



Strange Attractions:

When

a

Wall

Becomes

the

Canvas

of the

Soul

© 2005 by **Sandy Lee Carlson**

All Rights Reserved. No part of the contents of this document and its accompanying video disc may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author.

T: 203-266-4303

E: sandylcarlson@att.net

Five Woods Way, Woodbury, Connecticut 06798

First Printing 2005

Printed in the United States of America



STRANGE ATTRACTIONS: WHEN A WALL BECOMES THE CANVAS OF THE SOUL

WHEN WORKERS REMOVED the last beam from the pile at the World Trade Center site, the Associated Press reported that they “topped the beam with an American flag and covered the sides with spray-painted messages and photographs of victims.”

What else could they do?

By the time the beam came down, writing names of September 11 victims was a common practice in New York City. The workers who sprayed the names united the world in our common humanity in the same way thousands of others did when they painted names and handprints and other messages on bed sheets, T-shirts, paper—whatever they had—and affixed these bits and pieces to the fence outside St. Paul’s Chapel across from the pile.

Graffiti united people around the world in a grass-roots expression of pain, love, sympathy,

and support. Graffiti became the art of ordinary people who did not want to be alone. The art form was an effective vehicle for that act of reaching out because the fence around St. Paul’s became the backdrop of documentaries about the September 11 nightmare, a visual byte into our soul.

Three years ago, I wanted to explore the connection between the graffiti response to September 11 and its relation to graffiti you might see around just about any suburban town. This essay about graffiti is based on research I began last summer in the Greater Danbury, Conn., area for a video documentary about graffiti as an art form and a means of communication. My working thesis stated that graffiti is both of these. The graffiti writers, police officers, psychologist, and teachers I interviewed agreed. They added that it might be both fun and cheerful. A look at the activity of graffiti writers—getting their

names (even if they are pseudonyms) up for the world to see—reveals a creative response to the mystery of life. The world made the same response to the World Trade Center nightmare. A look at serious graffiti writers suggests the significance of the gesture.

Serious graffiti writers comprise a subculture of artists. They are not necessarily angry. They do not represent gangs. They are neither uneducated nor unhappy. The desire to paint impels them to paint, so they paint.

Though most of the time what graffiti writers do is illegal—painting unsanctioned murals on other people’s property is a form of vandalism—graffiti writers perceive their artistic gesture as a means of connecting with other members of their subculture and with anyone else who might notice their work. Graffiti writers see their pieces—what they call their elaborate, colorful, unsanctioned murals—as an affirmation of the beauty of life as they experience it individually and at the moment.

Most graffiti writers are males between the ages of 12 and 35. There are very few women involved, according to the writers and police officers I met. They come from all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some are college graduates. Some are college students. Others are college dropouts. Some are professional artists. Others are truck drivers. Still others say very little about what they do aside from spray painting pictures.

Political commentary is a byproduct of graffiti writers’ work, a result of the artists and their works’ being in and of this world. The writers I met did not identify a political purpose to their work beyond the role art has always played in challenging the way people perceive life individually and collectively. Artists, Picasso said, “have to wake people up. [They have t]o revolutionize their way of identifying things. You’ve got to create images they won’t accept.” Artists respond to the world creatively as they dismantle our perceptions and offer a vision of something new. Although the

graffiti writers and police officers with whom I met said the impetus of the writers is not political, the writers nonetheless place their art in a political framework by putting it in large, public spaces, often without the permission of the owners of those spaces.

Graffiti writers thus initiate a visual, creative dialogue with the communities that, however unwillingly, display their works. They force myriad questions: Why did they do that? Does it represent urban blight? Is it art? Even if the owner of the wall has granted his permission to the artists to paint, is it acceptable to the leaders of a city who embrace gunmetal gray walls as a symbol of order and control? What are we going to do about it?

“Graffiti is all about holding your thoughts in your hands. You affirm your emotions, your identity, your place in society. All can react,” Bridgeport artist and teacher Suzanne Kachmar told me in 1993, when she was working with youth from

Bridgeport to paint murals on a wooden hoarding surrounding a redevelopment site.

The same year, Jo Fox of the Bridgeport Area Arts Council told the *New York Times* the kids were painting the murals because “art is important for the human spirit. It’s an expression of the soul, and if ever there was a city that needs to express its soul, it’s



“Beat” in Bethel, Conn., 1993

Bridgeport.”

