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“Spraycan leads” – the urban paradox of graffiti

An art teacher studying a subculture

Is spraying a graffiti just an act of anarchism or is one having an aesthetic, creative or artistic experience? Graffiti as a form of culture has many qualities and aspects that are similar to art education, yet illegality is unavoidably a part of graffiti culture. This is a dilemma that I am dealing with while doing my dissertation study on the question how would art education and youth subcultures interact more fruitfully. I wanted to study aesthetically meaningful graffiti and visually interesting graffiti. Quite soon I was to realize that my point of view was elitistic.

When I see a student who is very strongly attached to some visual orientation group, who am I to force the youngster to drop the whole thing and start respecting the ancient cultures while I do not show any respect to his/ her culture? It is all about meeting the other, crossing the boundaries. I would like to raise a discussion on how the others meet in the school world in general. For me as an art teacher it seems that in the Finnish school system there are too many instances that are too strongly attached to their own ideas. The feeling of opposing the other occurs between the teachers of different subjects, between the teachers and the students and between different groups of students. The educators are told to deal with multiculturalism, but often that means just another theme day of getting to know some other ethnic groups.

On my study I emphasize the graffiti culture, because I felt it to be the most visually based, changing and yet having historical background. In this article I want to reveal my thoughts on how an art teacher can meet the other, maybe cross the boundaries and try to understand the many aspects that influence the graffiti maker. For my PhD study I have interviewed six graffiti makers, some of them twice. A very important aspect on my study is to have interaction for many years with the graffitiists. Some of them have been my students. The study is ethnographic and autoethnographic even though it is not traditional ethnographic study in a way that a researcher goes to spend time in different culture, comes back and then starts to analyze the data. As Pink (2001/2005) proposes reflexive ethnography as a process of intersubjectivity between a

researcher and the research context. Often there occurs a lasting interaction between the researcher and the people in the study.

Critical pedagogy, theories of how to meet an other and studies on multiculturalism give me the theoretical support. Even though critical pedagogy was born in the American and Latin American culture and the roots are rather politic, it supports the idea of getting the voice of the other, the youngster to be heard also. Critical pedagogy also emphasizes that the power structures should be questioned and that power structures constructing the knowledge should be acknowledged and disturbed. The critical pedagogy wants to abandon the division between the high culture and the popular culture so the curriculum can be more based on the every day knowledge. Also when defining the language and procedures, ethical questions should be considered. (Aittola and Suoranta, 2001, see McLaren 1997, Qiroux and McLaren 2001) Naturally there occurs many dilemmas. Helena Helve is asking does multiculturalism mean for instance at school that all the different cultural aspects should be tolerated, even though the values were controversial to the educator's own values. (Helve 2002, 21-22).

Meeting the other, achieving a cultural hybrid

Multiculturalism is emphasized in our official curriculum. But most of the time multiculturalism in school happens when the culture is exotic enough geologically or on timeline. The official curriculum does not pay much attention to the youth subcultures. Simply put, multiculturalism includes an idea of a society with several parallel culturally different groups living side by side (Huttunen, Löytty & Rastas 2005, 19-20). Therefore multiculturalism should not be defined by ethnicity only. An art teacher is facing all kinds of different orientation groups while working among young people. Some of them are particularly visual. More and more students are strongly attached to Japanese manga or anime, at the same time there are the heavy oriented youngsters drawing flames, using tribal pictures, red and black while capturing death and destruction. The Goth oriented students do not just dress up in dark and fancy but you can tell their orientation by looking at their pictures also. These are just to mention some of the most obvious ones.

Sometimes an art teacher feels lost: how is it possible to recognize when a picture of death is just a part of subcultural orientation and when it is something that we should be worried about. Art educators are not psychologists or therapists, but it is obvious that in an art class there is a lot of discussion going on. The students deal with their feelings and emotions while making pictures and discussing art. Instead of sweeping the problem under the table, an art teacher should try to actually meet the other, cross the boundary and be open minded to discuss even those pictures that are not very easy to approve or defend.

When having the feeling of uncertainty while meeting the different, encountering the other, it is many times about the hierarchy between those who meet or interact. There are ways of talking,

habits of interacting that are not even acknowledged but yet emphasize the difference. Building up and strengthening one's own identity it is often about defining the other. (Löytty 2005, 9.) When different cultures meet and interact it is rarely about just one culture emphasizing the difference or hierarchy. It is essential, whether only the differences are emphasized or are the similarities tried to be found. Reflecting one's own experiences, emotions, knowledge and characteristics to the qualities of the other culture defines and improves one's own identity. (Jalagin 2005, 65-66.)

