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Graffiti as a limit case for the concept of style: A genealogy of aesthetic impropriety

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This paper examines graffiti as an object that has historically confounded stylistic or formal analysis proper, although elements of this deviant form of mark making have been appropriated as expressive resources within the recognisable styles of modern and contemporary art. Critiques of the concept of style are now well established and this formerly dominant method of approaching the analysis of art historical objects has largely fallen out of favour in current scholarship. Beyond rehearsing these familiar critical points, it will be argued that a consideration of the limitations of this foundational disciplinary concept may be a paradoxically productive exercise if an approach is taken that examines the boundaries, or limits, to the kinds of objects and images to which the concept of style has been applied. It will be argued that a number of historically liminal categories of person – children; primitives; the mentally ill; and criminals – inform the genealogy of perception of the contemporary liminal ‘styles’ of graffiti, post-graffiti and street art; and that these limit cases, rather than being marginalised exclusions not worthy of analytic attention, are generative of the very coherence of the notion of style. Following Rancière, it is argued that contemporary applications of the concept of style may lie in attending to the contingency and primacy of the processes of perception itself, an essential component of seminal approaches to style (e.g., Wölfflin, 1915) in determining our practices of looking.¹

The concept of style

The concept of style remains an important organizing device for art history, permitting a reading of art as a sequential series of recognizable style-periods (e.g., Renaissance, Modernism) within which broad historical system of classification finer grained style categories may be identified (e.g., Abstract Expressionism; Surrealism) though critics note the determinism inherent in developmental models of style as progression.² The trained art historical eye is able to distinguish style at several levels. Schapiro suggests this concept can be applied to recognize the work of individual artists, the collective style of particular groups, and even the shared ethos of entire cultures.³ Rancière regards the concept of style, as expressed in the work of Winckelmann, as representing a productive “conceptual knot” that prefigures his own concern with the relationship between the aesthetic paradigm and political community, or “between individuality and collectivity: between the artist’s personality and the shared world that gives rise to it and that it expresses.”⁴

The identification and analysis of style, at whatever level, requires a coherent object/subject, in that the elements comprising a work must represent a resolved aesthetic whole. As Schapiro notes:

These elements-in-relationship... insofar as they produce something we can call a ‘style’, do so because together they come to constitute ‘a coherent whole’; and underlying all of that is the crucial point that the formal elements are ‘intrinsically expressive.’⁵

In this emphasis on the intrinsic expressivity of the formal elements of a work, the concept of style implies a focus on the act of creation, or the manner in which the object in question was made. As Walton observes, we do not tend to extend the concept of style to natural objects, only to human artifacts made by creative subjects.⁶ However, critics are wary of the methods of art historical scholarship as they tend ultimately to extract “from an artistic text... that which

¹ Rancière (2013); Wölfflin (1915).

² E.g., Ackerman (1962).

³ Schapiro (1994) p. 51.

⁴ Rancière (2013) p. 14.

produces as meaning an authorial subjectivity, the artist”, whilst others have challenged the assumption that the style or form of a work is ever separable from its signifying content.⁷

Besides limiting the application of the concept of style to human creations, and excluding naturally constituted objects, there are further limits that have historically been imposed on the types of human-made objects considered by art historians. In addition to the long existing function of style to delimit the normative (and often class-based) boundaries of ‘taste’ there are also limits as to *who* is considered capable of producing work that represents a resolved aesthetic totality, or a coherent style. Such liminal cases include (but are not limited to) the art of children; primitives; the mentally ill; and criminals whose work is often regarded as incoherent and incomplete. Indeed, the motivations attributed to these proto-authors differ from the motivations commonly attributed to those to whose work stylistic analysis may be legitimately employed – that is, the inferred ability of an expressive authorial subjectivity to competently and creatively arrange pictorial forms in such a way that achieves a resolved and aesthetically coherent whole (or, a ‘style’).

Wölfflin’s (1915) *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* represents an important early contribution to the tradition of style-based analysis that continues to guide art historians’ practices of looking.⁸ Wölfflin proposed a series of analytic binaries designed to differentiate the distinctive respective styles of the Baroque and Classic (High Renaissance) works (linear/painterly; plane/recession; closed form/open form; multiplicity/unity; absolute clarity/relative clarity). However, close examination of Wölfflin’s argument reveals the presence of a third unmarked category, that of the Primitive, against which the Classic and the Baroque are defined, and which arguably informs the limits of the application of the logic of his binaries. It is of note that Wölfflin does not subject the Primitive to the extended analytic attention afforded to the Classic and the Baroque. Rather this category is used to circumscribe, by exclusion, what we *should* look at – or for – as worthy of analysis. Wölfflin describes primitive art as being motivated by compulsion, rather than free expression, and from a perspective where “established pictorial form does not yet exist.”⁹ For Wölfflin, such work does not (yet) exhibit the coherent gestalt between the parts and the whole of a work required to engage in his method of systematic comparison. Wölfflin asserts that the component parts of primitive art are “too dispersed” and look “confused and unclear” (thus anthropomorphizing the perceptual capacities of the producers of such work). Further, he notes “an anarchy or lack of relationship between the parts” which he attributes to the “scattered multiplicity of the primitive.”¹⁰

