

“Consumerific”:

Disembodiment and Defacement of the Public Secret in Graffiti

Beth Bruinsma

Near the intersection of Sixth Street and Lamar, just west of downtown Austin, TX, change is brewing. In the shadow of the GSD&M Advertising Agency, warehouses are being renovated and new commercial buildings are being constructed at an alarming rate. This development coincides with the rapid growth Austin is currently experiencing, growth that is arriving in the form of shining new office buildings and expensive condominiums built to employ and house thousands of Austin's newest residents. Older houses, stores and warehouses are being leveled and replaced with upscale boutiques, restaurants and parking garages. Every week, the city newspaper reports that a new Internet corporation is taking root in Austin. Property values and housing costs are soaring as more businesses and people call Austin their home. Downtown streets vibrate with the street sounds of traffic and new construction.

But clearly not all of Austin's residents receive this economic boom in the same way. Whereas Austin's downtown is a place for businesses, the state government, and universities, it also has been a space where musicians, artists, university students and street people gather. However, developers and corporations are swiftly transforming this area. Within a few square blocks of the urban node at Sixth Street and Lamar, I encountered extensive graffiti expressing direct resentment towards this unbridled development. In one instance, two warehouse garage doors were filled with black spray-painted text that railed against the renovation of space (*figure 1*). In part, it read, “And to the cake eaters, down with your wretched smart growth.” The rest of this spray-painted message posited an alternative to leveling the garages and constructing new corporate buildings: “A Stretched-out idea: con-



Figure 1: Graffiti located across from the GSD&M advertising agency

vert this lost site into cool art squat. Load it w/ bunks, typewriters, cameras + paint for street kids, students, busted artists and all else pinning for space.” Another example was located just around the corner from this garage. There, a construction company’s billboard announcing the construction project had been defaced with graffiti and several posters. The company’s title was crossed out and replaced with blue letters spelling, “Consumerific!” The rest of the billboard was littered with stickers to boycott the future stores and another to put a stop to the new proposed state highway. Also stuck to this billboard was a more abstract statement, “Warning, this neighborhood is being gentrified” (figure 2).

Graffiti marks and remarks contested spaces. These anti-development speech acts can be interpreted as explicit attempt to reterritorialize, even for a few days, urban space that used to be utilized in a different way, possibly one that is more public or accessible to the public. The diatribe directed at the GSD&M advertising agency addresses this point. Clearly, a group or an individual had conceived of this downtown Austin property, the warehouse district, as a creative space, one that fostered intellectual and personal freedom, and until very recently, an affordable and productive place for the city’s musicians, artists, and “street kids.” GSD&M is accused of destroying this space. The graffiti in this changing urban landscape is contesting the

recent changes and reterritorialization by city developers and corporations. Graffiti resists these changes and the new uses of these spaces by illegally marking them with transgressive messages, attempting one last time to own them, if only temporarily.

Writing in Public

Part of our long-term concern is to persuade both historians and anthropologists that current notions of popular, folk, or traditional cultural forms simply are not adequate for the interpretive challenges posed by the cosmopolitan forms of today's public cultures... We intend that our argument in favor of the rubric of public culture should provide a fruitful vantage point for such consideration (Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge 1988:8-9).

Public culture connotes a mode of thinking that takes us beyond binary patterns of high/low and elite/popular culture. Following Appadurai and Breckenridge, I discuss graffiti in Austin in relation to its emergence in the space of public culture. Graffiti in this paper involves several instances of outdoor, public and private space being



Figure 2: Graffiti at the intersection of Sixth Street and Lamar

marked with spray-painted messages on walls or signs for other community members to read. These messages can be interpreted as evocative of certain specific thoughts or emotions about broad issues of development, consumerism, and capitalism in a local context. In this paper, I attempt to move beyond approaches that focus on graffiti as an articulation from socially disenfranchised groups or as a medium to be read for a reflection of a collective conscience. Drawing from the concepts of *defacement* and *public secrets* as developed by Michael Taussig, as well as from Hermer and Hurt and Susan Stewart, I discuss some of the tensions implicit in the “presentness” of some urban graffiti in Austin. I present personal encounters with graffiti and offer possibilities for what these acts might signify in public. Viewed through the lens of public culture, graffiti hints at significant tensions, traces of violence, and contradictions entrenched in the social conditions that spur its appearance (and disappearance) in particular spaces.

What is graffiti?

