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**[____] WAS HERE:
AN EXPLORATION OF GRAFFITI IN LONDON**

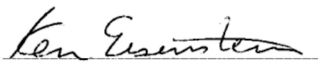
by

Alex J. Iannone

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council
For Honors in Film and Media Studies

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the art of graffiti through its culture and process as it thrives in London, England. I utilize footage of London as well as my own filmed performance art in order to reveal themes related to memory and remembrance that are expressed through both the creation and removal of graffiti. I seek to explain its existence and importance as it pertains to societal structures and placemaking. I delve into the topic of personal and spatial identity in relation to graffiti. This thesis works to investigate the controversies surrounding graffiti that act as catalysts for its creation and prevalence. I discuss my filmmaking process to explain my motivations and intentions for my film, and to expand on certain aspects of the footage and the editing.

INTRODUCTION

“I was here but now I'm gone
I left my name to carry on
Those who liked me
Liked me well
Those who didn't can go to hell”
-The bathroom wall”
– E.M. Crane, Skin Deep

Graffiti has never been something that I have been drawn to. Rather, in my urban experiences, I found it to be either entirely insignificant or an indicator of lack of safety and regulation. I generally viewed the practice as mundane or threatening, depending on the context or space. Upon my arrival in London for my semester abroad, I tasked myself with discovering the inspiration for my film. I had initially approached the matter with the belief that a singular, thesis-worthy event or conversation would pique my interest and launch my project. As time went on, the moment never came, yet I was surrounded by a city filled with passion and creativity. We moved as a pack and spoke almost exclusively to each other in the early days. As my friends and I embarked on our daily explorations, I was instinctively pointing out the markings on the walls. Graffiti became my first introduction to Londoners. I began to grow familiar with their lingo, their jokes, and their passions before ever getting to know any locals. I took pictures of the ones that amused me and attempted to find out who created them. It was in this personal research that I discovered that there is a richness to graffiti in London that I had not recognized.

I recall a class visit to the British Museum where we wandered into the exhibit of Assyrian Sculpture dating from 1100 - 800 BC. Our professor led us to a back area that hosted massive human-headed winged lions. He gestured to the base of the figure where

there was a collection of squares etched into the stone. It was an act of Ancient graffiti. He made a comment along the lines of “See, people have always been dodgy.” It was amusing to see a practice that seems so modern performed over 3,000 years ago. However, this revealed to me that there is something instinctual about graffiti that has always been a part of human nature.

Children doodle on their desks in class, young couples carve their initials into trees, bar patrons scribble obscenities on a bathroom stall. Humans have a craving to be significant and to be remembered. I grew to recognize this urge as a large part of a graffiti artist's motivations for their creations. Many artists across all mediums crave recognition. Not everyone needs to be a household name like Van Gogh, yet they often chase some form of importance. I myself often feel the same yearning for significance in my filmmaking; that someone might be drawn to my work in a meaningful way or that it will achieve something more than an unremarkable Vimeo upload.

It became apparent that I was both creatively and fundamentally drawn to the world of graffiti in London, and that it had potentially to be fulfilling both academically and personally. The topic gave me the opportunity to investigate areas and subcultures in London that I wouldn't ordinarily pursue. I began as a blank slate, with no information or strong opinions about graffiti, which meant that I was able to film objectively, and let the graffiti lead me. I would snap pictures of graffiti sightings on a daily basis, and later return to the site. I would take the tube or a bus and hop off at any stop and begin walking wherever I felt compelled to go. The walls were like an endless trail of breadcrumbs that I'd follow until I lost the sunlight.

SECTION ONE: Controversial By Nature

When engaging in conversations about graffiti, it is entirely common to approach the artform as vandalism and the destruction of property, especially pertaining to the demolition of historic monuments and buildings. This is something that I witnessed in London. You will rarely see one of the emblematic red phone booths without a sprayed tag if it is not maintained and monitored in The City of Westminster. Even Westminster Abbey, with all its grandeur and numerous uniformed guards, was not safe from sneaky vandals. On the stone supports right next to the door, there are etchings that someone astonishingly managed to scratch into the stone without being spotted. On this proud landmark of England, that has stood since the 1200s, that hosts the coronation throne and the remains and monuments to historical heroes, somebody wrote, “Ya Boi Biggie Cheese.” Could this be an act of *lèse-majesté*? A piece of protest by someone who is against the crown and the imperialism and classism it stands for? Or, is it the work of a 13-year-old class clown on a school field trip? It is likely that this phrase will one day be sanded and scrubbed away; yet, from my visit to the cathedral, I will always remember the monuments to William Shakespeare, Stephen Hawking, and Ya Boi Biggie Cheese. Certainly, the writers, philosophers, and scientists who are buried and honored in Westminster Abbey have their accolades and achievements, but who is to say that they deserve to be remembered, while Biggie Cheese will be washed away.

I was nearly starstruck to observe and capture graffiti artists at work. I had been spending weeks capturing tags and spray-paintings and to finally see someone in the act was thrilling. The first time I witnessed it was in a very busy area near one of my most prominent filming locations, Brick Lane. Two men wore jumpsuits and used a paint roller on a wildly long pole to place their work high up on the side of a building. Crowds

of people casually passed by them, unphased and unbothered. I asked them if I could film them for a while, to which they explained that I could film the painting, but keep them out of the shot, since “technically” this is not allowed. There is an understanding in the Shoreditch and Brick Lane area, where graffiti has become a massive part of the appeal. Numerous tours of the graffitied walls take place daily, where people celebrate the work, although it is still considered illegal. Graffiti experts lead tourists on a walk through the neighborhoods, pointing out notable pieces and remarking on their significance. These safe spaces provide a secure location for mural work. I spotted another comfortable artist at work in a skatepark on the Thames River in Waterloo. He gave his piece a touch-up while standing on a ladder with his speaker bumping R&B. Where these theoretical boundaries end, the war begins.