Graffiti writers come to terms with their physical world through their emotions as they represent them in art. “It’s about taking whatever you’re feeling at the moment and shoving it under the public eye,” said Jive, a truck driver in his early 30s who now

lives in Denver, Colo. He formerly lived in Brookfield, Conn.

“Our world is unhealthy,” said Dr. John Briggs, a professor of English at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury who has written extensively about chaos theory and creativity. “We squeeze creativity into useful forms. We evade the core of creativity in favor of knowable forms.” Graffiti writers challenge those forms.

When a graffiti writer covers a train car with colorful pieces—“kills” the train, to put it in the terms of the subculture—he is redefining the train, according to Briggs. He is challenging the idea of space. “The artist takes a conveyance of the American capitalist structure and makes the people on that train realize they’re not on a train; they’re on something else. You have an aesthetic response—Where am I?—and you realize that the world is a dream.” These colorful, elaborate, abstract versions of “Kilroy was here” offer a glimpse of the mystery of life.

Paint is not art just

because it’s on a wall, however. “If you just kill a train by defacing it, nobody gets the message,” Briggs said. “If you stay in anger, you stay in that subject-object mode and never get to the art. The other remains the other, the enemy, and there’s no communication. Art is very much about communication.”

Cycle, a graphic designer and graffiti writer living in New York City who grew up in Redding, Conn., and graduated from George Washington University, corroborated Briggs and Picasso’s statements when he said: “There’s a distinction between legally and morally right and wrong. Things that push the envelope are kind of good.”

“Waking us up is more than slapping us in the face,” Briggs argued. “If you just mar something, people never get out of their definition of you just marred it. [Art] takes us deeper into what it means to be in life. We sometimes describe it as an act of love.”

Some people see it that way. They see it as a form of

urban beautification. Crayone, the tag of a graffiti writer on the West Coast, told author Michael Walsh in his book *Graffito* (1996), “One of the most amazing things is when you go to an abandoned building or a section of town where it’s all run down and

there’s no money coming in and all of a sudden you turn a corner and there’s this huge multicolored mural; it just brightens up the whole neighborhood” (74-75).

Commenting that graffiti writers embrace their physical world as they find ways to paint in unlikely spaces, Cycle said, “We’re on top of buildings and we’re under ground. You’ll be in the subways running around and you come up into this little garden of graffiti in one of the ghost stations. It’s just beautiful, all color. And we’re the only ones who see it.”

Kenneth Utter, a police officer of the Danbury Police Department and head of its Anti-



A piece by Cycle at a legal wall in Bethel, Conn., in 1993

graffiti Task Force, said, “People tell me they’re tired of looking at the same old drab walls. The graffiti pieces give them a lift.”

Referring to an incident in Danbury three summers ago, when a group of writers received a building owner’s permission to paint graffiti murals around a Main Street building adjacent to a public housing project, Utter said, “The people there wanted it, they liked it; but as soon as I went on the record and said it was art, there were people who said, ‘How dare you?’ and they just weren’t going to have it. But it was legal. The guys used their own paint, they did it on their own time, and people wanted it. There were some

town officials and other policemen who agreed with me, but some people just wouldn't have it. So what do you do?"

The owner of the building, who had granted his permission to the writers to paint, later gave in



Jive's short-lived production piece in Danbury

to the wishes of Mayor Mark Boughton and other town officials and painted over the mural in the same hunter green that had served as the graffiti writers' blank canvas.

Utter, whose police work has all but eliminated graffiti vandalism in Danbury, has sought legal walls where writers can paint. There are two in the Mill Plain Road area of Danbury. Utter polices the walls regularly to

ensure that the painters take their garbage with them and limit their painting to the agreed upon areas.

"They respect that because they want to paint," Utter said. "I like to have the younger guys coming up in the culture to

see these guys because they tell the young guys they've done they're time and learned their lesson the hard way."

Though some members of the graffiti subculture argue that graffiti loses its emotion and strength when it is legal and there's no

rush to finish a piece, the writers I met weren't interested in the argument. These men said they were happy to paint on legal walls, even if they're in out-of-the-way spaces, because they like to paint. They were happy to paint without looking over their shoulders for the cops.

