



Headline: Design or Vandalism? Remarks on the research of graffiti through album covers

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In 1985 New York dance music label Sleeping Bag Records released a record titled *Sleeping Bag Records' Greatest Mixers Collection*. The album is a compilation of eight of the label's tracks, mixed by prominent DJs from New York City, hence the title focusing on the mixers and not the recording artists.

The album cover was designed by two graffiti writers, Gnome and Gemini, and it displays a detailed full colour drawing with a scene of several rows of subway trains with graffiti pieces, and two figures in the moment of producing the pieces of graffiti - one sitting on top of one of the subway cars, seemingly watching out for the police, and the other painting bold straight letters on another car. Above the scene levitates the title of the album in legible block letters. The title is also repeated on the lower part of the front cover, but then written in a hand style usually used for tags.

As a researcher on the visual culture of contemporary graffiti, record covers such as the one above, provide a unique source of material, where it is possible to study graffiti as visual communication and design in a nexus of complex relations. Graffiti is often understood as singular, site-specific paintings, or acts of vandalism, conducted in a non-commercial context. A record cover has, on the other hand, been designed and produced to communicate the content of the music; pressed, printed and distributed through complex, often transnational networks; bought by retailers and sold to consumers, collected, enjoyed and sometimes sold and bought again within the second hand market. These album covers are thus multiple, not site specific, they are not paintings (even if the *Sleeping Bag Records' Greatest Mixers Collection* may have paintings as part of the motif, or in other cases as part of the technique) and they are produced and circulated in a context of complex commercial relations.

Graffiti is also primarily discussed in a framework characterized by a dichotomous relationship, oscillating between claims that it should be labelled either art or vandalism. A problematization of such polarisation has been a point of departure for many popular as well as academic investigations into the phenomena, including my own doctoral dissertation *The G-Word – Virtuosity and Violation, Negotiating and Transforming Graffiti* (2014), where I suggested that graffiti could be understood as what Michel Foucault called discursive formation built up around interdependent points of incompatibility. From this perspective it is not relevant to discuss if graffiti is art or vandalism – rather just acknowledge that it can be both – and it can be both at the same time but in different cultural and institutional contexts. Again, we can take *Sleeping Bag Records' Greatest Mixers Collection* as an example. From the perspective of the police, this cover displays a crime scene – of two people with criminal intent entering a train yard and painting the trains. From the perspective of subcultural graffiti, the person is a style master who creates burners on the trains, and as such “an example of true grace under pressure”.¹

But as in many polarised discussions the poles have a tendency to become hard-drawn, either this, or that. The concept of ‘Vandalism’ is often understood as vandalism in ‘criminal damage’, and the concept of ‘Art’ often as art as in ‘fine arts’ – singular objects produced and displayed for the primary purpose of aesthetic pleasure and/or intellectual reflection. Even if this relationship is not irrelevant, it seem to have obscured other relevant aspects, for example the fact that a lot of graffiti is used as visual element in contexts where the art pole could just as well be considered as ‘applied art’ – as design or decoration of objects with more mundane uses. “Graffiti – Art or Vandalism?” is a question posed in headlines of innumerable newspaper articles, but fewer ask “Graffiti – Design or Vandalism?”

¹ Craig Castleman, (1982), *Getting up: subway graffiti in New York*. p. 24.