Encountering the other happens at least on two levels: in concrete social interaction as well as in using the language in representation and media. In interaction between two cultures or cultural orientation groups there is a possibility for a cultural hybrid to happen, which questions the hierarchical systems. What is significant about the process is that, both cross the border, meet the other half way. Cultural hybrid is not happening when just the other expects the other go across. Those who work or are in action near the borders can be some kind of cultural interpreters. (Löytty 2005, 89; 14-20.)

In an art class there is a good possibility to have cultural hybrid to happen. At least it can be a place of actual dialog between different cultural orientation groups. Expecting the young people to respect the other cultures includes a challenge to respect their cultures. Naturally it is easier to respect and understand different aspects of variable subcultures if you have some knowledge of them. That is one of the main reasons I am doing my study.

Graffiti experience

Many comments on the graffiti culture in media indicate ignorance or lack of knowledge and understanding of what is important for the graffiti makers. There are many comments defending visually interesting graffiti. A lot of graffiti artists themselves declare that meaningless scabbles should not be tolerated. Yet the same graffiti makers describe that sometimes they just can not help themselves: "Can leads" or "because of the marker" they just do some tagging even not when intentions and interests are usually opposed to that. As an art teacher I think it is important to realize and respect what is significant in graffiti experience and graffiti making experience. That is the way to deal with the fact that there is and probably will be some illegal graffiti. Right now illegality gets all the attention in public discussions. For me as an outsider studying the graffiti culture, it has been quite amazing to realize the other aspects that are significant in graffiti experience.

By graffiti experience I mean being part of the graffiti world: social relations, attitudes of surrounding peer group and others in the society. Of course graffiti experience includes the graffiti painting experience. Graffiti painting experience consists of the sketching, actual painting situation and very importantly documenting the painting. For some graffiti artists the completeness

of graffiti experience is very strong: their whole life seems to be about being a part of the graffiti world.

In graffiti painting experience it is significant and meaningful to get the kicks, the good feelings. For some painters the kicks come from the illegality, but there are many of those who get the kicks from the aesthetic experience: more important than painting without permission is to paint visually interesting graffiti and to develop own recognisable style. The kicks can also come from getting fame, being known, being imitated. In graffiti culture fame is a very important aspect. A painter called Ance is quoted in a book *Overground*: "That's what makes graffiti interesting: anonymity, but being seen through your name." (Linblad 2003, 16.) Most of the time it is desired to get fame for the tag, the signature, not for your own face. Fame used to be something to be achieved by making graffiti on difficult places, bombing as many places as possible, in New York marking your territory. But nowadays in Finland when painting illegally has been made very difficult, the painters get fame by painting wherever without or with permission and then putting the photos in the internet galleries.

Almost all the graffitiists have painted illegal paintings, but the motivation changes, usually after getting skilful and technically more competent. For an art teacher it is rather important to consider how and under what circumstances can the motivation change. How does a bomber become interested in aesthetical growth or in developing visually interesting style? The kicks that used to be achieved by painting as many illegal tags as possible can be changing towards the way that the kicks will be more about the quality not the quantity, content not the place and getting fame by own style not the courage to paint wherever. The development has to be made possible. Obviously there are some writers whose motivation of writing illegal does not change at all. But many graffiti painters declare that it is impossible to develop the style and the skill when there is no place to paint at all.

Of course I do realize that as an art teacher I am a representative of the institution and therefore I can not defend illegal graffiti. I hate to see marker made scriblings around a jugend –house. So does most of the crowd, even the people who belong to the graffiti culture. As many other cultural phenomena, graffiti culture has aspects that are negative to the surrounding society. Many graffiti makers do not consider themselves as criminals, even though they make illegal paintings on the grey cement walls. There used to be rules inside the graffiti world where to paint and where not to make a graffiti.

Roughly put there are two types of differently oriented graffiti makers: those who get the kicks from the illegality and those who get the kicks from the aesthetic value and the visibility of the graffiti. Of course that is simplifying the phenomena. From an art teacher (and also from an outsider)'s point of view there occurs three types of writing on the wall that can be or is defined as graffiti.