Jive said, "I've been arrested 13 times. I guess I'm just not good at that sort of thing. I'll

paint legal walls. Why not? I want to paint. I don't care if nobody ever sees it."

Other writers shared his view that they didn't need the fame—their peers' recognition of their work as a result of repeatedly seeing it on freight trains, subways, walls, highway bridges, and so on—but admitted that they had sought it when they were younger.

Da'man, an upstate New Yorker in his early thirties, said he was happy to paint legally at a highway overpass off of Mill Plain Road in Danbury where Utter allows the writers to paint so long as they clean up after themselves and stay within the space he prescribes. "We can take our time, listen to the radio, relax, and have a few beers. That's a good day."

Writers have access to the Internet, where there are Web sites dedicated to graffiti and even to individual writers. Graffiti writers post their photographs of

their work, so anyone in the world with Internet access can see their work. There are also graffiti magazines and videos, so a little self-promotion can take a remote wall a long way.

Rhondall Khoo, Ph.D., a



"Cycle" alongside "Jive" in Danbury

professor of psychology at Western Connecticut State University, pointed out that the images and colors in the graffiti on the walls in Danbury are "cheerful, happy," free of aggression, though there can be a note of defiance and an assertion of individual freedom in the gesture.

"The colors, the designs, are very cheerful," Khoo said as he examined a photo of Jive's piece that had adorned the controversial

legal wall on Main Street, Danbury. Pointing to a whimsical bug-eyed character in a corner of the wall, he said, "It's funny, actually."

All the writers I met said they traced their interest in graffiti to the first time they drew letters when they were small children. Paper gave way to book covers and then to secluded bridges and then to the ghost stations of the New York City subway system, overpasses, buildings, large rocks.

Khoo was not the first to say this is only natural. In 1948, Henry Schaefer-Simmen wrote in *The Unfolding of Artistic Activity*: "Drawings on walls, doors, pavements are visible proofs of the child's inborn creativeness. But because, in the general education, attention is still mainly directed toward acquisition of conceptual knowledge, the child's spontaneous

drive for genuine visual cognition is neglected. As he grows older, the creative urge diminishes."

We are witnesses to that learning process as it becomes an art that becomes a life-style.



A young graffiti writer at work

Eventually, the graffiti writers said, the desire to paint and the physical aspect of graffiti joined and becomes an addiction. "Because it's so physical—you're climbing fences, going around buildings, through woods,

maybe—I think it's addictive. Like cigarettes," Ultraalpha said.

"I was joking with my friend that I'd have to take a 12-step program to give up graffiti," Cycle joked.

Nonetheless, addictions can be tamed. "Your life changes and you find other things to do with your time, but I think this will always be some part of my life," Ultraalpha said. He is a Web

designer who lives and works in New York state. All the writers I met said they gave up graffiti for a while and came back to it. Some have moved on to other art forms.

Cycle said his landlords, both in their 40s, continue to paint graffiti. He said another writer in his 50s had been arrested recently for graffiti-related vandalism. Subways, bridges, freight trains, highway bridges, and sides of buildings comprise the salons of these creators of what Cycle calls “Americana art in the same way as jazz.” These public venues offer something that canvases stretched in private, solitary rooms do not: a social life.

The act of painting graffiti is at once social and artistic.

Meeting to paint a production—a group of pieces with a single theme, color scheme, and background that unite the individual, highly stylized pieces—means meeting to share ideas, to display new techniques, and to swap

albums of photos of each writer’s works.

Writers know each other’s tag—the pseudonym a writer adopts for all of his pieces—rather than his legal name. Graffiti thus creates a new context for relationships. Cycle said, “Graffiti is this vehicle for this incredible journey I’ve been living. I’ve been overseas, to Korea, and across the US meeting people. It’s kind of like, wow. Graffiti crosses all socioeconomic boundaries. I could be out piecing with a guy from Korea, a couple of Puerto Ricans, a Dominican, and some



“If Mother Only Knew” in Bethel, Conn.

white kid from the Upper East Side whose father is a millionaire,”

Cycle said, adding, "It doesn't matter. We're there to paint. If we did normal things, we'd never have met."

