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From Subways to Product Labels: The Commercial Incorporation of Hip Hop Graffiti

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Figure 1. Piece. Courtesy of the author. Color figure available online.

From Subways to Product Labels: The Commercial Incorporation of Hip Hop Graffiti

Once described as a terrorist act, hip-hop graffiti has been increasingly appropriated by commercial, art, and government institutions. This article explores one aspect of its mainstreaming, the commercial, breaking with previous scholarship which has stressed the exploitative and degenerative effect of commercial culture on graffiti. It refers to creative industries literature and the scholarship of economist Tyler Cowen to demonstrate that although commercial incorporation can change the graffiti aesthetic and exploit it, increasingly the commercialization of graffiti is a collaborative process. It also finds that often graffiti writers will compromise in one area to obtain rewards in another. Despite increased appropriation, it is evident that ambiguity continues to pervade the meanings of graffiti, indicating that this has not rendered it insignificant or meaningless.

Kara-Jane Lombard

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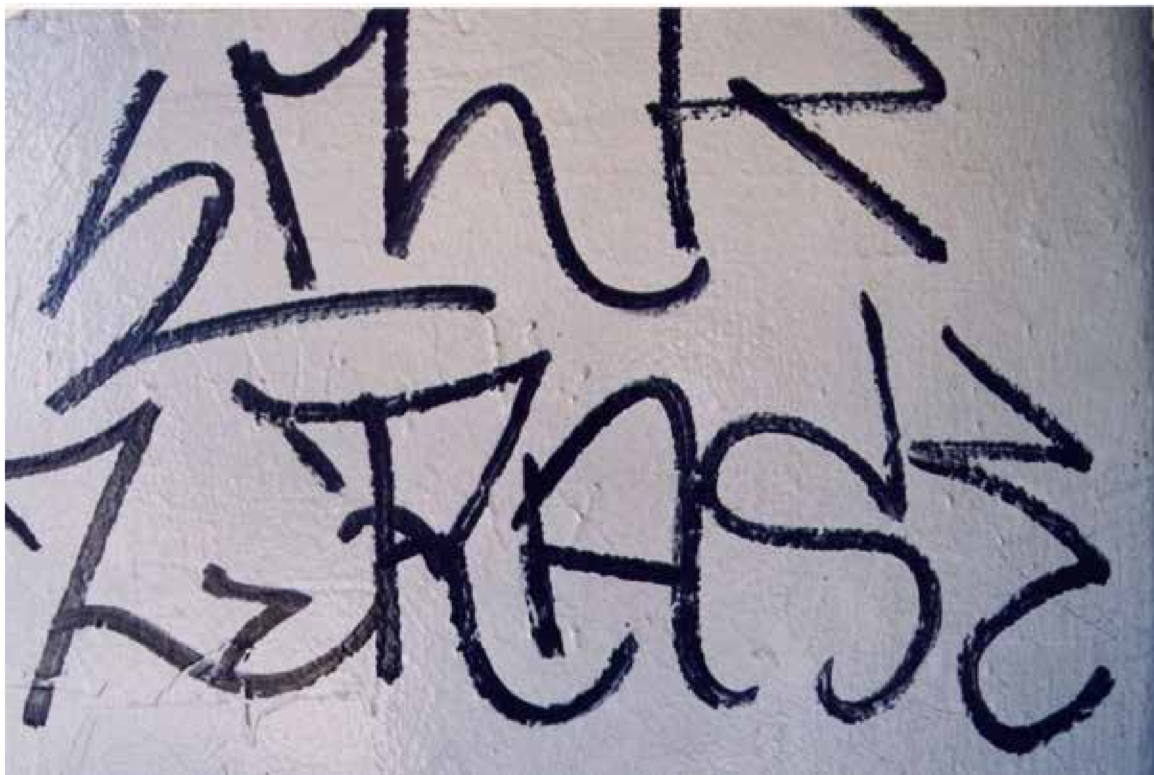

Figure 2. Tagging. Courtesy of the author. Color figure available online.

Considered a signifier of resistance, even described as a terrorist act (Iveson, 2010, p. 130), hip-hop graffiti first evolved as a distinct form in the late 1960s and 1970s when young people in New York began to systematically graffiti trains and public buildings. Since then, its aesthetic codes and stylized images have disseminated to major cities across America and throughout the globe, and hip-hop graffiti has become an increasing part of the mainstream. Many mature writers have been supportive of the mainstreaming of graffiti and, as Australian graffiti writer Phibs says, are interested in "being a businessman, getting government grants" (cited in Hamilton, 2001, p. 73). Greek graffiti artist Jasone ("The artists," n.d., para 1) described Chromopolis, the 2004 Summer Olympic Games graffiti project, as an "opportunity to promote our work, on a professional level."

