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Tagging

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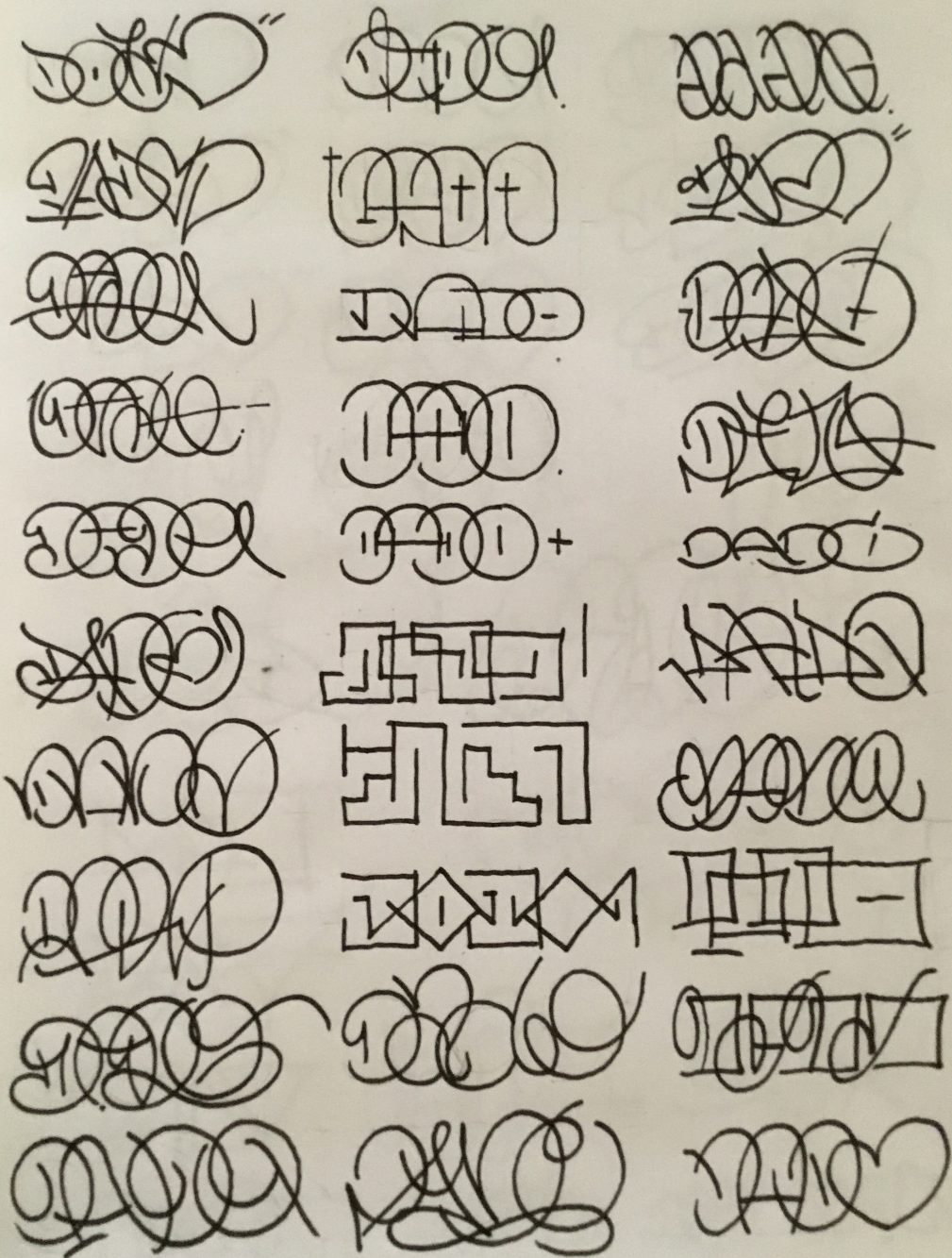


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EDITORIAL

The tag is intensity instantiated and localised: the tag is a singularity — and because no singularity exists without a multiplicity, the tag is swarm: its name is legion. How to capture the abrasive and yet elusive power of the tag? How to describe and document its forms and effects? How to attend to the actors who participate in the game and those who — for the good and for the bad — are affected by such practice?

The power of tagging comes from the simple act of marking one's existence in a particular place and time by leaving a trace and a claim that is visible to others. As Ella Chmielewska (2009: 34) once put it, 'graffiti marks are an inherently public statement. They often attempt to make territorial claims, but typically make no assertions on property ownership.' The 'Me' component, in other words, necessarily prevails over the 'my' or 'mine'.

This issue of *lo Squaderno* collects a series of reflections and case studies of various types of tagging in public space. The 2019 event [Tag: Name Writing in Public Space](#), organised by Javier Abarca and Orestis Pangalos, represented a crucial venue where various contributors first gathered. Some pieces advance a series of remarks about the nature of tagging, its meaning, its history, and its urban and suburban transformations; others illustrate some of the many traditions and cultures of tagging.

The issue is opened by a contribution by Lachlan MacDowall that provides a close reading of the movie *Beat Street* (1984), one of the earliest graffiti movies. Ramo, the movie's protagonist, is obsessed by the idea of finding a brand new white metro train to paint, instead of the by-then conventional grey ones. MacDowall hints that this specific obsession may be not only a metaphor of race in 1980s New York, but more deeply connected to Melville's *Moby Dick*. From this perspective, the tagger takes on the existential features of a modern Ahab in search

for a total and necessarily 'fatal' encounter with the 'white whale.'

In the following piece, Vittorio Parisi takes an aesthetic and ecological perspective on tagging. He originally suggests that tags occupy urban interstices in the same way a number of other illegal and unwanted wild entities, such as weeds, do. Urban interstices, Parisi submits, appear to be haunted by 'a sense of transience, emptiness, interruption or suspension'. Drawing from his fieldwork in Pantin, a North-Eastern Parisian *banlieue*, the author probes the peculiar mode of existence of areas contradistinguished by the systemic co-presence of waste, weeds, and illegal graffiti writing.

Lisa Garcia follows up on these reflections, unravelling the puzzle of tags as one that swings between calligraphy (style) and cacography (scribble). Garcia argues that, even apart from their moral connotation, tags are regarded by many as possessing a lower aesthetic value than the rest of graffiti, amounting to the most 'unpopular expression of urban art'. Nonetheless, Garcia reminds us that the tag is one of the few public expressions of handwriting in cities now marked above all by typography, and as such, it embodies the potential encounter with calligraphy — a fact that is perhaps clearer when observed from a non-Western perspective.

While tags are often described quintessentially urban, Julian Windisch takes a provocative stance bringing us into provincial landscapes, where, in the 'heart of the country', uncool and sometimes awkward tags can, in fact, be interpreted as exquisite form of 'province poetry'. While Windisch is describing the territories across the French-German border, along his commuting route between Karlsruhe and Strasbourg, one easily recognises this type of landscape of the 'global periphery' which we have already explored in [lo Squaderno 41](#). Here, the author invites us to inspect a 'tag, lost in no

man's land, copying urban styles, being ugly: in this mixture of style and spatial aspects — Windisch concludes — rural tags have a poetic grace.'

Next, we feature two interesting case studies. Charles Nolan Vanlinden reconstructs the tradition of early Atlanta tags. Focusing on the writer LEON, Vanlinden puzzles over the difficulty of defining an original Atlanta writing style, taking into account what might have been the original characters of such a style, and how transmission of it may have come about. Interestingly, Atlanta is also where in the US the first all-nation crew, Network, was established, which makes the connection between the locale (walls, subway) and trans-locality (freight trains, the internet) even more captivating.

Subsequently, Konstantinos Avramidis richly documents the tags found in an Athens detention centre that was active during the Second World War. The prison wall appears as a 'panorama' where several individual biographies can be read together, composing the fresco of a critical, traumatic moment in the collective history of Europe. Retracing the inmates' desperate attempts to mark their own presence, their fleeting and otherwise invisible (also in the sense of extra-judicial) passage through the detention centre, Avramidis analyses the outcomes of his own mapping technique, which he describes as a 'design reading' whose aim is telling a choral

history without sacrificing the individualities that compose it.

The methodology for studying tags is also expanded upon by Peter Bengtsen. Bengtsen proposes a reflection on his own attempt to trace the tags of the Danish graffiti writer Kegr in the outskirts of Malmö. In particular, the author suggests that video making and 'videography' could represent a useful tool to take into account the fact that 'a key part of looking for tags is remembering, among other things, the style, medium, size and placement of previous tags.' The medium of video gives emphasis to the peculiar conversation that is produced by tags.

Finally, the issue is concluded by a contribution about the recent upheaval in Lebanon. The piece by Dina Yunis is an apt reminder of the continuing political relevance of the tag. As we have learnt, the walls are the place where the becoming-revolutionary of a people can be read most clearly and directly.

JA, OP, AMB

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Ramo? Meet Ahab: Beat Street and the Migaloo Boogaloo

**Lachlan
Macdowall**

Introduction

I'm travelling north to south on a 737 over the rim of Australia, along the western edge of the Pacific, on a migratory route from the tropics to more temperate climates, departing from the islands of the Whitsundays to the urban centres clustered along the east coast, from a holiday resort to colonial settlements that became cities huddled on the shoreline away from the expanse of ocean or the vast interior of the continent, along the busiest airline sector in the world, moving at the greatest height and velocity my body will ever encounter but also cruising gently in the docile reverie of plane flight.

More than photography, it was movies that spread New York graffiti around the globe from the mid-1980s. Photography froze graffiti and enabled a usefully forensic decoding of its details, but movies showed graffiti on, or from, trains, in situ, running in traffic. Photos of graffiti appeared predominantly in books; an older media form designed for private contemplation. In contrast, graffiti in movies, on big or small screens, embodied the collective experience and fleeting nature of graffiti.

So, if graffiti's history can be organised around a distinction between photography and film, between objects and *experiences*, it is has also typically been based on a distinction between tagging and pieces, between raw, pioneering and prototypical gestures that become the templates for sophisticated, iterative and ornamentalised murals.

Thus, graffiti's value is often described vertically. At the peak are well-known artists and colourful pieces. But these are merely the tip of an iceberg in a vast ocean of signifiers. Underneath, outnumbering all the masterpieces by recognised Kings of graffiti are a deep archive of nameless contributors, low-grade marks and visual slurs.

Graffiti's style masters, visual innovators and life-long mural painters of course deserve recognition and respect. But by sheer empirical volume, most graffiti is tags and most contributors are unknown and unrecognised. Just as most events that occur do not enter into History, the predominance of glitzy pieces by known artists skews our attention from the sheer volume of tags. Recent scholarship, such as the work of Javier Abarca, has focussed on overturning this preference for pieces over tags, and giving tags and taggers their deserved aesthetic and conceptual attention.

The plane's wing arcs over Byron Bay, the easternmost point of the Australian mainland and my children need my noise-cancelling headphones. Our family is divided by the central aisle of the plane and left to one side, I scan the few files on my laptop, choosing to re-watch a classic graffiti film, the 1984 movie *Beat Street*. Viewed on a small screen, with the babble of the plane carriage as a soundtrack, guided only by subtitles, a new vision of the film emerges. . .

Working across art-making and academia over three decades, Lachlan MacDowall is a scholar of graffiti, street art and digital culture, best known for pioneering research methods that mix genres, images and data. He is currently an Associate Professor and Director at the MIECAT Institute in Fitzroy, Melbourne. His most recent book is *Instafame: Graffiti and Street Art in the Instagram Era* (Intellect and University of Chicago Press, 2019).

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The canonical movies of this era are *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*. Widely released in 1983, *Wild Style* sets graffiti within the nexus of Hip-hop and the broader cultural scene of New York, using director Charlie Ahearn's established practice of improvised scenes and loose narratives with non-actors, shot in public locations. Often regarded as the first hip-hop film, *Wild Style* includes a roll call of key figures in the subculture, with the lead character of "Zoro" played by graffiti writer "Lee" Quiñones. First screened in January 1984, *Style Wars* is a potent verité documentary about New York writers that cemented many of the cultural forms and identities of the global graffiti movement in a way that make it strangely inseparable from its subject matter.

The tags of New York have always told a distinctly American story, not just of the melting pot of the Bronx, but of a longer, global American history of obsession and commerce

Drawing on elements of both *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* but unlike its predecessors, *Beat Street* is an awkward mix of the authentic and the grimacingly inauthentic. The film follows the interlocking lives of a group of young people in the South

Bronx hoping to find success from the interests in DJing breakdancing and graffiti. The graffiti strand of the story involves Ramon, who writes "Ramo", and his struggle to balance his family life with his obsession for graffiti.