Drawing upon literature from linguistic anthropology, graffiti may be framed as a communicative event. Dell Hymes asserts, “It is desirable to treat the transmission or receipt of information as not the same as, but a more general category than communication” (1990: 29). Seen as more than communication, graffiti privileges the act of the transmission of ideas. The communicative event becomes the “metaphor, or perspective, basic to rendering experience intelligible” (Hymes 1990: 29). Graffiti, I would argue, can be viewed as a particular kind of communicative event, a non-verbal form of communication performed in unsanctioned spaces. Alan Dundes (1966) describes graffiti as the act of making one’s mark, or leaving something behind in a particular way by writing on walls. All the acts of graffiti I discuss use the English language to articulate counter-hegemonic discourses in response to dominant paradigms situating development as normal, beneficial and desirable, and similarly law enforcement agencies as protective and beneficial to all members of the community.

Early work on graffiti by folklorists and anthropologists employed structural analyses and sought direct correlations between graffiti’s content and social attitudes, hoping to ultimately reveal patterns of customs and attitudes of a society.¹ Later studies sought to move beyond the limits and assumptions of structuralist approaches

and assumptions that graffiti reflects, without refracting or distorting the collective conscience.² Moreover, much attention has been focused on reading *latrinalia* (restroom graffiti) tagging, and the art of street graffiti as expressive culture, as a medium for expression created by individuals who are socially and economically disenfranchised.³ These studies have been inherently gendered, racialized, and classed, focusing on or assuming a marginalized male creator of graffiti.

A more recent analysis by Susan Stewart addresses several conflicting sentiments caught up in graffiti, citing it as simultaneously outlawed and venerated, as both a crime and an art, as ephemeral yet constantly emerging and present. For Stewart, these contradictory reactions to the genre of graffiti are rooted in a contemporary crisis that situates art objects as commodities for consumption. Graffiti pits different classes and groups of people against one another in terms of taste and choices of consumption and production, pushing the receiving community of graffiti to “a limit where the postmodern emergence and disappearance of such notions of quality, integrity, and taste may be described historically and specifically...” (Stewart 1991: 207).

Following Stewart, Ann Norton(1993:52), argues that consumption is one mode of self-representation, and in this model a disconnection to powerful products and what they might signify silenced citizens denied access to the arena of consumption. People at the periphery of the economic system are constantly reminded of their limited consumption opportunities and, subsequently, their political power. Stewart asserts that the “attempts for the peripheral to acquire power through the acquisition of consumer goods that serve as signifiers of power merely increase the periphery’s economic and cultural indebtedness to the center” (1991:67).

In relation to graffiti, Stewart accounts for the “presentness” of graffiti, considering its manipulations and resistances of contemporary consumer culture. Graffiti writers sometimes articulate the traumatic experiences of people isolated from the everyday practices of consumption that empower those who are allowed access to the closed and highly mediated arena of consumption. The community or public’s response to graffiti can be read through the continuous erasure in addition to the seemingly immediate reappearance of graffiti. Stewart asserts that it is no accident that the frequency of the emergence of graffiti production borrows from methods of commodity advertising and publicity (1991:214). There is a particular thrill or excitement involved in committing the kind of transgressive, public activity that cre-

ating graffiti involves, and especially with graffiti that is tagged, the act of leaving one's mark in a public space is one way to assert identity outside the stifling realm of consumption-representation articulated by Stewart and Norton.

Disembodiment

Above, I addressed the point that analyses of graffiti, in particular latrinalia, have generally assumed a male subject/author. This point is related to Habermas' idea of the disembodied public subject of the bourgeois public sphere (cited in Warner 1993). The public sphere was imagined by Habermas as a space where people could abstract themselves from their bodies and social status and offer opinions and participate in public discourse. In reality, however, Michael Warner argues that the public sphere was a space where only white, male subjects could command the rhetorical strategies and the ideal body required of those offering legitimate discourse in this arena (1993:239). Warner also illustrates how the development of print media became an important medium for the "publication" of the public sphere, and a way for authors/speakers to submit their ideas to an audience that was "by definition indefinite" (1993:237). Warner also mentions that the ambiguous relationship between the writer and the text was a liberating experience for the writer who, for the first time, was not reduced to a body but rather an "identification with a disembodied public subject that he could imagine as parallel to his private person" (1993: 238).

It is worth noting that this liberating self-abstraction found in printed texts is not by any means equally available to all; nevertheless, the ideas that Warner posits in terms of self-abstraction and disembodiment are quite salient to an analysis of graffiti, especially those unsigned or anonymous expressions that are accessible to nearly everyone. Warner argues that the sentimentality of the signature in graffiti is a direct link to the body; however not all graffiti producers are attached to the signature. Indeed, dozens of examples of this disengagement from the signature can be noted simply by being aware of the demarcation of official graffiti (which I will explore below) as well as the articulations posted on blank walls.