There are three main avenues through which graffiti has been incorporated into the mainstream: commercial culture, the art world, and government institutions. The focus of this article is on the commercial mainstreaming of hip-hop graffiti. As BBC writer Jane Hughes (2000, para 20) notes, "The commercial world is increasingly being won over by its charms." This article analyzes such effect on graffiti culture and its aesthetic, and examines the different ways in which graffiti is commercialized by considering the graffiti writers and companies involved. Previous work into the commercial incorporation of graffiti has stressed the exploitative and degenerative effect of commercial culture but lacks supporting evidence. This article refers to creative industries literature and the scholarship of economist Tyler Cowen to demonstrate that although commercial incorporation can change the graffiti aesthetic and exploit it, increasingly the commercialization of graffiti is a collaborative process in which graffiti writers are involved in negotiating how the final piece will look. It also finds that while graffiti writers may have to compromise in some ways, there are complex motivations behind artistic creation, and often graffiti writers will compromise in one area to obtain rewards in another. The central claim is that it is necessary to resist a uniform understanding of incorporation which is a complex process. Incorporation is not simply a case of gentrification, corruption, or exploitation, but has diverse and often contradictory potentials.

The Mainstreaming of Graffiti

The extent to which graffiti is incorporated into the mainstream, and the manner and circumstances in which this occurs, is dependent on context. For instance, in America, graffiti was first incorporated into the mainstream through the art world, and then through landlords and shop owners commissioning "mural" works on buildings, whereas in Australia graffiti has only really gained acceptance as an art form during the past decade. While graffiti has primarily been incorporated via the market in America, governmental incorporation is more common in Australia. This is largely due to the differing political and economic conditions. Generally in the United States, private enterprise is preferred over government intervention, lower taxes over government programs. On the other hand, in Australia, the role of government has been much more central, as Keith Hancock's *Australia*, first published in 1930, claims, Australia's prevailing ideology was "the appeal to government as the instrument of self-realisation" (p. 1).

To begin the discussion of the commercialization of hip-hop graffiti, it is useful to articulate a historical discussion of mainstreaming of graffiti that takes into account two complementary processes of mainstreaming that have occurred: the development of graffiti from a crime into an art and the commercialization of the form. This contextualizes these processes of mainstreaming alongside the increasingly stringent measures by authorities to curb graffiti and discusses the development of the relationship of graffiti writers to processes of mainstreaming. Hip-hop graffiti evolved as a distinct form in the late 1960s and 1970s. With unique forms and functions, hip-hop graffiti is distinct from gang, racial, folk, political, and other kinds of graffiti. The graffiti painters refer to themselves as "writers," and more recently, often as "aerosol" or "urban artists." During the early 1970s this form of graffiti began to fuse with the other elements of hip-hop culture, and it spread rapidly when hundreds of young people were inspired by a July 1971 *New York Times* article about a young graffiti writer called TAKI 183.

Hip-hop graffiti is comprised of three basic forms: tags, throw-ups, and pieces. A tag is a stylized version of a signature, a mark of identification that is instantly recognizable, and is the most basic form of graffiti (see Figure 2). There are two types of tagging: individual and crew. Throw-ups are large two-dimensional versions of tags. The outlines of letters are usually drawn in one color and filled in with another color. The piece, short for masterpiece, is the most sophisticated kind of graffiti (see Figure 1). Usually designed and practiced beforehand in a piecebook, pieces are most often completed by a crew or several writers. Pieces can include characters—often poached from pop culture—as well as words and phrases, and are of complex design and style, featuring backgrounds, patterns, and multiple colors.

Graffiti began to infuse the mainstream in the 1970s as it first found its way into the legitimate art world. A key moment in its incursion into the mainstream was initiated by the graffiti writers themselves, when in 1973 a group called the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) participated in the first formal showing of graffiti art at the Razor Gallery in SoHo, New York. The collective had been formed by sociology student Hugo Martinez a few years earlier as a forum for writers who were interested in developing graffiti as an art form which could be exhibited in legitimate arenas. Certainly UGA wanted to be artists and so steered toward galleries, not commercial products (Miller, 2002, p. 154). Unlike Tricia Rose (1994), Ivor Miller (2002, p. 154) finds that some early writers did resist profiting from their pleasure, turning down commercial contracts in favor of gallery work. Soon graffiti writers were involved in art exhibitions and "paintings sold for over a thousand dollars, and press reports were generally favourable" (Cresswell, 1996, p. 35), although in sharp contrast to common views at the time. At the end of the 1970s Italian art dealer Claudio Bruni purchased a number of graffiti canvases, and graffiti was soon sought after by European art dealers and collectors, and lauded in the prestigious *Art Forum* magazine. In 1979 Galleria Medusa in Rome introduced "graffiti art" to a European audience for the first time.

Struggling with the illegal graffiti epidemic, government bodies in the United States resisted referring to hip-hop graffiti as art. As cultural geographer Timothy Cresswell (1996, p. 33) notes, the New York City government, "fuming at the suggestion graffiti should be considered 'art,' instituted a series of expensive, and largely fruitless, antigraffiti campaigns." During the 1970s and 1980s, authorities considered graffiti one of the worst urban afflictions and dealt with it under a broken windows policy. This policy is based on the belief that one broken window in a building makes the building appear neglected, leading to more windows being broken. Therefore, tolerating graffiti was believed to lead to an increase in all forms of crime and ultimately urban decay.

