

Appropriation: Graffiti (UK)

Graffiti as a spatial and material practice linked to Hip Hop culture emerged in the early 1970s in the urban landscape of New York and Philadelphia. It developed as a response to the spatio-political context within which minority and marginal groups were dwelling, and has since been practiced globally by a multiplicity of people following the New York City graffiti pandemic of the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Graffiti has evolved into various urban art forms and since the turn of the twenty-first century is commonly located under the broader discipline of “street art”.

Graffiti in the UK arrived in 1982, coinciding with the acquisition of Hip Hop culture from the United States, and within a few months surfaces of public transport and walls of city centres across the UK were adorned with graffiti. The illegal practice of graffiti evolved as a counter-narrative to the construct of the urban environment (Evans 2014) and incorporated an element of mimicry from the styles that were presented to the young would-be graffiti practitioners (known as graffiti writers or simply writers) in the UK through two key publications: *Subway Art* and *Spray Can Art* and the pivotal documentary *Style Wars*. Graffiti writing can be classified into the three distinct practices: tagging (to write one’s name), bombing (to tag with the intention to saturate a targeted environment in a relatively short space of time) and piecing (painting colourful words that incorporate scenery, backgrounds and occasionally drawn caricatures; derived from the word ‘masterpiece’).

By the mid-1980s graffiti had spread from urban places to rural areas, and although the rural graffiti writers based their activities on the American model by forming crews (gangs) to enhance their writing experience as well as mimic the styles of lettering and symbols, this cultural appropriation developed into a vernacular form of graffiti specific to the rural UK. This vernacular rural form of graffiti advanced from two particular phenomena that distinguish it from other graffiti.

Firstly, graffiti practiced during the formative years in the urban areas of the UK was learned through an acquired history, and rather than solely evolving within the primary spatio-cultural contexts similar to the US, graffiti in the UK also learned from family members or friends who had either lived in or visited the US, and who may have brought first-hand experience back to the context of the UK. This was very common in cities and larger towns, but was less likely in rural areas. Graffiti’s starting point in these parts of the UK was located purely in borrowed, published material from books, news and television reports and consumer products such as record sleeve artwork. This meant that in rural places graffiti was exclusively an acquired culture, and much of the work produced in the early years was based on copying these sources.

Secondly, the rural buildings and infrastructure was an important influence. Graffiti writers “bombed” farm buildings, barns, silo-stores, village bus-shelters and light industrial units as well as agricultural machinery, box-trailers, fences, and even livestock. The barns and stores were ideal sites supporting the most superlative results as they generally had large surface areas which faced open landscape with excellent vantage. The smaller scale and mobile sites also produced powerful results, and machinery and trailers particularly were pursued when unattended in fields. The smooth metal surface of machinery and light industrial units meant that writers had to work fast to avoid paint drips, whilst the more traditional brick construction of barns and signal boxes were a favourite semi-smooth, semi-porous surface which took paint application well. It was uncommon to target stone barns and walls due to the unevenness of surface.

The combination of copied works, the self-taught paradigm and the use of spacious sites resulted in a rural vernacular form of graffiti which differed from the urban, and tended to be more liberal with surface area, optimistic colours and varied background sceneries.



New York (A Dedication to the Creators and Makers), epitomises the UK vernacular by its juxtaposition of NY trains and Devonian landscape. By SCARCE, JAY and PROJECT CEE. Exeter, July 1991 (Photograph courtesy of SCARCE).

Keywords

Graffiti, spatial practice, graffiti writers, writers, street art, illegal graffiti, graffiti culture, subaltern, subculture, UK

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