I focus on graffiti that is unsigned, where the message or the painted graphic is present in numerous locations and is itself a signature. I maintain that the desire for abstraction from one's body into a

privileged space of disembodiment can be noticed in specific public practices like graffiti, in which individuals assert their opinions without necessarily connecting a private identity with these public expressions. In this way, graffiti production takes advantage of a disembodied public identity, and utilizes this subjectivity as a powerful and viable means for personal expression that is also more accessible than other forms of public discourse, such as print media, television, or the Internet.

Official Graffiti

Official graffiti is defined as an apparatus of regulatory mechanisms, utilized by both state and private individuals. Whereas graffiti is perceived as a typically transgressive act that defaces public spaces, official graffiti is a demarcation of space that is sanctioned by the legitimate power in command of that particular site. For Hermer and Hurt official graffiti becomes a site for governance through its activities of creating self-regulatory subjects. A semiotic system of signs, phrases and warnings direct viewer/subjects in the appropriate actions both in private and public spaces. Official graffiti has become a normalized feature of society, and unofficial graffiti, consequently must compete for the same space for its articulations. Instead of adding order to the public domain, unofficial graffiti disrupts the process of governance and self-regulation that official graffiti attempts. Street graffiti, the antithesis of official graffiti, attacks the system and becomes a medium for expressing individual or group social concerns. In contrast with official graffiti, street graffiti is ephemeral, and subject to cycles of erasure and reemergence.

However, as Hermer and Hunt explain, the process of self-regulation and governance are not without unintended consequences. These unexpected results sometimes take the form of an imagined, yet not at all imaginary, violator of a crime entering from outside a community whose boundaries have been carefully marked with official graffiti (Hermer and Hurt 1996: 462). (This point will become particularly salient in the discussion of the public secret below).

To extend this notion of unexpected consequences implicit in the functions of official graffiti, I posit other unintended consequences such as the defacement of official graffiti as a specific site for the disruption and contradiction of governance. Hermer and Hurt

acknowledge that just as official graffiti on some sites, like product packages, construct mass subjects as incompetent and ignorant, and thus the recipient of endless regulation in the form of directions, in the same way some street graffiti may also create its subjects/viewers as oblivious to the ideas that street graffiti is addressing.

Several examples of this appear in Central Austin, both in the form of defacement of official graffiti as well as marking of private property. One instance of defacement which may have unexpected consequences is the graffiti present on a stop sign which transformed the sign into a command to STOP RAPE. This expression may be interpreted in multiple ways, one of which could say to the viewer - You! Stop rape now! Alternatively, this graffiti could also be addressing the state, or the police, asking them to stop rape. In Austin, this defacement of official graffiti could have a specific meaning in reference to the 1999 incident of abuse of authority and police brutality between officer Samuel Ramirez (an alleged rapist) and a female city resident. In this case, the sign could be asking the police to stop the rape and abuse of the population they are appointed to protect.



Figure 3: Closeup of “they’ve got guns,” Austin Plasma Center

In a similar appearance of graffiti in North Austin on the side of a plasma donation center, a black painting of a skeleton wearing a police hat, holding a discharging gun, warns people that they’ve got guns (*figure 3*). Again, this graffiti alerts people of what is seemingly obvious to all citizens, especially to those who reside east of IH-35 where the construction of the interstate created the means for de facto segregation between Austin’s white and non-white residents. The public is warned not to trust, or possibly respect, police officers that are officially patrolling for it’s own protection.

The location of this graffiti is particularly salient: the plasma center where the graffiti appears is in on a heavily traveled area near

the University of Texas where students and street kids hang out. The Stop Rape graffiti appears all throughout the city, on stop signs in the East Austin, as well as in neighborhoods surrounding the University. In each of these cases, the graffiti may have either the effect of confusing the public, or constructing a public who is apathetic or indifferent as to the seriousness of police abuse and the need to make interventions and prevent it. Clearly the purveyors of the consumerific, Stop Rape and they've got guns messages place them in areas where they are likely to be read by the public. Moreover, the repetitions of the "consumerific" and "Stop rape" motifs reinforce the publicity of the messages.