Beat Street has strongly authentic elements. The original script came from a series of interviews with Afrika Bambaata, one of hip hop's founders, conducted by journalist Steven Hager, who was the first to use the term "hip hop" in print in a 1982 article in *The Village Voice* in 1982. The film includes cameos from key figures such as the New York City Breakers and Rock Steady Crew, as well as DJ Kool Herc and Grandmaster Melle Mel and Furious Five. Leading graffiti writers Bill "Blast" Cordero and Lonny "Phase II" Wood are credited as "Graffiti Consultants" and key elements of graffiti culture, such as the notion of copying or "biting" are explained in the movie. The character of Spit, who defaces Ramo's work, is based on the real-life figure writer Cap, himself profiled in *Style Wars*.

Though *Beat Street* has become part of the lingua franca of graffiti (for example Biggie Smalls rapping: "should I die on the train tracks like Ramo in *Beat Street*"), the movie also has many inauthentic elements. Though scenes from *Beat Street* are shot (with permission) on the New York subway system and train yards, the graffiti included in the film is produced by professional set dressers using paint brushes rather than graffiti writers using spray paint. In its search for a mainstream audience and commercial success, the narrative of *Beat Street* is a melting-pot of genres: it is simultaneously a Christmas movie, set in the snowy backdrop of the Bronx, a love story, a gang feud (*West Side Story*), a dance movie (*Saturday Night Fever* (1979), *Breakin'* (1984), *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984)) or a quest for professional success at art school or the club scene (*Fame* (1980)).

But as well as mixing *Fame* and *West Side Story* with the civil rights commitment of its producer Harry Belafonte, *Beat Street* also tells another, distinctly American, story. In a sea of grey trains, Ramo is obsessed with a new white train, a dauntingly oversized, elusive and singular white beast. Ramo? Meet Ahab. . .

In his obsession with the single clean white train that stands out amongst the many grey models, Ramo is replaying the greatest of all American novels, *Moby Dick*, in which Captain Ahab hunts for a mythical white whale. Hidden throughout *Beat Street* are allusions to Melville's 1851 novel, from the aquatic motifs and images of giant squid painted by Ramo at the club he visits to a rapper who spits a diss at Santa ("You big fat whale, you might as well quit/'cause I can name 100 presents I didn't get").

In *Beat Street*, like in *Moby Dick*, the determination to hunt the white whale ends in the central

protagonist's death, and if we squint, like Ahab on the prow of the Pequoo, we find more Moby Dick connections, especially in the film's imagery. With crazed eyes, Ramo mutters to himself: "It's eight feet high and it's beautiful", while his friend responds: "All you ever talk about is white trains."

Like Ahab, Ramo searches for meaning in the incoherent logic of the city. Why was this brand new white train assigned to this line?

Ramo: Somebody made it an A train.

His friend: So, what does that mean?

In Melville's novel, Captain Ahab's ship departs from Manhattan Island, on the shores where the high-rise housing projects of the Bronx will be constructed nearly a century later. Why, asks Melville, is whiteness associated at once with purity and beauty but also death and annihilation?: "But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul."¹

In *Beat Street*, whiteness means more than the clean surface of the new A Line train. Perhaps the real white whale is the rare white character of Spit. Spit defaces Ramo's wholecar with his white cursive script, the letters rolling like the waves on a violent sea. Wrapped in a giant puffy jacket, Spit resembles the white whale and it is Ramo's determination to confront him that results in his death on the train tracks, as Biggie laments.

Spit's (aka Cap's) death is capped off by caps themselves. At Ramo's death scene, the passengers on the platform who try to come to his aid are wearing fisherman's beanies, now a staple of street fashion but also another echo of the nautical connection between *Beat Street* and *Moby Dick*.

Add to this another final connection, as I fly over the waters of the Pacific, an actual white whale, the rare albino killer whale known by indigenous people as Migaloo, a staple of white whale-watchers from Warnambool to Byron Bay, that makes the trek from northern waters to the east coast of Australia, the very trajectory over which I am now flying. Migaloo is a descendant of Mocha Dick, the infamous, hard-to-catch albino whale of the 1820s, which became the basis for Melville's novel. It was Australian whalers who rescued Melville after his own ill-fated whaling voyage into the Pacific at the age of 22.

In his series dubbed "Speculative Paintings of a Graffiti-Covered Earth," the American painter Josh Keyes presents images of tagging intruding on the natural world, from graffiti-bombed icebergs and space-satellites to a whale's tail emerging from a grey ocean covered in tags. "Are there things and places that graffiti should not be?" asked Keyes in an interview with *Colossal*. "Who is to say what surface is to be kept graffiti clean?"²

The tags of New York have always told a distinctly American story, not just of the melting pot of the Bronx, but of a longer, global American history of obsession and commerce. To tag is to enter this world-wide history and network of street writing, a history that is registered in *Moby Dick* via *Beat Street*, a dance we could call the Migaloo Bigaloo.

1 Melville, Herman (1961), *Moby Dick, Or the White Whale*, New York: Signet Books, p. 196

2 Sierzputowski, Kate (2017), "Speculative Paintings of a Graffiti-Covered Earth by Josh Keyes," *Colossal*, January 18, <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2017/01/graffiti-covered-earth-josh-keyes/>, accessed 25 November 2019



Haunting the neoliberal city

Illegal graffiti and the “infesthetics” of urban interstices

Vittorio Parisi

Anyone wishing to know what the future holds should not lose sight of vacant lots and urban wastelands, rubble and yards.

Marc Augé, Time in ruins

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For a hauntology of urban interstices

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In the early 1990s, the British-American architectural theorist Anthony Vidler (1992) famously proposed to adapt the Freudian notion of ‘the uncanny’ (Freud 1955[1919]) to urban spaces. However, while referring to spaces like “transitional wastelands” (*Ibidem*: 162), “empty spaces” (*Ibidem*: 184) or “interstices of the settled community” (*Ibidem*: 214), Vidler does not dedicate much attention to urban interstices, i.e., places that are clearly characterized by a sense of transience, emptiness, interruption or suspension, that is, arguably, by the most striking features of uncanniness. When Vidler’s essay was first published, after a massive and progressive wave of global urbanization ongoing since the 1950s, urban interstices as a proper spatial category only started to become evident as a constitutive element of the neoliberal city. In 2013, Italian sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti has edited a volume of essays dedicated to the critical analysis, the aesthetic and political relevance of the urban interstice considered as a proper category, in terms of physical space, but also as an “event”. He defines it “a leftover space, what remains after a single, central planning process, or between two heterogeneous and discontinuous plans” (Brighenti, Ed., 2013: xviii).

The consequences of a discontinuous planning process had also been observed by Lefebvre in his definition of “urban society”, namely “a society that results from a process of complete urbanization . . . during which the old urban forms, the end result of a series of discontinuous transformations, burst apart” (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 1–2), and the origin of the urban interstice lies precisely in such a process of “implosion-explosion” (*Ibidem*: 14) that has twisted the traditional cityscape. Another definition of urban interstices can be derived from Gilles Clément’s *Third Landscape Manifesto*, in which the French environmentalist describes a specific, transitional place in the contemporary cityscape: a place that “proceeds from the abandonment of a formerly exploited territory”, and that he identifies with vacant lots (*friches*) and urban wastelands (*terrains vagues*), and to which he gives the name of *délaissés*, “neglected”. In addition to vacant lots and wastelands, further kinds of urban interstices may be found in abandoned buildings in postindustrial zones, back alleys, and spaces that are a constitutive yet unfunctional part of the infrastructural fabric, for instance areas underneath

bridges and viaducts.

What defines urban interstices as physical places is their state of neglect, or their configuration as places of transit. In both cases, interstices result from the over-exploitation of space occurring elsewhere in the neoliberal city. On the other hand, if we wanted to define urban interstices as metaphysical places — or, in a Freudian-Vidlerian psychoanalytic perspective, as places of the urban unconscious — we could not but associate them to the category of the architectural uncanny. From this perspective, urban interstices reveal their actual nature of events rather than mere places, for their constitution is temporal more than physical: a sudden, disturbing arrhythmia in the urban heart frequency. Indeed, they succeed in suspending the sense of familiarity produced by the usual pattern of functioning buildings and streets, thus prefiguring what our cities might look like as ruins, as in the post-apocalyptic sceneries announced by science, the ones already occurred in Chernobyl or Fukushima, and the ones depicted in science-fictional stories like Arthur C. Clarke's *Rescue Party*: "... a great, sprawling metropolis, built around a river that had disappeared leaving an ugly scar winding its way among the great buildings and beneath bridges that looked very incongruous now. Even from the air, the city looked deserted."

Like the dried river in Clarke's story, urban interstices are scars in our cityscape: they make their sudden appearance, and what we sense is the disappearance of the city. The ghostly aura of a temporal disjunction seems therefore to imbue places like vacant lots, wastelands and abandoned buildings: a condition of absolute in-betweenness, a suspension amidst a *no longer* and a *not yet*. Often a vacant lot is, indeed, a hole left by a demolished building (*no longer*), but at the same time that same hole can be a space for the construction of a new one (*not yet*). An abandoned building can be perceived at once as a place of nostalgia, where some human activity used to happen (*no longer*), yet at the same time as the frightening omen of human extinction (*not yet*).

According to Martin Hägglund, being *no longer* and *not yet* at the same time is what better defines the figure and the condition of the spectre. It also helps in understanding the notion of "hauntology" (*hantologie*), conceived by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, originally to describe the "spectral" agency of communism: still "haunting Europe" even after the fall of the Iron Curtain, in a time that appears Hamletically "out of joint", and in a condition of concomitant absence and presence. The spectrality of urban interstices — and so their hauntological constitution — depends on this very same condition, for the absence of usual and familiar activities in such places actually turns out to be the presence of something else, something unusual and unfamiliar, something unmistakably uncanny.

Of signs and weeds: interstitial ghosts

From late 2015 to early 2017, I have been conducting fieldwork for my doctoral research in Pantin, a North-Eastern Parisian *banlieue*, where urban artistic practices like graffiti writing and street art¹ are massively present, both as spontaneous-illegal practices and as sanctioned festivals and art contests. My aim was to take record of all the noticeable differences in how illegal and institutional art affected those places. My attention was caught by the constant presence, in the urban interstices and urban *friches*, of three coexisting elements: generic waste, weeds, and illegal graffiti writing. Each one of these produces the commonplace image of the *friche* as a symbol of urban decay: an unfunctional, architectural vacuum, a neglected place, chaotically taken over by nature, used by people to get rid of their junk and for illicit activities such as spray-painting on walls. Also, each one of these elements plays a role in defining the *friche* as a haunting and haunted place. Haunting, for the *friche* prefigures

¹ The term "graffiti writing" denotes an (often illegal) urban art practice, based on the spray-painted inscription of the artist's own tag (i.e. their pseudonym) through their own personal graphic style. The term "street art" has fuzzier limits, and it is employed to denote various urban artistic interventions, from mural painting to stickers, from posters to installations, etc.

our extinction and “the disappearance of the city”; haunted, for some kind of uncanny activity seems to occur in these deserted places. (Fig. 1)

To sum up and complete my hauntological analysis of urban interstices, two considerations can be stated:

The concept of decay evokes the idea of death, along with those of expiration, disappearance, and immobility. Yet this is true only from a functional, capitalistic perspective, where things have value inasmuch as they can be put to profit and traded: from this point of view, the vacant lot has no value in itself, but only as a prospective building lot. Nonetheless, decay does not admit immobility: on the contrary, it is in all respects a process of transformation, in which a rotting body is altered under the action of external agents (molds, maggots, bacteria, etc.). Indeed,

Both weeds and graffiti share the ability to transform portions of the urban in uncanny, unexpected ways. But they also seem to share, in manner of speaking, a certain modus operandi or, to put it better, a common aesthetic

if an urban interstice should be considered more as an event than a mere place, and if such an event is one of urban decay, then the *friche* can be considered as the rotting process through which the city changes and turns into something else. In other words, there is no place for expiration, disappearance, or immobility. Alteration concerns the city as a “conscience” more than as a “body”: far from being a place where the city ceases to live, the *friche* is a place where the city ceases to be functional — i.e. to act as a catalyst of the capitalist routine — and becomes something different.

Of the three elements introduced above — generic waste, weeds and illegal graffiti writing — the latter two act like true “rotting agents”, given that they both imply the presence of what we could loosely equate to Henri Bergson’s *élan vital*: a vital and incessant impulse to create, involving all living beings, and leading all of them to seize and transform each piece of matter and space on their way. While such an impulse is self-evident in plants, it is only implied in graffiti writing, and it is directly responsible of what Rafael Schacter calls “the unease and angst that emerges at [its] sighting”, much more responsible than “contravention of legal codes” (Schacter, 2014: 34). The British anthropologist goes on claiming that graffiti acts as “an embedded form of sociality, expressing the evident ‘personhood’ of producers, eliciting an evidentially animative quality” (*Ibidem*). Both spontaneous plants and the human act of writing graffiti autonomously engage in an extra-ordinary, creative and unceasing relationship with the surrounding environment, while the same cannot be maintained for the ordinary, uncreative need for throwing garbage.

