

Reevaluating 'Public Art':
A Photo Essay and Analysis of Graffiti Art
Along the Los Angeles River

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Introduction

With an interest in public access to ‘public art,’ my curiosity directed me again and again to the anonymous designs and colors on the walls of Los Angeles. I was curious as to how an average, creative citizen might have access to the making of art for the public. Could graffiti be public art? The most effective means of answering these questions, then, was to simply go out into the field and look. My camera allowed me to capture an extensive inventory of what is available along the Los Angeles River. My fieldwork in the riverbed too, gave me the opportunity to experience the art within the various contexts of the river— the breeze under bridges and the heat on exposed concrete banks, the rushing sounds along freeways and quiet lulls at vacant spaces of the channel, are among the many sensations I encountered. Three hundred photographs and several months later, my perception and appreciation of graffiti changed significantly as did my notions of public art.

Thus, my project goal was to gain a better awareness and understanding of the images along the river by *looking* at them, and in a sense, *listening* to what the images have to tell. What does graffiti art of the LA River look like? Should it be appreciated as an art form, or even considered pub

which public art is understood in which to base a concrete discussion on the validity of graffiti art as a public art form.

The second chapter explores the background histories of graffiti and the Los Angeles River. It provides a general overview of major concepts and information behind these entities that are important but are often untold or overlooked. Though these accounts remain incomplete and brief, they illuminate the socio-political and cultural themes of the Los Angeles River and Graffiti Art movements in history. Knowledge of the socio-political context out of which graffiti evolved, then becomes central, as is an understanding of the river as a significant place in cultural and political history of Los Angeles, to appreciating how and why graffiti is a significant public art form.

In order to complete the project I conducted an in-depth photo exploration of the river walls from where the Tujunga Wash feeds into the Los Angeles River in Studio City through NorthEast Los Angeles, Downtown, and Chinatown to where the 10 freeway crosses the River in Boyle Heights. Over several days, I walked or biked down the river photographing the hundreds of various pieces I encountered from scribbled 'tags' to elaborate murals 50 ft long and larger on the river walls and bridges, consistently noting the location of each piece. I attempted to photograph a variety of works that would exhibit the great range of graffiti along the river of all skill levels. I was particularly attentive to pieces that made blatant political or social comments through words or imagery, but again, the go

depth interviews and several informal interviews with river advocates, graffiti removal teams, residents in the areas surrounding the river, and graffiti artists who have painted on the river.

Finally, there are two suggestions to keep in mind in the course of engaging this project. First, the photos are merely representational; there is an elemental experience that cannot be captured or fully understood through these photographic reproductions. Walter Benjamin speaks of this discrepancy in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He says, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”¹ In this case, I cannot emphasize enough the sensation of stepping into the vast space of concrete—the abandonment, the freedom, and the quiet. The flickers of river life a tree that breaks through a crack in the concrete glints of sunlight reflecting off the sewage water surface seem both instantly pathetic and ever precious. Though I began unsure whether or not graffiti could truly be public art, the more I absorbed their colors and designs, the more time I spent walking in the riverbed, I found a greater appreciation for it.

Secondly, understanding graffiti as a *public* art form also demands a broader perspective of what characterizes art. As many theorists suggest, our notion of what constitutes art is culturally and economically determined. Therefore, to appreciate the artistic expression relayed through the graffiti images in this book requires the viewers to expand our culturally constructed views of art. In this sense, it can be a thrilling or an uncomfortable process of the politicization of art, and questioning the origins of our conception of art has been shaped overtime

This project has given me an amazing opportunity to explore graffiti art and culture through colors, designs, and the sense of space that they create together. After spending so much time at the river, watching it through the photography process, I've become a river lover myself. This project should make a space for many other people to begin to think about graffiti in different, challenging ways as well; to perhaps learn to appreciate the works as public art with immense aesthetic and cultural meaning.

ⁱ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1928, 220.