Throughout the 1970s, graffiti pieces became bigger and more complicated as measures to deal with it became increasingly stringent. Austin (2001, p. 245) notes that "by 1977, the MTA

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Figures 3 and 4. Tats Cru pieces for Coke. Courtesy of Tats Cru. Color figures available online.

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[Metropolitan Transportation Authority] had built a $25 million car wash that smeared and faded (but could not remove) the masterpieces on the trains and had formed an antigraffiti police squad." As a new wave of creativity bloomed in 1977, the MTA introduced polyurethane paint coverings, an automatic chemical wash known as "the Buff," and an enforcement unit known as the Vandal Squad. While measures were being taken to eradicate graffiti in America,

> interest in graffiti as "high" art quickly burned out. A 1975 gallery exhibit in SoHo, with prices ranging from $1,000 to $3,000, was deemed a disappointment and the trend spotters, once hot on turning this public nuisance into a saleable commodity, turned their appraising eyes elsewhere. (George, 1998, p. 12)

Graffiti's second foray into the art world occurred in the early 1980s, "after the whole-car trains had gained international press and the movers and shakers in the downtown art scene were getting hip to the dynamics of the culture" (Miller, 2002, p. 158).

> Graffiti's new prominence has encouraged some to return to the trains. Others, like Vulcan, who re-emerged in 1981 after a six-year hiatus, work primarily on murals and in commercial art. Futura 2000 and Dondi, among others, have done work in fashion design. Fab Five Freddy has sold pieces to banks. (George, Banes, Flinker, & Romanowski, 1985, p. 52)

While many writers became famous as "graffiti artists," a term first used by UGA in 1972 (Miller, 2002, p. 167), some artists with little connection to hip-hop graffiti culture (such as Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Kenny Scharf) were represented by the media as graffiti artists, becoming the most famous figures associated with the culture. The *Post-Graffiti* exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1984 was an early attempt to rebadge graffiti as art. Soon after that, however, graffiti began to recede into the underground. Austin (2001) explains that

> despite good reviews, the "Post-Graffiti" show at Janis marked the decline of the mainstream New York City art world's fascination with writers as canvas-painters. Gallery owners had already stopped buying new paintings before the Janis show was hung, and they had a difficult time selling those already in stock. (p. 192)

Graffiti writer Mare 139 recalls seeing cartoon characters shown Barney Rubble and Fred Flintstone b-boying in commercials during the early 1980s, as well as a range of graffiti toys and graffiti applications on clothing and in advertising (Miller, 2002, p. 175). While many writers refused to have their work co-opted, just as many pursued commercial opportunities and studied art traditionally, so clearly not all writers were against graffiti's relationship with commercial culture. A further development during this initial phase saw the first instances of commercial interest in hip-hop from the late 1980s. At first, only a few mainstream corporations were willing to associate with hip-hop, despite the fact that hip-hop music was becoming increasingly commercialized and reaching a wider audience.

It was also during this time that graffiti became a regular part of the commercial mainstream. Ivor Miller (2002) gives some indication of how this market relation evolved: "After several years of the corporate mimicking of New York City urban youth culture, some companies began to hire actual writers, dancers, and musicians" (pp. 176–177). After examining books, newspaper and journal articles, and Internet sites and interviewing graffiti writers, my research reveals that graffiti was predominantly inserted into

marketing and advertising through landlords and shop owners commissioning "mural" work on buildings. Thus graffiti writers benefited because they were paid or given paint. This relationship was also beneficial for landlords and shop owners who had had trouble keeping their property graffiti free: those who commissioned a prominent writer or crew would find that other graffiti writers would not "go over" this piece.

With the proliferation of legal graffiti, its meaning has changed in some contexts where it is now referred to as aerosol art. Since the 1990s graffiti has been a regular part of the commercial mainstream, appearing in advertising for everything from apparel to beverages, food, and cars. Angela McRobbie's (2002) work on creative entrepreneurs is useful in discussing the commercialization of graffiti. McRobbie outlines a series of constitutive features of this new model of work in the creative industries that are useful in explaining the differences between the unconventionality of business entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs in the creative sector. She points out one of the features of this new work is that it draws on rave culture, leading to a fusion of youth culture and entrepreneurship: "imported into the creative sector are elements of youth culture, in particular those drawn from energetic and entrepreneurial world of dance and rave culture" (McRobbie, 2002, p. 519). She states:

> The dance/rave culture which came into being in the late 1980s as a mass phenomenon has strongly influenced the shaping and contouring, the energising and the entrepreneurial "nous" of the new culture industries. . . . The level of self-generated economic activity which "dance-party-rave" organisation entailed, served as a model for many of the activities which were a recurrent feature of "creative Britain" in the 1990s. (p. 519)

This rave model of entrepreneurship is certainly the same model favored by grassroots hip-hop ventures since the 1970s. It reveals a style of economic activity that begins not as a career or means of generating an income but more as a hobby or promotional activity. This trend has occurred in the musical elements of hip-hop, the development of media such as magazines and websites, as well as in the work of graffiti writers.

