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## **THE ART of GRAFFITI**

*“It’s time for us to create a time and space so the young people can imprint their hand and their heart on the map of the country. That they can become the leaders, the next generation of powerful people-  
- Gregory Hodge (Spitz, p.11, 1998).*

In the words of film producer Edward Zwick (2002) the teenage years are best described as the age of “radical innocence.” In the United States teenagers have few legal rights. Their creativity has been undervalued and therefore ignored and underdeveloped in schools. In turn, adolescents have risen in silent anarchy armed with little more than a can of spray paint, inspiration, a sense of self-worth and a desire to be acknowledged, in a world where they are denied autonomy. As a result, these youth have turned their urban communities into their canvases, sparing few structures in their manmade worlds, from their unweilding spray cans.

Universally teens have silently banded together to assault our urban communities with a plethora of revolutionary visual literacy that is both profane and self-explorative. Through the medium of spray paint, they are transforming their anonymous concrete jungles into colorful rainbows of self-identification. This burgeoning youth art form is

not an isolated phenomenon; graffiti can be found spray-painted throughout almost every city around the country. Actually few cities escape their raw anarchical declaration. Graffiti is visually apparent on bridges, highways and buildings throughout urban areas around the world. It is this universal silent scream of our urban youth that needs to be honored and fostered into a healthy means of youth expressionism rather than youth criminalization. We must heed Maxime Greene's warning,

-surely not to censor, not to bring into being a new kind of witch burning, but to take positions when witches are being burned, to ponder the relationships between illusion and reality or the issues raised by recent explorations of sexuality and what it implies for us as educators (p. 174, 1999).

Although she was not directly addressing graffiti, we must recognize the silent cry of our burning teens and commit to vanquishing the flames.

Unlike our culture's youth pop stars, such as Brittany Spears and N'Sync, the teenagers of today are less polished and censored, but more raw and authentic. Instead it seems more likely that are following in the footsteps of the artists who originally founded Rap and Hip Hop. At the time, these creative but economically disadvantaged urban youth did not have access to musical equipment or music lessons in school, at home or in their communities. What they had available were their imaginations, record players and albums, which they learned to scratch and rhyme too in harmony. In so doing, developing one of the most inventive and improvisational music forms in America since Jazz (Spitz, 1998). In contrast, Brittany Spears and N'Sync are marketed as quintessential teens. Romanticized as both innocently sexy but virginal, portrayed as dull rather than edgy. It is this misrepresentation of our 21st century teens and before them of the "alphabet generation-ers" which displays an inaccurate but more palatable version of youth culture to the adults in the United States.

Like Rap music, which developed out of a need for creative survival, the graffiti artists of today use the only available canvas they are afforded (Spitz, 1998). The flat concrete surfaces of our urban environments provide endless opportunities for teens to paint. The infectious allure of underground graffiti art has spread through our youths around the world. Their silent rebellion reflects a search for visual autonomy in a visually saturated world, which needs to be acknowledged. It is time for teenagers in the United States to gain visual autonomy, by learning how to respect themselves, their voices and their community. Kerry Freedman explains,

From an educational standpoint, it would be unwise to assume that images are held as mere forms (formal objects) in students minds-when students do not have contextual information, they construct their own contexts, thereby forming their own knowledge (p.319, 2000).

It is our responsibility to teach students to appreciate their community and provide an alternative visual outlet, safe from persecution, but rich in accessible visual symbolism and literal expression.

For generations throughout the country, arts classrooms have been deemed as safe places for children to escape during a school day. These art rooms have allowed students the freedom of emotional expression, which is not afforded in most academic classrooms. However, national cutbacks for the arts have forced these “safe havens” to disappear (Davis et al., 1993). Carol Becker asks the questions, “what are the safe places left that youth can creatively inhabit? Where can they go to see their actual experience mirrored in its complexity? From where can they take a sense of agency?” (Spitz, p.22, 1998). The result is that teens have turned the world into their art room.

The teenage years are a time of narcissism for youth. It is this egocentric notion which, propels youth to experiment with their own visual identity and for many this may

involve, body piercing, tattoos and radical hair colors or styles, for others it may be the creation of an identity within a gang environment. For others it means developing a style of "tagging" to spray paint around a neighborhood, which represents themselves and/or their gang. It is these signatures or monograms called "tags," which provide a visual acknowledgement of youth identity within a peer community that litter our urban neighborhoods. Michael Dyson articulates these shared sentiments,

There ain't no doubt we are living in the era of juvenocracies you know the rule reign and tyranny of people under 25 over urban space and culture. That's where urban space is in American cities. Where young people organize themselves in informal ways that have devastating consequences. That's the deal with gangs...and for those of us who are you know, older, or think more traditionally about art, it's very challenging because you have to see the ethical value of the attempt to represent (Spitz, pp. 2-3, 1998).

Along with individual "tagging" signatures, are literal representations of our youth's rage, anger and frustration throughout our urban communities. These untapped emotions are spray-painted into existence and assault our visual consciousness in public spaces with a barrage of profanity, sexual and violent, as well as, poetic and inspiring. It is the inspiring creativity that we want to preserve and foster in our urban landscapes. It is time for us as art educators to seek to legitimize and harness these teen voices, creating public spaces where their visual identities can be safely explored and celebrated.

It is time to start teaching social responsibility in arts education by giving kids a voice in school (Lanier, 1991). Presently, kids intuitive knowledge and visual literacy is devalued in educational curriculum and standardized tests. We must honor the tacit visual knowledge the youth of the 21st century bring to school (Freedman, 2000). By harnessing their visual literacy we create an entry point from which we can create an arts curriculum that speaks with the voice of urban youth. Kerry Freedom writes,

Art education is about visual culture, which is vital in a world where students of all ages are increasingly learning from visual sources ranging from television to manga. Even so, from my perspective, students need to know non-visual aspects of visual culture, if for no other reason than because greater general knowledge can reveal the importance of the visual (p. 319, 2000).

We as humans have a very frail and flimsy sense of identity but even more so during our teenage years. Maybe this is why teens over-compensate by becoming so arrogant about their individuality, that they are willing to “tag” it all over town, just to feel a sense of identity in the world. Life is about discovering who you really are and where you truly belong, and part of that is how you visually represent yourself to the world.

All over the United States, we read about acts of violence in the news, especially those committed by teens. Daily, teens are arrested for petty crimes such as vandalism and graffiti. Coincidentally we see the arts being cut out of school budgets around the country. Presently, reform efforts and funding are being implemented nationwide to promote literacy comprehension and improvement on standardized test scores. As literacy reform excels to the front of school reform efforts, visual literacy slips further from the radar of funders and philanthropists, politicians and education administrators. I conjecture that graffiti is a form of negative self-expression, which stems from a desire for visual communication that is deprived from the youth of today. I believe the worldwide phenomenon of graffiti represents a substitute for visual communication, which used to be provided by the visual arts in schools. As national cutbacks remove art from classroom walls, hallways and refrigerator doors, we as educators must commit to helping teens move art out into the community, legally.

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