Outside of these “designated” spaces, graffiti instantly becomes a nuisance to landlords and city officials. A wall on my daily outings became the site of a battle between graffiti artists and the clean-up crew. Every week, a new tag or doodle would appear on the wall, plainly created with haste. In the days following its appearance, the wall would receive a fresh coat of white paint, poorly hiding the evidence of the red spray paint or sharpie that lies beneath it. This was not unique to this location, if you look closely enough at virtually any painted wall in the city, you can see the paint swatch discoloration or the persistence of the spray paint beneath a thin topcoat. A sign was taped up in a stairwell near my flat where graffiti was common, asking painters to spare the wall. The subsequent tag proved that these efforts were unproductive. I was equally thrilled to spot a city worker sanding down a “Fatso” tag. Fatso was one of the first tags I recognized in my first weeks in London. He appeared to be unstoppable, and online graffiti forums praised his brazen style of work. I was honored to crouch down with the

worker and record his task. Much like the artists, the cleaners are rarely seen. Just as the graffiti mysteriously appears, it disappears the same way, with a poorly color-matched swatch taking its place.

In the 2001 film, *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, the narrator states that “what makes graffiti removal particularly intriguing, though, is that the artists creating it are unconscious of their artistic achievements”(McCormick). The film satirically likens the patchwork coverups to famous Abstract Artists such as Mark Rothko and Kazimir Malevich. The film also claims that in any form, successful graffiti removal will “repress communication entirely.” This statement suggests that the graffitier is trying to say something while the remover is ensuring that it is silenced. However, unlike the film suggests, I do not believe graffiti removal is shutting down the conversations that take place on these walls, but rather, it contributes to the discussion, making their opinion heard just the same. Still, the nature of the practice does come with its repressive connotations, asserting that the value lies within the maintenance and care of these walls, rather than the voices of the artists.

A sequence in my film focuses on another battle I observed in Brick Lane. In this space that is essentially the heart of graffiti culture in London, there is one wall in particular that is attached to a small community garden. A sign mounted on the wall pleads with painters to leave it alone, as the aerosols from the spray paints have been negatively impacting the growth of the plants. Unfortunately, this sign was sprayed over in vibrant paint, as well as the rest of the wall(See Appendix A). As an observer, I was conflicted by what I was seeing. I believe in this space as a welcome area for artists to experiment and express, yet I also understand the importance of utilizing green spaces within a city environment. I could not, in this instance, pick a side, even as this wall

seemingly asks you to. However, I still felt compelled to participate in the tumult. I chose to bring the wall into the studio and use the canvas to reflect the process of tagging that occurred at this site.

As in most places, Londoners have differing opinions on graffiti. Many believe it should be celebrated as an integral part of London's landscape. They subscribe to the belief that the art form adds much-needed color and unique character to the city. A local friend of mine expressed his appreciation for graffiti, saying that it gives London a heartbeat. The pops of color pleasantly contrast the ever-gray sky. However, others hold an entirely oppositional position on the matter. Graffiti is vandalism and an indicator of poverty and can therefore act as an invitation for nefarious characters and activities. However, this seems to be an increasingly unpopular opinion. A BBC article delightfully titled

“Street Art: Crime, grime, or sublime?” breaks down the controversy and the shift in opinions regarding the matter in the UK. Richard Clay, a professor of digital humanities at Newcastle University, is quoted in the article as claiming, “To most people street art is either an indicator of an area that is vibrant or of one that is run-down and in need of better policing. It very much depends on individuals' broader opinions about acceptable behaviours in public space, but it seems clear to me that more and more people regard street art as a positive phenomenon. Hence, it appears to be being more widely tolerated by public authorities” (Bell 1).

Graffiti thrives in controversy. The act itself is a statement, as artists take on the risk of consequences in order to make their mark. The use of public property makes massive statements about one's beliefs and motives in creating their piece. The allowance and acceptance of graffiti threatens to cheapen the art and dull much of its impact. Graffiti is no longer such when it is hung in a gallery. The same BBC article includes a statement from Liverpool graffiti artist Sam Fishwick: “It's raw, it's gritty, it's

on the street, it's not meant to be there. When you go and see it in a gallery it loses its charm, it loses its character”(Bell 1).

A particular shot in my film that I believe encapsulates this is of a sign for Whitechapel Gallery. (See Appendix B) The Whitechapel neighborhood is riddled with murals, casual spray painting from what I can only assume are hundreds of taggers. Seemingly every surface has some form of marking and the Whitechapel gallery was not immune. The sign is tagged with the signatures of a few writers. The gallery describes itself as “the artists’ gallery for everyone”(Whitechapel Gallery). Perhaps the artists were taking this claim as an invitation to include their work, or it could be a symbol of their discontent and rejection of art galleries. Galleries are inherently exclusive and selective in the art they choose to exhibit. Only what the curators deem to be worthy of the public display makes it to their showrooms, and ultimately enforces profit-oriented influences and injects capitalistic values into the art world. Or perhaps the sign simply presented a rare empty space for a tagger to take advantage of. Even so, the image of this created a composition that spoke volumes to me about the clash between artistic cultures.

SECTION TWO: Who and Why?