As graffiti writer Zephyr explains, he does not get upset by corporations' use of graffiti imagery because

> usually a lot of the products centering around graffiti is being produced from within the culture, as opposed to the '80s when that wasn't the case. We were very young and the people who were creating the business of graffiti were almost always outsiders. Now we've grown up; a lot of us are entrepreneurs and we're producing our own products. That's a much better situation. (Cited in Miller, 2002, p. 177)

By creating their own brands and businesses, graffiti writers are able to profit while "representing" the culture. New York–based Tats Cru Inc. have been instrumental in the commercialization of hip-hop graffiti. Tats Cru is symptomatic of the way in which those involved in graffiti are evolving due to its closer relationship with the mainstream. One of the most successful aerosol art businesses, Tats Cru was once a graffiti crew that wrote illegally on subway trains. Now legitimate aerosol artists, the group incorporated in the early 1990s and has been commissioned to do work for a variety of companies such as small neighborhood businesses as well as bigger corporations such as Coca-Cola, Firestone, Reebok, the Bronx Museum of Arts, and Chivas Regal (see Figures 3 and 4). They have also been featured in media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *USA Today,* CNN, and BBC.

The way in which Tats Cru work is very much like others working in the creative industries today, which breaks old working patterns (McRobbie 2002), instead involving "holding down three or even four 'projects' at once . . . [which are] usually short term" (p. 519). This is part of a broader trend in which "the new relation between art and economics marks a break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative" (p. 521). The recontextualization of graffiti as aerosol art has disrupted notions that equate crime with authenticity, and it means that graffiti writers have had to redefine notions of authenticity. For many writers, this has meant a weakened connection between illegality and authenticity, allowing them to become involved in legal projects.

While it is certainly easier to make a living from graffiti nowadays, especially in the United States where graffiti writers such as Man One and crews like Tats Cru are able to do it full time, the mainstreaming of hip-hop graffiti in Australia is significantly different to that of the United States. On the whole, developments in the United States tend to be formed by market relations, while in Australia mainstreaming occurs primarily through government. There is an aerosol market in Australia, however, although not as well developed as the one in the States, and commercial projects tend to come from small businesses and private commissions. Some writers have started businesses that combine their expertise in graffiti with other elements. Australian graffiti writer Andrew Bourke started

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KomplexGraphix, a business which combines classic graphic design with street art and graffiti in creating signage and advertising. A similar situation exists in New Zealand. As Jonny Wartman ("Graffiti Artist Jonny Wartman," n.d.) explains, he was inspired to start Disruptiv after returning from Europe, where he was

> lucky enough stay and paint with some of the best graf artists in the world. I met all these guys who were professional graf artists, running businesses, just the level hip-hop was at operating over there all together was an inspirational kick in the ass. (para. 2)

While governments utilizing the alternative approach and the art world have been intent on transforming graffiti vandalism into aerosol art, mainstream and commercial brands have relied on graffiti (and the other elements of hip-hop) remaining signs of resistance. At the same time, while graffiti is increasingly a part of the mainstream, it is facing escalating criminalization as governments deal with it in an increasingly stringent manner. It is interesting to note that while the meanings and aesthetics of graffiti have evolved, the debate over whether graffiti is art or crime has persisted. As Timothy Cresswell (1996, p. 52) noted, "It is surely paradoxical that the same act (painting a stylized logo) can be at once reviled and admired, removed and preserved." As graffiti continues to blur the boundaries between art and crime, its meanings are still somewhat contested.

Contemporary graffiti writers further complicate this paradox by being involved in both legal and illegal graffiti. This is particularly true for those who are able to do more complex forms of graffiti: while taggers tend to remain in the illegal element, those able to do pieces have more opportunities available to them for legal work and tend to feel limited by illegality as they mature. There is certainly a reluctance to consider tagging as art, although as a signifier of resistance it is often incorporated in advertising. The graffiti writer or street artist has always had to negotiate the ambivalences that exist at the edges of legality (Lachmann, 1988); however, these contradictions have only intensified. Although having been involved in numerous legal schemes, including private commissions, exhibitions such as *Word* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1999, graffiti demonstrations, hip-hop jams, workshops, youth festivals, and council schemes (personal communication with Amuck 37, April 28, 2005), Australian writer Amuck 37 remains a prolific illegal writer. He explains that he is well-rounded in this respect: "I like doing 'legals,' [1] I like doing 'illegals,' [2] I like bombing, I like, you know, taking photos, and I also like doing legal council work, and I like getting paid for doing legals as well" (personal communication with Amuck 37, July 3, 2004). Amuck adds that after completing a legal piece, graffiti writers often go out and do "the real thing"—illegal graffiti. He considers it important to be involved in a variety of aspects of graffiti.

Commercial Incorporation

This section presents a more in-depth analysis of the commercial incorporation of graffiti. It utilizes creative industries literature and the work of Tyler Cowen to explore various processes of commercialization of graffiti and argues that although commercial incorporation can change the graffiti aesthetic and exploit it, increasingly the commercialization of graffiti is a collaborative process in which graffiti writers are involved in negotiating how the final piece will look. While it is possible to explore examples of graffiti writers who are now employed as graphic designers or in industries such as fashion, this discussion is limited to those who are still primarily involved in producing hip-hop graffiti style for various types of commissioned works from signage to advertising to private murals.