In subcultural contexts graffiti has been used as design on clothes, for example in back pieces of jackets, or as typography and illustration on albums, posters and flyers, at least since the 70s. In broader commercial context graffiti has been used to flavour advertisements, for example as a backdrop for fashion models, at least since the 80s. And for the last few years, for example, McDonalds has started to use graffiti wallpaper as scenography and interior decoration in some of their restaurants.² And when I am writing this piece, the international high-fashion brand Moschino has just been accused of copyright-infringement, for using a graffiti-piece by Rime, in their clothing collection.³

One way of understanding the use of graffiti in a marketing context could be to see it as a conflict between an authentic subcultural art form and mainstream society, where the latter is exploiting the former in a commercial context. But the borders between fine and applied art, as well as between (authentic) subcultural and (commercial) mainstream contexts, are of course blurry and ambiguous, and I have no wish to participate in constructing new polarities in the field of graffiti. Consider the case of Michael Holman's production *Graffiti Rock* (1984). It was an attempt to create a hip-hop television show, mimicking music and dance shows such as Soul Train and American Bandstand. As such, it was an early, but moderately successful attempt to make subcultural hip-hop to reach a broader audience. Today primarily remembered probably in a subcultural context, and venerated as a kind of 'minor classic' there.

² Mark Duell (2016). "Bad taste? McDonald's under fire for revamping Brixton branch with walls and lampshades covered in GRAFFITI", *MailOnline*, 2016-03-04. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3476872/What-s-Brixton-like-Graffiti-yeah-ll-McDonald-s-criticised-graffiti-covered-lampshades-revamped-restaurant.html>> [retrieved 2016-05-08].

³ The Fashion Law (2016). Graffiti Cannot be Copyright Protected, Claims Moschino, Jeremy Scott, *The Fashion Law*, 2016-04-20. <<http://www.thefashionlaw.com/home/graffiti-cannot-be-copyright-protected-claims-moschino-jeremy-scott>> [retrieved 2016-05-08].

Graffiti Rock did not only use graffiti as part of the name, but also had graffiti as a title and as scenography in the space where the musicians and dancers performed. The final televised show also used graffiti as typography rendered in the at the time latest video-animation technology, when words such as 'fresh' and 'word' flow in the space, not visible for the participants at the scene of recording, but only for the viewer of the show through post-processing. Another case is the hip-hop classic *Wild Style* (1983) where the graffiti writers Zephyr, Sharp and Revolt have painted, or perhaps 'designed' is the better term in this context, a graffiti piece that became the logo of the film, part of the poster and also the cover of the soundtrack.

Works such as these point to the problem of making a clear cut distinctions between subcultural and mainstream contexts, as well as between fine art and applied art – and they are perhaps most accurately described as examples of interdisciplinary and intermedial *gesamtkunstwerk* – artistic works utilizing lyrical, typographical, musical, choreographic and visual expressions.

The concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* could also be used to understand many of the album covers using graffiti as graphic design. In a strict sense album covers could of course be simply described as packaging design, and thus produced in order to market the primary content – the music on the record. But at least in record-collecting contexts the album covers are regarded almost as important as the actual record. For example, at the database discogs.com, where users collect information of record releases, and also trade records, the users are asked to grade the condition of both 'media' and 'sleeve' of each individual item. In a broader sense the covers are thus more than just a package, and in many cases better understood as an aspect of the final product. In this sense record covers could be considered as luxury packaging, whose primary purpose is to arouse a desire for the product.⁴

⁴ Lasse Brunnström and Karin Wagner (2015). *Den (o)hållbara förpackningen*, p. 26 and 351-384.

In most cases where design and marketing are aspects of graffiti, the different examples are extremely diverse, and if they are preserved at all, they do end up in different archives and it would take a researcher enormous amount of time only to identify them. But since albums are collected with their covers, a large number of examples exist in similar formats and in several different available contexts. Through the second hand market and today's web databases such as discogs.com it is possible to access and systematically compare many different objects.

Let's now return to the initial example of *Sleeping Bag Records' Greatest Mixers Collection*. If we first consider it from a subcultural graffiti perspective it is possible to see that the picture has been produced with colour design marker on paper, a technique in graffiti most commonly associated with the medium of the black book – hard bound sketchbooks, “which is used for personal artistic development and for collecting other artists' work”.⁵ This would mean that the cover contains at least three different layers of intermedial relations. First we have the media that is embedded in the motif – the graffiti painted subway trains; the second media would be the drawing utilising the technique usually used in black book; and the third media is the record cover, communicating the content of the music.