I was curious to know, who are these taggers? Do they have day jobs? Have I unknowingly met one before? Finding any true identities was impossible. Artists use codes and aliases that ensure their anonymity to the public. A resident of Camden may recognize “Jet 97” or “10Foot”’s names, but they likely will never catch them in action. These monikers are often referred to as “tags.” I began to wonder, what’s in a name? As I filed through databases and forums, it became clear that there is something simultaneously simple yet massively important about selecting one’s graffiti pseudonym. I encountered a Reddit thread in which a beginner artist asks for help in choosing his name. Nothing seems to fit him quite right or seem to mean enough. The responses include a variety of pieces of advice; some urge him to not think about it, it will come naturally. Most posters have a story of how they came to claim their name. The depth of these sources of inspiration covers a whole spectrum. A few responses include:

- “Mine is the name of a character in one of my favorite books; I adopted it back in high school and it essentially defined my secret alter ego, haha”(unknown).
- “One of the main points of graffiti is notoriety. the artist is saying "look at me!" bringing attention to one's work, and also (IMO) the place that you are choosing to paint on. I typically tag on abandoned buildings, something that in my city, I think [needs] attention. graffiti draws attention. also, I work in an office and all day long I send and receive memos, utilizing the abbreviation "attn:" I don't know, I think it's witty, for me”(cicicatastrophe).

- “Klumpmeister, given to me by my old baseball coach in 5th grade. I go by Klumpy cause it rolls off the tongue better and is short”(Klumpmeister).
- The variation in nomenclature goes from the deeply personal, or somewhat trivial. One user even claimed, “Mine was always vandal [because] I was always getting the cops called on me as a kid, and since graffiti is "vandalism" or whatever I guess that's [why] I chose it”(refreshinghj).

Several respondents on this post expressed a lifelong connection to their tag or can tie it to a defining moment or experience. However, it appears that most artists feel that they have little to share in terms of their naming story. Some expressed an inclination toward a specific letter. They enjoy the way it looks when they spray it or they gain a sense of satisfaction from it. For example, an artist may adopt “Sneeze” as a tag as they enjoy the loop of the *E*'s alongside the zag of a *Z*. While this may seem elementary, a graffiti artist's tag is not like the initial at the bottom of a canvas, but rather the artwork itself. By using this method, artists can customize their compositions while simultaneously establishing their brand. With letters as the subject matter, the piece is reliant often only on the alphabet to establish balance, symmetry, shape, and form.

Style and signature are synonymous in tagging. Similarly, dynamics are often key, as speed plays a role for many artists. To avoid being caught, graffiti artists will place an arbitrary time limit on their work, thus they must have a natural, perfected flow and technique. The same principle commonly applies to the use of an image or doodle as a tag. One may employ a series of instinctive shapes and lines to develop a sort of logo in lieu of a name. Writers never remain entirely anonymous. In the age of the internet,

there are websites and forums dedicated to the sharing of graffiti in London. People can share a sighting and tag its location to encourage more viewers. An entire fanbase surrounds the practice. Their artistic identity becomes an alter ego; an extension of themselves that they can use as a vehicle for expression.

Much like a billboard, a writer may use the walls as a place to advertise themselves or their beliefs. The walls are used as a space for discussion. People express their political and social beliefs, and voice their discomforts, whether it be a rejection of COVID restrictions or hatred of Boris Johnson, or the common suggestion of “Be Gay do Crime.” Walls become a place of business where people paste their promotional posters or flyers for events or movements. I believe this to be a testament of the passion of individuals, or the frustration one may have with the world. People feel unheard or unable to have their opinions break through the noise. Writing their convictions on the walls acts as a release, and ensures that at least one person may see it and think about it. This has long been a purpose of graffiti; particularly during wars or times of significant social upheaval.

A notorious opinion piece from the 1960s in London is accredited to the radicalist group, King Mob. In a tube station, they scrawled on the wall, “SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY – TUBE – WORK – DINER [sic] – WORK – TUBE – ARMCHAIR – TV – SLEEP – TUBE – WORK – HOW MUCH MORE CAN YOU TAKE – ONE IN TEN GO MAD – ONE IN FIVE CRACKS UP”(Kunzru 1). This graffiti was left to stand until the 1990s due to its notoriety, effectively leaving its mark as an influential piece of statement-graffiti.

SECTION THREE: Through the Years

Graffiti has been a long-contested art form and has often been the source of debate and tension in urban spaces. The persistence and cultural importance of graffiti has led to a more commonly agreed upon acceptance of the practice. In the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, author Jeffery Ian Ross addresses this shift, “graffiti and street art have been faced with a dual onslaught from different dominant cultures (police/city politicians and art curators/galleries) to remove or restrict its practice and impact. However, despite this, or perhaps spurred on by this marginalization, counter hegemonic discourses have emerged, which in some senses have kept graffiti alive as both a cultural concept and as a practice that is now evident in many forms internationally - that is, graffiti is now a global cultural force”(Ross 170). While I believe this sentiment to be incredibly truthful, I would argue that graffiti is not “now” a global cultural force, but rather has always been and has recently gained respect in the eye of the public, especially within the art world.

Graffiti is recognized as having been around for thousands of years. The origin is often disputed, but there is archaeological evidence that both Romans and Mayans used walls for inscriptions and artworks. Pompeii specifically revealed the prevalence of graffiti as people would share stories and sentiments for their favorite gladiators on the walls (Wall). The term “vandalism” developed from a 5th Century tribe known as the Vandals, that performed destructive acts on Rome. The true definition of the word was set in place after the French Revolution and the defacement of art. From then on, the word was (Wall).

The birth of modern graffiti is attributed to the 1960s, when tagging became popular in New York City and Philadelphia, as individuals and groups employed graffiti

to trace their movements. It was quickly linked to counter culture, and took on new forms of rebellion in terms challenging public property and ownership. The later furthering of the acceptance of graffiti came with the admission of certain artists into galleries as well as the establishment of graffiti unions. As the line was blurred between “real” art and street art, graffiti became increasingly more palatable.

A 1974 publication by the Association of American Geographers tackled the resurgence and spike in popularity of graffiti in New York City and Philadelphia. The piece reports, “During the 1960s articles on graffiti had dealt with fairly traditional forms, the amorous, the erotic, the political, the historic, and the intellectual, but a new trend appeared in 1970. Graffiti writing had spread to the inner city. Almost all of the graffiti reports discovered for 1972 and half of those for 1971 were concerned with the newfound popularity of spray-painting among inner city youth”(Ley and Cybriwsky 419). The article discusses the epidemic of graffiti as it seemingly develops into a new practice. The authors attempt to make sense of seemingly nonsensical spraying that appears to contrast the former “intellectual” forms of graffiti. They decoded the tags to attribute them to various alleged gangs and organizations that seem to be making their “claim” on the area.

