Graffiti as Career and Ideology

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This paper identifies the organizational and ideological sources for the creation and structural evolution of New York City graffiti art. The stages and types of graffiti careers are traced through interviews with 25 graffiti writers and their gallery and gang patrons. The ethnographic analysis serves to build a framework for joining the usually separate sociological literatures on subcultures, deviant careers, and art worlds. Geographical and social proximity to other writers is the principal determinant of entry into graffiti writing and of whether that activity develops into a career. From their social relations with other writers, graffiti writers gain a sense of audience and a belief that graffiti will give them fame. Recently, police repression and the recruitment of a few writers to paint graffiti canvases for sale in galleries have fragmented the graffiti art world. The conclusion suggests that modifications in labeling and subculture theories are needed to explain the causal connections between social relations and ideological meaning.

Graffiti writing on public property is illegal in New York City. Still, graffiti writers appropriate public space in an effort to win fame for themselves. This study, based on interviews with graffiti writers, analyzes how they create their artifacts and careers through social interactions among each other and with patrons, audiences, and the police. Along with tracing the ways in which writers and others come together to create the social organization of graffiti, this study is concerned with understanding how the content of graffiti is formed and transformed by graffiti writers' social interactions with their audiences.

My analysis of graffiti as an illegal social activity for the production of fame through art provides an occasion to build a framework for joining

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DEViants, ARTISTS, AND THEIR AUDIENCES

Subway graffiti writers are involved simultaneously in an art world and a deviant subculture. Howard Becker (1963, 1982) has taught us that we can understand both deviance and artistic creation as the results of two sorts of social interactions. First, novices must learn the motivations and conventions for engaging in these activities. Second, deviants’ and artists’ careers are furthered or thwarted by the ways in which audiences label and react to them and their endeavors.

The concept of career is useful for tracing the influences of mentors and audiences on writers’ involvement with graffiti. Becker found that a marijuana user “must learn to use the proper smoking technique so that his use of the drug will produce effects in terms of which his conception of it can change” (1963, p. 47), just as professional artists must acquire “the technical abilities, social skills and conceptual apparatus necessary to make it easy to make art” (1982, p. 229). Thus, Becker would predict that novices would need to learn the techniques for, and desirability of, writing graffiti from an already skilled mentor, and therefore social and geographic concentrations of graffiti writers should be reproduced over time.

Deviants’ and artists’ career opportunities are determined in large part by the ways in which they are labeled by people outside their social milieus. Indeed, for Becker, “Deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender.’ The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” (1963, p. 9). Similarly, “large-scale editorial choices made by the organizations of an art world exclude many people whose work closely
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resemlies work accepted as art. We can see too, that art worlds frequently incorporate at a later date works they originally rejected, so that the distinction must lie not in the work but in the ability of an art world to accept it and its maker” (1982, pp. 226–27). As a result, Becker would predict the character and consequences of graffiti writers’ careers from the labels that adhere to them and their works.

We can gauge the effects of labeling on graffiti writers by comparing their “deviant” with more conventional artistic career trajectories. Luckenbill and Best find that police intervention disrupts stable career ladders. As a result, “deviant scenes usually lack established standards” for allocating rewards and determining success (1981, p. 199). In contrast, audiences that consume, and institutions that distribute and display, art encourage artists to produce works that conform to the aesthetic standards of their art world. While police seek to cut short the careers of those they label deviant, audiences enhance the longevity and rewards of artists who conform to the conventions of their preferred aesthetic.

The career is a useful concept for measuring the effects of mentors, police, and audiences on deviance and on the production of art. In Becker's analyses (1963, 1982), successful application of a label renders diverse objects and actions socially equivalent and locks their producers into set careers as professional artists or as deviants. Indeed, much of the previous scholarly and popular work on graffiti has tended to ignore the differences among graffiti writers and their creations and either has championed all graffiti from scrawled obscenities to elaborate murals as art (Mailer 1974) or has viewed graffiti writers as “part of one world of uncontrollable predators” (Nathan Glazer, quoted in Castleman 1982, p. 176). For Becker, labels are generated in response to the institutional imperatives of art worlds or police bureaucracies; they are arbitrary and do not reflect any quality intrinsic to the actors and their products so labeled. Becker's model does not identify a mechanism for explaining why particular actors and activities, and not others, are labeled deviant, nor why the aesthetic standards of art worlds change.

By examining the content of a subculture's self-expression, British Marxist scholars who view deviant subcultures as “symbolic forms of resistance” (Hebdige 1979, p. 80; see also Hall et al. 1975; Willis 1977) explain a labeling process that otherwise seems arbitrary. Following Gramsci (1971, pp. 210–76), Hall defines hegemony as the “containment of the subordinate classes within . . . definitions of reality favorable to the dominant class . . . [which] come to constitute the primary lived reality . . . for the subordinate classes” (1977, pp. 332–33). Members of subcultures challenge hegemony by drawing on the particular experiences and customs of their communities, ethnic groups, and age cohorts, thereby
demonstrating that social life can be constructed in ways different from
the dominant conceptions of reality.

Hebdige (1979, pp. 90–99) and Clarke (1975) contend that it is the
counterhegemonic character of a subculture that provokes a reaction by
police and media. Those “ideological” institutions seek to “situate [the
subculture’s resistance] within the dominant framework of meanings”
(Hall, quoted in Hebdige 1979, p. 94). From this perspective, the deviant
label serves to highlight the illegality of graffiti writing and (falsely) link it
with violent crime. Often more effective in denying subcultures legiti-
macy as alternative social orders is what Hebdige calls “the commodity
form” (1979, p. 94), an appropriation of subcultural artifacts from their
communities for sale to the general public. Thus, subway graffiti is re-
duced to a new fashion, fit to be sold on canvases, T-shirts, or coffee
mugs.