Jick, a Fordham University undergraduate from upstate New York, added, "That's right--and the millionaire's kid probably looks up to one of the other guys as a great writer." Careers, wealth, and neighborhood are not the Sort keys that determine social groups in the graffiti subculture; art is. You create it or you don't, and you earn the respect of your peers by developing your style.

"They replace social expectations with their own set," said Sharon Kaufman, an artist, teacher, and co-owner of the Village Center for the Arts in New Milford, Conn. She is founder of the Escape to the Arts in Danbury, an enrichment program that she established in 1991 originally for inner-city kids.

Within this social context, there is a hierarchy. Younger, less accomplished graffiti writers don't presume to paint alongside more experienced writers. They must earn their place by first painting on

less visible walls. "If a young kid comes along and tries to paint with the guys who are good, they tell him to just relax and watch us. You have to do your time," Utter explained.

Artistic standards are part of the creative dialogue among writers. This might be, in part, because many of them are professional artists. "Some of these guys have gone on to work for Disney and the Cartoon Network," Utter said.

Cycle said, "I incorporate stuff I do in graffiti in my canvases and what I paint on canvas influences my graffiti." He said his graffiti designs have become flatter than they were 10 years ago because of the design work he does using a computer. Twelve years ago, when I met Cycle at a legal wall at the back of a warehouse in Bethel, Conn., his designs were three-dimensional and loaded with figures and Escher-like mazes. Now there were wide swaths of color and flat figures within the stylized letters of his tag.

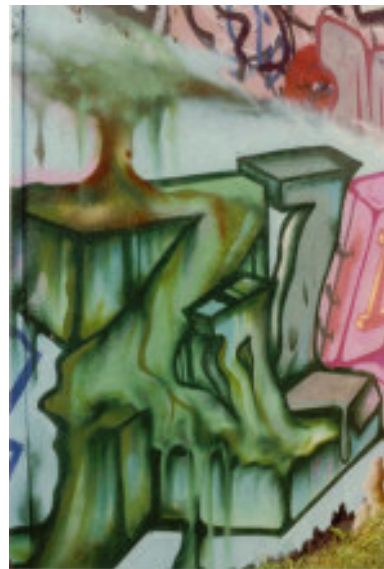
Ultraalpha said painting

graffiti accelerated his creativity as a graphic designer and that the graffiti style is visible in his Web designs. Khoo said that the intensity with which graffiti writers paint on their feet and the imminent danger (of perhaps being arrested) instigated a chemical process in the brain that stimulates creativity. The writers' comments bear this out.

Kaufman pointed out that graffiti has had a big impact on commercial art. "Look at the influence on Hollywood. The brief images that change, change, change. Nothing is expected to last too long. It's very immediate, in the moment, like graffiti. Look at the typography of a lot of businesses and colleges. They have a graffiti style. When I was at Florida State in the mid-1980s, they changed their logo to adopt a graffiti style."

Graffiti, which has made its way into art history books as an example of 20th-century pop art, is a part of the art of the letterform. In his introduction to *ABC Book of Early Americana* (1963), American artist Eric Sloane

said, "[A] century or two ago, people had their own peculiar reverence for the letters of the alphabet. They pondered the alphabet's history and lore; they could become excited about the beauty of the printed page or even

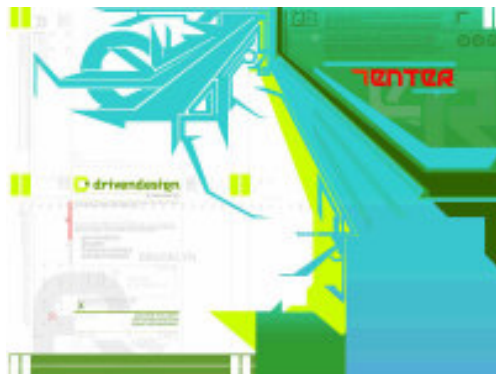


**The "W" of WINK
in Bethel, Conn., 1993**

one well-formed letter...Artists used to get delight from drawing their version of the alphabet."

Today's writers have a place in this larger history as they draw on a previous generation's bubble letters. They might stretch,

twist, or break the letters to abstraction and then play with the tension between colors in a maze that seems three-dimensional until the roughness of the wall impales the image and reminds the viewer that the wall is the wall. Writers might abandon what previous writers have done in favor of whatever image emerges in their imaginations as they stand in front of blank walls. “I love to see



Web design by Ultraalpha

someone breaking the rules that got them fame, throwing it away, and trying something completely new,” Jive said.