Elsner notes that Wölfflin’s method of systematic comparison continues to inform the art historian’s basic stylistic reflex, or “the grouping of like with like, and the disjunction of unlikes.”¹¹ However, critics such as Brown and Melville, drawing on Derrida’s conceptual practice of deconstruction, have noted that Wölfflin’s descriptive work is in fact generative in that the “supposedly derivative and marginalised category... of the Baroque is in fact constitutive of the very opposition through which it is excluded.” Elsner has suggested that rather than eschewing the concept of style altogether, we could instead adopt an orientation to style as a rhetorical or descriptive “response to objects”, arguing that “the stylistic reflex... entails an inevitable process of translation by which we understand (in a particular way) what it is we have been looking at.”¹² In arguing for the continued relevance of style Elsner employs Barthes’ example of the different semiotic systems drawn upon by fashion photographers and fashion

⁷ Pollock (1980) 65.

⁸ Wölfflin (1915).

⁹ Wölfflin (1915) p. 125.

¹⁰ Wölfflin (1915) p. 125.

writers in describing the same referent (fashion objects).¹³ However, this example assumes a singular and uncontested referent, a signifying object that may be sensibly regarded as within the legitimate purview of both of these overlapping semiotic systems. That is, despite drawing on different semiotic systems, the writer and photographer 'see' the same object, though they may describe it differently. The sanctity of the object (or what it is that we see) is inherent in the notion of description, even if considered as a constructive rhetorical practice.

Furthermore, in focusing on style as a rhetorical practice, Elsner neglects one of the key features that arguably makes style a still useful concept for art history: that it, in Wölfflin's sense, may attune us to the importance of perception in determining what it is that we see. Indeed, Wölfflin appeared to appreciate the reflexivity of his own perceptual practices: "one sees only what one seeks, but also one only seeks what one can see."¹⁴ Jacques Rancière's more recent focus on the crucial (and collective) operations of 'self-evident' perception represents one analytically productive approach to a renewed focus on perception that highlights the contingency of the perceptual/conceptual order, and thus a potential approach to style that could better accommodate the indexicality of contemporary art. This would permit a move away from a focus on style as expressivity, or even as productive description, towards a concept of style with a more critical purchase on the processes of reception. However, Rancière warns that the analysis of perception should not entail a focus on reception per se, but rather on the "sensible fabric of experience within which art is produced" – and recognized as such.¹⁵ In this sense, a focus on perception represents an important conceptual link between production and reception.

Rancière coined the term *division of the sensible* to refer to the "system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done."¹⁶ He argues that what is capable of being apprehended by the senses, in turn provides for possible forms of participation (or exclusion from participation) in various forms of endeavour. For Rancière, the "symbolic constitution of the social" encourages people not to look at that which should not be seen, and indeed:

defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that these bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.¹⁷

Here, the point that may revivify the centrality of perception for the concept of style is that whatever is capable of being apprehended by the senses may yield the conditions of possibility for forms of participation (or exclusion from participation) in various forms of productive (and creative) activity, including both the production and reception of what is understood to be art.

According to Rancière, art itself (or at least, art of the aesthetic regime, which represents "modernity's... dream of artistic novelty... and fusion of art and life") has the potential to challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions about what is worth looking at (and what it is that we are seeing).¹⁸ He notes that when such challenges to our common-sense occur, they are always the product of a genealogy of regimes of perception, thought and affect, but that once new artistic objects or events are (often retrospectively) accorded significance, these genealogies are effectively erased and are difficult to retrieve. Rancière argued that forms of aesthetic protest can create dissensus, or ruptures in common sense, and a "gap in the sensible", which works ultimately to show that what we see, according to our usual division of the sensible, could be otherwise - thus demonstrating the "contingency of the entire perceptual and

¹³ Barthes (1983) p. 5: "for any particular object (a dress, a tailored suit, a belt) three different structures exist, one technical [the actual object], another, iconic [any image of that object], the third, verbal [the description of the object which effects its translation from the technical structure to the verbal structure]."

¹⁴ Wölfflin (1915) p. 128.

¹⁵ Rancière (2013) p. x.