Hall et al. contend that the mix of repressive and co-optive responses
by police and media to subcultures is determined by, and varies according
to, the content of each subculture’s ideological challenge to the dominant
culture’s hegemony. In contrast, for Becker, the intrinsic differences
among subcultures are overwhelmed by the relatively uniform conse-
quences of being labeled deviant. As a result, a Beckerian analysis would
look for the meaning of graffiti in the artistic and deviant labels attached
to them and would explain a writer’s commitment to graffiti as a product
of his ties to mentors, colleagues, and audiences. Hall et al. would see
working- and underclass and minority youths’ attraction to graffiti as
evidence of their counterhegemonic character, begging the question of
why not all youths with those backgrounds have the same ideological
affinity and structural links to a graffiti subculture. The analytical tradi-
tions exemplified by Becker and Hall each offer a partial understanding
of the social forces that generate graffiti writers’ artifacts and careers. The
task for this study is to identify where each approach is useful for specifying
the causal connections between social relations and ideological mean-
ning.

SOURCES AND METHODS

This study is based primarily on interviews and participant observation
conducted by the author during February–May 1983 and January 1984. I
interviewed 25 graffiti writers. The sample was not selected randomly;
rather, an effort was made to find writers at different points in their
career development. Since one of the goals of this study is to determine
the extent and nature of networks among writers, and with patrons,
audiences, and police, subjects were encouraged to refer the author to
other writers. Subjects were also found through art gallery proprietors, schoolteachers, and gang leaders, who are patrons of graffiti art.

Subjects from among the elite of graffiti writers were found by asking art dealers and collectors for the names of "graffiti artists." Each of those informants produced an almost identical list of about 20 artists. Six of those graffiti writers were interviewed, first at art galleries and at the home of an art collector, and then elsewhere, away from their patrons.

The vast majority of graffiti writers are unknown to galleries and collectors. Rather than attempt to sample this population of unknown size, I interviewed writers from two sections of Brooklyn: Williamsburg–Navy Yard and Crown Heights. Those neighborhoods were chosen for the practical reason that my first contacts, who gave me entrée to graffiti writers and to their patrons in street gangs, were located there. Those initial interviews yielded further contacts, which allowed me to gain a sense of the networks among writers and patrons in the two Brooklyn neighborhoods, as my contacts with gallery owners allowed me to trace the networks at the apex of the graffiti art world.

The interviews were loosely structured. The writers were asked how they became interested in graffiti, from whom they had learned the techniques of graffiti writing, with which other writers they had worked, and on what sorts of spaces (e.g., subway cars, schools, canvases) they had written graffiti. The writers were also queried about any encounters with the police, whether they had received pay for any of their graffiti, whether there were any other graffiti or nongraffiti artworks or artists that were inspirations or models for their own work, and what plans they had for their futures as graffiti writers. I asked whom each writer saw as the audience for his or her work, and whether he preferred (or would prefer) to work on public spaces or to paint graffiti for private purchasers. I also elicited information on each writer's family and class background.

The set questions served as jumping-off points for further discussion about each writer's experiences. Interviews lasted from one to three hours. A few writers were interviewed in groups of two or three. The interviews were at times followed or accompanied by participant-observation, as I joined writers on expeditions to draw graffiti on public spaces or watched them paint graffiti canvases. I also observed, and participated in, interactions between writers and their patrons.

Additional interviews were conducted with gallery proprietors, art collectors, photographers, and makers of films on graffiti. I also spoke with the leaders and members of two Brooklyn street gangs that hired graffiti writers to advertise the gangs' power and claims to turf. Police and public prosecutors provided further information in interviews and documents. Scholarly and journalistic accounts of graffiti, especially Castleman
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(1982), are also cited in this article, although, as I will point out below, the different sample and later date of my investigations yielded some data that differ from his.

The gang members, police, public prosecutors, and some of the more candid art dealers requested anonymity. They are referred to with pseudonyms, or by their organizational positions, in this article. The graffiti writers are referred to by the “tags” that are their graffiti identities.

CAREER PATHS

Recruitment

Novice graffiti writers acquire skills and motivations from an experienced mentor. In describing their recruitment by mentors, novices say that first they had to be taught that there was an audience for graffiti before they wanted to learn and practice the techniques of graffiti writing. Each graffiti writer interviewed told of his initial inability to believe that viewers of graffiti could identify, and credit to specific writers, individual works of graffiti from among the collages of colors and lines that cover subway cars and neighborhood walls. One writer remembers his initial reluctance “to waste time bombing [writing graffiti on subway cars]. Who would know I did it?”

By accompanying a mentor, who points out his own work and that of other writers known to him, the novice learns that there is an audience for graffiti. In the process of becoming an audience for his mentor’s and others’ work, the novice comes to believe that there can be an audience for his own work. This belief is a precondition for engaging in graffiti writing and militates against the likelihood that individuals who lack personal acquaintance with graffiti writers will become writers themselves. Indeed, all the writers I interviewed met their mentors at either the junior or senior high school they attended or in the public housing project in which they lived. As a result, networks of graffiti writers are concentrated in particular neighborhoods rather than being located throughout New York City.