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Mapping the

If public art, in a new sense, is an art form that involves community members through the process, expresses community identity, and gives a sense of place, then it is the history of the people who made it and the place it is located that become central to the art form. Therefore, to best understand the significance of the graffiti of the Los Angeles River as a form of public art, it becomes necessary to have an understanding of the backgrounds and the histories from which it emerges. To know the stories of the people who made them what they are today, how it evolved, why it was and still is being developed, gives the pieces meaning and context, a human element and a sense of cultural history with which it is easier to identify with as a viewer and community member yourself. The ecological and political history of the river, with the artistic and cultural history of graffiti art intersects on the concrete channel walls to create a kind of public art unique to the Los Angeles River. The essay that follows explores the cultural, political, and ecological histories of the LA River and Graffiti, to further contextualize the art of the river and why it brings life.

Birth of the Hip Hop and Cholo Graffiti Styles

Literally meaning “writing” in Italian, graffiti takes many forms. And much like writing, there is different content and style. For instance, there is gang graffiti, neo-Nazi graffiti, and graffiti by other unaffiliated individuals as well. However, the vast majority of graffiti along the Los Angeles River, and throughout contemporary urban culture in general, is ‘hip hop’ graffiti originating from New York City, with influences of ‘Cholo’ graffiti that grew out of the barrios of Los Angeles. Therefore this brief history will focus on the cultivation of hip hop graffiti, or ‘graff’ rather than other forms of graffiti.

colorfully subversive statement. It is not *only* what these images depict that makes graffiti what it is, but the act of doing it as well.

As the graffiti craft and its brother arts matured, the hip hop movement received more attention from artists, media, and public officials. Graffiti was becoming to be praised as an eloquent, legitimate art form by some; and simultaneously degraded or written off as street vandalism by others. In 1972, one of the first ever gallery graffiti art shows was sponsored by writer Hugo Martinez, who organized other top graffiti artists into the group United Graffiti Artists. Graffiti gained national and international attention with the publication of Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper's book *Subway Art* (1984), which "itself became a manual of style for aspiring writers outside NY." Pseudo-documentary films like *Style Wars!* (1985) and the Hollywood film *Beat Street* (1984) and growing music video industry that often used graffiti murals as backdrops "spread the imagery and style of hip hop graffiti" beyond New York. By 1986, the same photographers/ authors of *Subway Art* were able to document even more graffiti works for a second book *Spraycan Art* that included pieces from around the world, from the Los Angeles, to Europe, to New Zealand. By the early '90s a network of numerous hip hop publications such as *IGT* (*International Graffiti Times*, later *International Get Hip Times*). Graffiti gained national attention in 1988.

early 1900's. "The Los Angeles walls are an unofficial history of the Mexican-American presence in the streets of East L.A."^{vi} One of the first documented references to Old School style also referred to as 'barrio calligraphy' appears in Beatrice Griffith novel *American Me* published in 1948.^{vii} The Latino Zoot-Suit culture of this time cultivated Old School style at a time of mass deportations and beatings of Mexican-Americans by U.S. servicemen in Los Angeles during World War II. "Even though the Cholo and New York styles look different, the purpose and intent are still the same. We all have the same mother, rebellion. Just a different father, style."^{viii} Chaz estimates that 98 percent of the graffiti in Los Angeles today emerge out of the hip-hop movement. However, these pieces still come from both the New York and Los Angeles graffiti heritages, as well as the individual and collective innovations of the artists who paint them.

As hip hop grew into a subculture, the movement adopted an informal slang vernacular as well. The doers or artists of graffiti are known as 'writers.' For instance, the basic word 'tag' refers to the writers' "subcultural nicknames, and the stylized renditions of these names which they mark or spray paint... 'Tagging,' then, refers to the ongoing adventure of marking these nicknames in and around the city,"^{ix} Other terms distinguish the various levels of graffiti art in terms of style and intricacy. Writers develop thei

groups, writers speak of the ‘crew’ or ‘set’ to which they belong.”^x These groups of writers go out to paint together, or hang out, and often collaborate to create larger pieces. The crews create two or three word names for themselves, but most often refer to their crews by the two or three letter acronym derived from their name.¹ Please see Appendix 1 for more terms.