¹⁶ Rancière (2004) p. 89.

conceptual order.”¹⁹ Here, Rancière extends the reach of aesthetics to encompass all those practices that make possible new commonalities of sense, and sense-making practices, created by breaches in common sense itself. This is political, he argues, as politics is located in “disputes about the division of what is perceptible to the senses.”²⁰ Thus, as May explains, “politics is itself aesthetic in that it requires a sharing of sense in common; art is not the exemplary site of sensory pleasure or the sublime but a critical break with common sense.”²¹

Graffiti as aesthetic impropriety

In order to explore the application of a Rancièrian notion of style, one must then not only “capture the occurrence of displacements in the perception of what art signifies” but also consider the genealogy of the regimes of perception (and thought and affect) that give rise to new artistic events, or aesthetic improprieties.²² Here, by way of example, the contemporary liminal categories of graffiti, post-graffiti and street art (recently collectively designated as Independent Public Art) will be examined as forms of art that may reveal the contingency of the perceptual/conceptual order. There is a sharp socio-moral aesthetic division between these recognizably distinct styles of Independent Public Art.²³ Street art is sometimes called ‘post-graffiti’, in an echo of the relationship between modern and postmodern art, positioning graffiti as a less coherent precursor to street art.²⁴ Indeed, the two are often presented in the form of a developmental history – a progression from an adolescent to a mature style. For instance, Burnham asserts that, “the original ‘tagging’ and ‘getting up’ graffiti matured to the visually representative works of the post - graffiti movement.”²⁵ However, these developmental accounts ignore their complex parallel histories. Such developmental narratives are commonly supported by the observation that whilst street art has proliferated and flourished, and has achieved a level of recognition as a form of art (with pieces by recognized street artists such as Banksy selling for as much as a million pounds) graffiti has not made a comparable transition to the art market, and is still conceptualised by some agents of the criminal justice system as a gateway to degeneracy and crime:

If a boy doodles graffiti sketches... that should be as clear a warning sign as if he brought a knife to school.²⁶

While both forms of Independent Public Art are often illegal, contemporary graffiti writers are more likely to be apprehended and to face punishment than are street artists, whose work appears increasingly recognized as visually pleasing, if unauthorized – an aesthetic socio-moral judgment that gains strength from its opposition to the visual ‘blight’ of the criminal damage caused by graffiti, though both may be subject to removal (or negative curation) by local authorities. Islington Council warns that, “graffiti can be the catalyst for a downward spiral of neglect... and encourage other more serious criminal activity.”²⁷ Such aesthetic socio-moral judgments are based on long-held associations between graffiti and criminal activity, as a visible index of social deprivation and urban decay, and as a form of abjection and territory marking akin to public urination, as dirt or filth, or “matter out of place.”²⁸

Iveson asserts that the policing of graffiti on the walls of a city is accomplished not just by its erasure by authorities, but also crucially via the discourses used to categorise work as ‘vandalism’ or as indecipherable nonsense, which effect “the reduction of graffiti writers to

¹⁹ May (2011) n.p.

²⁰ Rancière (1998) p. 176.

²¹ May (2011) n.p.

²² Rancière (2013) p. xiii.

²³ See Abarca (2011) p. 1 for more on the category of Independent Public Art.

²⁴ For a contemporary review of research on graffiti and street art see de Freitas and Neves (2014).

²⁵ Burnham (2010) p. 138.

²⁶ Edmonton Times (2011). n.p.

people who write but have nothing to say... [and thus have] no place/part in the city.”²⁹ It may be argued that the rushed and indecipherable aesthetic of visually offensive graffiti tags is in part a response to the increased level of surveillance and punishment that graffiti writers, relative to street artists, are subject to. That is, the offensive aesthetic of graffiti tags is produced by its policing – in Foucault’s sense, this is a form of productive ‘repression’.

An affective divide appears to exist between graffiti and street art in that responses to graffiti appear more commonly marked by revulsion and outrage at work “forced onto others”, whilst aesthetic responses to street art are often more positive, with some describing it as an unexpected pleasure yielding “delight upon discovery.”³⁰ The popular acceptance of street art may also be linked to the hierarchy of worth inherent in negative curation practices, where tags and other forms of graffiti are swiftly removed, whilst street art pieces are increasingly permitted to remain, on city walls. Further, the increase in large commissioned street art murals, which are protected from removal make these a more permanent part of many cityscapes than more ephemeral – if also more persistent and prolific – graffiti tags.

Graffiti is of particular interest as a limit case for the concept of style, as it is commonly presented as a primitive form of art, not subject to the developmental progression of style seen in art forms proper:

There are undoubtedly a number of examples of artistic graffiti in the history of mankind, but none of these ever showed a sign of aesthetic or stylistic evolution.³¹ It is also common for historical accounts to accord graffiti with ancient origins and thus as evidence of an urge to create (or mark territory) that is part of human nature: “From time immemorial, humans have sought to leave their mark.”³² However, despite the ex-post-facto categorization of prehistoric wall inscriptions and markings as graffiti, there is little evidence that this was considered a separate and special category of human activity until the 19th century.³³ While it is clear that mundane wall inscriptions and markings date back to prehistoric times, and have been documented on the monuments of the Ancient Romans and Egyptians, and in Pompeii, the emergence of the categorical term ‘graffiti’ was coterminous with the photographic reproductions that allowed for its identification by archeologists in the 19th century. Indeed, the now commonsensical distinctions made between adornment and defacement, creativity and destruction, illicit and licit, commissioned and uncommissioned images and text in public space is an historically recent notion.

