

# Intertext

---

Volume 15 *Intertext*

Article 4

---

5-15-2007

## Beautiful Losers

Mindy Tadai

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Tadai, Mindy (2007) "Beautiful Losers," *Intertext*: Vol. 15, Article 4.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol15/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intertext* by an authorized editor of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# Beautiful LOSERS:

*The Clashing of Culture and Capitalism in Graffiti*

**Can you hear the “insatiably curious, tirelessly inventive, [and] innocently self-deprecating” youth through their acid-based etchings? (Mayer 57)**

THE SEEMINGLY INDECIPHERABLE MESSAGES AND IMAGES FRENETICALLY published on unconventional surfaces are, in fact, multilingual. Graffiti writers translate their inherited worlds in fragments, often wherever fresh architectural mediums become accessible, aiming to reach no one and everyone in particular. Taggers and muralists communicate through graffiti, as if to say, “I dare you to understand.” The transition of graffiti from an underground subculture to U.S. popular culture—from subway cars to art gallery canvases—had compromised the founding principles behind graffiti. Evidence of the subculture’s oppression within hegemonic culture appears in the transition, highlighting deviations of thought and subsequent practices while posing a threatening construction of normalcy.

The surfacing of subcultures and art influenced by graffiti reveals the alternative forms of interaction emerging from marginal ethnic and age groups, illustrating an undertow of social cohesiveness against dominant cultural

realities (Lachmann 231). Graffiti writing “interrupts” the homogeneity and predictability of urban life, yet stimulates interplays among those sharing the urban environment (Ferrell 176). It is difficult to specify to whom this subculture is considered “normal” or “abnormal,” because the categories are inherently relative and continuously evolving. For instance, the public audiences most influenced by imagery and literature—city youth, media critics, filmmakers, and art gallery curators—may have once considered graffiti writings as vandalism and signs of urban decay, but now indulge in their unrefined and eccentric qualities. Even graffiti artists sometimes find themselves painting in subsidized art studios, re-imaging the nights they gambled and risked life and arrest for a tag, mural or “throw-up” (Ferrell 83). “Art worlds frequently incorporate at a later date works they originally rejected,” considering the relative normality of artistic mediums, materials, content, language, and overall aesthetic awareness (Lachmann 231).

In underground colloquialism, graffiti artists are called writers. Even within the urban subculture, there are two specialized subsets of writers, taggers and muralists. Writing became known as graffiti as it morphed into its corporate and mainstream American shape, but “Had it been invented by the children of the rich or influential, it would have been branded avant-garde Pop Art” (Ehrlich 2). The term “graffiti” carries with it negative connotations, inherently linked to structured anarchy and subsequent crimes against the reigning hegemony. The renaming of the artistic movement normalized expressions of urban life, associating writing with more traditional literary works (e.g. poetry, short stories), and graffiti with a more ubiquitous interpretation of street life. This failed to acknowledge the individual voices in pursuit of literary and artistic recognition. Graffiti art contains a mass diversity of elements extracted from both subcultures and popular culture—much of which remain difficult to understand—especially for the white, middle and upper classes of America. Grouping terms like “graffiti,” simplify an ideology as well as expose the limitations of media.

Those who shape public perceptions of graffiti culture—local and national governments, law enforcement authorities, media producers, and others—obscure the cultural and social contexts in which graffiti exists. Graffiti writing is an inspired social activity, “organized around the interplay of writers’ individual and collective artistry” (Ferrell 53). Achievement is not gained from the criminal activity itself, but from the communal engagement that encourages the reconstruction and repackaging of mainstream literature and imagery. The beauty and style with which “[popular] cultural resistance” is expressed is much more valuable than the finished products

(Ferrell 173). Unlike professional artists, graffiti writers surrender their art to the public, unprotected and without the security of preservation or profit (Ferrell 175). On public surfaces, graffiti writings remain only temporarily. Within the urban underground, the residues of aesthetic styles indelibly remain. U.S. popular culture fails to recognize the profound dependence graffiti writers have upon mercurial elements of street-style and art.