Juxtaposing these examples of unofficial or street graffiti with official graffiti in this way posits an interesting dilemma: Is street graffiti simply functioning to reproduce the self-regulatory effects inculcated in official graffiti by merely insisting upon different modes of behavior? While street graffiti may have unintended consequences such as identifying an unenlightened receiving subject, these messages still retain their critical edge in both content and form. This point will be expanded upon below in the context of public secrets, yet I argue here that the expedient eradication of most graffiti adds to the legitimacy of its claims. Graffiti that is regarded as controversial or offensive, especially that which adorns official graffiti or high-profile private property, is often quickly covered over with a fresh coat of paint. Moreover, the development of spray paint-resistant paint also hints at the tensions effected by graffiti on those responsible for public and private property.

Graffiti: Defacement of the Public Secret

The public secret...can be defined as that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated.

...

The secret, we could say, the secret of the system is that it is held together by some sort of *deus ex machina*, some sort of mischievous genie called 'secrecy' or "ambivalence" or 'instability' or 'friendship,' and this applies no less to the state and its practice of law than to the ethnography of those very forms.

-Michael Taussig, *Defacement*

While not explicitly speaking of graffiti, Michael Taussig's critique of objects and representations, and the multiple significations latent in them, augments the analysis of graffiti with the defacement of objects, spaces and ideologies. Moving beyond all notions of defacement as simply a negating or destructive act, Taussig identifies the power inherent in negative acts and all the unexpected effects that may be released when an object is defaced. Taussig posits that the act of defacement releases a strange surplus of negative energy, ultimately affecting a powerful form of social knowledge. Following Hegel, Taussig employs a study of the labor of the negative to mediate ambiguity, to characterize the strange forces at work within defacement (1999:107). Using examples of various unmasking events, from "primitive" to contemporary social scandals, Taussig demonstrates that it is exactly from the conscious activity of not knowing (or rather knowing what not to know) that the public secret derives its power.

Returning to Stewart's analysis of graffiti, the concept of the labor of the negative adds to an understanding of graffiti as defacement. Stewart states that "graffiti are widely considered to be a practice of defacement: an application that *destroys* the significance of the material base just as the defacement of coins *invalidates* their worth, their value, and proves to be threat to the monetary system as a whole" (1991: 216). According to Taussig, the activity of defacement is not so much destructive as it is productive in the release of energy and an undefined amount of new meanings. With defacement, it is not merely the negation of the object that is created, but the emergence of something entirely new that results from the fusing of the imaginary with the real.

Intertwined with the act of defacement is the simultaneous activity of refacement or remasking. For Taussig, defacements are slip-pages in the concealing devices of the public secrets. While public secrets are circulating ideas that are taken for granted or widely known, they must still be kept invisible and immediately refaced when they are revealed to maintain the power of the secret. Power is maintained by those who wield it because they possess the most important form of social knowledge, which is knowing what to know and what to conceal. Remasking efforts reveal that transgressive acts like graffiti also have the unintended consequence of reproducing the ideology or the power structures that it may have intended to undermine. According to Taussig, unmasking only serves to consecrate what it so spectacularly attempts to destroy (1999: 147).

The notion of the public secret is very powerful to this attempt at understanding of the process and effects of street graffiti. From Taussig, it becomes clearer how graffiti is framed as a crime, and not as art. While forces of power (the state, capitalism) tempt their subjects to transgress and deface, the state concurrently attempts to deface those disruptive acts and subjects by classifying and responding to them as criminal activities which are disruptive to the social order. Susan Stewart asserts that graffiti is threatening precisely because anyone can create it, and because anyone can be an artist/criminal (1991: 227). Like graffiti's perpetual cycle of erasure and reemergence, there is no closure to the process of unmasking the public secret; it is always kept permanently and partially exposed to the public.

Taking Taussig's critique of defacement to some specific references of graffiti in Austin, several features of the public secret momentarily emerge and are subsequently submerged. Returning to the examples of graffiti cited in the introduction, the defacement directs attention toward the rapid development occurring in Austin. In Figure 1, a lengthy diatribe urges the owners of the property to relinquish the artist community in the city, serving as a sarcastic reminder of the affordable studio space and music scene that the downtown area previously offered to the public. Directly across the street from this articulation, a developing agency's billboard has been defaced by a plethora of stickers that protest, among several things, a proposed highway and neighborhood gentrification. Interestingly, this board featured the two spray-painted expressions: "consumerific" and "Re-Indict Ramirez." Twenty blocks north of here, the same "consumerific" expression occurred again with the warning against police that "they've got guns."