The article features maps of Philadelphia neighborhoods where gang activity is reported and graffiti is identified. By comparing the maps, the authors form firm links between the two, as well as recognizing the use of external graffiti to encroach upon a given gang’s space. For example, the sightings of “White Power” scrawlings in Black neighborhoods in early 1970s. The article concludes by claiming, “Graffiti are a visible manifestation of a group's social space. Moreover, assertive or aggressive graffiti represent more than attitudes. They are dispositions to behavior, and as such impress a

bolder outline on the fuzzy transition between perception and action”(Ley and Cybriwsky 505). What intrigues me about the assertions made by this article is the revelation that graffiti is capable of representing many social conditions. These markings in a group’s territories have the power to claim possession of an area, without transactions or immediate action. Certainly, there is the association with the organization to which the graffiti belongs, yet it is the graffiti that effectively fends the space. The article also reveals the ability for graffiti to both work defensively and offensively in public spaces. In my observations in London, I recognized the works of groups and individuals as performing a sort of placemaking.

Particularly in the spaces where graffiti is not welcome, the signatures offered a challenge to the notion of public space. In neighborhoods I frequented such as Bloomsbury and Covent Garden, cleanliness and affluence are primary values. They invite a considerable amount of tourism and consumerism and rely heavily on the presentation of their streets and buildings to maintain the reputation of a prosperous space. Graffiti, in many ways, challenges this, as it often acts as an indicator of poverty and disorder. Perhaps it’s this concept that drives certain writers to enter the space. Knowing that they are actively unwelcome may counterintuitively urge them to claim some of the space. Visually, graffiti stands out greatly in the hearts of these neighborhoods and gets pushed to the outside. However, there is certainly a sense of vengeance when seeing a scribbled spray on the facade of a Chanel Shop; as if to say “Screw you and those fancy perfumes.” The contrast of the extreme consumerist culture and the grunge of graffiti acts as a distinct reminder of the wealth discrepancies in the city, and the incredibly exclusive nature of these spaces.

The rejection of concepts and institutions such as capitalism and consumerism has been a prevailing theme in graffiti culture. Certainly, much of the linkage between critiques of capitalism and graffiti can be attributed to the works of the infamous street artist, Banksy. Banksy has received remarkable praise and recognition for his brazen artistic style and evocative imagery. His pieces are said to challenge society and work effectively as commentary on social institutions that enact injustices and he is often hailed as the figure-head for modern graffiti. Many point to his 2018 auction stunt as a culmination of his capitalist criticisms. His piece, “Girl with the Balloon”, was up for auction at Sotheby’s London. The bidding concluded at \$1.4 million dollars and the gavel struck, and instantly the painting began to shred through the frame, leaving the bottom half of the painting in tethers(Edwards 1). Many marveled at this performance as a remarkable piece of commentary that allegedly challenged the art world and its corruption. However, in 2021, the piece resold under the new name, “Love is in the Bin.” This time, for \$25.4 million dollars (Edwards 1). Some argue that this was not Banksy’s intention, yet I find the scheme to be far too well thought out for this to simply be an unintended consequence.

The reason I reject Banksy as the figure-head for modern graffiti is the same reason I attempted to primarily avoid mural-work and coordinated street art in my filming process. While it is often impressive, it eclipses the reality of the majority of graffiti culture. There are certain pieces, particularly in my shots from Brick Lane and Southwark, that lean more towards street art that I included in the piece, as I believe their location and context lend themselves to the narrative of London graffiti I built throughout the film. Still, my discoveries led me to believe that there is a fine line between genuine graffiti and street art that is defined by their contexts and intentions. I

would be more inclined to elect the genuinely incognito and self-oriented artist with a single can of spray paint as the embodiment of modern urban graffiti.

SECTION FOUR: Putting the Pieces Together

Throughout the editing process, I began to recognize a peculiar and inspiring happenstance that I managed to capture while filming in London. There were several shots in which a passerby would emulate a piece of graffiti. One shot in particular shows a collaged wall with a poster of a man in a hood and gas mask in profile. As I am filming, a man walks across the frame with his hood up and a face mask on. He aligned perfectly with the poster when I chose to cut to the next shot (See Appendix C). I was incredibly excited to see this sort of parallel and any subsequent synchronicities I had inadvertently caught on camera. I considered this to be primarily coincidental and to be an example of the age old saying, “life imitates art.” Eventually, I recognized this as a unique phenomenon that occurs as a result of the interconnectedness of the city. Art is never created in a vacuum, and is inspired intentionally or unintentionally by one’s surroundings. The inhabitants of London are all connected to each piece of artwork that covers its walls, and therefore, share many of the same qualities.

Each neighborhood I explored had its own essence that is captured in its artwork. I recognized this same effect on an energistic level as well as literal. The graffiti art seemed to have distinct connections with each area it occupied. If its a fast paced area with people speeding down the sidewalks and just passing through, the graffiti captured the same urgency with quickly composed images and tags. If the area was home to vintage shops and hipsters, the art was quirky and often edgy. One space in particular was a fruitful site for this phenomenon. I came across a skate park by the Waterloo bus stop where the graffiti and the skaters shared the same spirit. The artwork was vibrant and included many yellows and pinks and teals, all colors that are robust and encourage energy. As I observed this space and its art, skaters flew around, practicing their

kickflips and sharing stories, reveling in their common ground. It is evident that the skaters and the artists actively enliven each other, creating an identity for the space. I took my observations as an invitation to include myself and my own work in this cycle of emulation.