Graffiti is a form of mark making located within the purview of a number of intersecting disciplines. The discursive regimes and classification systems of the disciplines of the human sciences including anthropology, archaeology, criminology, sexology and psychiatry all take (or have historically *excluded*, in the case of art history) graffiti as their object.³⁴ It is of note that these divergent systems of categorization had a common condition of possibility in that they were facilitated by the affordances of the parallel history of photography. Photographic documentation was adopted as a tool for empirical observation and conceptual classification by each of these disciplines from the mid 19th century and informed the ways in which the new category of graffiti was conceptualised. These overlapping discursive regimes subtend the contemporary ways in which graffiti is perceived, and our assumptions about the capacities and character of the creative/destructive agents responsible for its production.

Early scholarly discussions of graffiti in the mid 19th century were based on a “positive idea of primitivism, which saw in all untutored drawings a valuable residue of the primary urge to

²⁹ Iveson (2014) p. 96.

³⁰ Waclawek (2011) p. 17.

³¹ Mai and Remke (2003), p. 78.

³² Matthews, Speers and Ball (2012) n.p.

³³ Varnedoe (1990).

³⁴ Tanke (2011) suggests that Rancière’s notion of the division of the sensible is closely aligned with Foucault’s concept

create.”³⁵ In 1865 Champfleury compared a Pompeian wall drawing to a sketch by Delacroix. He argued that this graffiti represented an “urgent, unpremeditated delineation of (an initial) idea”, much as a painter’s early sketches captured the essence of the painting to follow. However, by the close of the 19th century, the notion that graffiti was in essence a positive and creative primitive form was unsettled in favour of the explanations that reflected the growing popularity of the concept of “evolutionary progress” inspired by Darwin’s work.³⁶

Until the end of the 19th century there was little interest in documenting and studying contemporary graffiti. The emerging discipline of criminology was the first to consider contemporary graffiti as a symptomatic object (as a manifestation of social deviance). In the late 19th century, Lombroso and Laurent separately documented and classified the graffiti made by incarcerated prisoners.³⁷ This was as part of the development of systems for classifying criminals and was associated with then current theories of criminality as atavism – or a reversion to a primitive evolutionary type whose behaviour was inevitably at odds with the behavioural and moral standards of civilized society. Until this point, crime had been considered part of human nature. However, Lombroso and Laurent considered criminality a heritable characteristic and, influenced by eugenics and Social Darwinism, viewed criminals as “modern savages” who could be identified as such via close attention to physiognomic measurements and other visual signs and behavioural manifestations, including graffiti – though graffiti was not yet considered a crime in itself, but rather as symptomatic of degeneracy and criminality.

In 1901, Havelock Ellis explored the parallels between the atavism of criminals and then contemporary anthropological studies of the characteristics of “savage races”. He noted that hieroglyphs and ideogrammatic forms of visual communication are evident in both the graffiti of criminals and the marks made by “modern savages, and that:”

these hieroglyphs often show considerable aesthetic feeling... [a] resemblance [is] sometimes found between the criminal ideograms of different countries; a large number are also in common between criminal women and prostitutes. It is a curious fact that a very considerable proportion... of... ideograms, indicate proper names; Lombroso compares the criminal hieroglyph in this respect to the savage totem.³⁸

“Secret hieroglyphs” or coded visual messages only intelligible to insiders were described by Ellis as “a form of social protection used by outcast classes as a weapon against society” especially in geographic locations (e.g., of the Mafia in Sicily) where criminal associations were highly developed. Ellis describes the graffiti of criminals both as a compulsion, and as a form of self confession:

It is for himself, for himself alone, that he writes what he cannot or dare not say, and these revelations are very curious for the psychologist: His desires and lusts, his aspirations, his coarse satires and imprecations, his bitter reflections, his judgments of life are all recorded.³⁹

However, in contrast to Lombroso and Laurent, and aligned with the more positive view of primitivism evident in the work of earlier scholars of ancient graffiti, Ellis appeared to consider the graffiti of incarcerated criminals as the product of a universal creative human instinct: that when in seclusion, one will experience “the need of embodying some artistic expression of himself” that is “scarcely distinguishable from the instinct which leads to the production of heroic works of art.”⁴⁰

The specific subtype of graffiti identified and documented firstly by folklorists (and subsequently by sexologists) in the early 20th century does not appear to have been of any interest to criminologists, anthropologists or psychiatrists until the 1950s, as this form of graffiti was, until this point, understood as an unremarkable and widespread practice of otherwise civilised

³⁵ Varnedoe (1990). P. 73.