Mentors express a preference for befriending novices younger than they because “they’s like my little brother, they show me respect.” Mentors gain satisfaction, and ratification of their skills, from “showing toys [their term for novices] all I know, teaching my style.” Novices spread word of their mentors’ abilities to spray-paint and to outwit the police: “That way all the juniors [high school students] know who be king [the most prolific tagger] of the [subway] line.” Mentors’ desires for younger protégés were reflected among the writers interviewed, all of whom found their own mentors from among schoolmates two to four years older than they. Since
almost all writers give up graffiti writing (for reasons analyzed below) by
their late teens, the selection of younger protégés produces a young age
range—between 12 and 15—for novices’ initiation into graffiti writing.

The current absence of sites outside ghetto neighborhoods at which
potential novices could meet established mentors has the effect of narrow-
ing and reproducing the existing ethnic and class distribution of the writ-
ers. The schools and neighborhoods in which graffiti writers are concen-
trated are largely populated by poor blacks and Hispanics. Where
Castleman (1982, p. 67) found writers “from every race, nationality and
economic group in New York City” in the 1970s, my 1984 queries to
district attorneys yielded their consensus (based on their review of arrest
records, which themselves might reflect the arresting officers’ own biases)
that non-Hispanic whites composed “perhaps 5%,” “at most a tenth,” of
graffiti writers.

Among the elite of graffiti artists, featured in the gallery exhibits dis-
cussed below, 15 of 17 are black or Hispanic. Of the 25 writers I inter-
viewed, 19 were not part of that elite group of 17. Among the 19, which
was not a random sample, 12 were black, five Hispanic, and two white.
Twelve lived just with their mothers, seven with both parents. Nine of
the 12 single mothers were on welfare, while the other three worked at
unskilled jobs. In five of the seven two-parent households, both parents
worked at unskilled jobs. In the two other two-parent households, the
mothers were housewives, while one father held an unskilled, the other a
managerial, job.

Graffiti writers are overwhelmingly male. Only one woman is among
the 17 major writers exhibited in galleries. She, and the few female
writers known to the neighborhood-based writers I interviewed, were the
girlfriends of their mentors (Mizrahi 1981). However, most of the male
writers interviewed believe that graffiti writing should be restricted to
men and would not train women or accompany other men who brought
along women. The male graffiti writers’ sexism is integral to their bravura
conception of the act of graffiti writing. They often define the dangerous-
ness of writing on the subways in terms of women’s inability to partici-
pate. “You got to get into the yards [where the trains are parked at night]
by going under or over those barbed-wire fences. They have dogs loose.
Women get scared and can’t keep up.”

Graffiti writers define their prowess against the police as well as in
comparison with women. Even as writers protest that their graffiti are a
positive addition to the cityscape and should be legal, they relish the
contest to elude police capture. They rely on stealth and speed rather than
brute strength. The police are “big, strong. . . . We don’t want to fight
those thugs. . . . We’re smarter than they. . . . We know their schedule, so
we can get up [the term for writing graffiti on public spaces] before they
come around.” “We know the yards and tracks better than any. . . . We know where to run, hide, how to get away.” The writers display the same skills and superior attitude when they steal the spray-paint cans used to write graffiti. It was a point of honor among all the writers who worked in the subways, and even some who were given money by gallery or neighborhood patrons to buy paint, that they stole rather than paid for paint.

A 1977 police survey found that 28.78% of those arrested for graffiti writing were later arrested for felonies (there are no data on convictions, nor is that figure compared with the rate at which all teenage minority males in New York City are arrested for felonies), which led the transit police chief to assert that “it is predictable that a young graffiti writer will become a criminal” (quoted in Castleman 1982, p. 167). The police, district attorneys, and school counselors I interviewed in 1983–84 doubted that graffiti writing and paint stealing were precursors to more serious crimes. One district attorney explained that “the link between graffiti and real crimes is just in our rhetoric.”

School counselors believe that youths are attracted to graffiti as a way of proving their bravery and contempt for authority without the dangers of participation in more serious crimes. Graffiti writers who offer their services to gangs can gain gang benefits and protection without having to join other gang members in fights and felonies. Graffiti writers’ felony arrest rate in 1977 might reflect their associations with gangs, even if later they are found to be innocent of such crimes, as police were willing to concede in private. Graffiti allow writers a relatively safe way to proclaim their opposition to law and its enforcers; that is why they need and want to celebrate graffiti’s illegality to each other and to those schoolmates and neighbors engaged in more serious crimes.

Tagging

Once novices have acquired from their mentors the skills to write graffiti and an understanding that an audience can recognize individual writers’ work, they create distinct identities for themselves in the form of a “tag”—a stylized signature or logo unique to each graffiti writer. The novice attempts to win recognition from an audience by placing his tag before the public as often as possible. Novices believe that prolificity is the path to fame. They are encouraged in that notion by mentors and friends who comment on seeing their tags. One writer relates how he “took a week off from school, getting up on the 2 [subway] line. When I got back to school everybody was saying they’d seen me on the train.”

The vast majority of graffiti writers never progress beyond tagging to produce graffiti murals. Murals are defined here as any graffiti that encompass more than the writer’s basic tag. Transit police in interviews
estimated that more than two-thirds of subway writers were merely taggers. The muralists interviewed were more exacting in their assessments. They believed that few writers possess the artistic ability to become a muralist, arguing that "Few toys [muralists' pejorative term for taggers who fail to develop a style] could ever do what we do." "They don't got the style . . . and never will." "Not one in a hundred taggers has ideas and style enough for even one mural."

Geographic location, rather than innate artistic talent, is a necessary precondition for entering the specialized subset of muralists, as it is for becoming a tagger. Muralists are found in only a minority of the schools and housing projects where taggers are located, and only novices there became muralists. Some of the taggers interviewed attended school or lived only a few blocks away from other schools and housing projects where muralists were present. Yet those taggers did not cross that social gulf and link up with muralists. Just as most New York youths lack access to any graffiti writers and so are unable to appreciate that an audience could exist for their graffiti, most taggers do not enjoy proximity to established muralists, who could educate them to value mural quality over tag quantity.