Those who have explored the commercial incorporation of graffiti have argued that it renders graffiti meaningless. For example, Lynn Powers's (1996) article, "Whatever Happened to the Graffiti Art Movement?," argues that graffiti has become devoid of meaning (p. 141). She believes that graffiti's move into the commercial scene is an example of "a successful art movement within a subculture that was subverted by a dominant culture" (p. 142). Similarly, Susan Stewart (1994) argues that as graffiti has moved to canvas and gallery space, it has been rendered acceptable, readable, and apprehensible (p. 225). There are a number of problems with the work of Power and Stewart, however. First, they do not acknowledge that graffiti artists continue to pursue commercial opportunities despite the fact that commercial culture apparently exploits and degrades graffiti. Also, as discussed earlier, Phibs has indicated there is a tendency for graffiti writers to graduate from illegal graffiti to being more business oriented as they get older. Last, and most significant, Powers and Stewart offer no evidence that commercial culture exploits or degrades graffiti or graffiti culture.

To conduct a more detailed analysis of the commercial incorporation of graffiti, the creative industries literature provides a useful point from which to begin. As John Hartley and Stewart Cunningham (2001, p. 4) state, "creative

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Figure 5. Amuck hears noises while painting. Courtesy of the author. Color figure available online.

Figure 6. Moizie please stop biting me. Courtesy of the author. Color figure available online.

industries" is an idea whose time has come; it "suits the political, cultural and technological landscape of these times," and it is a concept that combines and radically transforms the two existing terms of creative arts and cultural industries to produce the creative industries (p. 2). Creative industries is a reaction to the former polarized opposition of commerce and creativity. To understand why the creative industries concept is seen as so radical, it must be noted that civic humanism and cultural conservatives such as Geoffrey Faber, F. R. Leavis, and Queenie Leavis have left a lasting impact, which has resulted in an opposition between culture or creativity and commerce. To develop an account of the rise of the creative industries that challenges such notions, it is necessary to first examine the rubric of the cultural industries.

American economic geographer Richard Florida (2003, p. 201), in his study of the creative class, remarks that "most good graffiti artists and rappers are like good artists of any kind. The mainly want to hone their skills and do their art . . . if they can make money in the process, that's wonderful." Angela McRobbie (2002, p. 521) concurs: "to have seemingly circumvented 'unhappy work' and to have come upon a way or earning a living without the feeling of being robbed of identity is a social phenomenon worthy

Figure 7. A Body Glove advertisement utilizes tagging style. Advertisement courtesy of Body Glove. Color figure available online.

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of sociological attention." The commercial incorporation of graffiti is not quite as simple as Florida would have us believe. The proliferation of legal opportunities has meant changes to graffiti culture. For instance, following the success artists such as Shepard Fairey and Banksy, graffiti writers command a notoriety that extends well beyond the subculture, challenging assumptions that graffiti is fueled largely by subcultural recognition. Recontextualized onto product labels, on clothing, and into advertising changes graffiti, thus legal graffiti is not only displaced from its location but also from another important aspect of the graffiti aesthetic: its mode of production. As Banksy (2005, p. 205) articulates, "The craft is finding a decent drainpipe to get access to the site as much as it is in the art. . . . Van Gogh used short, stumpy brush strokes to convey his insanity—I use short, thin ledges above mainline train tracks."

The commercial incorporation of graffiti has meant changes not just to the culture and craft but also to its aesthetic. The evaluative comments often put up alongside illegal graffiti (such as "sorry about the drips" and "cheap paint") are absent from legal pieces, as are comments describing the circumstances in which the graffiti was done, such as "too late, too tired," "my hands were cold," "nineteen years old, nineteen years young, someone is here so let's all run" (see Figures 5 and 6). A further change in the graffiti aesthetic when it occurs in legal contexts is in terms of style. Advertising and product labels tend to privilege tagging style over complicated lettering forms such as wildstyle and 3-D, rendering graffiti readable and comprehensible (see Figure 7).

In commercial contexts, illegal graffiti style (which places great importance on names and individuality) is transformed, rendering the graffiti writer nameless and anonymous. Graffiti writers realize that outsiders are unable to understand the graffiti aesthetic. As Amuck puts it,

> If we're going to paint some high profile area I would basically just look at actual painting and go, "Okay. Should I do an intricate piece, or a shall I do a public style piece?" Public style piece is basically readable; wildstyle is something very intricate that the public just looks at and goes, "That looks like shit because I can't read it." All right, to us it looks like a mad piece, but to them it looks like this big wild abstract pattern. (Personal communication, July 3, 2004)

As Stewart (1994) notes, "The more illegible or 'wildstyle', the writing, the stronger is the public's assumption that the message must be obscene" (p. 219), although it must be noted that hip-hop graffiti is rarely obscene. The implication of commercial culture's celebrating of tagging, despised by the public and many graffiti writers, has yet to be realized, but it is already obvious that contemporary graffiti writers are more likely to be taggers than the artistic writers of the 1970s and 1980s. Kurt Iveson concurs that graffiti will continue in a less sophisticated form (2009, p. 25; 2010, p. 129). Also, while graffiti culture encourages unique and individual styles, commercial culture encourages a uniform tagging style, rendering graffiti dull and easily reproducible.