From this perspective, both weeds and graffiti share the ability to transform portions of the urban in uncanny, unexpected ways. But they also seem to share, in manner of speaking, a certain *modus operandi* or, to put it better, a common aesthetic: an aesthetic of spontaneity and invasion, of parasitism and palimpsest, of mixture and superposition. Both spontaneous plants and illegal graffiti are acts of reappropriation of, and resistance to, pre-existing architecture through the creation of new forms: as Emanuele Coccia puts it, the former “don’t have hands with which to shape the world”, yet they make “the world itself a site of infinite figuration” (Coccia, 2016: 25); the latter, says Jean Baudrillard, transform “the city’s walls and corners [...] into a body without beginning or end”, they “free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter” (Baudrillard, 1976: 126), through an “insurrection of signs” (*Ibidem*: 123).

Thus, artists with no hands and rioting signs inhabit urban interstices. Interstitial ghosts, engaging in a living, conflictual, and uncanny interaction with the built environment: they attack it, they haunt it, they *infest* it.

Towards an “infesthetics” of urban interstices

The verb “to infest” comes from Latin *infestare* and *infestus*, respectively meaning “to attack, disturb, trouble” and “unsafe, hostile, threatening, dangerous”. Always referring to animals and insects that carry disease, in modern English the verb denotes the act of causing a problem to something (a body, an object, a space) by being present in large number. Its Italian equivalent *infestare* refers also to plants, and one of the possible translations of the English word “weeds” is *piante infestanti*, “infesting plants”. The very same Italian verb also means “to haunt”: a *casa infestata* is literally a house haunted by ghosts. In this sense, the common aesthetics of weeds and illegal graffiti is an aesthetics of infestation: they act as external agents in places that they both attack and haunt. They also act as supplements on surfaces and volumes, and this is a quality that they share with ornamentation². Notwithstanding their “adjunctiveness”, I shall claim that both illegal graffiti and weeds have the power to subvert the common hierarchy of ornamentation: the *parerga* become the *erga*, and vice versa. If ornamentation is used to rhythmise, frame and embellish surfaces and volumes, the same cannot be said for illegal graffiti writing and weeds. It is actually quite the opposite: instead of acting as ornament, illegal graffiti and weeds subjugate place and architecture as their own ornaments by means of infestation. In most cases, ornament is servile to architecture, or it engages with it in a harmonious relationship. The infesthetic, anti-ornamental force of graffiti writing and weeds lies, on the contrary, in the fact that their adjunctiveness is parasitic, it exploits the architectural element instead of serving it. Architecture is here subordinated to the intimate need for aesthetic chaos — “infinite figuration”, “insurrection of signs” — which is the essence of their *élan vital*. Yet, such *élan vital* is not meant to embellish: even though our own gaze cannot help but aestheticize those places as ruins, both graffiti writers and weeds are unconcerned with adding aesthetic value to them.

As a consequence of infesthetics, places cease to exist as the mere result of the neoliberal exploitation of space, and turn into places of spontaneous and autonomous creation. Indeed, the presence of weeds and illegal graffiti reveals such places for what they really are: interstices, places that have lost their identity — in other words, non-places³. At the same time, while revealing these places as non-places, graffiti writing and weeds succeed in transforming non-places into other places, i.e., they provide them with a new identity.

Conclusion: the interstice as *oeuvre*

The capitalist city appears, *prima facie*, as a festive, “cultural” city. Yet in the 1960s, Lefebvre pointed out that an “organized, institutionalized, and . . . bureaucratized” culture could not be but “barren” (Lefebvre, 1996 [1969]: 170). In the urban society there is no place for improvisation and spontaneity: art can only exist and be admitted as a planned, mediated, and institutionalized phenomenon. Even an artistic practice like graffiti writing, born autonomous and illegal, is today subject to those very same dynamics: it either becomes museified or is institutionally employed by municipalities to “requalify”, “enliven” or “embellish” neglected and marginal areas of cities, thus losing its original conflictual, parasitic and infesthetic force, and becoming in all respects consensual ornamentation. In other words, and to employ Adorno’s vocabulary, graffiti writing suffers a process of “de-aestheticization” (*Entkunstung*) (Adorno, 1997 [1970]: 16–18) — or, in this case, “de-infesteticization”.

2 Schacter has noticed this common property of graffiti/street art and ornamentation. By reasons of their “adjunctiveness” and agency on the surfaces and volumes they affect, Schacter claims that they should be considered in all respects as ornaments (Schacter, 2014).

3 The expression non-places has already been employed by Marc Augé to designate “a space that cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé, 1995[1992]: 77–78). Nonetheless, Augé circumscribes the discourse to a quite specific kind of place: he means especially the airports, the service stations, the shopping malls, the hotel chains and the holiday villages, all those places produced by what he calls “supermodernity”, or a world characterized by “overabundance of events, spatial overabundance, the individualization of references” (*Ibid.*: 40).

In a Lefebvrian perspective, official “street art festivals” and “graffiti jams” on authorized walls could never be seen as the spontaneous *oeuvre* of the inhabitants: on the contrary, as part of a cultural industry system, they fit perfectly the “place of consumption and consumption of place” (Lefebvre, 1996 [1969]: 73) conscience of the capitalist city. On the other hand, when we claim that illegal graffiti and weeds in urban interstices provide urban interstitial (non-)places with a new identity, it is precisely because, once infested, they appear as places where the city has changed its conscience and has become *oeuvre* again: the *oeuvre* of its human and vegetal inhabitants. Urban interstices are thus the only places where space is no longer experienced as an element of consumption, for it undergoes a process of obsolescence in favor of time: the city becomes ephemeral, “the perpetual *oeuvre* of the inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this *oeuvre*” (*Ibidem*: 173).

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Urban tags

Calligraphy and cacography

Lisa Garcia

Introduction

We usually designate as tag a writer's signature, illegally appended onto an urban surface. Two competing discourses about tagging are commonly found. On the one hand, the writer's technical virtuosity and the calligraphy of the tag are emphasised. The term "calligraphy", applied to the letters' form, appears to be used by artists and graffiti expert. Here is, for instance, a testimony by Keith Haring:

Often, I'd take the trains to museums and galleries and I was starting to see not only the big graffiti on the outside of the subway trains but incredible calligraphy on the inside of the cars. (Haring, in Gruen 1991: 44)

Incidentally, one can observe that, in the West, handwriting attracts attention also because it seems like an old-fashioned activity (this is less true for the Chinese characters or the Arabic alphabet than for our Latin alphabet).

On the other hand, however, tag writing is also often described in terms of doodle, stain, parasitic noise: it is the point of view developed by politicians, the media, and even, sometimes, graffiti writers themselves. Thus, the tag tends to be depicted in simplistic terms, as either beautiful or ugly, in a sort of black-&-white interpretation.

Based on this preliminary remark, the question posed here is: Is the tag to be regarded more as *calligraphy* or *cacography*? The term "calligraphy" literally means "beautiful writing", from the ancient Greek words *kalós* (beauty) and *graphein* (to write). Calligraphy is handwriting executed in an artistic and expressive way. By contrast, cacography, less employed, is formed by *kakós*, "bad" and *graphein*. Cacography is normally associated with spelling mistakes, rather than with the letter's appearance. Hence, strictly speaking, there is no antonym for calligraphy. Here, we employ the term cacography to designate that antonym, even though acalligraphy would be more accurate, since the prefix *a-* signifies negation. The prefix *caco-*, has to do with an unpleasant characteristic, as in cacophony for example, a combination of unpleasant sounds. One is reminded that in one of the earliest scholarly writings about graffiti, Jean Baudrillard (1976) used the expression of "visual cacophony" precisely to refer to tags.

Tagging, the unpopular expression of urban art

Before considering whether tagging is calligraphic or cacographic, let's start with a piece of evidence: the tag tends to be the most unpopular expression in urban art. Tagging is usually despised by two different communities: uninitiated people (passers-by) – to whom tags appear as a childish practice, scribble, chaos, buzz, signalling a weakening of social control – and insiders. Indeed, to some

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artists and writers, tagging represents the graffiti's early sketch, the first step before starting serious production. It is not uncommon to have tagging regarded as a by-product of graffiti, interpreted as a worthless scrawl or a filthy mess, comparing to the accomplished pieces (Saavedra 2017: 6).

The alleged inferiority of the tag is usually explained with reference to issues of technical skills, as well as of size. According to the graffiti's own rules, tagging can be unproblematically covered by a throw-up or a piece, while the reverse is not granted. Despite that, precisely their lack of popularity may give tags a greater formal freedom, escaping the stylistic categorization of much graffiti.

*The tag is one of the few public expressions of handwriting
in cities now marked above all by typography*

Which handwriting for the tag?

It is impossible here to go into the details of the different types of forms used by the writers. Every signature is the result of a particular national and local culture. Nonetheless, a

few general characteristics can be outlined. At school, we learn to write in block letters and italics (*corsivo*), but not calligraphy. Italic (*corsivo*, from the Latin word *currere*, to run) is the fastest way to write. In the 1960s, graffiti pioneers such as Taki 183 could only use the scriptural codes they knew: block letters and cursive writing. Their primary purpose was bombing the urban space, following a quantitative strategy. As noticed by Martha Cooper (2008: 8) earlier tags "looked naive and unpolished compared to the slick tags of today". Style wars began once the urban space was saturated with signatures. Calligraphic research was a strategy to shine again, adding quality to quantity. In *Getting up*, Craig Castleman (1982: 55) already observed: "In order to make their names more noticeable, many writers began to embellish them". Despite stylistic evolution, cursive writing and block letters are still quite widespread. In Madrid, for instance, Menda has taken up Muelle and *Flecheros'* style in cursive writing, with arrows and trademark symbols.

Since the invention of mobile-characters printing by Gutenberg, around 1450 (freely inspired by earlier Chinese techniques), calligraphy has become increasingly less appealing. In a world where typography dominates the scriptural panorama, could the tag be a way to reconnect with calligraphy? We know that each writer draws inspiration from one or more other writers who function as graphic referents — consider for instance, Blade in the US, Muelle or Juanmanuel in Madrid, etc. With these "calligraphy masters", the young writers start their learning process, like Flea I, "Lee's graffiti teacher" (Castelman 1982: 19), or Ersi with Ars in Madrid, a more experienced classmate who guided him in the formal development of his signature. The tag can be a real challenge that requires the help of an initiated person — a professor of calligraphy who would draw the first lines to set an initial example. Extensive practice based on repetition is then required. Any medium will do: a paper towel, a fogged shower enclosure, a sketchbook, a black book, etc. To achieve the best forms, one has to practice one's signature introducing variations, including a range of icons (such as stars, halos, arrows, etc.), until the desired result materialises. If traditional calligraphy needs a horizontal substrate — such as a piece of parchment, or paper — it is not uncommon to see tags inserted into a rectangle, or square. The graffiti writer unconsciously returns to the page format, in order to put emphasis on the signature, in the vastness of the city. Sometimes this calligraphic work is so sophisticated that the signature may become unreadable — at that point precisely, for some it becomes an undecipherable scribbling, a cacography.

The term cacography may difficult to interpret: there are no cacography workshops, and no studies about the topic. Ugliness has never been really attractive. The metaphor of dirt is often used in the media and in political discourse. Graffiti are measured in terms of millions of euros spent on removal.

Sometimes, we find explicit mentions of its ugliness. Significantly, *El Mundo* titled an article “Grafiti con ‘f’ de feo” (*feo* means *ugly*) (Robles 2013). Calligraphy is produced in an artist’s studio, tags in the streets. Constraining factors – such as available time, weather conditions, lighting, etc. – are clearly different. Also, tags are mostly vertical, rather than horizontal, put on rough rather than smooth surfaces, which can lead to drips and inaccuracies. Spray painting and markers clearly differ from pen and ink. In short, tagging involves a series of constraints which lead to the impossibility of formal perfection. In addition, tagging it can be intentionally anti-aesthetic, deliberately cast against “good taste” (examples from Madrid include Sosa, Itzo, Pateo and Geray).