Scribbling/scrabble (=töhry) was not even used as word when talking about graffiti before the Helsinki city declared the so called scrabble war. Scrabble is nowadays often used to define writing on the wall that has no aesthetic value whatsoever nor needs talent to write. Tag is a writer's signature, according to Ganz TAG is a *Striking signature of a graffiti artist*. (Ganz 2004, 374.) Which includes the idea of some kind of visual value or technical skill. Bombing/tagging means to tag your signature as fast as possible on as many places as possible. Then there is the piece, which many people consider as a real graffiti. Piece is a painting, often including the tag, three-dimensional letters, shades, fillings and lining.

Graffiti experience as a bodily, social, aesthetical and environmental experience

Graffiti is public art. A very important part of it is, that it was not used to be seen in galleries or institutions. Well, that has changed. Graffiti has been in galleries. Many Finnish graffitists who were painters when graffiti came to Finland, work on the visual career now. They show their background without shame. They honour the fact that their skill and interest in visual art is based on being a part of the graffiti world. Even though those who I interviewed for my study can not really describe the relationship between a painting and the surrounding environment, it is obvious that graffiti experience is environmental. Now when the debate about the graffiti is going on more vividly than ever, lot of graffitists defend their rights to have a relationship with the city environment. Graffiti is an urban way of influencing the visual surroundings. Some people opposing the graffiti say that graffiti and scrabbles make the city feel insecure and violent ghetto-like. It is true that graffiti has started from the ghettos, but in fact originally it was thought to be a visual way of battling between the gangs instead of using physical violence. (See for instance Isomursu & Jääskeläinen, 1998)

“Choose spots that maximize the good impact of the work while minimizing its bad effects. Maximize public exposure, surprisingness and daring of a piece while minimizing its insults and cost to people of the city”, advises Wimsatt (2000, 57) a beginner. That sums up the thoughts of those painters that I interviewed also. Why can dull, boring and grey cement walls not be painted? – is quite a common question. The opposing argument to that is often heard that graffiti spreads, it does not stay on those spots that might be given to the painters with permission. That has something to do about the social relations and hierarchy in graffiti world. In graffiti painting festivals or happenings there might be places arranged for the famous and skilful painters. Meanwhile those not having so much fame must stay back and watch others painting. Then the spraycan starts leading and scrabbles and sprayings start spreading around the place. Feeling flow-experience takes over, sometimes because of illegality but often because of having an aesthetic experience.

Even though for many graffiti painters being part of graffiti culture plays an important role in their social life, there are hierarchical othering happening inside the graffiti world also. Painters may

describe somebody else as a *wanna be* –graffitists based on the quantity of illegal paintings (lack of it) or based on the techniques used or based on the quality of the paintings. In one of the most famous graffiti books *Spraycan art Glossary* defines *toy* as an inexperienced or incompetent writer (Chalfant and Prigoff 1987/2002, 12). When I asked the painters to describe an ideal graffiti painting situation, all of them mentioned a good company. Hanging around with a good company on a nice sunny summer day with good music and free spirited atmosphere seems to be the ideal painting situation for many painters. The social networking becomes evident when getting a good space to paint. The word travels fast when one finds a good place for painting.



Hiphop-festival in Kaapelitehdas Spring 2008

Graffiti is also about knowing the city. A painter describes it the way that you look at the city space with totally different eyes. When you get to know the other painters, they tell you stories about the city that you would never hear from the official guides. Berg (2008) comments, that he does not know any other group of people or cultural group that has so intensive relationship with the city. Even though graffiti artists are not tolerated they know the city better than anyone else. (Berg 2008, 8)

Painting thru the body, yet puzzling the mind

“It’s all in the muscle memory”, describes one painter the physical aspect of painting. Painting fast (even when doing it with a permission) is a part of the vitality and thrill in graffiti. Body motions are totally different painting a big piece than when drawing something small. That is why just sketching graffiti pieces is not enough for most of the painters. They want to feel the movement and the action, they want to practice the body lines. They want to use the muscle memory. One painter describes graffiti painting as performative.

In most of the time discussing about the aesthetical sides of graffiti, the tagging is left out. But Berg (2008) feels that tagging acquires maybe even more skill than painting a sketched piece. He states that a tag can also be beautiful and fit into the city picture. He is defending the writers and saying that many of them want to decorate or embellish the city not to wreck it as they are blamed of. (Berg 2008, 7-8.) The aesthetical aims are not to be dismissed. Aesthetical experience can be about the good feeling of creating something new, being able to paint a good piece but also more profound. Ikaroz describes that graffiti is about solving problems, getting as much information on a piece as possible and what has been worked hard at should look easy (Larsson 2003, 55).