The widespread passion within the graffiti movement was equally matched by anti-graffiti campaigns throughout the US. Anti-graffiti organizations, corporate and political leaders, as well as the media have effectively constructed negative conceptions of graffiti in order to feed their movement. For instance, since the 1980’s politicians, transit officials, corporate executives and others in cities across the country have “increasingly responded to graffiti as a political and economic issues, and thereby constructed it as a social problem.”^{xi} To them, graffiti has been seen only as vandalism rather than art, or a potentially meaningful public statement. One vehement anti-graffiti activist wrote in an op-ed, “Territorial tagging leads to turf wars, and graffiti is a blight that saps the aspirations and deflates the pride of entire neighborhoods.”^{xii}

The broken windows theory is one of the dominant arguments to which they counterpoise graffiti. The theory assumes that “untended disorderly behavior can signal that nobody cares about the community and lead to more serious crime” just as a broken window can suggest that nobody cares about a building and would lead towards more serious vandalism.^{xiii} In the 1980’s, the National Graffiti Information Network was formed to combat graffiti with a large-scale organizing campaign. Their tactics to combat the illicit street art according to a 1988 press release outlined, “draft[ing] legislation, continuity of city ordinances, construction, and investigation of graffiti vandal sting

¹ For example, CBS, which stands for ‘Can’t Be Stopped,’ is a Los Angeles crew from the late ‘90s.

operations through use of surveillance sites.”^{xiv} Please see Appendix 2 for a listing of relevant national and state graffiti legi

not only identify American constructions of what is public art (as discussed in the previous essay), but to recognize the mainstream American construction of graffiti an ugly social problem as well. Further, to appreciate the graffiti art requires an understanding that there exists a rich history and message behind the graffiti art that is of a different culture and story as well.

The Los Angeles River: From a Wetland Ecosystem to Concrete Jungle

The 51-mile long Los Angeles River carries with it intertwining histories of a lush riparian wildlife, indigenous cultures and colonization, immigrant populations and ghettoization, natural disaster, and ecological degradation. That is, though it is bordered today by vacant train yards, boxed by pavement, and guarded by barbed wire fences, the Los Angeles River has a rich cultural and ecological history. This history situates the river in time and space, creating a perhaps surprisingly meaningful sense of place (and sense at all) of the concrete box that now stretches 51 miles across Los Angeles County with only a trickle down its center.

Before Los Angeles was even a city, before the arrival of Spanish colonial and missionary settlers in, the region where the Los Angeles River now runs was pristine natural wildlife. Its watershed is estimated to have housed over twenty different plant and animal habitats that existed before settlement by biologists from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Large areas of the river intersected with lowland wetlands covered in a floodplain forest, making up part of the south coastal landscape in which bears and other wild animals roamed. It was an ecosystem of marshes, thickets, and dense woods where a rich animal and plant life flourished. In his book on the history of the Los Angeles River, Gumprecht describes what the river most likely looked like at

this time. “The arid nature of the river greatly influenced the creation of this diverse environment... oaks and walnuts rose above the river...dense shrubs and water loving trees such as willows and cottonwoods...were more common where floodwaters regularly spread over the landscape. Cattails, bulrushes, and other marsh vegetation thrived where the streams’ course was even more indefinite...reeds, wild grasses.”^{xviii} Habitats consecrated with the river formed some of the most biologically rich habitats in all of Southern California.

The river, as a part of the diverse ecosystem in which it flowed, also provided natural resources for the subsistence of the local indigenous tribe known as the Tongva-Gabrielino. As hunters and gatherers, they relied the ecological diversity supported by the river for food, raw materials, shelter, clothing, and tools. Gumprecht recalls, “The River’s waters were crucial to [the Tongva] way of life.”^{xix} The river was the key water source for the Tongva, providing clean drinking water and pools in which to bathe each morning. As a result, they tended to travel for the Tongvalong the len2 Tn TmTc -0.0028 Tw .Tw 12 0 0 12 8

river itself was lined with concrete and manipulated to creat

was suffered by native residents (including the Tongva) who were displaced throughout the development along the river whose stories were only briefly acknowledged in this section. This theme of displacement and domination inspired Baca's community mural project along the Tujunga Wash that leads into the Los Angeles River. Titled the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, the half-mile-long mural retells some of these quieted stories that comprise the cultural history of the Los Angeles River.