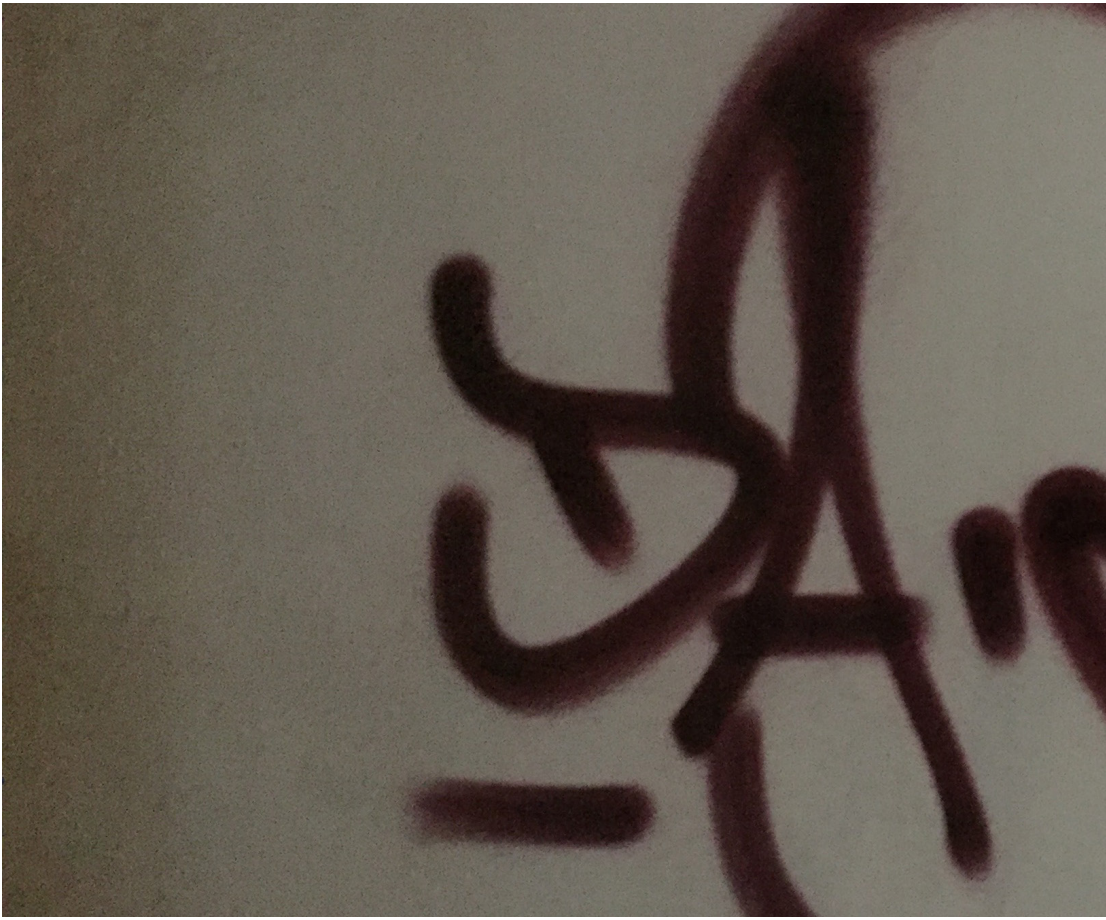
What would, for instance, an elaborate tag and the frantically circles scribbled by Cy Twombly in *Bacchus* (2005) have in common? Both are dripping handwriting, so more a cacography than a calligraphy. Yet, as we know, Twombly is sold at 15m dollars, while tags are not considered worthy the cost of their erasure. Depending on the place, either placed in the streets, or an institution such as a museum, the same scribbling can be described as beautiful, or ugly. Cacography becomes beautiful, and expensive, when it is under control, contained in a frame. The spatial context clearly influences our aesthetic judgments when it comes to deciding between calligraphy and cacography: in that moment, a range of additional subjective factors, including emotions, intoxications, artistic philosophies, and so on, similarly come into play.

Conclusion

The tag is one of the few public expressions of handwriting in cities now marked above all by typography (signage, advertising, etc.). While typography seeks to be legible and functional, tagging represents but the expression of a name. Therefore, it can be twice disturbing: first, it disrupts the neutrality of public space, second, it is not functional. Because of this, tags have been compared to hieroglyphs, scribbles or drawings. Incidentally, this reminds us of the visual nature of the writing: well before symbolic communication, writing means laying down a set of lines. As remarked by François Chastenet (2016), name writing may communicate “nothing but gestural dexterity”. Tagging thus it brings us face to face with the materiality of writing, with the writer’s gesture. Tagging pays a tribute to handwriting, giving back its pictorial thickness.

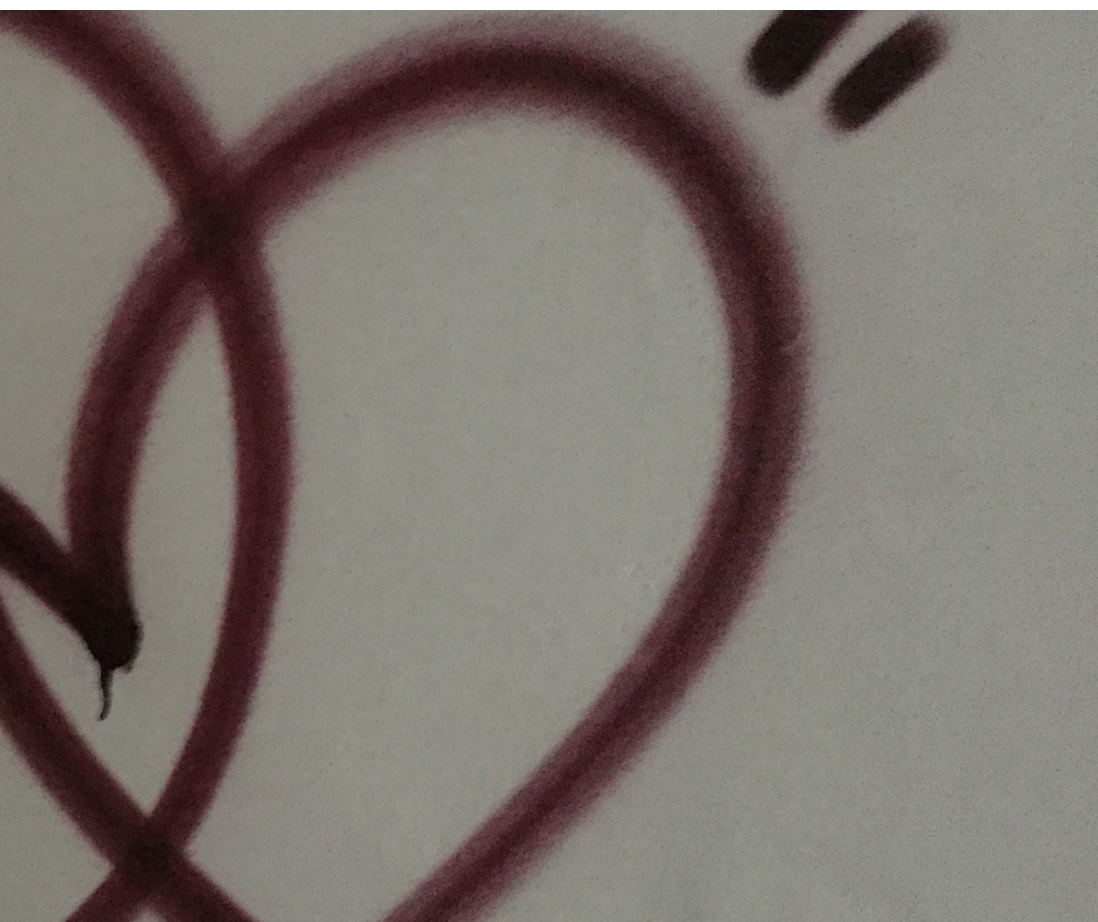
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“Il Wild Style si pone davvero vicino all’essenza stessa del writing. Esso è lo stile che tratta del sublime: nasce libero dai processi dogmatici (come le funzioni sulla forma e le funzioni sulla composizione di forme, che abbiamo considerato sopra), vive evadendo da se stesso, ma agisce nella conoscenza piena del game. Nel Wild Style, la disciplina viene portata avanti attraverso la piena comprensione del writing come stile d’essere che si attua matericamente nel pezzo. La piena padronanza della disciplina consente ora al writer di inoltrarsi in territori che apparentemente non gli appartengono, quali la scultura, l’installazione, il design, la moda, ecc. Nessun writer che abbia raggiunto questo metalivello di pratica abbandona però l’unico vero soggetto del writing, che è la scrittura. Il proprio segno scrivente si esprime nella disciplina e conduce a una conoscenza della natura umana che utilizza come strumento ogni tipo di linguaggio della strada, riportandolo alla pratica e all’esperienza di sé.”

DADO, [Teoria del Writing](#)



Dado is an Italian graffiti artist since 1985. He has collaborated with artists as Phase2, Sharp, Loomit, Lokiss, Quatre, Cuoghi-Corsello, Peeta, Joys and Etnik. He is a member of EAD crew of Padova and of FX crew of New York. Dado has taken part in endless writing and street art meetings in the world. His work has been featured in galleries, museums and public spaces in Italy and abroad, including the Tour 13 in Paris, the Biennale of Venice, the Art Biennale Nanjing (China), at the PAC in Milan, La Scala Mercalli Villa dei Quintili in Rome.

<http://www.imdado.com>



Province poetry

Praise of the rural tag

Julian Windisch

"I was here" is probably the oldest and most popular written tradition to tell the world, "Hello, I exist." To leave one's name, one's pseudonym anywhere, is a manifestation of one's own ego in public space that is as idiosyncratic as it is self-evident. "I was here" means nothing more, nothing less than "Scribo ergo sum". The fact that the clandestine yet public manifestation of the (alter) ego mostly takes place in urban space has to do with the historical, cultural and social dynamics of cities. And so tagging in the sense of name writing is generally perceived as a genuinely urban phenomenon: If we think of tags, images of an urban environment are inevitably conjured up before our mind's eye. Tag and city form an inseparable unity. But in this constellation of two, the tag has made itself very comfortable in the role of the insurgent: an insurgent who consciously defines himself as a rebellious antipode to social conventions.

Honestly, who still cares about the tag? Hasn't it long since become the victim of a society that has learned to accept it? A society that has appropriated the tag's originally radical subversive power, its anti-bourgeois attitude against itself?

After all, the codes and clichés of graffiti culture have long since been discovered by the media and the marketing to enhance their own "authenticity". In this context, a formula is often used to condense phenomena from the field of graffiti culture into a catchword: "urban culture". The term is not only about a geographical-local assignment. Rather, "urban culture" is used as a cipher for any cultural impulse beyond popular culture – which has sometimes become a self-perpetuating concept. The goal: to categorize the cool, i.e. to commodify it. With the result that subculture is "mainstreamized", i.e., mediocrated.

Admittedly, "rural culture" probably doesn't sound so likeable and clickable. And yet, especially in recent times, rural life has increasingly become a place of all kinds of positive social projection: as a place of retreat for stressed city dwellers and as a phantasm for creative refreshment. Rural life promises rural idyll, community and the prospect of alternative lifestyle in harmony with nature – the perfect counter-model to the city, which suffers from its own 24/7 hubris. Until then, a myriad of sociological, planning, urban-theoretical and literary studies had been devoted to urban life in all its facets, but in recent times also literary studies expressed curiosity about the "village stories"¹. However, in the context of tagging culture, the countryside is still largely neglected.

But it is worth taking a closer look at the province despite the undisputed predominance of the "urban": In the tradition of Henri Lefebvre's (1901–1991) radical geography we leave the urban playground heading towards the countryside, to explore the subversive potential of province poetry.

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¹ Twellmann, Marcus: *Dorfgeschichten. Wie die Welt zur Literatur kommt*, 2019.

Famous for his sociology of urbanism and space², in the sixties the French philosopher criticizes a “society that results from a process of complete urbanization of society”. Lefebvre, who had always perceived himself as a rebel from the provincial South of France where he was born, forecasts a “subordination of the rural to the urban”, a role model and mainstream culture creating cultural norms, imposing them on periphery.

In the light of his famous urbanist maxim “Reclaim your city”, Lefebvre’s praise of the periphery lacks attention. But in his counter-model to the over-evaluation of the urban, he argues that the urban

centre is static, not dynamic in terms of cultural achievements – due to its own imposed and reproduced norms. In contrast to that, due to Lefebvre, the periphery develops constantly new ideas and texts, breaking with the rules and normative codes in aesthetic way, and thus is creative.

These tags are non-urban, they seem to be non-visible, and they are in big contrast to their environment: a tag in the countryside is a foreign visual object in rural area, it represents a big difference to village beauty, its boredom, its atmosphere, and the petit bourgeois’ dream of the lovely countryside life

Translated into tagging culture: Can

the periphery thus be seen as a space of creativity and subversion? If yes: Against whom are these countryside’s tags subversive? Do they break with the codes of a pretended “normative”, uniform visual expression and tag culture in our cities where the styles don’t seem to differ one from another? What do these rural tags want and what do they stand for?

When we look at what the tag in the countryside is like – in this case in the referenced region in Southern Germany – we see that the walls are speaking.