Florida's comments also fail to recognize the various processes of commercialization of graffiti. There is top-down commercialization of graffiti, where commercial culture favors a generic kind of tagging that can be generated with computer programs. As Sterling Downey (cited in Woodley, 2003, para. 16), graffiti artist and co-organizer of the Under Pressure hip-hop event in Canada, argues, "Corporations exploit graffiti imagery and give nothing back to the community." Some corporations have developed credibility by working with those involved in graffiti culture and

not exploiting the style on a superficial level but, as Downey notes, that kind of support is not as common in countries outside of the United States. He approached numerous companies in 2003, including Fuji, to sponsor *Under Pressure*, and was refused. Even seemingly supportive corporations such as Nike and Adidas were not interested. "The events in other countries are being financed majorly" (para 14), said Downey, "whereas it's encountering all these financial barriers in Canada. They come out with a campaign with graffiti in it and when you say 'I want to get on board,' they say, 'No no, we do our own things'" (cited in Woodley, 2003, para 14).

On the other side of the spectrum are companies who do give back to the graffiti community. One company that has developed credibility by working with those involved in graffiti culture is Coca-Cola, which has commissioned hundreds of writers to paint aerosol art murals across America over the past ten years. In 2002 the NoGraf Network, which is involved in combating graffiti globally, wrote to the CEO of Coca-Cola, outlining its concerns about the company's aerosol art initiatives. The NoGraf Network was specifically concerned about Sprite sponsoring a national program to highlight aerosol art as well as the *Art of Harmony*, art competition which transforms the winning works into aerosol murals. Coca-Cola responded to the NoGraf Network saying there is a difference between "mural tagging and street graffiti" (Robinson, 2002, para 2). It explained that the aerosol art lessons given as part of Sprite's Liquid Mix Tour focused "on the artistic style of graffiti and how it can be applied to more appropriate mediums" (para 2). Coca-Cola also added that the *Art of Harmony* murals are for the "express purpose of beautifying the neighborhoods and are not acts of vandalism. In fact, most locations are chosen in order to replace unsightly graffiti" (para 1).

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Man One is one of the aerosol artists who completed murals for Coca-Cola's *Art of Harmony* initiative. Since 1996, he has painted various other murals for Coca-Cola around America, including "Paint the Town Red" in Southern California and "The World of Coke" in Georgia and Nevada. He first became involved in graffiti in 1987, writing tags and his trademark colorful pieces around Los Angeles. After completing a degree in fine arts, he set about changing the way the world interprets graffiti. Man One's commissioned works for MTV, IBM, Adidas, and Sony, among others, has made him influential in graffiti's move from graffiti into aerosol art (Man One, n.d.). This is a collaborative commercialization where corporations and graffiti writers work together to create a piece. Graffiti writer Zephyr explains how this is a more positive process of commercialisation: "It's nice when corporations go to the real people as opposed to asking art directors and illustrators to co-opt the imagery that's synonymous with this culture" (Miller, 2002, p. 177).

The fact that graffiti writers are increasingly being hired for advertising and marketing campaigns instead of the superficial appropriation of graffiti style is indicative of a more positive process of commercialization; however it is important to be cautious about such an argument. In this regard, Richard Caves' (2000, p. 4) study of the organization of creative industries is useful because he explores the problems that arise from "coupling creative effort with humdrum commerce." Caves points out that

> the view of creative inspiration inherited from romanticism holds that the artist creates out of inner necessity . . . asked to cooperate with humdrum partners in some production process, the artist is disposed to forswear compromise and to resist making commitments about future acts of artistic creation or accepting limitations on them. The rub is that resources are scare, and compromise is unavoidable. (p. 4)

It is certainly true that graffiti writers hired by companies are often forced to compromise. For example, when New Zealand graffiti writer Jonny Wartman of Disruptiv Limited (a company started by two graffiti writers specializing in permissioned and commissioned graffiti works) was involved in a Vodaphone commercial, he found that "we just had to follow their direction with little creative input" ("Graffiti Artist Jonny Wartman," n.d., para 10).

However, compromise is not as distasteful as it might seem, and here it is necessary to reexamine the arguments of Richard Florida. Noting the "acute shortages of factory workers across the United States" (Florida, 2003, p. 85), Florida asked his students at Carnegie Mellon if they had only two career choices open to them, where would they rather work: in a machine shop with high pay and a job for life or a hair salon with less pay and less stability? (pp. 85–86). Florida found that repeatedly the hair salon was preferred for the same reasons: it provides a more stimulating and cleaner environment, more flexibility, the chance to work with interesting people, learn new things, as well as the opportunity to make creative decisions and see immediate results (p. 85). Florida explains that "in almost every case, the content of the job and the nature of the work environment mattered more than compensation" (p. 86). He also came to much the same conclusion through field research and statistical

studies. To summarize Florida's point: people are increasingly interested in more than pecuniary compensation in employment. As Florida (2003) puts it, money "is important, but not the whole story. Creative people want challenging work and the ability to do their jobs flexibly" (p. 98). Thus it seems that creative people are willing to compromise in some respects to gain intrinsic rewards. Graffiti writer Amuck confirms this:

