

Reevaluating 'Public Art':
A Photo Essay and Analysis of Graffiti Art
Along the Los Angeles River

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Introduction

With an interest in public access to ‘public art,’ my curiosity directed me again and again to the anonymous designs and colors on the walls of Los Angeles. I was curious as to how an average, creative citizen might have access to the making of art for the public. Could graffiti be public art? The most effective means of answering these questions, then, was to simply go out into the field and look. My camera allowed me to capture an extensive inventory of what is available along the Los Angeles River. My fieldwork in the riverbed too, gave me the opportunity to experience the art within the various contexts of the river— the breeze under bridges and the heat on exposed concrete banks, the rushing sounds along freeways and quiet lulls at vacant spaces of the channel, are among the many sensations I encountered. Three hundred photographs and several months later, my perception and appreciation of graffiti changed significantly as did my notions of public art.

Thus, my project goal was to gain a better awareness and understanding of the images along the river by *looking* at them, and in a sense, *listening* to what the images have to tell. What does graffiti art of the LA River look like? Should it be appreciated as an art form, or even considered public art? I hypothesized that graffiti art *is* a valuable public art form along the Los Angeles River with cultural and aesthetic meaning.

To explore this question, I begin with a discussion of the term ‘public art’ to understand why graffiti might or might not qualify as such. This first chapter examines various interpretations of the meaning of public art to provide a context in which to debate the images that follow. Whereas the photo essay provides a better visual understanding of graffiti art, this essay discusses the variety of cultural lenses through

which public art is understood in which to base a concrete discussion on the validity of graffiti art as a public art form.

The second chapter explores the background histories of graffiti and the Los Angeles River. It provides a general overview of major concepts and information behind these entities that are important but are often untold or overlooked. Though these accounts remain incomplete and brief, they illuminate the socio-political and cultural themes of the Los Angeles River and Graffiti Art movements in history. Knowledge of the socio-political context out of which graffiti evolved, then becomes central, as is an understanding of the river as a significant place in cultural and political history of Los Angeles, to appreciating how and why graffiti is a significant public art form.

In order to complete the project I conducted an in-depth photo exploration of the river walls from where the Tujunga Wash feeds into the Los Angeles River in Studio City through NorthEast Los Angeles, Downtown, and Chinatown to where the 10 freeway crosses the River in Boyle Heights. Over several days, I walked or biked down the river photographing the hundreds of various pieces I encountered from scribbled 'tags' to elaborate murals 50 ft long and larger on the river walls and bridges, consistently noting the location of each piece. I attempted to photograph a variety of works that would exhibit the great range of graffiti along the river of all skill levels. I was particularly attentive to pieces that made blatant political or social comments through words or imagery, but again, the goal was to be as representative as possible of all types of graffiti one finds in traveling down the LA River within the city of Los Angeles. This process has culminated in ten dynamic roles of film and over 300 color photographs documenting the pieces within the river environment. To supplement these photos I conducted three in-

depth interviews and several informal interviews with river advocates, graffiti removal teams, residents in the areas surrounding the river, and graffiti artists who have painted on the river.

Finally, there are two suggestions to keep in mind in the course of engaging this project. First, the photos are merely representational; there is an elemental experience that cannot be captured or fully understood through these photographic reproductions. Walter Benjamin speaks of this discrepancy in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He says, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”¹ In this case, I cannot emphasize enough the sensation of stepping into the vast space of concrete—the abandonment, the freedom, and the quiet. The flickers of river life a tree that breaks through a crack in the concrete glints of sunlight reflecting off the sewage water surface seem both instantly pathetic and ever precious. Though I began unsure whether or not graffiti could truly be public art, the more I absorbed their colors and designs, the more time I spent walking in the riverbed, I found a greater appreciation for it.

Secondly, understanding graffiti as a *public* art form also demands a broader perspective of what characterizes art. As many theorists suggest, our notion of what constitutes art is culturally and economically determined. Therefore, to appreciate the artistic expression relayed through the graffiti images in this book requires the viewers to expand our culturally constructed views of art. In this sense, it can be a thrilling or an uncomfortable process of the politicization of art, and questioning the origins of our conception of art has been shaped overtime.