Taggers who fail to apprentice to muralists cannot envision why they should sacrifice their existing fame to the long-range task of developing the technique and style necessary for building a reputation as a muralist: "'Ts king of the line. They knows it's me and even when I got no style, even when I drip [paint]. What I should slow up tagging just to drip no more? I take a year to learn to be a style king [i.e., someone noted for his superior mural style], they be another king of the line. Then I be nobody."

Novices learn from their mentors that fame is won by imposing oneself on an audience. Taggers compare themselves to advertisers, arguing that they purchase space with their boldness and style rather than with money. Mr. G, who takes his tag from the name of a television weather forecaster featured in many subway ads, says, "Mr. G.'s famous 'cause he's rich; I'm famous 'cause I ain't scared of the cops and I got the style." However, taggers' conception of style does not refer to the relative attraction of different graffiti and advertisements to audiences. Instead, they equate and admire all appropriations of public space, rarely covering ads with their tags. I repeatedly observed subway car interiors blanketed with graffiti except for the spaces covered by advertisements.

Drop-outs and Gang Taggers

Taggers are caught in a dilemma of their own making. In order to be sure that they are "getting up" their tags in sufficient quantity to be recognized by an audience, taggers must inform novices of their writing in order to
win personal confirmation of their fame. However, that acknowledgment
is gained at the cost of creating new taggers whose graffiti will compete
for audience attention.

“Fox,” who was king of the 2 subway line, expressed the tagger's conundrum by lamenting, “I'm bombing all day. Then I got to watch out
for the cops so they don't beat me, then I got to snatch cans so I can get
up. I can't rest a day, go to the beach, 'cause some other gonna get ahead
of me.” At the same time, he expressed pride in “all the toys [who] follow
me. . . . I teach them all I know. They want to be king like they know I
am.” A few weeks later, Fox complained, “There's too . . . many . . . toys
on the line. Brothers can't see my tag no more.” He decided to retire from
tagging and return to junior high school.

Fox's trajectory was similar to that of most of the taggers interviewed.
They typically spent two or three months at intensive tagging, cutting
school in order to do so, until they could claim the title of “king of a line.”
At that point, they attracted novices in an effort to ratify their status and
then felt secure enough to slacken their own tagging efforts. Over the
following months, the novices themselves achieved fame and attracted
their own toys, displacing the old kings. All the taggers interviewed were
unwilling “to start that bombing grind again” in an effort to make a
comeback in competition with their former disciples, preferring to rest on
laurels earned months or even years earlier.

The lack of possibilities for further achievements, beyond becoming
king of a line, precludes tagging from becoming a career. In the absence
of career opportunities, and under the pressures of competition, all the
writers interviewed, unless they became muralists or gang taggers, aban-
donied active writing within eight months. While Castleman (1982, p. 67)
quotes police who believe that writers “stop graffiti by their sixteenth
birthday” because at that age they become liable for criminal penalties,
most of the taggers I interviewed quit at a younger age, and none ac-
nowledged fear of arrest or of police violence as a reason for stopping
their tagging. We will see in the following section that some muralists
curtailed their graffiti writing because of knowledge or experience of
police beatings. Perhaps taggers' involvement in writing is too brief to
expose them to a high enough risk of an encounter with police that could
deter them from further writing.

Inactive taggers believe they retain their neighborhood fame even after
their tags have been displaced by others: “I been the king. The whole
school knows what I done, what I can do again. I got respect, I'm a
writer.” As long as retired taggers believe they retain their fame, they
have no need to return to active tagging. A school guidance counselor
agreed with that logic: “Even though the kids may flunk a term because
they've missed school while getting up, those months of graffiti are a
smart investment. For years after they can stand as equals with the real bad students: the gang members, the drug dealers, the ones who threaten teachers. They establish themselves as tough guys and can then get on with graduating high school.” Another counselor, finding in her review of school records that a majority of writers return to school and are more likely to be promoted at year’s end than the average student at that high school, believes that “the sort of kid who can be motivated to work for hours each day tagging to become famous can also accept the grind of school in order to get a degree.”

Within neighborhoods, only gangs offer taggers the incentives to remain active after they have already achieved fame through their tags. Gangs recruit taggers to develop a tag for the gang, which can then be used to adorn members’ clothes and mark off their territory. Taggers are used when a gang wants to make or reassert its claim to territory. Gangs will saturate a housing project, school, or subway line with their tags to demonstrate their commitment to holding that territory. Thus, gangs will employ taggers who have demonstrated their prolificity by getting their own tags up.

An offer of gang employment is tangible recognition of a tagger’s fame from other neighborhood youths. Gangs usually provide spray paint to the writers, by either stealing or extorting the paint from local storekeepers. The gangs pay their writers with cash, drugs, and also offer protection in their territory. Often gang employment provides the tagger with the impetus and means to recruit novices. A gang tagger often needs assistance to get up the gang’s tag over a large territory. The principal tagger can share his gang payments with novices who agree to help with gang work. Several novices said they were attracted to their mentors, and to graffiti writing, by the rewards of gang work.

Thetaggers interviewed did not become full gang members. Nevertheless, they voiced pleasure in the rewards, prestige, and protection afforded by their gang affiliation and were aware that tagging allowed them to reap those benefits without the dangers faced by full gang members involved in felonies and in warfare with rival gangs: “They respect me, they give me [drugs]. All the toys respect me. . . . I get it with my style, I don’t got to fight.”