> If I have to do what they want me to do, I put a price on it, a very nice one. And if I get creative control where I get to do something as well we negotiate a price that is not too unreasonable, but it's like they're getting a good deal and I'm getting a good deal as well. That way I manage to get like a painting for free and they get the signage and background and everything at the same time. And you get a fair few tins laying around after the actual painting, plus you know you actually get paid for it, but if you don't then you get a few tins out of it, you get cans. It's all good, you know. (Personal communication, April 28, 2005)

While Amuck is concerned with pecuniary rewards, "getting a painting for free," and collecting spare tins of spray paint is just as valued. When commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney for the 1999 exhibition *Word*, Amuck explains that his main motivation in accepting the contract was to obtain paint:

> The lady tried to rip me off by taking me to the Dulux and by saying, "You can paint this in Dulux." And I just went, "Stop wasting my time." And I went to the Belton store and spent five grand on Belton, which was heaps of fun; you can do that very, very easily in a paint shop. And then we just walked into the art gallery with twenty cans, painted for the whole entire day . . . and walked off with just over four and a half thousand dollars' worth of paint. Good deal that one . . . four and a half grand's worth of paint is a lot of paint to play with; it's just over 540 cans. I think we used twenty or thirty in the actual piece. (Personal communication, April 28, 2005)

The work of economist Tyler Cowen is useful in understanding the more positive processes of commercial incorporation of graffiti. As Cowen (1998, p. 10) remarks, there are complex motivations behind artistic creation and psychological motivations that do not operate independent of external constraints. He explains that artists respond to both internal forces (such as the artist's love of creating, demands for money and fame, and the desire to work out styles, aesthetics, and problems posed by previous works) and external forces (such as the artistic materials and media available, the conditions of patronage, the distribution network, and opportunities for earning income) (p. 10). Cowen (1998) adds that "when translated into the terminology of economics or rational choice theory, the internal forces correspond to preferences and external forces represent opportunities and constraints. These internal and external forces interact to shape artistic production" (p. 10).

Cowen sees the capitalist market economy as a

> vital but underappreciated institutional framework for supporting a plurality of coexisting artistic visions, providing a steady stream of new and satisfying creations, helping consumers and artists refine their tastes, and paying homage to the eclipsed past by capturing, reproducing, and disseminating it. (p. 2)

In this way, Cowen disagrees with Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the market's effect on cultural production. Like Florida, Cowen is critical of these "cultural pessimists" who take a negative view of the market economy's effect on culture. He uses "the term 'market economy' to refer more generally to a nexus of voluntary exchanges" (p. 3) and treats "capitalism in terms of its underlying economic logic, rather than in terms of a particular historical epoch, as do many Marxists" (p. 3) while still acknowledging that capitalism has not operated in the same fashion across historical eras (p. 3).

Cowen gives several reasons why the capitalist market economy is positive. First, he declares that "the arts tend to flourish in a modern liberal order" (p. 9). He explains that this is just one of at least three versions of the cultural optimist position. The second version

> goes further and makes the political prediction that a liberal order will remain prominent for many years to come . . . [while] the third version of cultural optimism argues that the arts will flourish precisely because capitalism is doomed and will be replaced by a superior system, such as socialism or communism. (p. 9)

Cowen rejects these latter versions, instead preferring the first. Thomas Frank (1997, p. 295) is critical of Cowen's combination of cultural studies populism and market populism, which has translated into his "extended celebration of the benevolence of markets." Frank certainly has a point; as mentioned, there are instances of the superficial exploitation and exploitation of graffiti by commercial culture. Furthermore, there are also some weaknesses in Cowen's argument. For instance, Cowen (1998, p. 18) claims that

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Figure 8. Amuck legal piece. Courtesy of the author. Color figure available online.

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capitalism has "allowed minority groups to achieve market access, despite systematic discrimination and persecution. Black rhythm and blues musicians, when they were turned down by major record companies, marketed their product through the independents, such as Chess, Sun, Stax and Motown." While this is true to a certain extent with graffiti, especially in the United States, Cowen's perception of capitalism's effects on minority groups is oversimplified because the majority of graffiti writers involved in graffiti production for the market still need to supplement their income with other employment.

Despite these weaknesses in his argument, Cowen is useful in understanding the more positive processes of commercial incorporation of graffiti. One area which Cowen is able to illuminate in the commercialization of graffiti is diversity. Cowen (1998) asserts that the capitalist market economy is positive because "market exchange and capitalism produce diverse art, rather than art that appeals to one particular set of tastes" (p. 6). He explains that a well-developed market supports cultural diversity (p. 14) as "the market brings crowd-pleasing artists, such as Michael Jackson or Steven Spielberg, in touch with their audiences, while at the same time securing niches for more obscure visions" (p. 6). He adds, "Competition and complementarity are forces for innovation. Artists offer new products to increase their income, their fame, and their audience exposure" (p. 15). Related to this point is the fact that "a large market lowers the costs of creative pursuits and makes market niches easier to find" (p. 14). Cowen argues that "today it is easier than ever before to make a living by marketing to an artistic niche and rejecting mainstream taste. The wealth and diversity of capitalism have increased the latitude of artists to educate their critics and audiences" (p. 15). It is certainly easier to make a living from graffiti nowadays, especially in the United States where graffiti writers such as Man One and crews like Tats Cru are able to do it full time.