The straight lettered words on the subway cars – Larry Levan, Francois K. etcetera – are the names of the DJs who have mixed the tracks on the album. There are also smaller words written in hand styles, mimicking tags, on various places on the subway cars. In most cases these are the titles of the tracks on the record, or the names of the recording artists. This is obviously an approach that subverts the music industry's common hierarchy – focusing either on the song – the hit record – or the

⁵ Eric Felisbret & Luke Felisbret (2009). *Graffiti New York*. See also Alain Mariduena (2009), *New York City Black Book Masters*, and Sacha Jenkins and David Villoriente (2008), *Piecebook: The Secret Drawings of Graffiti Writers*.

artist – usually the singer – and as such could be seen as something that foreshadows today's DJ-cult, with superstar DJs touring the world. But the focus on the DJs must be understood as a marketing strategy, and a plausible interpretation would be that it targets consumers for whom the DJs are often more important than the recording artists themselves: the clubbers and dancers of the New York City. This would suggest that this record's primary target group is a small but sub-culturally well-initiated audience.

The title of the album, some of the tracks, as well as the names of the DJs and of some of the recording artists, are all written in fairly legible letters. But the cover also contains less legible lettering. At the very centre of the cover, in blue and white wild style lettering are the designers own names – rendered as one two man top to bottom whole subway car, Gnome and Gemini, followed by the letters CWK on the next car. There is not much information of these two artists in the international graffiti literature, but it is nonetheless possible to identify Gnome and Gemini as two well-respected graffiti writers from New York, who seem to have primarily been active in the mid-80s. There is a portrait and also a piece by Gnome in Henry Chalfant's and James Prigoff's book *Spraycan Art* (1987), where Gnome is presented as an important and influential graffiti writer from Brooklyn. The most detailed information on these artists that I have found is in David Villorente's and Todd James' book *Mascots & Mugs: The Characters and Cartoons of Subway Graffiti* (2007), focusing on Gnome but mentioning Gemini and that they both belonged to the crew Craftwork, abbreviated CWK.⁶ This could be considered on one hand as the signature of the cover or on the other hand, as a part of the cover and the marketing strategy. Either way, it adds to the subversion of the hierarchy of the music industry.

⁶ Villorente and James also mention that Gnome “did illustrations for two classic record covers, for Just Ice and Mantronix”. In my research for records using graffiti as album cover design, I have been able to identify five different album covers, and they all seem to be joint productions by both Gnome and Gemini.

But as a marketing strategy the 'wild styled signatures' in the middle of the cover can be seen in relation to one last aspect of the cover. When I wrote that the cover displays a scene of several rows of subway trains with graffiti pieces, I failed to mention that it is possible to identify the trains as subways from New York City. This aspect might not be as obvious today, as it probably was in the early 80s, when subway graffiti was still primarily a phenomenon identified with New York City. In the 1983 documentary *Stylewars*, a young woman with a French accent proposes that the graffiti on the subway trains is "a symbol of New York for foreign people, especially French people".⁷

In his seminal text on visual semiotics from 1964 – "Rhetoric of the Image" – Roland Barthes coins the term 'Italianicity' to point at the connotations of Italy in a French advertisement for pasta and canned tomatoes.⁸ Many of the album covers using graffiti as graphic design, especially those from the 80s, including this specific one discussed here, would in analogy to Barthes concept be said to utilise an aspect of 'Newyorkicity'. To the previously suggested possible primary target group, of local subcultural clubbers and dancers, a second possible target group could be suggested – most likely a significantly larger group of consumers – all the people in the world who in the mid-80s dreamed of and desired to go clubbing and dancing in the New York City.

⁷ Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver (1983). *Stylewars*. Released on DVD 2003.

⁸ Roland Barthes (1977). *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana

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