The examples examined ([Fig. 1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)) show tags on bridges, boxes, road sign and train stations in remote village areas in Southern Germany between Karlsruhe and Offenburg. At first glance they look all alike. They maybe make laugh, because they look ugly and their displayed ghetto attitude does not match with the lovely middle-class environment of mid-European average villages. But there’s something poetic about it. At least we can find different categories in terms of style, meaning and spatial relation. In aesthetic way, the tags are mostly rough, showing a “low” quality. They are rather brut, undistinguished, and rude. In semantic terms, there is astonishingly almost no classic personal name writing, but a lot of anger: dominant topics are ACAB, 187, Fuck the law, Don’t obey – just to cite the “political” messages –, and several SmokeWeed tags. So, the messages seem rebellious in Lefebvre’s terms, but not rebellious against assumed normative “urban codes”. They rather seem to reproduce the city’s tag messages and codes, bringing it to the countryside. But, considering the geographical aspect, one could ask: Making mark on society in the rural area where normally people – properly speaking: other writers – don’t see it: what sense does it make?

This takes us to the spatial and social aspect: These tags are non-urban, they seem to be non-visible, and they are in big contrast to their environment: a tag in the countryside is a foreign visual object in rural area, it represents a big difference to village beauty, its boredom, its atmosphere, and the petit bourgeois’ dream of the lovely countryside life. Although they are mostly ugly tags, slogans, scribbles or bad name writings, they nevertheless catch one’s attention immediately, because they just don’t seem to fit into our imagination of the proper countryside. In consequence, these rural tags in a way are even more rebellious than city tags are. Why? Because the contrast between a shabby tag and a petit bourgeois’ environment is much bigger than between a city’s tag and its environment. The conventional beauty of the countryside meets the unconventional beauty of these trash tags. And that’s the peculiar and sociologically interesting point: There is in a way even more visibility, or more

2 Lefebvre, Henri: *The Right to the City*, 1968 ; *The Production of Space*, 1974.

accurately said: evidence, due to this strong contrast. Whether these tags are expression of rebellion against boredom, countryside idyll or “the system”: Here they are eye catching, thus even more evident, and above all they seem to testify to more civil disobedience. Whereas in the city, tags – no matter if slogans or name writing – are part of the standard furniture of the city’s public space. They belong to the urban pop cultural inventory ever since so that they lost their rebellious character.

So periphery poetry on the one hand seems to be an “urbanized” momentum in terms of codes. But on the other hand, these tags are screaming: “Look, we are here, we do exist. And we are reclaiming our space” – just as city graffiti writers do with reference to Lefebvre’s famous quote “reclaim your city!”

The city, whose manifold signs together form a cacographic metropolitan lyric, is often sung about in a metropolitan lyric.³ The rural flexer – arm in arm with the village flaneur – opposes this with his country lyrics: the song of the tag as a sign of the no man’s lands where nothing remains but the rural tag, where the tag is king alone in the wide corridor, because here it has no natural enemies, where no tag fights against another text, where tags become signatures themselves for the places, for the beauty of the places, and where they offer a unique access to the landscape. Not aesthetics and style, but the combination of tag, spot and environment counts: it’s the context, the quality of the whole ensemble, not the tag itself, that makes the usual become extraordinary. That’s why on closer scrutiny, all in all, a tag, lost in no man’s land, copying urban styles, being ugly: In this mixture of style and spatial aspects, rural tags have a poetic grace.

In times of an over-aestheticizing of (social) media, the dispositive of a clean, lacquered sterility determines life, in which beauty is obviously everywhere: in form of capitalist consumer culture which produces an “aesthetic of smoothness”⁴ and which also marks the public perception of the beautiful “urban culture” as a decorative mural art. As the rural tags don’t fit in the mainstream “urban” graffiti style pattern, they are so far from being commodified – by the art market, the scene, the economy, the media –, that they are nothing but “real” and maybe even more authentic than urban tags are?

Although rural tags are mostly copying urban codes, urban tagging culture itself seems influenced by province tags. At least, there is a correlation of periphery poetry and urban written expression on walls. Two analogies seem to be evident, firstly in spatial terms: city tags in back yards, off spaces, industrial “non-lieux” in cities – which also reflect the aspect of “non-visibility” of the province tags. And secondly in stylistic terms: the naive style writing which is applied by many writers. It seems quite interesting that the so called “toy tags” that you would find in rural spaces attract attention and re-appear as a global contemporary tag genre. Whether you call it “trash graff”, “garbage graffiti”, or “ignorant handstyle”: graffiti name writers tend to apply the rough style, the negation of “beautiful” style letter writing, against all beauty clichés: a praise of imperfection – in form of dots that began to dance.

In this respect, rural tags unintentionally become a symbol of a counter-model to the “unification of the world”⁵, the process of cultural standardization, which stands in stark contrast to the simultaneously increased need for uniqueness, distinction and “compulsion of authenticity”. Rural tags offer an undisguised form of demarcation, a friction surface, a fundamental antithesis to the equality of visual inventory and uniformity. In a way, they are thus unintentionally (?) the real vanguard of urban trash tags, which in turn, however, are very concerned with the obvious non-fulfillment of categories of beauty – and are incumbent upon the same compulsion of authenticity, or are a variant of this over-aesthetisation?

3 Novy, Dumar: *What Do One Million Ja Tags Signify*, 2015.

4 Byung-Chul Han: *Die Errettung des Schönen*, 2015.

5 Bauer, Thomas: *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt. Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt*, 2018.

Without continuing the history of innocence of the country: the naive trash tag of the country is an unusual and unwanted provocation, not just a tired laughed at toy tag. Rural tag as subcultural written expression in public peripheral space might thus be seen as the rebellious authentic counterpart to the city tag.



Atlanta Style

Mapping the Local in the Digital Age

**Charles Nolan
Vanlinden**

Tagging styles originate from individual graffiti writers, crews, scenes, or cities and develop through a variety of tools, techniques, and forms. These methods and styles pass between practitioners who study their mediums as well as one another's work. Its ephemeral nature has meant that books and films, which record, disperse, and mediate graffiti have also been vital for accessing its history. Today, documenting and sharing the subculture with communities worldwide is possible through social media platforms like Instagram. These social networks of user-created content provide a place for the curation of virtual archives and allow for the demonstration of processes on the screens of personal devices. If these technologies are shaping how users consume graffiti and its DIY practices, what effects are they having on aesthetics?¹ While the emergence of graffiti online has furthered its spread and development, could the internet also be nullifying its site-specific aspects, thereby erasing native approaches to tagging? To explore where local aesthetics exist in the global digital age, this paper will trace the notion of an original style in the history of Atlanta, Georgia's graffiti.

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Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon's book, *The History of American Graffiti*, records an overview of Atlanta's graffiti history. In the book, the authors write that the city and its surrounding area was an entirely blank canvas when the first transplants arrived from the Northeast in the early 1980s.² Inspired by the influx of hip-hop culture, the original local writers began writing names, starting crews, and forming the first generation of the Atlanta graffiti scene in the neighborhoods of southwest Atlanta.³ Known locally as the SWATs, an acronym for South West Atlanta Too Strong, these locations are central sites for Atlanta's history because landmarks remain from the most prolific practitioners.

A native of the SWATs, the writer LEON emerged from the second generation of the city's graffiti scene in the mid-1980s. Over the next 15 years, they took their name all-city and frequently painted in their neighborhood. For over two decades, LEON landmarks such as this (Fig. 1) have managed to avoid being buffed, burned, or destroyed by the elements. This tag represents a local approach to writing that LEON (a.k.a. LEON 2000), who is also known as Sir (or Ser) LEON, adopted from the first generation writer Sir SMITH who opted for this honorific as opposed to the title of King, which was already an established tradition in New York. While the hometown of hip-hop graffiti certainly contributed to the Atlanta scene and LEON's style, influence also came from connections to taggers who hailed from the opposite side of the country.

The Los Angeles, California writer CHASE was a primary influence on LEON's style and Atlanta's graf-

1 MacDowall, L. J. & de Souza, P. (2018). 'I'd Double Tap That!!!': street art, graffiti, and Instagram research. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717703793>

2 Gastman, R. & Neelon, C. (2010). *History of American Graffiti*, Harper Design, 300–1.

3 Sunshine, P. (2012) "RAZ69, AKA Yoda" *Frank* 18, 125. <https://issuu.com/frank151/docs/frank18>

fiti. In the mid-1980s, the West Coast writer arrived in the city and brought with them the LA writing subculture, which by that time had already come into contact with the New York tradition, but had roots in a unique tagging tradition that dates to the 1940s and 50s when Mexican-American gangs painted their *placas* on the walls of their neighborhoods.⁴ Characterized by black, vertically stacked, block style lettering in a roll-call format, the style emphasizes territorial boundaries and group affiliations. These features appear in this (dissed) LEON tag (Fig. 2) and correspond with their induction into the UCA crew by CHASE in 1987. Over the next few years, other writers from the Atlanta scene

Although it lacks an online presence, LEON's graffiti has had a significant effect on past and present generations of local writers who consider it to be the epitome of the Atlanta style

became a part of the crew such as Brooklyn native SB1 who brought an archive of photos to the city that included images of bombed subways and freight trains.

Many of their photos appear in the 2010 book *Steel Wheels: 1986-1997*, which documents graffiti's transition

from subways to freight trains.⁵ The subculture's shift from localized contexts to a national scale began in what the author terms as first-generation cities such as Philadelphia and New York during the mid to late 1980s. By the beginning of the following decade, they write that this practice started in second-generation cities like Atlanta, where the first all-nation crew was established. Begun in 1992, Network, signified by the letter N within a circle, adopted Atlanta writers and others from different US cities into the crew. Their cross-country connections were maintained by the trains' movements across the continent as well as through the trading of photos between practitioners. Although, their exchange of material culture would begin to be outmoded within only two years as images of graffiti were uploaded to the internet. The website Art Crimes started in 1994 by a Georgia Tech graduate student, Susan Farrell, initiated graffiti's presence on the web. Eventually hosting images from locations worldwide, the online archive began its collection with photos from the Atlanta scene in the mid-1990s; however, the website provides an incomplete picture of the city's past because it does not include a single image from the first generation of Atlanta graffiti and features only one picture of LEON's work.

Although it lacks an online presence, LEON's graffiti has had a significant effect on past and present generations of local writers who consider it to be the epitome of the Atlanta style. "When you talk about true and original Atlanta style, you have to say LEON," says the writer SAVE.⁶ Still an active practitioner, SAVE began tagging during the third generation of the Atlanta scene, and was influenced by and later wrote alongside LEON. Their names frequently appeared throughout the city and remnants of their landmarks remain; however, as these spots are buffed, dissed, and repainted, their names will become the collateral damage of graffiti's inevitable ephemerality. As it disappears from the walls, the local scene, to preserve its history in the global subculture, which is becoming increasingly reliant on digital technologies, will have to reconcile the problem of passing on its native styles to the next generation before they come to an end.

In his article, "The End of Graffiti" the Australian researcher Dr. Lachlan Macdowall identifies three real or imagined endings for graffiti that include: the end of the industrial city, the overreach of control societies, and the supplanting of graffiti by street art.⁷ As cities are gentrifying, being monitored by

4 See: Phillips, S. (1999) *Wallbanging: Graffiti and Gangs in LA*, University of Chicago Press.

5 Onely, C. (2010) *Steel Wheels: 1986-1997*. Steel Wheels Press.

6 Gastman & Neelon. *History of American Graffiti*, 300.

7 MacDowall, L.J. (2013) "The End of Graffiti" in *INOPINATUM. The unexpected impertinence of urban creativity*, Arti Grafiche Boccia S.p.A, 122.

panoptic surveillance, and street art is emerging as an alternative to graffiti's visual and conceptual conservatism, tagging's aesthetics are reflecting these ends; and, upon recognizing them, Macdowall writes, "the aesthetic conditions of exhaustion, decadence, and nostalgia," become evident.⁸ Defying graffiti's end, writers exhaust letterforms by replicating them on a massive scale and ornament them to a decadent dead-end. This exhaustive decadence aims to create a visual impact, an aspect of tagging that has remained constant, carrying over from some of the subculture's earliest moments. The aesthetics of nostalgia, in which Macdowall identifies a critical mode, revisit the New York subway masterpieces as well as the innocence and experimental approaches of the early 1970s. During this moment, diverse styles were developing within localized contexts; and, as names went all-city, their aesthetics became codified before spawning a global practice that is currently threatened by conformity and extinction.

