketches to works. In addition, graffiti not only affects the formation of one's own abilities, but on a personal level, the creative activity can be one of the crucial factors in shaping one's life. It is particularly remarkable that graffiti as a creative and private action acts as a valve to process problems, stress and conflicts and thereby creates a mental balance. This enhances yourself, as it broadens your horizon by extending moral borders and dismantling inner prejudices - or at least generates a reaction that signifies an (un)intentional outburst of everyday life.

Therefore, it is necessary to demand and encourage this personal development in order to make use of graffiti as a catalyst for positive change and for dealing with one's own life in a more creative way.

Due to its actors and sympathizers, graffiti succeeds to influence society in a positive way. Firstly because the work of graffiti based artists, cultural entrepreneurs and scholars influence society. Their social background and the variety of experiences enable them to solve challenges and problems with a different approach. They influence other creative fields, and it becomes visible as trends in media, fashion or lifestyle. Furthermore, the creative output of graffiti writers shapes and designs their environment and changes the point of view of local residents. These interventions pose the old question of who really owns the city. To local people their borough looks almost different every day and shows them that there is still enough space to create a place worth living in. Whether tags or masterpieces, every graffiti comments, reflects or criticizes current issues from the local to the global level. Therefore, graffiti can be seen as a mirror reflecting society.

#### **5. So far so good. Potentials and perspectives.**

In which areas of society are the greatest potentials of graffiti identified now and in the future?

	<b>kids (beginner)</b>	<b>young adults (amateur)</b>	<b>adults (professional)</b>
<b>motivation</b>	lack of recognition, acceptance, perspective, look for adventure, escape from home	improve skills, hold status, test limits, new challenges, seek for popularity,	expand popularity, increase business, follow their profession, make a difference with art, see new countries
<b>possibilities</b>	express themselves, test limits, freedom without interference of adults, be somebody, be a part of a group, recognition >> <b>local FAME (in the scene)</b>	exchange, refine or redirect profession or interests, get respect, distraction from daily life, new challenges, commissions >> <b>city-comprehensiv FAME</b>	get stable income, develop personal business, connection to other artist, travel, invent new forms or transform expression >> <b>positiv public reception</b>
<b>range / coverage</b>	<b>local circulation</b> neighbourhood, borough and hometown	<b>local - national circulation,</b> hometown, public transport, other cities or countries	<b>local - global circulation,</b> public space, venue, museum, official commission, fairs,
<b>affect</b>	development of basic skills and abilities, arouse personal interest on being creative, increase self-efficacy, respect from others	improve skills, notice of the public, get first commissions, find a profession, have a valve for stress and problems, hobby or parallel life	financial security, influence on society, acceptance and recognition by public, lead role in creative expressions
<b>dropout</b>	chance hometown, get injured, get caught, get arrested, exclusion by the group, chance of interests >> <b>become a sympathizer and maybe an direct influencer in another field</b>	to much risks, have family, injuries, arrest, not enough time, (drug) addictions, death, sick of it, chance of interests or profession >> <b>become a sympathizer and maybe an direct influencer in another field</b>	burn out, chance of subject, injuries, death, family, not enough commissions >> <b>become a direct influencer as an artist</b>
<b>field of activity</b>	illegal, <b>because no options for legal practice (hall of fame)</b>	mostly illegal, <b>but if available legal as commission or hall of fame</b>	mostly legal, <b>in exceptions or in case of understatement illegal</b>

table 2: Example for development in course of the time for a graffiti based artistic career. Illustration by author

Apart from the art and cultural work of which graffiti has already become a part, the possibilities of transfer should be considered more closely. Concerning the challenges for the future (for example, automation of the secondary and tertiary sectors, demographic change), in the field of intergenerational education there are a multitude of application areas: questions regarding one's own actions and the confrontation with one's own identity and with regard to finding one's own role in society through skills and experiences from graffiti. Through the mediation of free, creative action through graffiti, both the commitment to one's own environment and society as well as self-efficacy can be increased considerably. Everyone can become the creator and designer of society. The key is to initiate the development of the uniqueness of each individual through creative action. If this succeeds, it means stability and security against external influences, which are more present than ever nowadays. It lays the foundation for responsibility and maturity that allows for social change and improvement. Thus, it is the closest possible approach to the expanded concept of art of Sozialer Plastik, by Joseph Beuys, which states that art brings about social change, since every human being is a creative being who tries to change society with

his or her actions (Beuys 1977). From creative individuality springs a cultural wealth of perspectives and opportunities for each individual and the society. Only the right conditions have to be created.

Existing structures in education with the purpose of talent and ability promotion should be extended and should involve the offer of graffiti and support more creative activities. For example, at school graffiti could be included through a curriculum extension or art working groups. By promoting and involving honorary and full-time employees, associations and independent educational institutions, the necessary specialist knowledge and positive role models that show the potentials of graffiti can be brought to school. One of the basic ways to promote this is to create more free legal activity space and to observe and integrate existing experiences of graffiti generations.

In urban development and participation, it is especially important to involve the street, which has been a place of exchange and action since modern times. Here, the genesis of graffiti offers unprecedented access and the opportunity to create new forms of participation. This is already illustrated

by isolated projects that use Urban Art to anticipate the challenges of social urban planning in the 21st century (Halle, Treihse, von Busse 2017). The recourse to already existing findings from graffiti practice opens up a wide range of action and planning spaces, which enable productive approaches to the (first) activation of neighborhood residents.

The goal must be to make the inhabitants of the urban space aware of their neighborhoods and, through participatory projects, become partakers and actors in their development, because they know best what the demands of their neighborhood are. Graffiti and even street art can play a special role in this kind of urban development, since they promote freethinking at the initiator level, as well as activation and change at the implementation level. It is very important to break the repression or gentrification described in the double invasive successive cycle (Dangschat 1988). For this purpose, tools of urban development such as environmental protection, public participation centers, district councils must be taken into consideration in advance in order to prevent displacement.

Here and in many other societal challenges, graffiti's creativity and self-efficacy can provide new and unconventional approaches and solutions. The integration of graffiti as a catalyst of creativity, however, succeeds only if the known restrictions (Graffiti Archive 2012) are overcome and adequate balance and activity offers are produced by society. Then, nobody will be able to stop this development. The first tags have been set some time ago, now they only have to be recognized and promoted as the beginning of all masterpieces.

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