³⁶ Varnedoe (1990). P. 74.

³⁷ Lombroso (1894); Laurent (1890).

³⁸ Havelock. (2013). pp. 212-3.

citizens. In the 1920s the folklorist A.W. Reid published an in-depth account of bathroom graffiti in the United States, and in 1935 published a further collection in Paris to avoid obscenity charges in America.⁴¹ By the mid 21st century, these formerly unremarkable marks were now considered to be symptomatically obscene. In the early 1950s, Alfred Kinsey designated these forms of graffiti as a vital resource for the discipline of sexology, and he documented and classified over 300 words and images from the walls of public toilets. The form of graffiti now classified as *latrinalia* were identified as an object of interest to scholars of sexuality, as public toilets constituted a unique space, in that they are public/private places segregated by gender that offer the opportunity to communicate in temporary seclusion (and in address to members of the same sex). Latrinalia was viewed as a form of private visual confessional or fantasy (that also permits dialogue and commentary on the marks made by others). Kinsey saw in these mundane inscriptions and drawings evidence of repressed unconscious conflicts, including latent homosexual desires. The latter was inferred from the preponderance of obscene and erotic graffiti in men's toilets, and in particular the dominance of images involving the penis. This form of graffiti was conceptualised in psychoanalytic terms – as a universally shared abject (anal) “smearing impulse”, and as the product of unconscious anxieties formed in response to common social stressors – as evidence of the anxiety of repressed masculine egos in threatening modern urban environments.⁴²

Duchamp's (1917) *Fountain* was arguably one of the first modern art pieces to incorporate visible graffiti, in the form of an inscribed urinal, though most commentators describe the text (which reads “R. Mutt”) on Duchamp's inverted urinal more neutrally as a pseudonymous signature. This piece was famously rejected when Duchamp submitted it for exhibition, and thus was clearly not initially accepted as an art object. A number of contemporary critics have since retrospectively claimed Duchamp's readymade urinal as an instance of dissensus, in Rancière's sense of a disruption to the division of the sensible that reveals the contingency of our perceptual/conceptual order, and thus the contingency of what we see as art. However Rancière himself was dismissive of the significance of Duchamp's work:

I don't really give so much importance to Duchamp and to the readymade. I think the readymade is only a particular form of interpretation and implementation of something that was wider, an already existing erasing of the border between what belongs to art and what does not belong to art. The readymade plays... no significant role in a redistribution of forms that had already occurred.⁴³

Rancière asserted that the prominence that we now accord Duchamp's *Fountain* should be considered with attention to the now erased genealogy of forms of perception that, from the mid 19th century, blurred the boundaries between art and everyday life that preceded (and made possible) this ‘artistic event’. Rancière also identifies the “anti-modernist polemics” of the 1960s as key in the iconic status, or stylistic break, that we now accord Duchamp's readymades, including the *Fountain*.⁴⁴

That the *Fountain* was viewed as a transgression (or was intended to be received as such) is clear from Duchamp's written defense of his work:

Mr Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers' shop windows... Mr Mutt... CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object.⁴⁵

Here, Duchamp takes care to detail the crucial role of the conceptual strategy and choice made by the artist – of displacing ‘an ordinary article of life’ and creating ‘a new thought for that object’. However, before doing so, he is careful to dismiss – as absurd – the apparently common perception of the *Fountain* as immoral, by placing it in the same class of ordinary articles as the

⁴¹ Reid (1935). *Lexical Evidence from Folk Epigraphy in Western North America: A Glossarial Study of the Low Element in the English Vocabulary*, was privately published in Paris in 1935

⁴² Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard (1953).

⁴³ Arnall, Gandolfi and Zaramella (2012) p. 291-292.

fixtures seen in plumbers' shop windows. Unlike the pristine fixtures on public display, however, Duchamp's urinal is crudely inscribed with a name and a date. It is perhaps this inscription that makes it possible to perceive the urinal as immoral, abject or used. In 1917 it is likely that latrinalia were viewed, not yet in psychoanalytic terms, but as a relatively mundane (if tasteless) form of human expression, perhaps of interest to folklorists, but not (yet) a symptomatic object for the human sciences. However, as we have seen, the new category of graffiti had been pathologised since the late 19th century, and was considered symptomatic of criminality; and names (when graffitied) were viewed as 'criminal hieroglyphs' or 'savage totems'. Thus this 'ordinary article of life' is not – as Duchamp disingenuously claimed – akin to a new and unused bathtub from a plumbers' shop window. Rather, the graffiti on the urinal marks helps to mark it as having formerly existed for *use* as an ordinary object. That this inscription today is more often described as a signature (rather than being perceived as graffiti) effectively neutralises the impact of the earlier reception of the work as degenerate or immoral – as a flagrant case of aesthetic impropriety, and a brutal assault on taste itself – for a signature is, of course, an entirely normative and expectable inscription to be found on an object (now) recognised as a work of art.