Geographic location determines which writers gain the opportunity to link up with gangs. Gang leaders and taggers agreed that it was gangs that took the initiative in approaching taggers. One gang leader asked around his high school to find the tagger “everybody knows was all around.” The tagger remembers his surprise at the offer: “I never knew [the gang] wanted me to make them famous with a tag. . . . They showed me and said they wanted me to get it [the gang’s tag] up in the [housing] project” that the gang was attempting to add to its turf.
Taggers’ willingness to subordinate their quest for individual fame in return for the material and social rewards of gang affiliation provides support for the Beckerian contention that graffiti do not have single, determinate meanings. Rather, the tag’s value is derived from the social relations within which it is created and is transformed by taggers’ developing ties to mentors and audiences. The tag can be understood as a sign of personal fame, an attribute of its creator, only through the dyadic tie of mentor to novice. The tag assumes a different symbolism—collective and territorial—when produced by members or affiliates of gangs.

Muralists
Historically, in New York City, graffiti muralism developed from tagging. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the number of taggers and the volume of graffiti on the subways proliferated. Writers competing for each other’s recognition, and for public fame, created ever larger and more elaborate tags. Some writers experimented with spray-can painting techniques to create murals and thus sought to distinguish themselves by the quality, rather than the quantity, of their graffiti (Castleman 1982, pp. 52–65).

Muralists are required to surmount logistical and artistic problems not encountered by taggers. One muralist drew the comparison: “Taggers never get near the [electrified] third rail. They whip out a spray can and get up on the inside of the car, or on the outside when the train’s standing in the station. They’s so fast, the cops never see them. A whole car [mural] takes hours, more when I worked alone” or on a complex design. Thus, it is only the muralists who must learn to work on the outsides of cars near the third rail and other, moving trains: “We got to scout to know the right yards and tunnels [so] we can work long enough to finish a whole car before the [police] chase us away.”

The most daunting problem facing novice muralists, once they learn to avoid the police and the third rail, is to figure out what to paint on the side of a subway car, a canvas 60 feet long. The young muralists begin their apprenticeships by filling in the outlines of large graffiti works designed by their mentors. Such work does not contribute to the novice’s own fame but does allow him to learn from technically accomplished writers with well-developed styles and reputations: the mentor “showed me how to move the [spray] can and not drip, how to put colors next to and on top of each other, how to make [lettering appear] 3-D[imensional] and [rounded in the] bubble style.”

The apprentice muralists’ willingness to work anonymously, in contrast to the novice taggers, who quickly begin getting up their own tags to build fame, points up the difference between taggers’ and muralists’ ideas.
of how graffiti are evaluated and fame is conferred by audiences. The muralists interviewed all derided the goal of producing tags in quantity, characterizing such graffiti as "scribble-scrabble" and having "no style." These muralists recounted that at the outset of their graffiti-writing careers they had concentrated on developing their artistic styles and claimed that they had sought and achieved fame through their excellent styles rather than the drudgery of getting up their tags in quantity. Such memories, which involve selective forgetting by muralists of their early efforts at tagging, are important as indicators of the sharp divide between taggers and muralists and of the very different ways in which the two types of writers pursue and assign fame.

In cultivating styles that would distinguish them from the more numerous and prolific taggers, muralists identify their peers as an audience better able than the public at large to discern and appreciate stylish murals: "No clerk, no . . . schoolteacher can say if I got style. Only someone who's out there . . . [doing murals] on the subways, in the parks can know to judge what I done." Muralists' substitution of a gradated and qualitative for an absolute and quantitative idea of fame leads them to adopt a different strategy for locating an audience worthy of ratifying their graffiti status. While taggers concentrate their efforts on a particular subway line to attract recognition from an undifferentiated audience in their neighborhoods, muralists seek out skilled colleagues from beyond their neighborhoods to confer their reputations for style.

Graffiti's mobility on subway cars that cross neighborhoods provides the material conditions for muralists to meet at "writers' corners" and to allocate fame for style on a city-wide basis. Several stations serve as nodes for the New York City subway system. Because a number of different subway lines pass through those stations, muralists could sit on benches in those stations and in the course of several hours watch a substantial fraction of the city's stock of subway cars and graffiti murals pass by. Beginning in 1972, such writers' corners provided a forum for muralists from different neighborhoods to become known to each other and form a city-wide community of serious muralists (Castleman 1982, pp. 84–87).

The writers' corners served to organize muralists' careers. Muralists from several neighborhoods could gather at a single corner to determine their relative stylistic prowess and accomplishments. Because subway trains travel between boroughs, muralists at each corner became aware that other writers, unknown to them, were at work elsewhere in the city. As "Bear" explained, "We would see some fine cars go by . . . knowing there were masters out there we'd never seen. We knew them as artists before [we visited them at their own corners and] got to know them as men." Meeting on the trains and at each other's corners, muralists measured their accomplishments and fame on a city-wide basis. Bear remem-
bered, "Meeting at the corners we found out what . . . [other writers] were trying to accomplish. . . . [We discussed] ideas for style, could agree on what worked and what was just junk. . . . That's how we learned so much . . . why we were the first and the best" generation of graffiti artists. Out of such discussions, writers formulated plans and organized parties for collective work. Muralists ratified their status as stylists by the inclusion of their labor and their ideas in such collective projects.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL MAKING OF AN ART WORLD

Graffiti writers create and sustain a belief in their fame through their ties to fellow taggers and muralists. The nature of those links determines the content and durability of writers' sense that audiences appreciate their graffiti. Graffiti's historical development is sociologically interesting because the original writers did not emerge from other art worlds. Few had studied art in school, and none were practicing professionals. I was unable to find evidence that any writers had been active in the Latin American or Caribbean folk art worlds that also produce murals. The original graffiti muralists could be viewed as naive artists in that they lacked any sort of training yet produced new forms of art that incorporated diverse elements of mass culture. However, unlike the socially and aesthetically isolated naive artists described by Becker (1982, pp. 258–69), taggers and muralists developed social mechanisms both for allocating fame and for the recruitment and training of new writers.

