

## Graffiti friendships and existential visual sociology

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The aim of this paper is to utilize photographs to investigate existential aspects of graffiti that are theoretically underdeveloped such as how the subculture offers foundation for life-long friendships. Previous literature on the life of graffiti writers has often emphasized aspects of hyper masculinity such as competition, bravery, law breaking and risk behavior and neglected how boundaries concerning space and generations are negotiated through graffiti writing.<sup>1</sup>

Illuminated the existential meanings of graffiti allows subcultural research to contribute theoretically to an enlargement of sociological analysis. This calls for analysis of subcultural emotions of joy of co-existence in times of social distancing. My attempt is to reconsider graffiti research through the lens of cultural sociology and existential sociology.<sup>2</sup> These perspectives consider how layers of meaning are connected to human fragility and the finitude of existence.

The main source of empirical material are photographs from my personal archive that stretches over 30 years<sup>3</sup>. These photographs represent situated knowledge achieved as a participant observer and a subcultural insider during global infusion of subway graffiti<sup>4</sup>. I return to my archive to reconsider how photographs can represent the way friendship is performed through gestures of shared artistic practices in graffiti hall of fames in New York and Stockholm where graffiti painting is permitted

Hall of fames have similarities with galleries as places where paintings are displayed. But in hall of fames paintings are produced directly on walls by several artists who work side by side utilizing their bodies in execution of letters that are tall as a man<sup>5</sup>. A visual analysis of this side by side practice aims to illuminate existential dimensions of coexistence and friendship across life courses of aging graffiti writers. When writers socialize words are in focus but not expressed through oral communication. Instead writers concentrate on individual molding of the letters in their nom de plumes. Despite focus on individual achievements shared aesthetics and bodily co-existence is vital.

Photographs from annual get-togethers and daily use show how hall of fames facilitate friendship bonds that stretches over decades and continents. Hall of fames are places for reunion, for commemoration of lost friends, and for aesthetic inspiration and diffusion. Additional to several internal subcultural practices hall of fames offer openings between the subcultural towards the society around. As open air public places for graffiti painting they invite non-writers to see how graffiti is executed and offer possibilities to meet the artists. The social meaning of hall of fames builds on the traditions and conflicts throughout graffiti history were will for expression often has clashed with ownership of property. Hall of fames are places where the stigma associated with graffiti as something causing harm and insecurity can be addressed. As such these places connect subcultural outsiders with other citizens and contributes to restore social trust between different aspect of society<sup>6</sup>.

Photographs from hall of fames displays gestures that establishes and confirm social bonds. Gestures like

1 - see for example Macdonald, 2001.

2 - On cultural sociology see Alexander, 2008 and Hannerz, 2015. On existential sociology, see Bengtsson & Flisbäck. 2016.

3 - See Becker, 1974, on how photographs can be used theoretically in social science.

4 - Haraway. 1988.

5 - Kimvall. 2014. Mariduena, 2012 .

6 - See Alexander 2016 on civil repair.

handshakes and hugs may in times of pandemic appear as memories from another time. But the warmth of coexistence through shared artistic focus in hall of fames continues. Many writers hold that their way to socialize is quite ideal in unsettled times, plenty of outdoor space and possibility to retain social proximity without intruding on the six feet of prescribed social distance.

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Two friends reconnect after years of distance. Harlem Hall of Fame, New York, 2018. Photo © Malcolm Jacobson.



Artists and visitors during Spring Beast Festival. Snösättra Hall of Fame, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019.

Photo © Malcolm Jacobson.



Collaborative painting by ETC-crew, an opportunity for old friends to reconnect. Snösätra Hall of Fame, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Photo © Malcolm Jacobson.



Two friends reminiscing their shared graffitied life course. Snösätra Hall of Fame, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Photo © Malcolm Jacobson.