The appearance of these two graffiti together in different contexts suggests that development, or capitalist growth and police brutality, are not unrelated events in Austin. Economic growth in Austin has affected all city residents, the public, disparately. While a number of people experience this growth positively, there is a large proportion of the city that is struggling to keep up with the increasing cost of living anywhere near Austin. There is no doubt that the construction of more upscale retail stores and office buildings will not affect them positively. In fact, this development will no doubt provide more venues where they are denied access to the empowering practices of consumption and self-representation. The deployment

of the “consumerific” motif, I contend, becomes a trace of the public secret that economic growth is desirable and is a positive experience as it trickles through to all members of society. The emergence of this along with the “Re-indict Ramirez” slogan hints at the fact that while development is on the rise, so are instances of unpunished police brutality and serious abuses of power. The tensions and anxiety related to development and its accompanying practices of consumption surface on this billboard downtown, perhaps providing amusement for those who share the joke. Nonetheless, this articulation is perceived as a transgression of space by someone who incited the immediate refacement of both the contractor’s billboard and the warehouse doors (*figure 4*). Perhaps the purveyors of this development cannot mediate contrasting realities about the kind of growth that they are facilitating in Austin. So, immediately, any trace of negativity or contradiction are eradicated to minimize people’s anxiety about their our own complicity or lack of access to the process of development, gentrification of the city, and futility in reducing police violence.

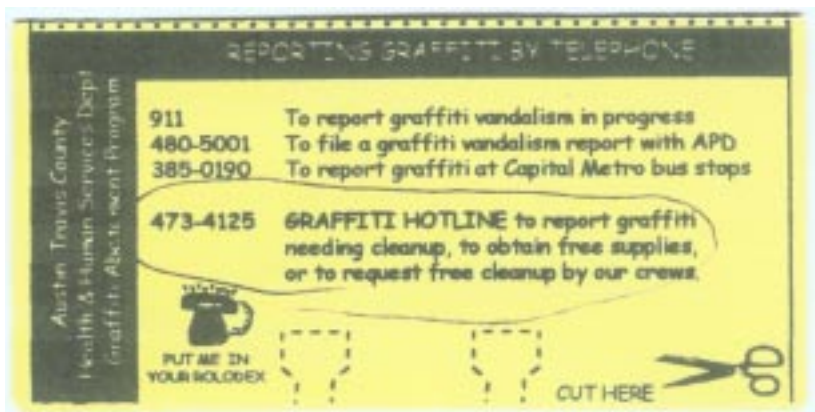


Figure 4: Excerpt for a pamphlet addressing the Graffiti Abatement Program in Austin

However, as Taussig asserts, the refacement does not completely obscure the public secret permanently. Secrets that accompany city development and neighborhood gentrification are constantly revealed and refaced, not only by graffiti’s defacement, but also in particular moments that people experience each day. Recently, one such moment occurred for me. Cop cars with their search lights on, repeatedly cruising slowly up and down the Central Austin neighborhood where I live, causing residents to curiously peak through their blinds

and doorways, and wonder out loud what the reason is for such an occurrence in *this* area, on *their* street. The next morning, I found out that the cause for all of the *unusual* police activity and surveillance was that a woman two houses down from me had returned home that evening and discovered a *stranger* rooting through her car parked in front of her house. Someone suggested that the two itinerant men, both black, who sometimes solicit yard work in this neighborhood might be involved. Safety concerns were heightened and neighbors reassured each other that they were on the lookout for each other. I found myself thinking of a new place to store my bicycle at night.

What this experience makes evident is one of the public secrets latent in urban development and subsequently gentrification. The very fact that crime, or any undesirable intrusion may occur is one such public secret masked by organizations such as the Hyde Park Neighborhood Association, and even residents themselves. In a similar manner, I argue that graffiti operates as a medium for continuously bringing public secrets into partial exposure. These examples illustrate how public secrets operate, and how, through these moments of defacement to the social order, a disturbance of an imagined peace or safe space, the immediate reactions by neighbors and police attempt to take care of things by restoring order and assigning blame to an outsider. What is new that is created out of these defacements of public safety, of police protection, and of “smart growth” are the fractures in the structures that act to conceal the public secret. However, while these graffiti transgressions are immediately refaced, many people who briefly experienced a glimpse at them are left with the choice of what to know, what to remember, and what to forget.

NOTES

1. See Stocker et al: 356-65.
2. For a structural analysis of graffiti, see Gonos et al: 40-48.
3. For an analysis of urban tagging and street murals, see Boheley 1989.

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