From the conception of this project, I was drawn to the idea of including my own performance art in the film. Initially, I thought of this primarily as a way to break up the monotony of a montage film, and to push myself out of my comfort zone and work in carefully composed shots for the sequence. The idea to use the projector was inspired by an installation in London's Imperial War Museum. The installation used a projector directed downward onto a board cut into tessellations and projected a moving animation of a map. I placed my hands in the path of the light and watched the image use my skin as a screen, and the shadow cast by my body inserted itself onto the map. The use of physical projection would allow me to both intercept the original image, as well as interact with the footage, and utilize superimposition to convey something to my viewers.

What I wanted to communicate to the audience was entirely unknown to me at the developmental stage. Much like the overall idea of the film, I hoped for it to come to me through my observations and experiences in the city. The walls certainly spoke, and I drew much inspiration from the words and actions of graffiti artists. However, the connective tissue I had hoped to discover did not appear to me as I filmed throughout London. The motives, inspirations, and products of artists extend across a massive variety. This is largely a part of what makes graffiti so intriguing, yet presented a challenge from a thematic perspective. I needed to find a joining concept that works

with both intention and incident. By the time I left London, I was leaving without a true grasp of what this was.

In reviewing my footage of a collaged wall in the Shoreditch neighborhood, I discovered a phrase, almost buried beneath the hundreds of posters, piles of stickers, and spray paint. I did not notice it while filming this location, perhaps because it was not as flashy as the other pieces, or because the phrase did not mean as much to me then when I was still there. “They don’t want you to remember” (See Appendix D) Who are *they*, who is *you*, remember what? The sentence is vague enough that it could speak to any onlooker. Initially, as I caught this line, clinging to the edge of my frame, as I filed through footage of my memories. Upon my return to the US, I had become the quintessential “college girl who just had the most *amazing* time abroad.” I brought up London in almost every conversation, subconsciously ensuring that everybody knew I had been there, and ultimately, trying to convince myself as well. The increase in distance from London, both physically and temporally, made the experience seem less real.

I initially understood that the “they” in my experience referred to the people around me who were sick of hearing my abroad anecdotes; eventually, it occurred to me that I had become my own “they.” I had transitioned from a space where I was entirely expressive and rapturous in everything I did, to a life that was routine and colorless by comparison. Any attempt to view my footage was met with intense sadness and ultimately envy for the version of myself holding the camera. My own bereavement became the primary hindrance to my progress.

I soon realized that this line applies to a much larger, shared experience about memory and remembrance. The slip of paper with this quote is surrounded by marks

and pastings of proof of existence and presence. By graffitiing something, an individual is performing a place-making action. They establish the fact that they have stood in this place and held these opinions, passions, talents, or behaviors. It is undeniable evidence that they were here and in many ways, they make their claim on the space.

“They don’t want you to remember,” became an arc in my mind that both extended across my film, as well as my editing and further production. The film and the filmmaking process depict a struggle and craving to remember and be remembered. Some artists create significant pieces that become icons of the spaces they take up, while others quickly ink the walls. Operating either consciously or subconsciously, they are establishing their existence and importance. They effectively secure themselves as part of the city landscape, at least until it’s painted over. Yet still, their signature will remain beneath the fresher coats. Without such practices, they risk being forgotten.

Even those who are attempting to remove the graffiti are participating in the ritual. By its nature, graffiti requires an adversary or rejection in order to thrive. The removal acts as the antagonist for the artists, upholding and enforcing the barriers that fuel many artists. Like the aforementioned film, *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* (2001), asserts, “the declared war on graffiti plays an important role in the furthering of the artform. The unconscious artistic desires of even the most conservative members of the ruling system leaked out in this subconscious conspiracy to fund and promote creative endeavors”(McCormick).

In my projection sequences, I played with both the painting and removal aspects of urban graffiti practices. I spray painted and created my own pieces, both methodically and spontaneously, all the while knowing my creations were essentially temporary. After I was done with a piece, I removed it in some way, either by pushing it over or shutting

off the lights and letting the darkness swallow the image. The removal became an essential part of my performance in order to properly pay homage to the ritual.

The mural I painted was inspired by the persisting quote (See Appendix E). The figure is a characterization of the yearning and exhaustion of the need to be remembered and to remember, as well as a self-portrait. The hands are of the perpetrators of the opposition; the embodiment of the “They.” They pry at the figure’s mind, peeling the memories out and away, yet it is never fully disconnected from the form. It plays on the unending persistence of the push and pulls of the battle over graffiti.

My final painting was not only an attempt to incorporate the title of my piece, but it was also a way to bring many of the artists into the studio with me and place their signatures on my film. I created a montage that featured many of the most distinct signatures and names that I encountered and superimposed the footage onto the canvas after I completed the piece. I played upon the common graffiti cliché of claiming a space by signing your name, followed by “was here.” This trend can be traced back to World War I with Australian’s use of “Foo was here”, and later in World War II when American soldiers overseas would graffiti the image of a long nosed creature named “Kilroy” peeking over a wall, featuring some variation of “Kilroy was here.” Kilroy has always been meaningful to me, as my father’s father would complete the doodle alongside his signature on documents and cards. As a child, I got such a kick out of that anecdote that my father has since added it to his signatures when he writes me a note. Thus, I felt that the phrase, as simple as it reads, is capable of carrying the weight of the film and graffiti culture with its historical significance and relatability. It encapsulates the placemaking

and territorial aspect of the practice. What better way to prove your existence than to plainly state the fact that you were here?

The use of sound in [____] *Was Here* became the link that joins the studio footage with the street footage. By using the footage projected and reshot, there is a mental distance that naturally forms for the viewer as they are no longer “in London.” My use of ambient street noise and significant sound events throughout the majority of the film works to relink the two locations. While the visuals of London and its graffiti may be less clear and often abstracted throughout the performance art segments, the sound works to keep part of the viewer's mind rooted in the city. I believe that this serves to create an experiential depiction of memory. The brain struggles to recall visuals and auditory experiences, yet what results in our mind is a fuzzier recollection of the events, and draws out only what is most meaningful or significant to our emotions. For me, that often means that music is one of the most prominent details that remain.