Although not necessarily an end for graffiti, considering the possibility that local styles could disappear from the subculture's visual repertoire may highlight how graffiti's aesthetics are understood to be changing in the digital age. If the ever-expanding online archives of social media are controlling how practitioners consume graffiti, then will styles and aesthetics that are not shared or liked survive the instant accessibility of online networks? Allowing images to be accessed across space and time, the web is integral to the visibility of styles and enables them to spread. For example, Wicked's, widely-recognized handstyles characterized by difficult to decipher letterforms that originated during the mid-1970s in Philadelphia, appear in their native location, other places, and online, which suggests that styles can retain their site-specificity but also be mobile.⁹ Moving between local, national, and global contexts, writers spread aesthetics in the physical world and on the internet. Virtual space's capability to disseminate visuals contrasts with the archive's incompleteness, which does not account for the multiplicity of existing tagging styles that are not shared. Only a fraction of graffiti's aesthetics are recorded for future generations; thus, creating distinct characteristics and maneuvering conformity could be a concern of overexposure to a codified tradition online.

Before concluding, this paper will attempt to define what is an original Atlanta style. Mapping a history of the city's graffiti has led from tracing its beginnings to considering its end. Doing so raises the question of whether an original style ever existed if the city's scene was initiated by writers from elsewhere; furthermore, setting this issue of origin aside, is an Atlanta style lost to present-day practitioners who may have virtually no exposure to the first generation of the city's writers? Moving beyond these questions, most locals agree that the native writers from the second and third generations of the scene, LEON and SAVE, define the Atlanta style, but drastic differences exist between their tags. In these examples (Figs. 3 & 4), there are distinctions in orientation as well as the spacing, proportion, ornamentation, and flow of their letterforms. Whereas LEON's name is written horizontally, with each letter separate and equal in size, SAVE's tag is oriented more vertically, almost on a diagonal line in a script style font. The letters connect, flowing into one another, and their movement is directed by an arrow that ornaments the tag. Further emphasizing SAVE's name are the quotations on either side, both them and the arrow being relatively conventional additions to a tag. LEON's, on the other hand, employs stylizations that refer to the city's graffiti history. The use of the local honorific "Sir" or "Ser" situates the tag in its context; moreover, the "2001" beneath the name is possibly a date or a rendition of the number 2000 that they regularly added to their tag. The answer to this mystery is as elusive as what defines an original Atlanta style, especially considering the local scene developed over decades of outside influence mixing with native approaches to the practice that is now mediated through digital networks, which gives a new dimension to the phrase "locals only."

8 *Ibid.*, 128.

9 Youthward, B. Art Crimes: Philly Wicked's. <http://sunsite.icm.edu.pl/graffiti/faq/wicked.html>. Accessed September 2019.



Tagging a WWII detention centre in Athens

Drawing biographies on/of the walls

Konstantinos Avramidis

Tagging Beyond

The Nazi troops enter Athens on April 27, 1941.¹ A few days later they commandeer several governmental and institutional edifices in the city centre. Among them is the imposing National Insurance Company headquarters building at 4 Korai Street, the air-raid shelter of which is turned into a Detention Centre. The Centre develops in two levels, six meters below the ground. It has four rooms on the upper level and three on the lower, the walls of which are covered with numerous well preserved graffiti written by the inmates: poems and songs, beloved and heroic figures, familiar landscapes and everyday life scenes, and, prevalently, dated signatures and names.

This short paper offers a design – and, therefore, incomplete and subjective – reading of this surprisingly underexplored space (cf. Minos, 1991). It is framed by and positioned in relation to other studies of extensively written war spaces (Backer, 2002) and prison graffiti (Wilson, 2016). The paper critically re-examines a series of architectural drawings of the Centre's dark-grey surfaces which were produced as part of my by-design doctoral thesis (Avramidis, 2018). The goal is to reconceptualise the meaning and function of the writings and the walls that host them (see also Brightenti & Kärrholm, 2019) whilst offering a design methodology to study tagging beyond the New York style expression of this repetitive mark making practice (see also Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Ross, 2016). The paper focuses on both the *content* and *form* of the drawings of the writings, and reflects on the methods followed for their production. It begins with the form of the drawings which raises the idea of the panorama and then moves to the content of the writings that is linked to the movement in space and the passing of time. The concept of presence – and, by extension, absence – is a central subject in the paper given its indissoluble link with tagging and writing more generally (cf. Avramidis, 2014, 2015).

Rooms with Panoramic View

In order to document all the inscriptions of the Detention Centre, I photographically 'scanned' each room separately, as a singular continuous surface (See [Fig.1, middle strip](#)). When I started drawing the walls, I initially used conventional architectural sections. It quickly became obvious, however, that the sections could neither show all the walls nor communicate the sense of confinement in each space. These restrictions lead me draw each room separately and represent it as an 'interior panorama.' The drawings make one wonder whether the writings aimed to transform the interior surfaces of

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each room into panoramic decorative wallpapers. Of course, wallpaper panoramas are made of vivid colours and depict natural landscapes in a very realistic manner to give an illusion of the outer world. I feel that the inscriptions of the detention centre are, somehow, serving a similar purpose: they attempt to bring the outside world inside and cancel the very nature of walls.

Visual studies scholar Giuliana Bruno, in her book *Atlas of Emotion*, discusses how wallpapers in late-18th century Europe transformed the experience of interior spaces. For Bruno, panoramic wallpapers “reframed the inside as an outside” and, in a sense, they made the exterior interior (2002: 166). At the same time, these visually inviting panoramas break the limits of the walls transforming them into “windows and screens” (2002: 169). Inhabitants not only can view and experience the outside from the comfort of the inside, but are also able to project their desires on this interior universe while having the feeling they ‘own’ the exterior. As Bruno argues, this leads to the collapse of the enclosure of the interior, as the resident could be both physically inside and also mentally outside.

Bernard Comment, in his detailed study that examines the history and development of panorama structures (1999), argues that since its invention the panorama has been associated to entertainment through the illusion of escape it provided. Even though it seemingly sought to be an accurate painterly representation of reality, in fact idealised reality. The image of the outside is reinvented and reconstructed to serve the needs of the inside. Is this not what the Centre’s inscriptions try to achieve? Create a more attractive version of the outside world and bring it in? Or even, permit detainees to travel outside without leaving the dungeon? That’s the reason why inmates draw, despite their graphic abstraction, natural landscapes and idealised representations of the everyday life in Athens.

The themes of most writings are not war-related. Yet, some figurative ones depict images of the dramatic everyday life in occupied Athens: a house on fire, battleships and frigates, tanks and fight aircrafts. Prisoners also draw on the walls domestic animals (e.g., rabbit, chicken, dogs, etc.) which are extinct in occupied Athens as they are killed to be eaten by the starving population. Others carve the bright side of the world on the surfaces: blossoming flowers, portraits of their beloved ones, the places they used to live or always wanted to visit. Some others feel that the situation overwhelms them and turn to God; they pray while asking for help and forgiveness. In the Detention Centre, human needs are magnified. Inmates miss intimate erotic life, and draw nude silhouettes to keep them company. Some other prisoners, however, ‘censor’ and deface these images when they find them insulting — these often depict nude women or phalluses.

As Comment asserts, the panorama abolishes the traditional painterly frame in favour of a comprehensive, uninterrupted area of representation which aimed to “transport the spectators to different places which they took to be reality” (1999: 102). Of course, the ‘panoramas’ of Detention Centre are not giving the illusion of the whole; they are more like collages of carefully and idiosyncratically chosen parts of the outside. The inscriptions transform the walls of each room into a spontaneous series of images: a fragmented, yet no less comprehensive, representation of occupied Athens. While the shut doors and windows create an inescapable enclosure, the intimate scribed images create a new visual landscape which provides the much needed anchors for mental escapes.

Prisoners use everyday imagery of the outside world and bring it onto the walls to appropriate these spaces. This is perhaps the most basic way to resist to captivity. In so doing, the different surfaces of each room become a continuous, self-sufficient one. Yet, this does not mean that each room is isolated; quite the contrary. These ‘panoramas’ connect the interior surfaces with a series of other surfaces out there: the exterior Athenian walls, the walls of other detention centres and so on, thus suggesting a complex network.

The inscriptions transform the spaces of confinement to rooms with an idealised, invented panoramic view of occupied Athens.

Biographies on/of the Walls

When I started examining the content of the inscriptions on the walls of the Detention Centre, I felt that I had to transform my photographic images into texts. To do so, I digitally typed the word over each inscription I could identify and decipher. I used the same font because I treated all individual writings as a collective one, but I changed the size and boldness of each word or letter in an attempt to register the dynamism of the inscriptions. Also, each word was rotated in order to grasp the trajectory of the physical inscription.

This process resulted into seven oblong (one per room), landscape format, sheets with digitally 'searchable' texts that look like concrete poems (See [Fig. 1, bottom strip](#)). In all the sheets I made a search for each individual surname and the 'texts'

These tagged names acquire a different meaning in the context of incarceration, let alone when captivity takes place in a war situation, in a condition of occupation and, thus, of defeat

started revealing association primarily within each room and, sometimes, across the spaces of the Centre: a hidden choreography of movements. In a sense, these recurring texts suggest, or rather register, peripatetic experiences in each room, which also have constant reference to the city outside. When one connects the 'dots', drawing lines between the places where the same person has left one's marks, a sort of celestial atlas reveals itself (See [Fig. 1, top strip](#)). It is as if the movements in place present the passing of time in the cell. Space and time collapse into each other: what we are left with is an unrepeatable, imagined trace. In this condition of confinement, the rooms become micro-cosmoses and the traces allow us to read the movement of time by visually reconstructing the movements in space.

On top of the photographic study, I have chosen to trace over the inscriptions while doing the same for other signs and architectural elements as well. These drawings registered the material traces of past presences and revealed the blatant absence of writings in Rooms I and II, which were not used as detention spaces, but as Nazis offices. This emphatically demonstrates that the occupiers ensured that no traces of their presence would be left behind. This is in stark contrast to the ones from the other Rooms where the traces of the inmates' existence are overwhelming. The urgency of absence of graffiti in this underground world of graffiti is more significant than the graffiti themselves.

Regardless of their content and theme, all writings are characterised by brevity. Images and graphisms, scribbled letters and misspelled words, personal names and dates, or rather, all kinds of personal stories, were inscribed on the walls. Poems, names of betrayers, wishes and requests, all co-exist on the same surface. Some prisoners aggressively offend the Occupiers and the centre's guards (e.g., "Damn those who made me be on the streets, and forced me to suffer the German laws"), some express despair about detention conditions and ask for help, while others who feel forgotten express their loneliness (e.g., "There are no friends any more, and everyone forgets you – G. Karousos").

By way of travelogues, many writings inform the viewer where do their authors came from, and how they ended up in these basements: the district – often, an Eastern one where the National Resistance Movement was very active – or the street where one got caught, and sometimes, even exact home addresses are inscribed on the Centre's surfaces (e.g., "Anastasopoulos Kostantinos, Caught 26-4-44, at Skaramaka District, at Sapotas St.") weaving a network of places, times and personal stories with constant reference to the outside world.

Prisoners invent stories with vivid colours and smells in an attempt to mentally escape from the harsh conditions of incarceration (e.g., "D. Moraitis, 24 hours without food and water. Just smelling jasmine"). In Room V – where most of the inscriptions written in foreign languages appear – inmates

take advantage of their time in dungeons to learn the Greek alphabet and/or train how to spell their names in Greek, thus breaking their daily routines. In the same room, others inscribe music scores and notes. In the absence of music instruments, the music can be performed only mentally.

The writings evince that all sort of people are held in the Centre – people of different age, social status, political orientation, nationality and gender. For example, it is shocking to read the inscriptions of prisoners who are juveniles, or even kids (e.g., “Tripodis Kosmas, 14 years old”). Also, some names of famous Athenians stand out. For instance, two small pencil writings that appear on two different walls in Room VI read “Petros Poulidis, War Photojournalist, 14-7-1944.” The inscriptions mirror the literate level of the times, which seems to be relatively low – except for some rare occasions of educated people with particular societal status (e.g., “Mavrikios N. Malevris, Medicine Graduate”).

The most prevalent group of writings consists of tags. In these inscriptions, we witness the primary instinct to mark presence and the primitive urge to create. In all these instances the aim is the same: stating one’s presence and marking temporality; let others know that ‘I was here’ while also measuring time in captivity. These signatures are often accompanied by other personal information (e.g., dates or places of birth, home addresses, etc.) and, even more often, followed by the dates, and even exact times, when the person enters and leaves the prison basements. These tagged names acquire a different meaning in the context of incarceration, let alone when captivity takes place in a war situation, in a condition of occupation and, thus, of defeat. By recognising specific daily routines, the detainees use walls to count their days in prison so as not to lose the sense of time. Carving the days and crossing them is key here: it is a daily marking, a marking of temporality. This repetitive, albeit always historically unique, gesture is the rawest way to categorise and document daily experience. In these basements where the notion of time is erased, the act of inscribing gives a completely new meaning to time.