This might account for regional styles. Da’man, who sometimes goes by “Amish”

because he likes the way the letters interact with each other, pointed out the New York wild style, which he prefers to paint, to Jive’s style, which he called “the Connecticut style.” In the former, the letters determined the shape of the piece as they sprawled and intersected and overlapped and twisted back on themselves, whereas in the latter the letters filled a defined space as they

sprawled and intersected and overlapped and twisted back on themselves. Style and color are as individualized as the writer cares to make them. He might even color his piece with specialty colors he might mix himself from can to can. (The process: cool one can in the freezer; join it to a warmer can with the straw from a DW40 can;

press the nozzle on the warmer can and that color will mix with the color in the cooler can.) The writer who doesn’t mix paint might have bought specialty graffiti paint for \$5 per can, plus postage, imported from Germany. These cans, marketed to graffiti writers,

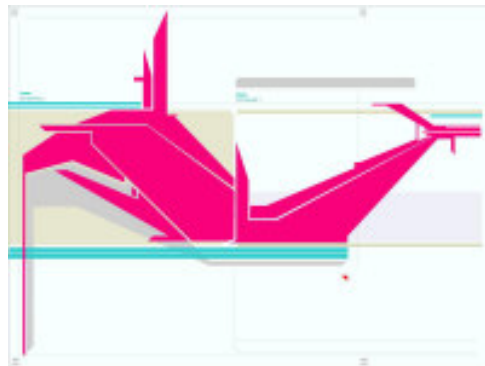
are marked, “for art, not vandalism.”

Each painter I met said he likes to create his piece by himself. Graffiti crews with their initiation rites and turf battles—issues that arise in New York City—are different in the suburbs. “My crew is the bunch of guys I like to paint with. You see the crew tag and you associate the piece with a whole group. You’re saying hi to your buddies,” Jive said. There wasn’t much conversation the summer day I watched Jive and his friends paint. Ultraalpha said that’s the way it usually goes. “We get painting and it’s totally quiet. We’re into our painting.”

The other “breed” of writers, Utter said, is the vandals. “They’ll put acid in a shoe polish bottle and burn their tags into windows all over town. They’re out to destroy. They’re a different breed from the guys who do it for the art,” he said. Utter said 5 percent of the graffiti in the Danbury Area was gang related. It is easy to identify because it is the

name of the gang spray painted to mark territory. There is no attempt at art.

Kaufman said that the graffiti writers who tag post offices and street signs do so as a gesture of defiance. “It’s about control,” she said. “I’ve asked them why and they tell me, ‘Because I can.’ They feel helpless, and this is something they can control.”



Another web design by Ultraalpha

Kaufman worked with many graffiti writers back then to channel their talents into some other form. “I encouraged them and tried to get them to apply their ability to something more acceptable. A lot of these kids need to be nurtured and loved,

and some just want to be taken seriously as artists,” she said.

Some of those kids painted murals. “Murals provide hope, something to be proud of. They let people connect with the community,” Kaufman told me back then.



“Jive”

Utter has arrested vandals at the same time he has sought legal spaces for serious graffiti writers. “I have these kids clean it up. Home Depot donated a lot of paint when we started the task force [in 2001], and I took these kids out and had them clean it up. None of their parents said they didn’t want their kids to clean it up. But then the kids would get mad when they would clean up a

place and someone else would paint on it. I would tell them, ‘Now you know how the property owners feel,’” Utter said.

As graffiti writers have forced viewers to connect with them, even if only to object to their work, Utter has forced the connection the other way. For example, he took some writers who had vandalized an elderly woman’s fence to see the woman. She was crying about her fence. “I said to them, ‘See what you do to people? Is this what you want to do? To hurt people?’”

Youth Officer Gary Gramling of the Brookfield (Connecticut) Police

Department holds a view similar to Utter’s. Brookfield is home of the unofficial Graffiti Bridge, a state-owned railroad bridge near the intersection of routes 133 and 25 where the town’s high school sports teams have advertised their victories for as long as Gramling can remember. “It’s been like this since I was in high school in the 1970s. There’s so much paint on there, it’s not likely to rust any

time soon. It's school spirit." He added, "As long as it stays on the bridge and the kids don't start damaging property or getting hurt, it's really not a problem."