Taggers use existing ties to neighbors and schoolmates to conceive of audiences for their graffiti. Castleman (1982, pp. 95–107) and Williams and Kornblum (1985, pp. 73–82) describe the efforts of taggers to win a greater measure of fame for themselves by forming "writing gangs" or "crews" in an effort to get up a group, rather than personal, tag over a wider territory. However, once taggers laid claim to territory, they came in conflict with fighting gangs, who either pressured them to disband or incorporated them into the fighting gang, as described above. The limits on taggers' organizational development prevent them from viewing fame as more than a personal attribute (albeit one that can be traded for participation in a fighting gang). Conversely, the purely quantitative evaluation of taggers' fame limits the complexity of their organization, and by concentrating their attention on territory, taggers are brought into competition with violent gangs.

Muralists' qualitative conception of style allowed them to develop a total art world, formulating aesthetic standards for evaluating one another's murals and determining which innovations of content and technique would be judged advances in graffiti style. Comparisons of style
were made possible by graffiti's mobility on subway cars. Writers' corners allowed muralists to associate with their peers, who constituted an audience with the experience and discrimination for bestowing fame for style. However, that collegial audience could not provide access to a wider audience nor generate material rewards for artwork on public spaces.

My focus heretofore on the temporal development of the individual writer's career supports Becker's thesis that tags and murals, whether viewed as deviance or as art, assume meaning in terms of the social relations within which they are created. As taggers move from dyads to writing groups and gangs, and as muralists develop wider circles of collaborators and admirers, the intent of their graffiti is transformed to address their social networks. While viewing the individual career as dynamic, I have considered social relations among taggers and muralists and with their audiences as static. Yet the subcultural and Beckerian perspectives each posit a causal relation between audience initiatives on the one hand and graffiti writers' ideologies of, and practices for generating, fame on the other. Hall et al. contend that the nature of a subculture's challenge to hegemonic categories will shape the dominant reaction to the subculture, while Becker gives autonomy to audiences and sees their rejection or acceptance as decisive in altering career opportunities for people so labeled.

We can gauge the explanatory value, and limitations, of the Beckerian and subcultural models by examining the ways in which the muralists' cohesive art world, described above, has been fractured in the 1980s. The following sections trace muralists' movements from writers' corners into galleries and gangs and concurrent efforts by the police to destroy those corners. Muralists' loss of organizational cohesion and the diversification of their careers and audiences over time provide the opportunity for us to examine how their structural situations affected, and were affected by, their ideologies of fame.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE GRAFFITI ART WORLD

Police Disruption of Writers' Corners

Muralists' ability to meet and allocate fame on a city-wide basis has been diminished since the late 1970s by police harassment of writers' corners (Castleman 1982, pp. 87–89). The police have arrested writers gathered at corners, seizing and often destroying the black books writers carry that contain photos and sketches of their murals. One policeman boasted, "We get the kids, and their books contain enough evidence to get a conviction." However, muralists, like the taggers discussed above, are not concerned with the legal consequences of arrest. New York City judges, as one borough's district attorney ruefully complained, often dismiss and
never seriously punish cases of graffiti vandalism. What scares muralists are the stories, told by fellow muralists, of cases in which police beat, rather than arrest, writers. The muralists who spoke most seriously of quitting, or had already given up, subway writing were ones with friends who had suffered police beatings. That fear was common to muralists older and younger than 16—the age at which they become liable for adult punishment. Police violence is a real deterrent for graffiti writers; combined with continuing surveillance, it has destroyed the writers' corners. By spring 1983, none of the writers' corners were still functioning.

The absence of writers' corners, and the transit authority's success at quickly erasing most murals on subway cars, means that neighborhood muralists enjoy neither personal nor artifactual contact with other muralists. As a result, the social and material bases for sustaining their ideology of fame have been lost. Confined to their neighborhoods, muralists cannot determine whether their work merits recognition from the now-shattered muralist art world.

With the destruction of the old art world, Becker's theory would predict that neighborhood muralists would either find new audiences for their graffiti or abandon their art. At the time of my observations, most murals were placed above ground on public spaces in writers' neighborhoods: the walls of playground handball courts and the outsides of public housing projects and schools. Those spaces have the advantages of being large enough for elaborate murals yet situated in ghetto neighborhoods and therefore not guarded by the police or erased by a city government that is aroused only by those graffiti that pass before the eyes of its white and middle-class constituents.

Muralists believe that their art is appreciated by local residents, "'cause we's bringing style around." However, the local building owners and shopkeepers who commission murals do so in the belief that it reduces the likelihood of vandalism against their property. Some school officials have allowed murals on the insides and outsides of their buildings on the same principle. Gangs do view murals as a source of prestige within the community. Gang leaders believe that stylish graffiti on their jackets and murals on their clubhouses are signs of their success and wealth. One leader explicitly compared his purchase of graffiti jackets to a person's buying "a painting so others say . . . he is rich." Another gang leader told of hiring a muralist to paint the outside of his clubhouse, "just like I was a museum." Muralists' community status was compared with that of taggers by a gang leader, who explained, "Tags is just for regular times. . . . When another [gang] comes on [our turf] we get [a muralist] to say this is ours, we is serious, we is ready to pay to keep our streets." He went on to describe how his competition with rival gangs to hire ever more famous muralists to paint ever larger murals on disputed territory.
Graffiti initiated, and occasionally substituted for, gang wars. Indeed, on several subway lines the only whole-car murals were those commissioned by gangs. Gang patrons did not care that those murals were often erased within a day since they were intended only for the eyes of the rival gang, who were told when and where to watch the painted car pass through the disputed turf.