In my mind, graffiti and music have always gone together. Perhaps this is due to the televisual depictions I have seen where delinquent teens are tagging a wall with Hip-Hop music blasts in the background. Or the image of a punk rock concert venue with grungy graffitied walls that somehow comes to mind. In truth, there is a genuine connection between the two artforms. In the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, the onslaught of graffiti is recognized as arriving alongside a new music scene. A Guardian article by Alexis Petridis highlights this connection:

“In 1975, graffiti was a shorthand way of accessing the mood of the time,” says writer Jon Savage, who mentioned *The Writing on the Wall* in his 1992 history of punk, *England’s Dreaming*. “In the 60s and even the early 70s, music had reflected the environment and how people felt, how people thought about things – and that was almost gone. Pop wasn’t doing its job, it wasn’t the teenage news. Graffiti was like a secret code, the voice of the underdog. It was people telling you things you couldn’t read in

mainstream media and wouldn't necessarily think about. You'd get jokes, stoner and outcast humour, with serious points. It was another kind of language."

It appears as though the same communities that shared a passion for Hip-Hop or Punk music also were drawn to creating or discussing graffiti (Petridis 1). The 70s through the 90s often remembered fondly in the UK for the explosions of new culture and social rebellions that came with them. People were no longer content with the status-quo and sought new forms of creative expression.

Incidentally, I came across many street performers in my filming process. I find that the music is incredibly evocative when paired with the visuals of the graffiti as I had witnessed in real-time. Every graffiti artist I came across was also playing music, rap, edm, and R&B, letting the music fuel their creativity. In order to emulate this experience and pay homage to the historical links between the two, I paired a music track with each of the projection sequences.

CONCLUSION

An integral aspect of both the practice and culture surrounding graffiti is that it is anomalous in nearly all ways. It is a dividing concept that is simultaneously uniting. It has the ability to be anarchistic and upsetting to some, while it is entirely joyful and inspiring to others. The paradoxical nature of graffiti made my exploration and research into an equally contradictory experience. Sometimes I would be delighted by graffiti; either the content or the context would amuse me. At other times, I would be concerned by its sentiments or disregard for one's property. Graffiti flourishes as a result of this controversy that is shared across communities. London's graffiti offers an incredible intersection point for the world of graffiti. The city reflects the controversies as well as the triumphs of graffiti. Each neighborhood develops its own relationship and identity in terms of graffiti. Each paint splatter on every wall is like a fingerprint that proves one's existence. As I complete this project, I am closing a chapter of my life and accepting my experience as a memory. Yet, I am leaving this film as my proof that I was there.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A:



Appendix B:



Appendix C:



Appendix D:



Appendix E:



Appendix F:



Appendix G: Presentation Speech

Throughout the process, the simplest question became the most difficult to answer: What is it about?

My answer generally depends on who's asking. If you're a film fanatic, I'll throw in terms like "montage" and "poetic documentary," if you're not, I'd just call it "artsy". But ultimately my answer is... Graffiti in London. Which is the main source of inspiration and footage. Yet in truth, I myself am not completely certain of what this film is *actually* about.

Throughout the process, this film has shifted and changed alongside me. I had the privilege of spending last semester in London for Study Abroad. Entering a new city in a new country full of strangers was disorienting. My first introduction to the city was through graffiti. It taught me about current events, shared beliefs, the energy of the city.

Graffiti has long been a part of the human experience. It dates back to the Ancient Romans, Greeks, and the Mayans. Since then it has become an integral part of art, culture, and a platform for social movements. The Berlin Wall, Banksy, Basquiat. Etc.

I took on the filming portion with an open mind and a loose plan. I wanted the inspiration to come authentically. I wandered around London keeping my eyes on the walls. If there was something that caught my attention or was exciting, I would return later with my equipment and capture it. I primarily shot in Waterloo, Brick Lane, Shoreditch, and my home neighborhood of Clerkenwell. At the time, I envisioned the film as an ode to graffiti and its artists. In my explorations into the world of graffiti, I witnessed both the creation and destruction of the art. I was often interested in places where graffiti was unwanted, yet persistent. A perpetual loop of paint was created where

the artist would tag a wall, and the building owners would cover it with a fresh coat of white paint. Which... presents the perfect blank canvas for the next artist.. And so on so forth.

Other neighborhoods were so graffitied that it became their appeal. Shoreditch and Brick Lane were two of those places. It was so widely accepted that artists would openly paint as people passed by. I happened to catch two painters at work while filming and asked for permission to capture them. They told me yes, but keep their faces out of it, since it is *technically* illegal. Interactions such as these allowed my to grow acquainted with London's graffiti culture. It is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, as it pushes the boundaries of the public and the private.

I was confident in the direction of my film all throughout my time in London. I had become comfortable with my skills and excited to put the pieces together. However, once I left the city and returned to the US, I was devastated. Leaving the experience behind left me with memories that I was desperate to hang onto, but were often too painful to remember.

Moving on to the editing process was a challenge. I couldn't look at the footage without feeling an immense sense of grief. When I finally did get the guts to dig into my footage, the separation allowed me to develop a new perspective on graffiti *and* my film. I was filling through my own memories and facing the temporal and physical distance from London. And I began to see link between graffiti... and the desire to be remembered. If I had only left something behind, or had more tangible proof that I had been there.

This is where the title of my piece, [___] Was Here was drawn from. It plays on the vandalism cliché of making the obvious claim of existence. As simplistic of a

statement as it is, it says so much about the human obsession with being significant. Temporariness is a fact of life that people are constantly resisting, and graffiti renders this affliction.