The commercialization of graffiti revolutionized the contemporary art world and mainstream America, objectifying the hip-hop-influenced graffiti subculture through mass-produced merchandise. Decades earlier, the voices of the hip-hop underground bellowed statements of territorial ownership when saturating areas of urban sprawl with tags, murals, and throw-ups. But, as images of graffiti became popular culture commodities, the “authenticity” of underground communication became contaminated by market forces aiming to translate a language in which they could not speak (Genocchio). Saturated instead were canvases, wall posters, t-shirts, computer font software, coffee mugs, etc. Graffiti, originally prevalent in residence and business districts, schools, and subway lines, shifted to art galleries and product markets. The “appropriation of subcultural artifacts from [underground hip-hop] communities for sale to the general public” was an exploitative project, because it not only denied the subculture a legitimate position in popular culture, it revamped the purpose of graffiti writing altogether (Lachmann 232). Style wars—street competitions based on natural writing skills—crowned style kings. With more incentive to sell work rather than for the purpose of gaining underground reputation and street credibility, the poetry of the streets became mainstream slogans of subcultural ignorance.

Graffiti collages of street-life strategically avoid spaces covered with legally-displayed advertisements. The juxtaposition rather than the blatant defacement of popular culture advertising (e.g. retail store signs, posters promoting products) illustrates the ways in which cultures contribute their voices. Often, graffiti blankets every space within the interior of subway cars except the spaces reserved for advertisements (Lachmann 237). Graffiti writers “purchase space with their boldness and style [rather] than with money” (Lachmann 237). One of the main powers of a national government is creating (and monitoring the flow of) its sole legal currency. As alternative currencies develop in territories controlled by the urban underground, the allocation of “wealth,” in terms of culturally-saturated spaces and broadcasting capabilities, shifts from the influential wealthy to graffiti writers. “Signpainting” describes graffiti’s presence in cultures outside of

its origin, typically where graffiti can be traded for monetary gains (Ferrell 92). Naturally, the troubling question arises: is signpainting street-art or advertising? In graffiti writing, writers are essentially self-employed. In signpainting, employers grant permission to create graffiti, predetermine artistic visions, choose locations, enforce time restraints, and provide fiscal rewards. Writers must conform and create within a vacuum of project requirements, limited content, and comprehensibility (Ferrell 93). Graffiti then becomes another anthem of the mainstream, establishing graffiti as another lens with which audiences can view U.S. popular culture.



Photo Courtesy Luna Park <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lunapark/270572133/in/pool-streets/>

The film *Basquiat* chronicles the ascendancy, decline, and identity struggle of graffitiist and neo-expressionist artist Jean-Michel Basquiat in a fixed, Andy Warhol-inspired art world. In the film, a reporter asks Basquiat, “Do you feel that you’re being exploited or are you yourself exploiting the white image of the black artist from the ghetto?” Basquiat’s reflective pause is a silent protest, an implicit reminder of the unspoken yet visibly profound struggle for minority representation in the United States. Perhaps the exploitation of graffiti writing was mutual. The hegemonic culture consumed Basquiat’s art on canvas (or post-graffiti), while the subculture Basquiat actively represented admired his fame and comparative wealth, generating marketable demands for other promising street writers. Regardless, graffiti and post-graffiti writers are still “involved simultaneously in an art world and a deviant subculture” (Lachmann 230). Though the exploitative evolution

romanticized graffiti art, supplying the mainstream with souvenirs and whimsical creations influenced by the hip-hop underground, the subcultural art remains a distant symbol of social problems and crime.