Despite the social and financial appreciation shown by neighborhood audiences, albeit for murals that meet the particular advertising needs of gangs and property owners, the muralists I interviewed tended to measure their local fame against the wider recognition once available at writers’ corners (and still available for an elite of gallery artists, described in the next section). The denigration of neighborhood rewards was shared by even those muralists too young to have attended writers’ corners. Unaware that other subway muralists share their isolation, the neighborhood muralists I interviewed blamed themselves for lack of wider recognition. One neighborhood muralist, with subway cars (for gangs), school walls, handball courts, and the retaining walls of two tenement buildings (at the behest of their owners, who paid him to do the murals) to his credit, lamented, "I was sure I’d be a king of style like Lee [a muralist then featured in galleries and in films on graffiti]. Brothers is all telling me I'm fine. . . . But no TV crew, no rich-ass buyer been down to see me. Maybe I was wrong. I guess I'm not that good." Subsequently, he refused a commission to paint a wall at his school and announced his retirement from graffiti.

A Beckerian emphasis on social ties to mentors and audiences makes it difficult to explain why a muralist nurtured on community expectations and rewards would abandon graffiti in deference to the greater success of another artist in a different art world. Muralists’ devaluation of the fame and financial rewards generated within community art worlds suggests that we must investigate the effect of hegemonic conceptions of fame and artistic worth on muralists’ evaluations of their social ties as well as on the ways in which those ties mold local standards of success and reward. The following section shows how the theoretical frameworks developed to study art worlds and subcultures can be joined to understand the ways in which graffiti muralists responded, in their individual careers and in their collective ideologies of fame, to waves of acceptance and rejection by commercial art galleries.

Graffiti in Galleries

Subway muralists have come to the attention of gallery owners, critics, and buyers in the elite New York art world twice in the past two decades: first beginning in late 1972, and a second time in 1980. In each instance, a
group of entrepreneurs served as intermediaries, packaging graffiti muralists and their work in ways that appealed to journalists and gallery owners. The entrepreneurs’ interventions in the subway muralists’ art world fit Hebdige’s definition of “the commodity form” (1979, p. 94) in that they sought to remove muralists from the social and aesthetic context for which their art was invented. Castleman (1982, pp. 117–33) describes how the organizers of United Graffiti Artists (UGA) and its successor, the Nation of Graffiti Artists (NOGA), tried to “win their members recognition as serious artists by encouraging writers to produce graffiti-style works on canvas and various other media with a view toward their sale to art collectors” (p. 117).

The mere fact of gallery owners’ commercial interest in graffiti may be taken as an effort to co-opt an alternative aesthetic and social form into the dominant art world. However, the way in which graffiti canvases were presented for sale, and the timing of interest in graffiti art, responded, as Becker would contend, to the dynamic of the art market and did not react, as Hebdige would predict, to the specific character of the graffiti subculture’s resistance to hegemonic categories. Graffiti canvases were marketed as a response to buyers’ constant demand for stylistic innovation. But because graffiti artists violated so many of the post-modernist canons, their canvases could not be evaluated and priced in relation to other works. As a result, dealers skirted the aesthetic merits of graffiti art in their sales pitches and instead contrasted the artists’ background of poverty and crime (even though several so described grew up in stable, working-class families) with their current ability to “paint just like real, trained artists.” The owner of a prestigious Manhattan gallery stated that, as a sociologist, I would no doubt be interested that “these graffiti paintings by poor, ignorant blacks and Puerto Ricans hang in the same museums, are sold in the same galleries, as Picasso, Pollock and Schnabel.”

The emphasis on graffiti artists’ unconventional background served to attract the attention of buyers who might otherwise have shunned paintings so far removed from the conventions of elite art. However, because graffiti were sold as what one dealer calls “the efforts of ex-junkies and thieves to pull themselves out of the ghetto,” and bought as “the way in which these poor people can better themselves,” in the words of one collector, prices remained low, reaching peaks of $3,000 for large canvases in 1973–74 and $5,000 in 1982–83. Speculative interest quickly waned. In the first instance, demand had dried up by 1975 (Castleman 1982, pp. 119–25). When I conducted my interviews after the 1983 Christmas season, the market had again collapsed. Galleries refused to buy any more canvases from graffiti writers. While dealers expressed
optimism, several betrayed perhaps the true state of affairs when, after allowing generous time for interviews, they asked whether I could arrange for a graffiti art show in Madison, Wisconsin, hardly the sort of place to park canvases in a vibrant market.

While gallery owners' periodic interest in graffiti was a response to the logic of the elite art market, the organizational and ideological attributes of the graffiti writers' subculture do help us understand their reactions to the waxing and waning of commercial demand for their work. Subway muralists of the 1970s successfully resisted buyers' attempts to impose themselves as the judges of graffiti writers and their work. The writers' corners, rather than UGA, NOGA, or the galleries, remained the sites at which style was judged and fame allocated. Writers at all career levels agreed that a writer's standing was determined by his subway work (Castleman 1982, pp. 81, 110–11) and that gallery shows and sales were the rewards, not the arbiters, of writers' graffiti reputations (Goldstein 1980). The muralists who had come to the attention of gallery owners through the exhibits, with the resultant publicity in general circulation newspapers and magazines, took it upon themselves to introduce their peers at writers' corners to gallery owners and art buyers. The muralists' success in circumventing the entrepreneurs' efforts to impose themselves as the mediators between the subway and commercial art worlds ensured that the standards of the writers' corners remained decisive in shaping writers' careers. The organizational and ideological robustness of the writers' corners limited the commodification of graffiti in the 1970s.