However, Varnadoe regards Duchamp's (1919) irreverent *L.H.O.O.Q.*, as being the first "fully modern" work to incorporate graffiti.⁴⁶ To a small print of the *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp applied both a penciled moustache and a coded and obscene abbreviation popular in graffiti at that time (*Elle a chaud au cul* or, "she's got a hot ass.") The dissensus here is produced by defiguring the *Mona Lisa* from the representational regime of art and incorporating it into the non-linear temporality of the aesthetic regime – rather than, as has been claimed for the *Fountain's* effect, *reconfiguring* an everyday object as art. However, in common with the *Fountain*, this is achieved in *L.H.O.O.Q.* via a crude inscription of the irreverent style identified with graffiti, and unskilled (even juvenile) mark makers.

Graffiti was also an object of interest within the burgeoning discipline of psychiatry. In the early 20th century Emil Kraepelin began collecting art (including graffiti) produced by the mentally ill. This collection became the project of Hans Prinzhorn, who in the 1920s published a collection of these images. The title of Prinzhorn's work, *Artistry of the mentally ill: a contribution to the psychology and psychopathology of configuration* demonstrates a focus not entirely dissimilar to art historical concerns with style and form in its attention to the configuration of the works of the 'mentally ill'.⁴⁷ However rather than assuming a coherent expressive authorial subjectivity (as per art historical scholarship) Prinzhorn provides a symptomatic reading that emphasized the boredom and dreamlike passivity that impelled institutionalized mental patients to draw on their walls.⁴⁸ Prinzhorn's collection reportedly influenced the creative practices of the Surrealists, including Max Ernst, who apparently perceived this dreamlike creative state as key to accessing the unconscious.⁴⁹ However, in the 1930s, Nazi propaganda drew on Prinzhorn's collection to denigrate the reputation and worth of contemporary non representational artists, and in 1937, the Nazis organised an exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* (or *Degenerate Art*) with the explicit aim of highlighting the shared inferior status of painters such as Paul Klee and Oskar Kokoschka by presenting their work alongside work by mental patients. This practice of anti-curation operated by coopting and inverting the stylistic reflex – or the grouping of like with like (and the disjunction of unlikes) – and invoked the discursive regimes of criminological and psychiatric systems of classification, in order to exclude non representational art from the status of art by its association with the non-art produced by (and thus symptomatic of) incoherent moral deviance and degeneracy.

⁴⁶ Varnadoe (1990) p. 77.

⁴⁷ Prinzhorn (1926)

⁴⁸ We can see a similar reading of the impetus for graffiti in Barthes' (1992) account of Cy Twombly's graffiti-like work.

Post World War II, Jean Debuffet appropriated the style of the work presented in Prinzhorn's collection, regarding it as an outsider manifestation of art (or Art Brut). With Ellis, he regarded graffiti as the product of authentic creative impulses borne of seclusion:

Those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses... are more precious than the productions of professionals.⁵⁰

However, Debuffet also appeared to invert, or revalue the very characteristics considered negative by criminologists in the early 19th century, embracing the rebellious criminality, brutal energy and disturbing content evident in graffiti in his own paintings.

In 1934, the photographer Brassai published an article on graffiti in the Surrealist journal *Minotaur* and went on to compile an extensive collection of images from the walls of the working class districts of Paris. This was the first photographic documentation of contemporary graffiti which positioned it as a form of (almost) art, and not as symptomatic of criminality or mental illness. Brassai grouped his photographs according to themes including, "the birth of mankind"; "masks and faces"; "love"; and "death."⁵¹ He described graffiti as a primal creative gesture and its images as a distillation of life itself. With Debuffet (who later sought to include Brassai's work in his Art Brut collection) Brassai emphasized the violent energy of graffiti, which he reported, "struck me with the force of an event", and he sought to capture the vehemence of these crude images gouged into the city walls.⁵² Brassai's selection and framing of graffiti by primal theme as expressed by recognisable singular images (closely framed to include only the complete image, and not the context of the surrounding wall) and his interpretation of these works as the product of unconscious forces, demonstrates his initial positioning of graffiti in the 1930s as congruent with Surrealist work, including Picasso's primitive sculptural masks (and his later graffiti-esque wall freizes). However, in the 1950s Brassai updated this stylistic reference by drawing a new parallel between graffiti and the "unmediated gesture, and speed of execution... [of] Action painters." Perhaps in recognition of the reflexivity of this retrospective recategorisation, Brassai declared "the wall as a mirror for the main trends in contemporary art."⁵³