Phenomenological studies examine what is significant in experience. Rauhala and Perttula (2005) emphasize the intentionality in signification process of experience. Rauhala separates two ways of consciousness and comprehension: psychic and intellectual (henkinen=spiritual/mental). Understanding can be constructive understanding (feelings, intuition, beliefs, hope, knowledge, willness, conceptualizing intersubjectivity) that creates and improves the experience. Understanding can also be deep occasion understanding which is the immediate reaction, physical reaction, something that might be recalled as tacit understanding or maybe something that I referred as body memory. Perttula states that a human body does not experience or remember, but the body can be the first location, situation, for the experience. Experiences become real thru the body, most of the experiences are of the body or of the situation that our bodies have transferred us. (Perttula 2005, 116-124) This point of view is questionable for those who do not emphasize the conceptualizing process in experience, for instance Merleau-Ponty.

Phenomenology also separates the objective space that means physically measurable space and subjective space that refers to perception of the space and experience of the space. In present time dividing the space only to the objective and subjective is not enough for describing the feelings and experiences of the space. Relationship with the space has become more complicated since there are also the virtual spaces that have essential meaning in many people’s lives (especially the young people). Also the decisions and solutions about the spaces lead the way to how the spaces are used and how people interact socially in them. (Parviainen 2007, 39-44) Many graffiti painters reclaim their right to experience the urban space. Even those who do not paint

graffiti question the fact that commercial advertisements can be so huge and disturbing that a person can not protect oneself from seeing them, yet at the same time a small stencil graffiti making a statement can lead to a conflict with the authorities.

Can a graffiti making experience be achieved in an organized (institutionalized) situation?

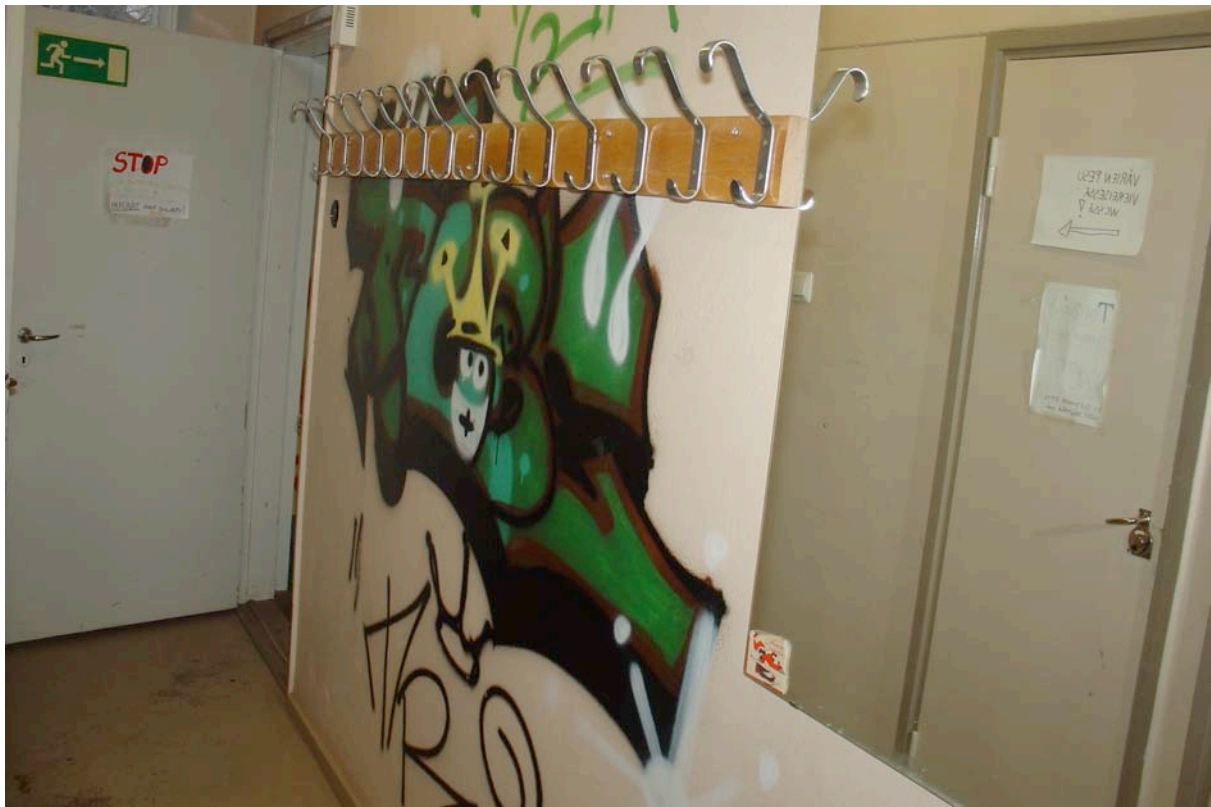
Even some graffiti painters suggest that legalizing the graffiti would stop the painting, because illegality is so essential part of it. There are also statements such as there is no legal graffiti or that the kicks are not the same. Well, that might be partly true, but my experience is quite the opposite. Since the students found out that I am not totally opposed to graffiti there has been many occasions when they have been asking for a place and occasion to paint graffiti.