The demise of the writers' corners left muralists more vulnerable to the blandishments of a second generation of entrepreneurs who organized the "Time Square Show" for graffiti canvases in 1980 and other exhibits in the following years. The 1980s entrepreneurs recruited muralists through the few gallery writers of the 1970s still active at the end of the decade. The writers introduced the exhibit organizers to their friends and protégés known to them from neighborhood and school. In the absence of writers' corners, young muralists of the 1980s have no place to make contact with those writers already known to the galleries. Unlike the 1970s gallery writers, who were continually reinforced with stars recruited from the writers' corners, the writers cataloged in the last major exhibit of this period (Janis 1983) were all recruited by entrepreneurs at the outset of the decade and were personally acquainted with each other before being packaged together in graffiti art exhibits.

After the destruction of the writers' corners, the galleries became the only sites at which muralists could meet other writers they regarded as peers. As a result, they came to share their patrons' rejection of subway graffiti as a legitimate form of art. The catalog of the 1983 "Post-Graffiti"
exhibit celebrates the graffiti muralist’s “transition from subway surfaces to canvas. . . . Today his painting, no longer transitory or ephemeral, joins the tradition of contemporary art and is recognized as an existing valid movement” (Janis 1983). The muralists echo their patrons’ distinction between subway graffiti and art on canvas, which is “post” graffiti. Several of the gallery muralists advocate a ban on subway graffiti, arguing that “we were the first and the best. The writing now is just scribble-scrabble. Our pieces were art.”

Although most of the gallery muralists still live in the same communities in which they began their graffiti careers, they refuse to associate with neighborhood muralists and do not introduce younger muralists to gallery patrons, fearing the competition and the danger that patrons might “confuse my art with that subway garbage.” The gallery muralists gain neighborhood status not through their graffiti, which now are done only for private patrons, but from the ways in which they spend the income from their gallery sales. Several of the gallery artists spoke with pride of their ability to afford high-priced drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, for themselves and their girlfriends. No longer acknowledging their neighbors’ capacity to judge their art and confer fame, the gallery muralists seek community admiration of the extravagance of their private consumption instead of the skill of their public production. After the collapse of the graffiti art market in 1983, none of the muralists returned to subway or neighborhood art. A few quit art entirely; the others sought to enroll in art schools or make careers as graphic artists.

CONCLUSION

This examination of graffiti writers’ careers and of the fragmentation of the graffiti art world in the 1980s suggests that both the Beckerian and subcultural approaches to deviance must be modified to account for the interaction of organization and ideology in the individual and collective experiences of graffiti writers. Entrepreneurs and gallery owners made similar attempts to commodify graffiti in the 1970s and 1980s. Their efforts succeeded in the second period because, in the interval, the police had disrupted the writers’ corners. This suggests an important qualification to Hebdige’s discussion of “the commodity form” as a way of overwhelming subcultures’ resistance. If the existence of a subculture is a sign that its members reject hegemonic practices, then simply offering the rewards of the dominant culture should not, in itself, subvert the subculture’s ideological or organizational cohesiveness. Only by undermining the organizational bases for sustaining belief in the subculture’s alternative view of reality could graffiti writers, or anyone else, be attracted to a conception of reality they previously had rejected.
Graffiti

The causal priority of organizational over ideological change in the practices of graffiti writers lends support to Becker's contention that careers in deviance, and in art, are grounded in the individual's local ties to mentors, peers, and audiences. Yet those social ties must produce a sense of reality with enough resonance to sustain an individual in his pursuit of a career. In the discussion of taggers' truncated careers, we saw that the quantitative conception of fame generated by their ties to mentors and audiences did not allow for the further development of a tagging career. Only by forging links to gangs, and subordinating their sense of fame to the collective goals of the gang, could taggers continue to write graffiti. Similarly, neighborhood muralists' support from patrons and local audiences lost importance in comparison with the adulation and rewards they believed gallery muralists received from their sponsors.

Graffiti writers at all stages of a career use their immediate social ties to construct generalizations about their opportunities for fame. However, when writers gain first- or secondhand knowledge of other writers' social relations and access to fame, the value of sustaining their own graffiti writing and the resultant links to peers and audiences are called into question. Writers' corners reinforced and deepened muralists' earlier conceptions of fame, while the loss of such ties to peers, in combination with the experience or knowledge of the different rewards available to gallery artists, made muralists question the worth of local fame. Taggers' encounters with other similarly situated taggers called into question the belief that the general public echoed the fame they had won from mentors and from their own disciples.

Although Becker correctly argues that individuals learn behaviors and beliefs through social interactions, we must amend his insight by recognizing that graffiti writers, and all other social actors, must reconcile what they learn and do in their individual careers with their broader experiences and observations, or, in the language of Marxist cultural theory, with the hegemonic culture. The analysis of individual careers must be grounded in an understanding that external labeling or co-optive interventions have their greatest effect by making apparent the internal limitations in the organizational or ideological bases for a career or subculture and thereby confirming or subverting individuals' faith in the value of pursuing artistic, deviant, or any activity with others.

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