Beyond Tagging

Beyond their own state of confinement, the detainees dissent against the very fact that somebody occupies Athens, seizing the Athenians’ architecture to hold them within it and using architecture to restrict them from having a voice. In a detention centre where you are allowed to say nothing else besides what you’ve been taught to say when being interrogated, the margins of manoeuvre are very limited. Since you cannot say anything, what you are left with is solely your (nick)name – the tag becomes a tactile vocality embodied within the structure of the building. So, the matrix of architecture is being abused, and graffiti is bursting out of the scenes of architecture, because it has to. By writing on walls, the inmates not only mark their presence but also reconfigure their architectonic space.

Ultimately, the walls of the Centre act as both diaries – where biographical notes and personal stories are inscribed – and guest books – where ‘guests’ write when they check in and out, leaving behind a record of their experiences. In contrast to the absolute absence of traces of existence by the occupiers, these writings represent the desperate attempts of inmates to mark their presences; a single line hastily inscribed on the dark surface stands as a sign of a whole human existence – ‘I tag, therefore I am’.



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Exploring tags through videography

Peter Bengtsen

I have spent countless hours hunting for graffiti tags. For a while, my findings were simply by-products of looking for more image-based street art (as opposed to letter-based graffiti), but over time, I developed a fascination with tags in their own right and began deliberately looking for and documenting them. Letter-based tags are surely one of the most vilified forms of unsanctioned artistic expression. Their varied size, from tiny scratches and ink markings to giant extinguisher tags, means that they can – and will – appear anywhere, much to the frustration of property owners, municipal workers, and anyone who consider these expressions nothing more than visual pollution and/or material destruction. Further, unlike street art that commonly is based on well-known imagery and tropes of popular culture, tags are often made up of enigmatic combinations of letters and numbers, sometimes stylized to the point of illegibility (Bengtsen 2014: 75–78). Whereas street art is relatively easy for a broad audience to digest, tags tend to stick in the throat. A concerted effort is required to begin appreciating tags, both as individual creations and as parts of a complex network of visual expressions. A pertinent question is, then, how we as researchers, who have the luxury of being able to engage with these phenomena for prolonged periods of time, can diversify and expand people's understanding of tags and tagging.

I usually record tags, as well as other iterations of graffiti and street art, through digital still photography. However, I recently started thinking about ways to document and relay to others not just images of individual tags, but also the series of works of which they are part. Further, I have been interested in conveying both my physical search for tags and parts of the mental processes that are taking place alongside the visible bodily activities. For me, a key part of looking for tags is remembering, among other things, the style, medium, size and placement of previous tags. While I am certainly not claiming that it is possible to predict on the basis of such memories when and where further tags will appear, previous findings can serve as points of reference to spot similar tags and likely locations, and can also provide motivation to keep looking on days when findings are scant.

In my attempt to go beyond the mere visual representation of tags as singular expressions, in the spring of 2019, I started experimenting with videography. The first result is a 26-minute video, entitled *Tracing KEGR*, illustrating a search for tags by the Danish graffiti writer Kegr at the outskirts of Malmö, Sweden.¹ The base layer of the video was recorded in one take with a mobile phone camera. While, on its face, this layer seemingly documents the physical search for tags by Kegr, what it really does is reconstruct such a search. Although I had not previously walked the entire documented route in one go, I had walked all the different parts on separate occasions, and attempted to memorise the

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¹ The full video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-16hcui_g (retrieved 15 October 2019).

location of the tags I wanted to focus on. Thus, while the film is meant to look like a documentation of an exploratory walk, this is in fact a fabrication.

I initially wanted to create with the video a visual representation of the search for tags in order to give viewers a better idea, and perhaps appreciation, of the actual process. It is of course to some extent possible to explain the practice of looking for tags through written words. One can indicate the time and patience needed, describe the physical act of walking, the requirements for paying attention to the surrounding environment, the doubt about being on the right track when not finding

For me, a key part of looking for tags is remembering, among other things, the style, medium, size and placement of previous tags

what one is looking for, and the drawing on intuition and previous experiences when attempting to follow the tracks of a tagger. I believe, however, that people may gain a deeper understanding of the process if – in addition to a written account – they experience it through

a visual representation like *Tracing KEGR*. I am fully aware that many will probably find the video rather boring.² Such tediousness is important, however, as the real-time temporal aspect of the video can add to the viewer's understanding of the researcher's experience when (perhaps unsuccessfully) looking for tags. To be clear, the purpose of using videography in the manner described in this article is not primarily to entertain. Rather, video serves as a tool for collecting material and communicating aspects of research findings in ways that words alone cannot.

Using videography to illustrate the researcher's traversal of a certain environment may require some planning, but is relatively straightforward. Attempting to communicate to the viewer aspects of the mental processes that are taking place alongside the immediately visible physical activities requires a bit more work and consideration. My solution, as can be seen in the *Tracing KEGR* video, was to add to the base recording overlays with imagery of previously-found tags by Kegr in Malmö, as well as other collected tags and phrasings I have seen in conjunction with Kegr's tag, either in person, in printed publications or in social media posts. In their base form, these overlays consist of manipulated photos of such tags and phrasings, originally taken in Malmö between 2016 and 2019. The overlays are meant to represent to the viewer my recollection of previously-found tags that occurs while searching for new Kegr tags.

I am still in the process of reflecting on the use of videography as a method for exploring tags and tagging. So far, an unexpected outcome of working on the *Tracing KEGR* video is the realisation that the editing of the overlay images, rather than simply being a necessary technical endeavour, has constituted a way of reassessing the collected material. From a technical standpoint, in order to create the type of overlays I wanted for the video, I needed images of light tags on a dark background. As I went through my photographic material, I realised that quite a few of the tags I remembered as meeting this demand in fact did not. Tags I remembered as being created with white marker, oil stick or spray paint on a dark background were actually dark tags on a light background, or light tags on light background. The process of sifting through my archives of photos with the specific purpose of finding material that would suit this project made me realise to what extent I was misremembering the

² An indication of this is a comment on YouTube, suggesting that the video "[w]ould be better with music" – comment by User30916 on *ibid* (retrieved 15 October 2019). It should be noted that the video uploaded to YouTube and submitted as part of this article is a work in progress. At present, there really is nothing compelling readers to sit through the full length of the recording. Going forward, my plan is to add to the video a commentary track with an expanded discussion related to the video and videography as a method for exploring tags and tagging. Since this discussion will be embedded in the video, anyone wishing to partake of it will need to view (or at least listen to) the entire video.

works I had recorded photographically in the past. This is in part interesting because, as mentioned, I believe that memories of previously-found works play a role when I look for further tags.

To get the effect I wanted, I also needed to completely isolate the tags from their contexts by masking and changing light and contrast in the original photos. While the overlays in the video thus do not accurately represent the tags as they appeared at their original sites, what is seen in the video is a rather accurate representation of the distorted process of recollection that takes place while exploring. Just as I discovered through my work with the images that I had mentally decontextualised and misremembered many of the tags, so they are now decontextualised and recontextualised in the video to reflect this faulty process of recollection.

Uncovering and representing to the wider public the complex nature of tags and tagging is by no means an easy undertaking. However, my work so far leads me to believe that employing videography as a method can help provide new insights among researchers. Further, I propose that publishing research-based videos on tags and tagging as a complement to written accounts can elucidate otherwise hidden aspects of these phenomena that may contribute to diversify the widespread perception of tags solely as vandalism.

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The protestor's weapon The Beirut Tag

Dina Yunis

Introduction

ثَوْرَة (thawra) – Arabic for revolution: a phrase now tagged across nearly every wall of the streets of Beirut's downtown area. Walls once barren, now, after over three weeks of ongoing and relentless protesting by Lebanese (November 2019), are brimming with a medley of tags, pieces, murals, and graffiti scrawls, expressing sentiments of frustration and disdain, as well as visions of hope, love, and acceptance. These walls have become a canvas for a plethora of ideas and possibilities once thought futile and naïve. Protestors have, for the most part, wielded their own voices to raise their concerns whilst many others have opted for the spray can to voice theirs, leading to the emergence of a graffiti scene that truly conveys and chronicles the country's socio-political landscape. Over the years, Lebanese youth has increasingly become engaged in reclaiming ownership over their everyday lives, rights, public spaces, and the city.

It is here where the practice of graffiti becomes an indispensable language during such throes of change. It provides a platform that allows any individual to freely express their sentiments on what has and is currently transpiring which is what is currently being witness and epitomised within the streets of cities across Lebanon, from Beirut to the Northern town of Tripoli. This article focuses on the significance of and the role of the graffiti tag during the ongoing revolutionary demonstrations, looking not just at its present use but also its history and evolution within the streets and the public spaces of Beirut. Not much has been written, at least academically, on graffiti writing in Lebanon. Most written sources can be found in cultural magazines, online media platforms, blogs or coffee-table books. This short piece submits a first critical engagement with graffiti and Beirut's urban landscape by illustrating how the use, intent, and perceptions of 'the tag' has changed over time – since the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) to its current catalytic use.

The Roots

Prior to its current adoption, the graffiti tag carried a rather negative connotation, tainted by years of misuse during and after the Lebanese civil war. Tag made their first appearance at that time, principally used as a demarcation tool by religious-political militias. The civil war spawned a plethora of anonymous tags and scrawls of slogans and stencilled logos of local religious-political militias. These were all meant as means of communication, propaganda, and territorial demarcation. It isn't necessarily unexpected that tags become abundant during epochal moments, since they are the style of graffiti most commonly associated with war and conflict (Saleh, 2009). As said, war-time graffiti on Beirut's walls was prominently used as a means for religious-political militias to mark, demarcate, and expand their territorial boundaries (Maasri, 2009; Riskedahl, 2017). These popular markings were

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usually made by young adult males to remark their own political participation in the public realm (Riskedahl, 2017). In the years following the war, political party slogans and militia emblems could be found all through the city (Zoghbi and Stone Karl, 2013). Taggers asserted their affiliation with various political parties, challenging the territorial control other parties may have had over certain areas (Riskedahl, 2017). Graffiti tags were also used as warnings or in defiance to those who did not follow a militia's religious and political ideology. What one may find intriguing is how many of the militias tags managed to endure the war, and to date still remain on the walls (Salah, 2009).

The new tags have empowered the Lebanese public to take back their country and their dignity

The function of graffiti tags in Beirut, was largely to segregate the city along territorial lines. The years following the end of the civil war did not see much evolution or change in the use or type of graffiti. Although the war may have ended in terms of physical conflict, psychologically

it had not. A silent war continued in the many-layered succession of graffiti tags: "by marking public arena within every area of the then divided city, each faction marked its territory [which] kept viewers aware of location and strengthened support among followers" (Saleh 2013, p. 15; cf. Schacter, 2008; Riskedahl, 2017). This way graffiti tags became ingrained onto the cityscape. In post-war Beirut, as Saleh reflects, it was still rather easy to determine which political faction was in control of which particular neighbourhood: "Walkers [knew] where they [were], under whose control [any] given area [was], simply by sheer density of graffiti [tags]" (2013, p. 16).

However, with the new millennium, tags shifted from those civil war remnants to the new worries, desires, and frustrations of the everyday Lebanese. In the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, tags in Beirut began to include elements of socio-political critique. Throughout history, creative and cultural practices have had the uncanny ability to reveal the cracks in a city's social fabric, exposing urban realities and narratives of dwellers vis-à-vis the normative practices of the status quo. The tag then started providing an alternative platform where one could voice one's sentiments and frustrations. In troubled times, the tags, capable of eliciting prompt reaction, act as an essential catalyst for socio-political change. While initially the taggers were not a large part of the public, but just a few select individuals, this has changed drastically in the upheaval of 2019: for the first time in over thirty years, vast sectors of the Lebanese society across religious, political and class boundaries have started using the language of graffiti to join in a new solidarity. What made graffiti so impactful during the civil war and its aftermath, is what also makes them so significant during the current revolution. What differs now are the hands holding the spray.

The Protestors' Weapon

Much like the protests in Chile or Hong Kong that have been unfolding at the same time, in Fall 2019 thousands of young Lebanese have mobilised from throughout the country to voice years of frustrations and suffering. Protests occurred in response to the Lebanese government's new tax increase on gasoline, tobacco, phone calls and messaging apps. Taken together, the new tags highlight the country's mass rejection of three decades of corruption by the country's post-war elites. These protests, at their core, haven't just been about venting the public's frustrations with the corrupt government, but rather about reclaiming back voice, solidarity, and the fundamental right to public space. Arab language has been extensively used. The new tags have empowered the Lebanese public to take back their country and their dignity. Marking walls laden with cultural significance — like the Egg, an abandoned former cinema situated in the centre of Beirut — tagger seek to remind themselves and

their readers that these spaces – much like the rest of the country – belongs to them, rather than to the corrupt Lebanese ruling elite. What becomes intriguing is that spaces in which contest occurs are contested themselves. Graffiti tags in spaces once used for segregation are now being used to transform those same spaces into spaces of solidarity.