Like Brassai, Aaron Siskind (working in New York and Chicago in the 1950s) also photographed graffiti on public walls, but in opposition to Brassai's recognisable singular primal images, Siskind zoomed in on smaller sections of the graffiti he found in order to capture the details and energy of the paint marks and scratches made on the wall, eschewing a focus on the recognisable signifying whole. Siskind thus produced abstract compositions evocative of the recognisable style of the then contemporary Abstract Expressionists – despite wielding a camera, rather than a paintbrush. While Brassai had remarked on the force of graffiti's gestural energy, this was not a quality visible in his carefully framed and themed photographs. In contrast, Siskind foregrounded the calligraphic and gestural force of graffiti, through his dismissal of the signifying element of the original work as a whole, and by capturing only the crude paintwork and rough textures of abstracted sections of the graffiti and accumulated marks on the walls he photographed.

Siskind's *Homage to Franz Kline San Luis Potosi, Mexico 23* (1961) has been argued to reflect his close relationship with the Abstract Expressionist painter Franz Kline. Indeed, Siskind's photographs often closely echo Kline's paintings, and in particular, *Meryon* (1961) which was painted in the same year as Siskind's *Homage*. These works are mutually constitutive, in Siskind's isolation and framing of the brutal gestural energy of graffiti as Abstract Expressionism; and in the crude calligraphic force of Kline's visible brush work, which evokes the rough energy of the unskilled mark. Both are monochromatic abstract compositions on a flattened visual field, in which figure and ground interlock. The forceful sweeping brushstrokes represented in each exceed the boundaries of the frame, and Kline's *Meryon* appears almost photographically 'cropped', in a manner akin to Siskind's viewfinder, in the suggestion of the

⁵⁰ Debuffet (1988) p.36.

⁵¹ Brassai (1958)

continued movement of the gesture outside of the frame (rendering these works dynamic fragments of a larger whole that we can sense, but not see).

Greenberg famously regarded the effectiveness of such apparently unskilled mark making as part of the progression of the skill of the modern artist in heroically suppressing the evidence of their actual technical skills. Greenberg describes this suppression as a 'triumph', against which "other contemporary painting begins to look fussy."⁵⁴ Against charges that children could produce similar work, Greenberg emphasized the role of the inspiration and conception of the skilled painter, and their ability to compose a coherent abstract composition – capacities that he asserted children lack, though he admitted that children have the ability to paint similar 'easy' marks. Arguably, a similar logic is here evident in the exclusion from consideration (as yet unthinkable) as potential creative authors the agents responsible for the production of the graffiti photographed and framed as recognizable instances of Abstract Expressionism by Siskind.

However, Rancière was dismissive of Greenberg's modernism, and argued that, "the 'internal necessity' of the abstract canvas is itself only constructed in the device whereby words work the painted surface so as to construct a different plane of intelligibility for it."⁵⁵ Here, Rancière builds on Elsner's emphasis on style as a form of constructive description, to consider the ways that discursive regimes (including art criticism) (re)work the canvas to form a new kind of common understanding and perception – here, of the apparently self-evident 'internal necessity' (or creative authorial drive to produce just this work) as the key to seeing and understanding the abstract canvases and gestural force of Abstract Expressionism as a coherent artistic expression, and not, as Greenberg was concerned to refute, marks that could be made by child.⁵⁶

Graffiti as (prospective) art

In the early 1970s, youth from the minority neighbourhoods of New York developed a style of graffiti that has come to signify contemporary perceptions of graffiti as wanton vandalism.⁵⁷ This 'new' form of complex gesturally expressive graffiti diminished the ability of outsiders to read or understand the writers' tags (or signatures) as anything other than destructive and abject, in association with prior notions of criminal hieroglyphs which were also regarded as indecipherable and thus as threatening. This modern form of graffiti, which initially combined a pseudonymous name and a number corresponding to the author's geographic location (e.g., TAKI131) was described in the late 1970s as "pandemic" by authorities, featured in *The New York Times*, and in the early 1980s was the focus of a feature documentary, *Wild Style* which attained worldwide distribution, as did the photographic collections of Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant.⁵⁸ It is of note that this was the first time photographers had thought to attribute authorship to the graffiti artists whose work they represented – arguably a key shift in the forms of perception necessary for this form of liminal art to achieve the status of prospective art.

Baudrillard, writing in the early 1970s, described this new graffiti as an 'empty signifier', or 'zero-sign', as it offered 'names without intimacy', however critics note that graffiti's status as a non-sign is defined against a positive/privileged idea (of a sign) from which it is deduced as secondary or derivative.⁵⁹ Baudrillard was writing at a time when signature graffiti was still legible (i.e., the letters and numbers were simply and recognizably rendered) but not traceable to any particular author, though he did briefly observe the transformation of its form into a "baroque graphic", which is presumably an observation on the development of more complex forms of calligraphy, referred to as 'hand style' by graffiti writers. This form of graffiti soon

⁵⁴ Oliver (2013). p. 160.