In the Spring of 2002, some Brookfield High School students painted the bridge, spilled paint, and made a mess, causing damage to cars that passed under it, to nearby street signs, and to the guard rail. "I went to the school and made a presentation about it," Gramling said. "The student council paid for the damage."

He added: "Occasionally someone will paint profanity or something else that isn't appropriate and the DoT (Department of Transportation) will come out right away and clean it up. There's a level of tolerance in town because it's always been here."

Is it art? I asked Gramling. His reply: "It's art until it becomes a safety issue and somebody gets hurt or property gets damaged."

The Brookfield murals changed frequently until the

terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Then adult and youth graffiti writers decorated the bridge with patriotic murals. "They really took their time because I think they knew we weren't going to do anything about it. That was up for about a year, the longest anything has ever stayed on this bridge," Gramling said.

The memorials painted on the bridge—amateurish, emotional, and patriotic—pleased many residents and united them with the many people who made similar gestures at St. Paul's Chapel near the World Trade Center site. The letters, photographs, shirts, memorabilia, and graffiti that people from around the world placed on the wrought iron fence surrounding the chapel transformed the fence into a wall, a solid mass, a montage of emotion and optimism. Though none of the individual pieces was a work of art in itself, the bits and pieces together formed a universal gesture that was a creative, artistic response to a crisis.

It was strangely cheerful in

the way the graffiti in Danbury is cheerful. “It’s a characteristic of chaotic systems and of creativity in that...out of collapse comes the urge to make something. It’s very much a part of who we are as human beings,” Briggs said.



“Emit”

Pointing to the myriad caps, T-shirts, banners, paper cranes, and memorabilia, Briggs said the people who put these things outside the chapel “are trying to make the connection between themselves and the other. They’re trying to touch someone else and to put [that person] where they are as much as they can. We’re seeing the

beginning of a creative response here.”

Painted handprints adorned banners in an elemental gesture of reaching out. Though the perpetrators of the attack sought to stricken a nation with

silence in the face of dreadful loss, people around the world responded with words and pictures and made a place for them. As people traveled to New York

City specifically to see the makeshift shrine in honor of the people who died in the attack and those struggling to cope with its meaning, the fence took on a spiritual significance. The graffiti insisted on the beauty of life.

In our despair, we returned to a moment in childhood when each of us was “happy as the grass is green” and

we were confident we could color the world with the palette of our imaginations. We affirmed our lives by writing names. I am here. I was here. I loved somebody.

One grandmother even wrote a letter and fastened the pages, protected in plastic sleeves, to the fence. She said she had attended her grandson's Christmas pageant at school with her daughter-in-law. Her son, the father, wasn't there because he was dead. She hoped "we" would never let others go through a similar experience like her grandson's or her own.

What else could she do?

In his *The Visual Dialogue, an Introduction to the Appreciation of Art*, (1966), Nathan Knobler said: "The artist produces a visual statement which in turn becomes the subject matter for a response or reaction from the observer. In this sense, the visual arts may be considered a language." In this way, the grandmother's

writing on the wall might be a work of art.

Art, as Briggs said, explores what it means to be in life.

Scrawled on the handrail of the makeshift sidewalk surrounding St. Paul's in 2002 was this contribution to the strange masterpiece : "Your response to this horrible tragedy has been an inspiration to the world. Keep dreaming. Keep hoping."

--Sandy Lee Carlson, 2005



why do we expect everyone to be so genuine.

not a question

the silent and the mumblers are the ones who have surpassed the rest in evolution.

it seems silly that one of the usual bums could understand what generations of humans have been asking.

but, it's true.

so many of the hippies were hipp-crits and the politicians just needed a job.

this is what i expect from the majority of humanity.

some people have so much promise of brilliance but then education gets in the way and ruins them.

run of the mill textbook knowledge.

they turn into boring wastes of time. for me at least.

and at least for me i can recognize this boredom quality and steer clear.

i end up alone but i can keep pushing them all away until the 1 or 2 or three stand out that i would like to forget with.

--Jive.