

## Documenting graffiti culture: an evolution of content

**Tristana Perroncel**

independent researcher, France

tristanaperroncel@gmail.com

### 1. Introduction

Since its early years, graffiti has been documented with photographs and videos, showing legal and illegal activities in the streets. The most famous photographer of this time will always remain Martha Cooper,<sup>1</sup> who still runs her photographer activities and is invited to the most important events of the graffiti culture in the world. In the mid-seventies, the first digital camera was coming out leading towards a real revolution in filming and photography. Technology has then developed extensively and cameras with higher resolution allowed graffiti writers and audio-visual artists to produce work of higher quality and with new visual perspectives. This progression in time has changed the way of documenting graffiti culture and has expanded its possibilities in terms of visual content, thanks to the democratization of technologies and its improvements.

I have photographed and filmed a few groups of graffiti writers, which gave me insight into this culture. This essay wishes to introduce some thoughts on this subject and open a longer discussion concerning the importance of audio-visual material for graffiti as an ephemeral art form.

### 2. An evolution in the mediums

Starting from the 1970s, mediums have followed a wide progress. The cameras available in the pioneering years of graffiti were heavy, and quite limited in terms of speed and light. At this time not everyone had a camera, and mostly professionals had access to quality cameras. Developing film also added a price of documenting your daily life with a camera, thus most kids did not have such things in their hands. Martha Cooper, at this time was the one chasing newly painted wall or trains, sharing them with the graffiti writers, immortalizing these historical moments. With the proliferation of digital cameras available at low price points, almost every writer now has a camera of quality. When a group of people is going to paint, several persons generally

1 - American photographer specialized in graffiti

possess a good camera to shoot their final piece, and, even have go-pro to film the entire action. Also, the emergence of cameras integrated in phones make it so much easier to archive an action. The iPhone 7+ has, for example, 12 mega pixels and only weigh 188 grams. This evolution in the access to technology has changed the way of documenting graffiti because each person is now able to document his or her own action. The expert photographer or video maker is no longer crucial to the action, even if his or her presence brings added value to the documentation process. An evolution coming from analogue cameras, then to big pixels reflex, until drones.

### 3. Practicing graffiti has also changed

Graffiti has become more ephemeral so it is important to document it straight away. This evolution in the access to technologies is thus really essential because graffiti on a train can disappear and never come to light. Photographers are not always available to come along the mission and sometimes it is too late to wait for the next day. It is not like New York in the 1970s, except for some cities like Athens where graffiti works can run for years.

Also, in terms of filming, graffiti crews have been more and more prolific in their self-production. Some members of a crew film, photograph, and edit videos. The presence of edition tutorial on the web also makes learning so much easier and available to the ones who want to learn. Many groups are coming out with movies that are sometimes quite impressive technically and aesthetically.

### 4. New perspectives

This self-production is really important in the age of social media where images are accorded a crucial place in our world. Instagram is the platform for writers and being able to post regularly is a good way to show that you are active on the scene. They are then able to promote their crew and increase their reputation on social media and the web.

More than that, in the last few years, videos of renowned crews and videographers have shown new perspectives of

filming graffiti in action. KCBR<sup>2</sup> were the first crew to use a drone to produce a video of a train action. This type of filming gives the opportunity to see the scene from another angle. Selina Miles,<sup>3</sup> in collaboration with “One up crew,” goes even further with a one-shot filming<sup>4</sup> drone going from a roll down painting to a metro action passing by several artists painting a wall

. Selina documents eight different actions in various locations but close enough to film it in a one-shot drone filming. Graffiti writers and filmmakers are able to let their imagination go with this new possibility. The drone’s cameras can go to diverse places in a few minutes and increase the capacity of the filmmaker to approach space and time differently.

A go-pro camera is also a tool regularly used by many writers. A go-pro generally costs less than a drone, and the accessories made for this kind of camera are really handy for the use of graffiti writers. They can record without thinking too much about their camera as you just need to press a button one time to begin the documentation process.

Good Guy Boris, a renowned graffiti writer that is beyond the Grifters, has used the drone to film himself painting<sup>5</sup> pieces in Greece. It expands the capacity of filming yourself that was only possible thanks to the go pro. The drone can shoot a wider spot and it is possible to leave it on autopilot, which gives a more professional look to graffiti videos. Before and still now (because drones are still a bit expensive), writers were leaving their iPhone or small camera behind them to film the broader scene.

Indeed, iPhone is also a new tool for graffiti writers since this decade. Their high-quality photo and video make it possible to produce high-quality visual records. And recently, Instagram has permitted the graffiti scene to go “live” while painting walls and trains.

## 5. Conclusion

Documenting graffiti has changed as the technology has improved throughout the last few decades. There are great videos on graffiti from the beginning of this trend, and the content is better nowadays and has changed significantly to explore new paths. Graffiti writers now have greater access to technologies that facilitate documenting their own

actions, which increases the number of documents that record graffiti culture.

## Bibliography:

Todd Gustavson, *George Eastman House, Camera: A History of Photography from Daguerreotype to Digital*, 2012, Paperback

Henry Chalfant, *Martha Cooper, Subway Art*, 2016, Paperback

## Endnotes

1. **KCBR, *Live Life Like Girls*, 2018** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVf-4dRx2Ds>
2. **1up, *Graffiti Olympics - Drone Video Athens*, 2018** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyjZ-zHzXN0>
3. **Montana Cans & Happy Socks: "Wear Under Pressure", 2018** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w\\_RmjB6bZ68](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_RmjB6bZ68)

2 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVf-4dRx2Ds>

3 - Australian filmmaker specialised in graffiti and street art culture

4 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyjZ-zHzXN0>

5 - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w\\_RmjB6bZ68](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_RmjB6bZ68)