They put the visual art class in a building that was in catastrophic condition. So we thought that anything covering the walls and decorating the place is positive. A graffitist was here.

When I arranged a graffiti workshop in my former school, there were almost 90 students signing up to paint graffiti. Naturally we were able to take only a quarter of those. Our graffiti workshop was attached to theme day when we wanted to cross the boundaries, mix things up, so to say. The students and other young people were the leaders of the workshops that included all kinds of activities that are attached to youth cultures. The idea was that students all age and the teachers are mixed up and the youngsters show their know-how.

The graffiti workshop took place in the old school building, where we opened all the big windows, wore masks and offered spray cans. The goal was to show the aesthetical aspects of graffiti. We had four painters leading the workshop. The participants were advised to look at the graffiti books and magazines and then try to sketch a piece of their own. Well the spraycan led. The anarchistic side of graffiti took place every time we turned around. But many of those making scabbles realized that they need to develop their style, that there work is not worth covering the walls with. But to tell you the truth, I was having a hard time coping emotionally with the fact that graffiti is uncontrollable quite anarchistic form of culture which one art teacher obviously can not turn one way or the other. I thought that the kids were ungrateful doing worthless scabbles when giving them space and possibility to paint graffiti. Well the autoethnographic part of my study really began at that moment, reflecting my own feelings towards the happenings helped me realize many things about the attitudes towards graffiti and also the fact that in certain circumstances the spraycan might just lead. But what was even more significant for me was the fact that the painters wanted to paint over the worst scabbles. The inner control that used to be an important part of graffiti world took over once again.





Graffiti workshop in my former school, After the workshop the building became a graffiti gallery

The word spread around. Graffiti painters asked for a permission to paint the place after the workshop also. The old school building in a small municipality of five thousand inhabitants became a graffiti gallery. There were quite a few nice pieces outside also. And graffiti did not spread as scabbles, no-one painted over the pieces. Just the construction diggers came and tore the building down.

The society versus graffiti writers: the urban paradox

There are many paradoxical aspects in graffiti from the art teacher's point of view. Graffiti is about social action, being creative, being daring, getting in touch with the environmental experience. It is about developing your own kind of filling, lines and making three dimensional letters. Graffiti is about making a statement. So it fulfils many goals that we aim at in the art education. It is about your personal relationship to urban city space, to an artistic form of culture which has respected its roots in New York for decades. Yet graffiti can be scaring, daring, awful looking phenomena that can lead a teenager do the crime of steeling paint and violating private property. And after that it might lead a seventeen year old to a personal disaster of going to juvenal jail or having to pay the fees for the next twenty years.

At the same time graffiti is changing forms of visualizing the city space. The reverse graffiti cleans up the blackened wall, but is still making a statement. Stencil graffiti is usually small, there are many similar pictures, but it is making a statement. Graffiti research lab uses the light to reflect pictures on the wall, they might even last longer than some of the paintings that take longer to spray than what they actually last. But they are still making a statement, maybe not by the content. Graffiti writing often does not even open up to an outsider, the letters are tough to read. But graffiti is making a statement just by appearing. Is that romanticising the phenomena? I was an outsider, I still am, I have not sprayed a single thing that could be called a graffiti, yet I do understand the thrill. And by thrill I do not mean the illegality.

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