A further aspect of Cowen's (1998) work that is useful in understanding the commercialization of graffiti is his point that many artists pursue profits, and "a wealthy economy gives artists a greater number of other sources of potential financial support" (p. 11). When I asked Amuck if it is acceptable to make money from graffiti, he replied, "Yeah, depends. If, like, you're making money from your own graffiti or from somebody else's. If you're making money from something that you've done, yeah, cool" (personal communication, July 3, 2004). Today graffiti writers are able to obtain pecuniary rewards from a number of avenues—commercial projects, government schemes, or private commissions.

Also, Cowen (1998, p. 15) argues that market mechanisms are involved in more than simply supplying consumers with what they want. He stresses that

> markets give the producer the greatest latitude to educate his or her audience. Art consists of a continual dialogue between producer and consumer; this dialogue helps both parties decide what they want. The market incentive to conclude a profitable sale simultaneously provides an incentive to engage consumers and producers in a process of want refinement. (p. 15)

A story from Amuck seems to bear this out:

> Nine times out of ten you just go with what you want to do. Like you know that demon that I did in that guy's lounge room? That was a really funny thing 'cause I rolled up with just a bagful of paint and had no idea of what I was even painting. And it's like we were just talking and he goes, "Oh, that's off the AC/DC cover." And we're like, "Yeah, it is, hey." 'Cause me and this dude just hit it off, 'cause he

> was an AC/DC fan and so am I. . . . When he was talking I was just subconsciously putting paint into color schemes and orders and stuff and I says, "Well, here's the deal." And he went down to the shop and got like some white primer and some pollyfiller and filled over a couple of patches and while they were setting up we primed the wall and everything and then just threw the actual dragon up in, I think it was, nearly two hours. (Personal communication, April 28, 2005)

As Amuck suggests, commissioned graffiti often results from a dialogue between the producer and consumer; there is a process of negotiation involved.

Conclusion

Once considered a signifier of resistance, even described as a terrorist act (Iveson, 2010, p. 130), hip-hop graffiti has been increasingly appropriated by commercial, art, and government institutions. Many contemporary graffiti writers are supportive of this transformation. Increasingly, mature writers feel that the removal of their graffiti has robbed them of a history and have turned to legal work in an effort to restore it. Some writers argue that they have gone beyond graffiti, while others refuse to call their painting graffiti (Brewer, 1990, p. 359). Australian graffiti writers Phibs and Kano (cited in Hamilton, 2001, pp. 73–74), who participated in the graffiti exhibition *Sake of Name* in Sydney in 2001, declared illegal graffiti "limited" and claimed it no longer inspired them. Phibs, who has been involved in graffiti for more than 25 years, explained, "I love graffiti; it's a major part of my life—but you have to find ways to adapt as you get older" (p. 73). His attitude demonstrates that nowadays it is acceptable to make money from writing graffiti.

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While the meanings and aesthetic of graffiti have evolved over the past 40 years, these meanings are still somewhat contested because graffiti continues to blur the boundaries between art and crime. Traditionally, location and mode of production have been the key markers by which the authenticity of graffiti has been established. The recontextualization of graffiti into aerosol art has disrupted notions that equate crime with authenticity and means that graffiti writers have had to redefine notions of authenticity. For many writers, this has meant a weakened connection between illegality and authenticity. Thus aerosol art can be considered just as authentic as illegal graffiti. Very similar to what is happening in art world where the commercial aspect "is no longer disparaged but is welcomed and even celebrated" (McRobbie 2002, p. 520). However, as Amuck indicates, the mark of authenticity is still involvement in the illegal aspects of graffiti:

> You can't stay in one form. If you stay in one actual area and just do legals all the time, I think that's where council people—not only council people but your graffiti community—will turn around and say "sellout" because you're not staying true to what graffiti is, which is basically illegal writing on a surface. (Personal communication, July 3, 2004)

This article has investigated the commercialization of hip-hop graffiti, analyzing the effect on graffiti culture, its aesthetic, and the different ways in which graffiti is commercialized by considering the graffiti writers and companies involved. In discussing commercial incorporation it is evident there are contradictory potentials. The central claim of this article is that it is necessary to resist a uniform understanding of the incorporation of hip-hop graffiti, which should be seen as a complex process. Incorporation is not simply a case of gentrification, corruption, or exploitation, but has diverse and often contradictory potentials. Although commercial incorporation can change the graffiti aesthetic and exploit it, increasingly the commercialization of graffiti is a collaborative process in which graffiti writers are involved in negotiating how the final piece will look. Although graffiti writers may have to compromise in some ways, there are complex motivations behind artistic creation, and often graffiti writers will compromise in one area to obtain rewards in another. Despite increased appropriation, it is evident that ambiguity continues to pervade the meanings of graffiti, indicating that this has not rendered it insignificant or meaningless.

Notes

[1] Legal graffiti pieces or opportunities.
[2] Illegal graffiti pieces or opportunities.

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