This film articulates the joys and irreverence, but also the pain of graffiti and memory. The honesty of the artform sets it apart from other mediums. It encourages risk, flippancy, and candor by the very nature of the practice. If you're going to break the law, might as well put it all out there. I took these as lessons in my filmmaking process.

- Take creative risks and get *way* out of your comfort zone
- Put your whole self into your art
- If you don't *technically* have permission to use a room for filming, use it anyway and deal with the consequences later.

Thank you again for coming and please enjoy: [___] Was Here

Appendix H: Segmentation and Reflection

Film Segmentation

- I. Studio Set up → Platform Projection (0:00 - 0:30)
 - A. Sound: Station announcer, platform ambiance
- II. Transportation (0:30 - 0:53)
 - A. Sound: Tube ambiance and announcer
- III. Tagging at Waterloo Bus station → tags in Whitechapel (0:53 - 2:07)
 - A. Sound: Ambient street chatter, guitar noodling, Bell ringing
- IV. Spray Sequence: Do Not Graffiti This Wall (2:07 - 2:47)
 - A. Sound: Accordion in Tunnel, smack of screen
- V. Brick Lane Park (2:47 - 3:22)
 - A. Sound: Suitcase rolling, Train whoosh
- VI. Tagging on Street and Walking (3:22 - 3:34)
 - A. Sound: Ambient Street Noise
- VII. Graffitied Faces and People → Ear Sculpture (3:34 - 4:03)
 - A. Sound: Voices in Tunnel
- VIII. Windows and Walls (4:03 - 4:40)
 - A. Sound: People on street, Lorry passing
- IX. Paper Shoe → Shoe on the projector (4:40 - 4:55)
 - A. Sound: Ambient Street noise, a brief clip of electric bassist performance
- X. Skate Park (4:55 - 6:02)
 - A. Sound: Skate Park Ambience, Fade in Electric Bassist
- XI. Spray Sequence: They Don't Want You To Remember (6:02 - 6:48)
 - A. Sound: Electric Bassist, people chatter
- XII. People in Visual Sync with Graffiti (6:55 - 7:14)
 - A. Sound: Street ambiance, people chatter
- XIII. Collages and Hot Takes (7:15 - 8:27)
 - A. Sound: Beatboxers, people chatter
- XIV. Bars and Barbed Wire → Drips → 444 with Barbs (8:27 - 9:31)
 - A. Sound: Echoed Voices
- XV. Painters → Spraying on Painters in Studio (9:31 - 9:47)
 - A. Sound: Repetitive Sprays
- XVI. Close-up of Graffiti on Projection Screen (9:48 - 10:06)
 - A. Sound: Spraying Cont.
- XVII. Spraying Sequence: [____] Was Here (10:06 - 11:04)
 - A. Sound: Synched Spraying, Partially Synched Spraying, Quiet introduction of piano.
- XVIII. Names on the Projector (11:04 - 11:31)
 - A. Sound: Piano in Tunnel, People Chatting
- XIX. Final walls (11:31 - 11:45)
 - A. Sound: Street ambience

Post-Production Explanation and Reflection

In this section I will detail my strategies in post-production that led to the final film. I began with editing and structuring the silent footage of London. I then created and filmed the creation of three murals. After this, I restructured the piece and ended with sound editing and design. The organization of this film found its structure through a series of observations and processes in post-production. I started by looking through each piece of footage and naming each file for the location, followed by a word or phrase that briefly summarized the content. For example, Shoreditch_Red Wall. As I began with over 300 pieces of footage from London, this was mainly for me to build an initial familiarity with the clips. I then worked on sorting the footage in various sequences in an Adobe Premiere Project. I would pull together pieces of footage that were most similar to each other. These sequences began as primarily geographical groupings, as I was instinctively pairing pieces that I recalled seeing together. They either included the same colors or artists. However, I soon naturally shifted away from this strategy, as I would view one piece of footage, and suddenly be reminded of another. For example, I had several shots of windows from different places across London, so I placed them in a grouping. This was a process of trial and error. I would put together a series of something I thought made an appropriate grouping and realize that together, they did not have the desired impact or the footage could be better used elsewhere, or not in the film at all. I worked on this sorting for several editing sessions.

The ordering of the clips in each individual sequence was based on a wide range of factors. I would look for visual or contextual links between shots and create a chain that flowed in my perception. For example: Man in a yellow hoodie on the left of the frame and tagging → Light blue tagging → Yellow graffiti on the left of the frame and light blue graffiti in the center of the frame. Through this, I developed visual cohesion across the sequence.

Eventually, I created one large project where I lined up all of the sequences in a variety of orders and viewed them as a unit. This introduced a new challenge of finding links between the sequences, as they did not naturally connect to each other. I ended up having to reshuffle footage and split up sequences, and use certain shots as a transitional point between sequences. For example: Graffitied Faces Sequence → Ear surrounded by rectangles and a black wall → Window on a black wall → Window sequence. While I wanted there to be several distinct moments throughout the film, I still prioritized cohesion. When I had something that I was comfortable with, I watched it through and used this rough cut as the inspiration for the paintings. I decided that I wanted to create pieces that leaned into the energy of a given moment

in the film, but also would work to further express the theme of memory. I marked off the sections in the sequence where I imagined the new footage would be inserted. I took notes of words and created sketches based on the footage that I imagined would lead up to the projection sequence. I decided on three main paintings and shot the process of creation.

After inserting the spray sequences into their allotments, I noticed that this addition in many ways reshaped the film, in both positive and negative ways. There was a disconnect between these moments and the rest of the film. In order to amend this, I used the B-Roll shot in the studio at various moments where the image projected matched the clip adjacent to it, or I perceived a thematic link between the action in the studio paired well with a London shot. On its own, the London footage encapsulates many key points about the city's graffiti culture; rebelliousness, rejection, community, etc. My studio footage was my way of pulling out my own interpretations or shining a spotlight on moments. I took the opportunity presented by these new additions to push the theme of memory and its undertones of bittersweetness, longing, and fondness. Still, I wanted this to remain subtle to allow ample space for audience interpretation.