The paradox of the defiant subculture having emerged into the mainstream was the greater diminishing of graffiti works in their intended regions and on their intended mediums, including subway lines and building walls. The absence and desaturation of graffiti art in public urban environments was due to “police violence . . . combined with continuing surveillance . . . and the transit authority’s success at quickly erasing most murals on subway cars” (Lachmann 244). The silencing measures of law enforcement have made communication among fellow street writers more difficult, allowing “neither personal nor artifactual contact” with each other (Lachmann 244). The presence of commercialized graffiti highlighted the illegality of street writings, thereby oppressing the origins of graffiti through the process of normalization. Rather than the mosaic and culturally-enriching graffiti of years past, graffiti art now appears to be crudely created (Lueck). Similar to Basquiat’s “frenetic, always-in-a-hurry style,” graffiti writers must further expedite their art processes, sacrificing the volume and impact of their messages (Jones 164).

The illegibility commonly associated with graffiti continually reinforces society’s fear of the unknown. The resistance against graffiti prompts the question, “How does one propagate a culture without sufficient understanding of its language?” In Basquiat’s style of communication, “We can read his pictures without strenuous effort—the words, the images, the colors, and the construction—but we cannot quite fathom the point that they belabor” (Mayer 50). His work, incorporating images and words from Afro-American history, popular and sub-cultures, and relatively taboo themes, keeps his audience in a state of “half-knowing, of mystery-within-familiarity,” and challenges them to know everything essentially (Mayer 50). The embrace of invisibility through visibility and simplicity through obscurity is a threat to the “all-knowing” hegemonic culture. The hidden meanings and messages behind graffiti writings transfer power to the hands of subcultures. Thus, the normalization of a subculture is a power struggle, an exchange or a stripping of power from less established communities to more influential ones.

Graffiti writing “stands as a sort of decentralized and decentered insubordination, a mysterious resistance to conformity and control, a stylish counter-punch to the belly of authority” (Ferrell 197). The mainstream dissonance between graffiti art and vandalism has unveiled both unmatched aesthetic exquisiteness and aesthetic degradation. Graffiti writers, emerging from

underground subcultures, are being pushed to the forefront of American popular culture and contemporary street-art. The commercialization of graffiti art has remodeled the founding contextual and physical premises behind graffiti to appeal to broader audiences and customer bases. The transition of graffiti—from art to advertising, exterior to interior, and public urban environments to private estates—involves the reestablishing of graffiti writing by those inside and outside of the subculture. The absurdity of artistic beauty is that it can be found where popular culture has not yet explored, branded, and exploited. From street writings to post-graffiti art, a subset of beautiful losers has come into focus. Foreign and “slang” terminology, street-calligraphy, and vibrant imagery harmonize experiences of marginalized, inherently unequal individuals (findlaw.com). §

### Works and Images Cited

Basquiat. Dir. Julian Schnabel. Miramax, 1996.

Ehrlich, Dimitri, and Gregor Ehrlich. “Graffiti in its Own Words.” New York 39.24 (2006): 1-7. <<http://nymag.com/guides/summer/17406/>>.

Ferrell, Jeff. Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality. New York: Garland, 1993.

Genocchio, Benjamin. “Spray Time; [Review].” New York Times 13 Aug. 2006, late ed.: 14CN.7 <<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1093739321&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1162054001&clientId=3739>>.

Jones, Kellie. “Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the (Remix).” Basquiat. Ed. Marc Mayer. New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2005. 163-179.

Lachmann, Richard. “Graffiti as Career and Ideology.” AJS: The American Journal of Sociology 94.2 (1988): 229-250. ABI/INFORM Global. ProQuest. Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, NY. 4 Oct. 2006 <<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=1&did=1504097&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1162055023&clientId=3739>>.

Lueck, Thomas J. “Graffiti Back in Subways, Indelibly This Time.” New York Times 25 Apr. 2006, late ed.: B1 <<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=1026503761&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1162054139&clientId=3739>>.

Mayer, Marc. “Basquiat in History.” Basquiat. Ed. Marc Mayer. New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2005. 41-57.

Park, Luna. all city crew: dem. 2006. Brooklyn, NY. 29 Oct. 2006. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/lunapark/270572133/in/pool-streets/>>.

“U.S. Supreme Court: Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).” FindLaw. 18 October 2006 <<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=347&invol=483>>.