In recent years, despite the unseemly vision of the river, environmental and community activists alike have embraced the urban waterway and begun to organize for its revitalization.^{xxix} Environmental advocates are responding to its historical ecological degradation by making its pollution levels and removal of concrete measures of policy within governmental jurisdictions. River politics extend to community advocates as well, who seek to turn the river into a "community asset." They understand the river's potential to revitalize neighborhoods by making the river a place for people to go by constructing bike paths, walkways, benches and other similar developments. Through their activism, these advocates are "re-envisioning" the urban environmental landscape, and reinventing a sense of place for the river.

Graffiti on the river: Public Art and Public Space

In many ways these two dynamic narratives share common themes of devastation, confinement, resistance, and persistence. In this sense that they mimic one another, their coexistence amid the concrete retaining walls seems suitable. The colors on the wall, and the springs of trees and grass through the concrete slabs alike become signs of life persisting through the historical oppressions they've faced. This reinforces the concept that the historical richness of the river is carried through today. As a river that still flows

Captions for Photo Essay

This text expands on the photos included in the photo essay. The photos that are displayed here were taken to be included with the research question in mind, 'Is graffiti art?' Of the 300 plus pictures taken in the course of my research, here is a selection of the best images, chosen for the significant content and insight they offer on graffiti along the Los Angeles River as a public art. The text includes observations I have made in light of my exploration of public art, elaborated in the first two essays, as well as insights from various river advocates and graffiti writers I interviewed. The captions are organized by page number. Letter and the corresponding page number can identify the photos.

Pg. 33: Concrete Walls

"I just think of the concrete as a cad

*ecision to
make it ugly was a human decision, and I think the decision to make it an attractive, in I thin*

celebrates the illegality of the act.”^{iv} In many ways this illicit creativity makes the visual experience equally as thrilling for the viewer.

Pg. 34: Throw Ups and Pieces

“For the commuter and the office worker, graffiti provides a series of mysterious, ambiguous images-- and some of the few available public images not bought and paid for by corporate art programs, city governments, or NEA grants.” Jeff Ferrell

Pg. 36

a-c) These pieces are on the east side of the river north of the Los Feliz Bridge. Note how Saber, a world-renowned writer, interchanges the purple and green in his block letters. Again, taken far away, please use the oversize. The location right above the water and sheer size is mind-boggling. The writers most likely used modest equipment such as ladders, rope, or perhaps a raft.

d) These pieces are part of an extended wall surface near the North Broadway Bridge in Downtown LA. Taken from a distance, the short wall on which the pieces are painted is 5 feet tall and approximately 50 feet wide. “Bash” “Envy” “Prayer.” Small writing on Prayer’s tag reads, “For my baby boy, thank you lord” and on the right, “Live to tell about it.”

Pg. 37

a) Under the 134 in Burbank, the river water has worn down the bottom of the piece since it’s creating 5/3/02. “CDP” and “BLA” (“Bombing Los Angeles”) are crews from South East LA.

b) As demonstrated in this piece, design and style are fundamental elements to the graffiti arts. In this case, the tag is nearly obliterated and the geometry of the design becomes more important than legibility.

c) North of Glendale Blvd. Bridge in Los Feliz, “CBS” (which stands for “Can’t be stopped,” or sometimes “California bomb squad”) is a crew from the time of UTI in the mid-late 80’s. “Graff guerillas” written at the bottom left has political/revolutionary context.