I used pacing and rhythm to play around with my themes. I would leave a shot long to have the viewer soak in the moment or to take in a busier visual. Some shots I would cut short, to forcefully remove the audience and make them move on to the next shot. This was used as a representation of memory. Sometimes the mind remains stagnant, even if you want it to move on. Other times you cannot remain in a moment, even if you feel compelled to stay.

The sound was my final frontier and the most successful component in joining the footage together and breathing life into the film. I layered ambient sound from various clips throughout the city to create one, long consistent track that played quietly throughout the entire film. I wanted this to act as a room tone that existed both in London and the studio. As there was an obvious physical distance between the locations, the sound would keep part of the viewer's mind in London. I used specific ambient clips or sound effects to further enliven what was on screen, highlight what I wanted the viewer to be seeing, or encourage the viewer to make connections. For example, I used a recording of people speaking along with the sequence of faces to animate them in a way. Another example is my use of a murmuring crowd with boosted reverb and a lowpass filter to create an almost ghostly effect during the sequence of bars and barbed wire, along with the drips. The combination of these two was used to depict the ways in which these moments are trapped in my memories and only exist in the past exactly as they were when captured through my lens.

The music as well was intentionally paired with the projection sequences, to give an auditory cue to the viewer, as well as to further strengthen the energy of the given piece. The

accordion was silly and juvenile, as was the irony between the graffitied wall and the sign that begs it to be left alone, and the spraying of the screen. The electric bassist's music carried with it a melancholic tone of longing and paired well with the creation of the brain-plucking mural, which was included following the skate park sequence in contrast to the fun and excitement of the space. And finally, I heard the piano piece as very bittersweet, which is how I felt towards my film and my memories. I also enjoyed how in that clip, the music eventually grows distant as I walked away and is drowned out by people. At the end of the file, a woman yells, "Okay, let's go," which I thought was an amusing way to end the film.

I chose my final two shots as a sardonic closing. "If You Don't Get it Just Forget About it," was my way of speaking directly to the audience. I assume many of the people who watch my film found it pointless and perhaps confusing. So rather than continue to explain, I include these words. I also think that this teasing could encourage viewers to watch again. The final shot of the "Caution Wet Paint" sign is posted on a wall where the graffiti that has been concealed is peeking through. I chose this as my final image for many reasons. Personally, it was taken around the corner from my flat so I felt connected to it. But also, as a reminder that the graffiti could all one day disappear, as will the memories. But traces of them will always exist.

As I went through the process of breaking my film down after its finalization, I noticed that despite the intermixing of the original sequences, I still recognize distinct sections. However, there are several new observations that I have made in regard to this segmentation. The first thing I've noticed is the variation of length across each section. While most are generally 30-45 seconds, others are only about 10 seconds and the longest is over 1:10. In watching and creating the piece, I had imagined that the longer sequences would be those I wanted to draw the most attention to. Yet, through this analysis, I realized that these moments are often the shorter sequences, both in duration and number of shots. I do believe that this did work effectively, as the brevity of these sections further punctuates their content and works to stylistically interrupt the montage. The sound pairings with each of the sections were also interesting to see. When working on a single timeline with sound, I was not able to notice the linkages that were happening between each segment and one or more distinct sounds. I recall using sound intentionally to set tone or direct attention, but I also see that there is an audio assignment to every section. For example, in addition to the general ambient track, the section in Brick Lane Park includes sounds of a suitcase rolling and the whoosh of a train. The next section, "Tagging on Street and Walking" features additional tracks of ambient street noise. They have been made more distinct through their audio pairings.

The increase in studio footage towards the end was also much more significant than I had observed. I was actively trying to increase the intercutting between London and the studio to draw the audience out of London. The last six sections all feature both London and studio shots, and I wonder if this dulled the impact of the final sequence. I wanted the final mural and the overlain projection montage to be a very memorable moment in the film. Yet perhaps with the overuse of intercutting prior, the audience was numbed to the impact of the studio imagery. I also wonder if the final shots being in London worked against my attempts to depict the concept of physical and temporal distance from a time and place. The final projection sequence brings the artist and the graffiti into the studio and away from the city, but the return to London negates that in a way. I am torn on this, as I really enjoyed the last two shots and felt that they wrapped the piece up well and incorporated my humor. In hindsight, I might have considered projecting the shots onto a blank projection screen and including them in that style, which could have worked to create a closed circle for the film structure.

I also discovered a new theme in the segmentation process. I had not noticed the play between dimensions that occurs throughout the film. The footage in London is of 2D artwork on 3D walls with distinct textures and natural interactions with light. As I then take those images and project them, they become 2D. And again, as I include the performance aspect of creating the pieces, it returns to 3D. This variation is highlighted through particular moments such as the shot of the paper shoe, which is a 3D piece of graffiti, that I then follow with the same shot on the projector. There is also the footage of the paint drips, which adds dimensionality to the medium of graffiti. To me, this further develops the theme of memory, as the present is multi-dimensional as our senses are actively taking in the space around us, and memories are reshaped and often simplified in our minds. Still, memories can be reanimated or enlivened by our senses.

Ultimately, this exercise brought to my attention the ways in which the film can be interpreted in many different ways depending on the viewer and their biases or experiences. In working on my film, I had taken an entirely subjective approach to editing and felt that the film was open-ended. I notice now that I had left ample space for interpretation; possibly more than I had intended. In the future, I would have enlisted viewers throughout post-production to watch the drafts and provide commentary so that I could redirect them as necessary. Where I was able to see links and connections between shots and sections, audiences may not, which may have led to the impression that the film was not carefully constructed.