⁵⁵ Oliver (2013). p. 160.

⁵⁶ Elsner (2003).

⁵⁷ Whilst the May 1968 uprising informed the stenciled graffiti of the Situationists in Paris, arguably a precursor to contemporary stenciled street art.

became largely indecipherable to outsiders, though insider practices of looking and subcultural forms of stylistic analysis and connoisseurship can attribute authorship, group and region, and can decipher the names, icons and messages hidden (or deformed) in this complex performative visual calligraphy. This new graffiti was thus accessible to the senses, yet opaque and inaccessible in its signification to most. The plethora of tags that adorn/deface the walls and surfaces of contemporary cities mean that graffiti is now uniquely visible to everyone but insignificant to most, unlike older styles of graffiti, which took the form of either recognizable images, or clearly legible, if crudely rendered, text.

The order of the visible has long perceived graffiti as inherently incoherent and often as symptomatic of a deficit of character or conduct. The forms of participation enabled by this (mis)apprehension have been accordingly limited. Such proto-authors have historically been excluded from full participation in the arts as they have been defined against the coherently expressive authorial subjectivity of the autonomous artist, though, as we have seen, the “pure and authentic” creative impulses often attributed to these almost authorial figures has meant that elements of graffiti have been appropriated as vital expressive resources within the recognisable styles of modern and contemporary art. Although older discursive regimes and forms of perception continue to inform our contemporary understanding of graffiti as abject and destructive, there is now also an alternative available discourse that for the first time perceives graffiti as a skillful manipulation of form and style, and graffiti writers as capable of the forms of conceptual experimentation previously reserved for visual artists:

Their power resided in their communication of form and style rather than in the words which they spelled. Writing on the wall became a formal experimentation.⁶⁰

This shift in the perception of graffiti was, as we have seen, preceded by a shift in the forms of perception and conceptualization of the discursive regimes that have taken (or excluded) graffiti as an object. Though the focus of this discussion has been on the genealogy of the discursive regimes concerned with graffiti, there undoubtedly many other more contemporary factors also worthy of note as contributing to our contemporary understandings of graffiti – not least in the conjoining (and marketing) of modern graffiti alongside other popular subcultural expressions (including hip hop music, music videos, feature films, computer games and more recently the prolific documentation and sharing of graffiti via the internet and social media).

Using the ‘limit case’ of graffiti as a worked example, this paper has explored the productive limitations of the concept of style. Our review of the discursive regimes that inform our contemporary aesthetic responses to graffiti demonstrates that rather than being marginalised exclusions not worthy of analytic attention, once incoherent limit cases such as graffiti may paradoxically be generative of the very coherence of the notion of style. Future, more critical applications of the concept of style might follow Rancière’s suggestion that we attend to the contingency of the processes of perception itself by identifying “displacements in the perception of what art signifies” alongside a genealogy of the regimes of perception (and thought and affect) that precede, and give rise to, what are perceived as new artistic events, or aesthetic improprieties, such as graffiti.⁶¹ Rancière’s focus on the collective operations of ‘self-evident’ perception highlights the contingency of the perceptual/conceptual order, and thus a potential approach to style that could better accommodate the indexicality of contemporary art. This would afford a shift in our understanding of style as a coherent form of expressivity, or even as productive description, towards a concept of style with a more critical stance and an important conceptual link between the processes of production and reception by attending to the “sensible fabric of experience within which art is produced” and recognized as such. Contemporary applications of the concept of style may thus lie in returning to the contingency and primacy of

⁶⁰ Roth (2005) p. 18. The work of graffiti artists active in New York featured in gallery shows in the 1970s and 1980s, but these artists had little enduring success. While Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring are sometimes claimed as ‘graffiti artists’, in that they produced unauthorized work on the walls of New York City, neither identified as such, and their work diverges from the calligraphic style and format of contemporary graffiti, though Haring has been recently

the processes of perception itself, an essential component of foundational approaches to style (e.g., Wölfflin, 1915) in constraining and enabling our practices of looking.

Visual Examples



Plate 1. Aaron Siskind, *Homage to Franz Kline San Luis Potosi, Mexico 23*, 1961. Photograph, Gelatin silver print mounted to board, 49cm x 41cm.
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/aaron-siskind/homage-to-franz-kline-san-luis-potosi-mexico-23-a-feaB8VIXYPrpGpdR67Ay5A2> (accessed 20 January 2016)



Plate 2. Franz Kline, *Meryon*, 1960–1, Oil paint on canvas. Support: 240 x 195 cm, frame: 240 x 200 x 4.7 cm. Tate, London.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kline-meryon-t00926> (accessed 20 January 2016)

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