Pg. 38

a) South of 6th St. Bridge, Boyle Heights. Open hole in fence would be optimal spot to enter the riverbed.

b) As you’ve seen throughout the pictures so far, doing one piece on top of others is part of the culture. “Cab” recognizes his crew “IFK” (International Freeway Killers) in the bubble to the right of his throw up. Under Fletcher Drive over pass near Silverlake and Atwater village.

c) Should some graffiti be made legal (the “good stuff”) and some not? Should distinctions be made? One writer answers, “You have to start somewhere. Sure there are different levels, [but there are] not distinctions of *this* is graffiti *that’s* not, because it’s all part of it. That’s how people develop themselves and become artists. The curve of the letters and lettering [involved in designing a tag] is an art form in itself. It takes practice.”^{vii}

Pg. 39

“Graffiti resists not only authority, but also the very letters and le. o. m. s. Tj. (ty, bTj. (ty, bTj. (ty, bTj. (ty, b

c) On this pipe it reads, “Fuck Burbank Cops, they’re donut eating cops.” It’s funny, and insulting, and a display of discontent. It is located near Buena Vista Park and Disney Studios in Burbank.

Pg. 44: Cultural Signifiers

Among the characters and symbols found along the river, there are some that have much more obvious cultural references. For instance, the skull, exhibited in photos 48 and 49 is a traditional Aztec image, still manifested in Latino festivals today. Graffiti artist Charles “CHAZ” Bojorquez, who has been painting graffiti in Northeast LA since 1969 wrote, “To the Latino people, a skull’s representation is not about death, but about rebirth.”^{xiii} In contrast, in most American traditions, the skull is a symbol to be feared, or considered abnormal. This provides one of the clearest examples of how art and symbolism is colored by cultural perspectives, and how graffiti can be misunderstood, whether it be a clash between ethnic cultures or between popular culture and subcultures.

a) This is part of the graffiti yard under the 2 freeway overpass. Note that this group of skulls was part of a larger production extending to the right, which consists of a pile of bones and rib cages. These skulls illustrate the relationship of death and rebirth clearly. The skulls are alive-- their mouths have expression, and some even have eyes that look up and out. Please use the woman who stands in front of the mural at about 5 feet 7 inches as a reference for the large scale of these productions.

b) Near the 134 freeway overpass in Atwater Village, this skull exemplifies a graphic shading technique that uses lines and curves to give shape and form rather than gradient aerosol. The top of the skull is cropped and looks unfinished. Though to some it may look sloppy, this actually tells the viewer a story behind the piece. This picture does not capture the large size of this skull so it may be hard to understand, but most likely the artist could not reach to finish making an accurate curve perhaps because of the restraints of his/her ladder, and so the top remains flat.

c) This long dragon can also be scaled to the trucks parked above the concrete retaining walls. Painted near the 134 freeway overpass in Atwater Village, part of the Chinese zodiac, this might be a symbol originating from the artists cultural heritage, though it is just speculation.

Pg. 45: Abstract Art

Here are some other examples of graffiti *not* in hip hop style, but nonetheless noteworthy because of their creativity and utilization of the large slabs of concrete along the river. None of these appear to use spray can. They most probably used house paint, brushes, and/or rollers.

- a) This mural situated on the east bank of the river just north of the 5/110 freeway interchange is visible by tens of thousands of commuters each day. The artists also unknown, these have been interpreted to represent petroglyphs of indigenous tribes from the surrounding area. For example, the man on the horse at the bottom could be identified from Tongva/Chumash heritage.
- b) South of the 4th Street Bridge in Boyle Heights is a pyramid of simply painted black outlined faces. The faces are stacked tightly on top of each other at the start of the piece upstream, and extend approximately 175 feet downstream. The fading faces, measuring about 9.5 feet long and 7 feet wide each, indicate that they have been exposed to the sun and times when the river has reached heights significant enough to wash out the faces along the base of the wall more so. Thirty-five to forty-five faces were counted.
- c) This multi-colored bulls-eye is located south of the 101 freeway overpass near Chinatown. The downtown skyscrapers loom in the background.
- d) Located near the 6th on the west side near the Sixth Street Bridge, these abstract lines look like a face with a tie.