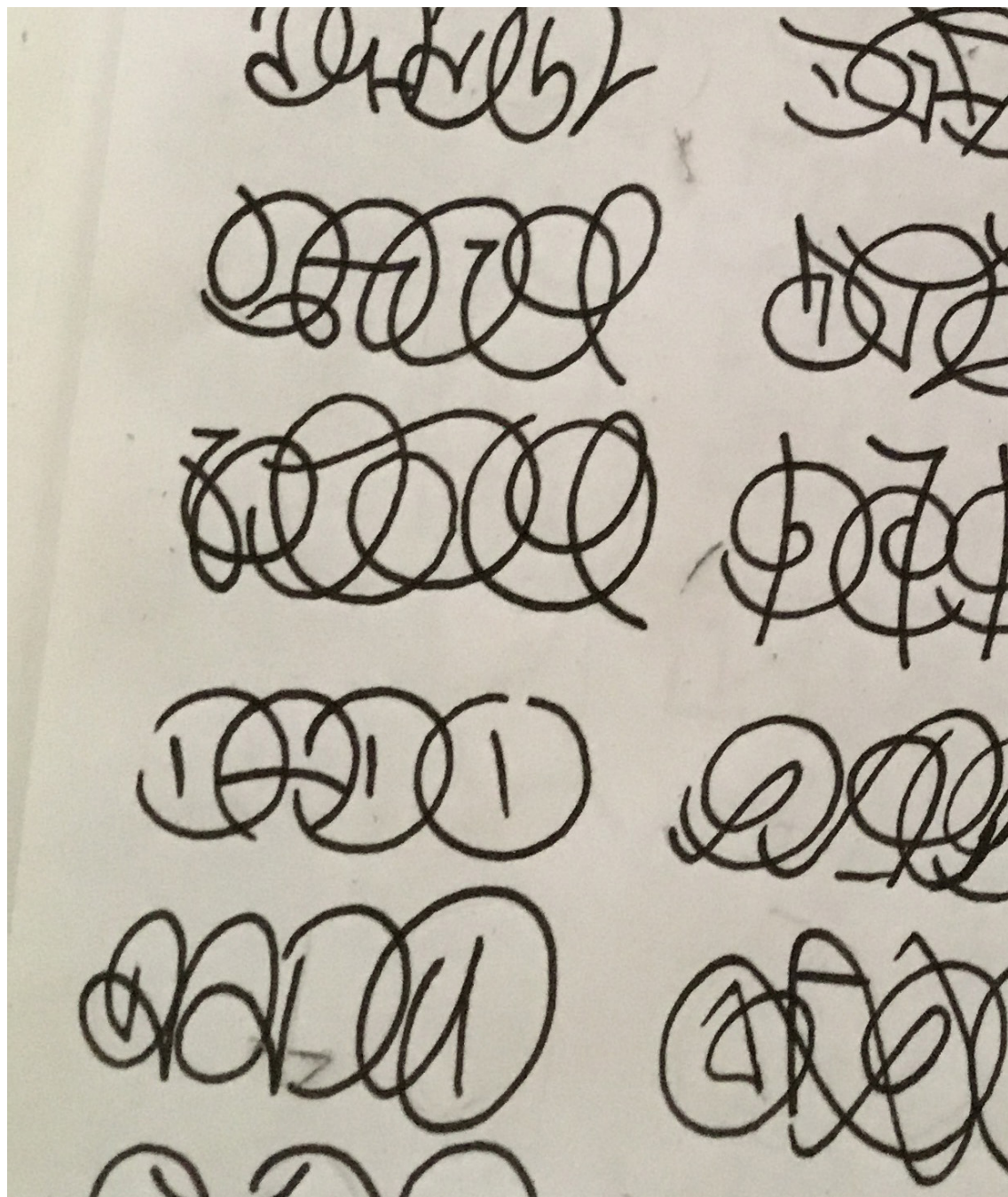
Years of suffering have made the Lebanese people to become much stronger, expressing emotions in a creative rather than violent way. This uncommon approach of reading and marking the city has shown to the person in the street that it is okay to reimagine the city as a legitimate space to voice one's critique and express one's frustrations. It through these unconventional creative means of marking that the Lebanese public are able to be freely creative whilst still demanding the demise of a corrupt, sectarian government. These graffiti tags, essentially, know no boundaries thus providing a broad medley of creative, political statements. The spray can has essentially become the protestor's choice of weapon, igniting and inspiring others to pick up a spray can as well. A catalyst of public dialogue, reclamation, and change. A catalyst by the people for the people.

Conclusion

The use of Arabic letters in a rather Western practice, coupled with situating the pieces within a highly politicized spatial context, has enabled local writers to distinguish themselves from party politics and sectarian propaganda. The new tags offer a primary instance of graffiti created by the Lebanese for the Lebanese. Social change is here enacted through social content. During the recent protests, tagging has emerged as a convenient form of disrupting the city's everyday lattice and as reclaiming democratic participation to "foster the emergence of a powerful revolutionary culture" (Awad, Glaveanu and Wagoner, 2017, p. 165).

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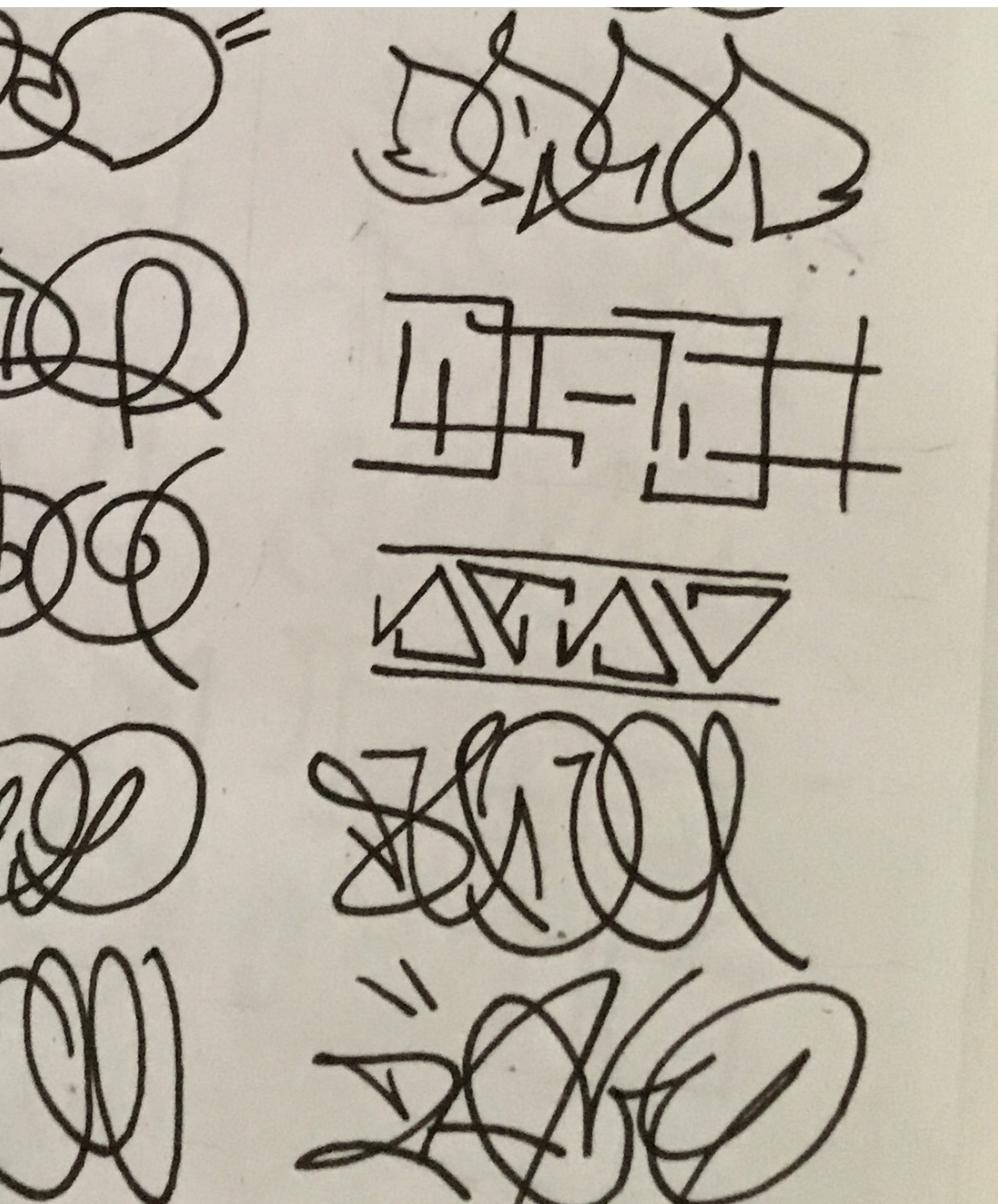
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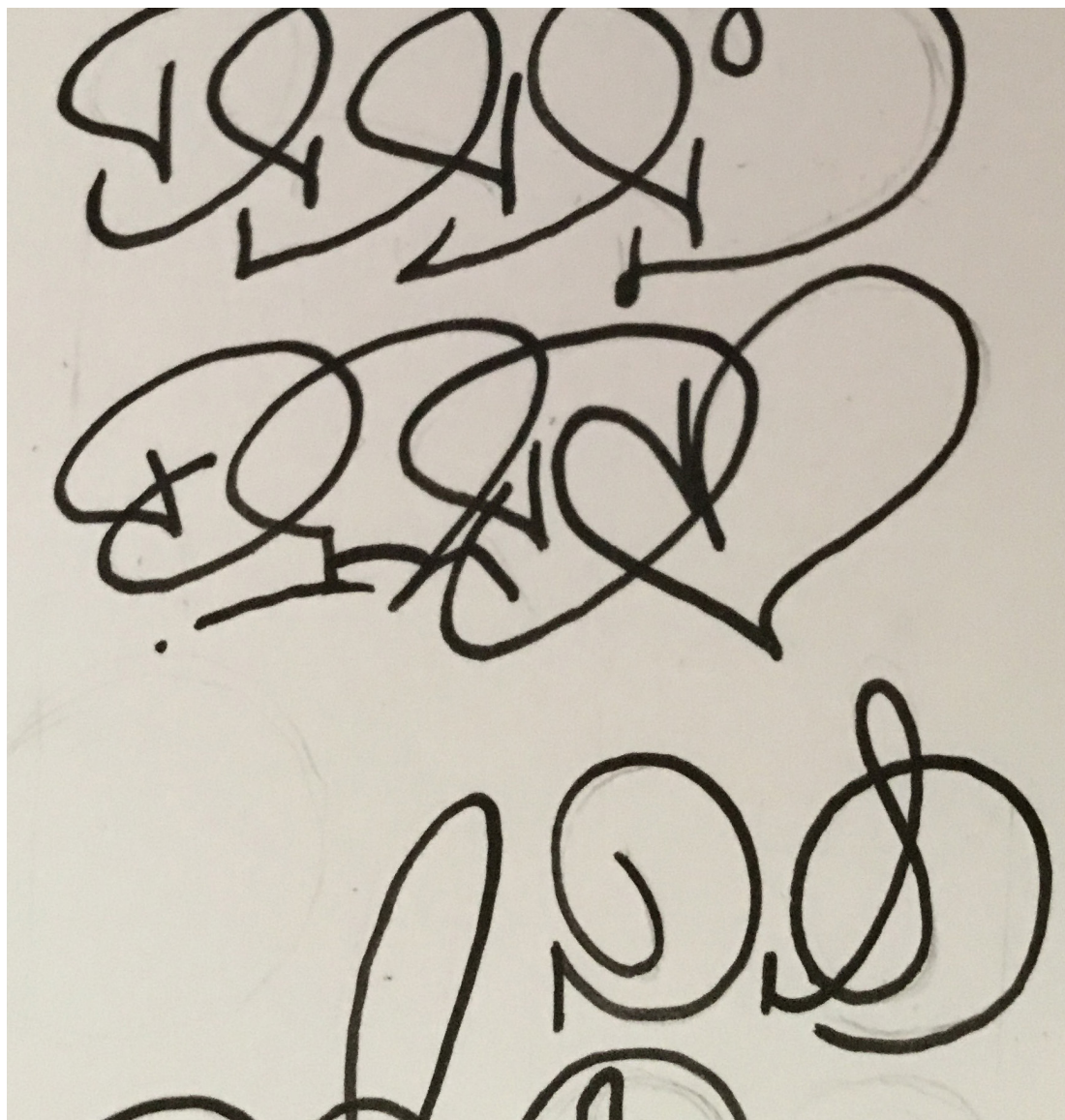
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