Pg. 46: Gang Graffiti

Again, while this while this photo essay focuses on hip hop graffiti, the dominant form of graffiti found along the Los Angeles River, these representations of gang graffiti are worth noting. The Toonerville gang (TVR) is the dominant gang in the Los Feliz area, where these graffiti were painted. This turf graffiti is exemplary of the type of graffiti that is highlighted in the media and get the most press attention. Academic Jeff Ferrell suggests, “Certainly gang graffiti, and the gangs themselves, merit something more than the usual knee-jerk condemnations by business and political authorities. If we bother to look beyond carefully cultivated anti-gang hysteria, we can surely read in the gangs and

Pg. 50: Political Statements

As previously discussed, graffiti is inherently a political, counter culture commentary by virtue of it's unlawful, historic, and ecological location; and the history of cultures from which it emerged and undermined. However, these photos show how some graffiti is more explicit in their message.

a) This piece reading, "Destruction must continue," is located near the 134 overpass in Burbank.

b) This anarchy symbol is found near the 134overpass in Burbank. It explicitly illustrates how much of graffiti, in challenging issues of authority and domination, could be interpreted as anarchical.

63. Under the First Street Bridge across is a traditional Mexican figure clad in sombrero. Next to him read slogans such as, "People of color unite," "Revolucion Cabrone!" (Revolution everyone!), "Kill your slave master!" and "Kill White." These slogans reveal a heated fury and dissatisfaction with the social and political system.

64. This tag refers to Latin American guerrilla leader and revolutionary theorist Che Guevara of the 1960's.

Pg. 51

a) Muralist Eva Cockcroft writes, "Art is a weapon to the degree that it is rooted in people's struggles. The re-appropriation of culture by the people is about the restoration to the people of a fully human imageGuevara e that it e t The re-appr

is not particularly hip-hop style, the artist notably used spraycan medium. How does the nationalistic message behind this graffiti change your perception of graffiti?

c) In contrast, this piece located near the 4th Street Bridge in Boyle Heights reads “USA” and points down with an arrow to the bottom of the riverbed, perhaps to the sewage water that runs downstream. It is also not in hip hop style, but was likely painted with house paint.

Pg. 52: Commemorative Pieces

c) In the Glassell Park area, three faded football helmets oppose each other on the east bank. Could it be a graffiti remnant from when the Raiders were in Los Angeles in the 1980's?

Pg. 60

a) Here is a view of graffiti under the supporting posts of the Glendale Street Bridge from the opposite side. As you've noticed, the supporting walls under bridges are popular places to paint, mo

Conclusion: A New Response to Graffiti Art

The opening essays of this project have served to frame the images that followed. This study began in search of an understanding of progressive tenets of 'public art' such as placing the public involvement and process at the center of a public art project, as well as reflecting community values and historical significance in the piece to create a sense of place. As a result, the histories of hip-hop graffiti and the Los Angeles River that followed were the preliminary steps to understanding how the graffiti art of the LA River fit into this new paradigm of 'public art.' The photos furthered our exploration by putting images to the term 'graffiti,' a term that mistakenly connotes negative

monstrations show graffiti

involving, community oriented process that to achieve a revolutionary resistant art form, the photographs show specifically the variety of colors, content, and design tools graffiti artists have used to communicate these messages. In these ways, it can be understood how the graffiti pieces along the concrete Los Angeles River creates a sense of place, and can be accepted as a public art form. In reflection on the photos and stories documented in this book, the question that follows is; what do we make of this? How should citizens, and how should the governme

Radiotron, Self-Help Graphics, and the Azatlan Cultural Center are some of the local centers that have been st

unleashes the stereotypes of it as dirty and constructions of fear that inhibit us from looking at it and appreciating it for it's beauty and meaningful content.

ⁱ Montalzo, Joseph 'Nuke.' Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2003.

ⁱⁱ Anonymous Eagle Rock graffiti writer. Personal interview. 7 Apr. 2003.

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Glossary

Bomb

Buff

Burner

Cap, fat skinny

Crew

Going over

Hit

Kill

King/Queen