This project has given me an amazing opportunity to explore graffiti art and culture through colors, designs, and the sense of space that they create together. After spending so much time at the river, watching it through the photography process, I've become a river lover myself. This project should make a space for many other people to begin to think about graffiti in different, challenging ways as well; to perhaps learn to appreciate the works as public art with immense aesthetic and cultural meaning.

¹ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1928, 220.

The Public art debate: what is public art?

“Art is fundamentally social. It is the demand of the human organism for a sphere of uncoerced expression. It is a demand for the abolition of all institutions, which tend to suppress and truncate human capabilities. And it is in the sense that art is intrinsically revolutionary.”ⁱ

The search for a comprehensive definition of ‘public art’ results in the discovery of a passionate, complex debate about art, power, domination and revolution. There is no consensus on the meaning of ‘public art,’ but rather, heated, dichotomous interpretations of it. What follows is an exploration of the changing understandings of public art over the last several decades. That is, traditionally public art has been understood to be under the jurisdiction of governing bodies at the local and national level. However, starting in 1960’s, activists began to question and challenge such institutionalization of public art. They believed that the government often used public art for political and economic gains under the guise of ‘beautification.’ In contrast, these activists re-envisioned public art as an outlet for free expression and an opportunity to build community. This essay begins with an analytic survey of traditional conceptions of ‘public art,’ followed by an overview of progressive reinterpretations and redefinitions of ‘public art.’

Institutionalization of the Public Arts

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other New Deal projects in the 1930’s were some of the first institutionalized programs that designated government money for the public arts. Thirty years later, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) ratified the Art in Public Places program in 1966, which is still in effect today under numerous city authorities throughout the United States. The intention of the NEA was for the arts to “be experienced and enjoyed by the widest possible audience.”ⁱⁱ California State legislation in 1967, made further precedence for the public arts under the percent-for-art rule. This rule demanded one percent of the budget of any publicly assisted

construction project be used for “the acquisition of sculpture or other appropriate art forms.” Theoretically, the application of the public art funding would be decided democratically. In an ideal world, what is ‘appropriate’ public art, as the NEA said, would be decided of the people, and would certainly not be dictated by government authority. However, patterns in public art developments show that public participation has been minimal. Moreover, governing bodies tend to use the arts as means for economic growth and redevelopment within cities.

One critic suggests that the NEA “seemed to promise democratic participation and to promote public rather than private interests,”ⁱⁱⁱ but in actuality bureaucratized the public arts more than democratize them. Performance artist and Professor of Fine Arts Suzanne Lacy notes that “in the most cynical view, the impetus [of the NEA] was to expand the market for sculpture, and this included patronage from corporations.” Though urban planners comprehend the fundamental interrelationship of the arts and society in that the arts help to “make a city livable,” in light of Lacy’s critique, urban planners also acknowledge that public art has many desirable political and economic benefits for cities as well. For instance, the Art in Public Places Program of the city of Austin, Texas is part of the city’s Economic Growth & Redevelopment Services Office.^{iv} At a 1980 Art and City Planning conference, Michael Newton, President of The Performing Arts Council of the Music Center of Los Angeles County said that to ‘beautify’ a city through public art is an effective means to increasing economic productivity.¹ He said that changing a city’s image is likely to bring commercial (in the form of shopping centers) and residential growth, “opening up abandoned or deprived areas of the city to redevelopment.”^v

¹ In this discussion, ‘beautify’ and ‘appropriate’ are placed in quotation marks to acknowledge the subjectivity of determining what is beauty or what art qualifies as appropriate.

Redevelopment, in the name of ‘beautification’ and ‘civic pride,’ then attracts tourism and consumerism, ideally bringing wealth to the city.

In these instances where governments exploit ‘public art’ as a means for economic gain, it appears that art for the public, the pleasure of looking or finding meaning behind a work is a secondary benefit of the public arts. In this scenario, art is a luxury, or an “amenity” rather than a necessary function within society.^{vi} The costs of public art pieces are often questioned when other areas of contemporary society are in need. At the same 1980 Arts and City Planning conference, R. Brooks commented “there is a blur between the notion of a non-essential amenity [of public art] and that which we know begins to make the city humane.”^{vii} These stories suggest, that though city planners and citizens recognize the “humane”-ness of the arts, it is economic motives that shape and define public art under the dominion of city officials. This risks the exploitation of the regenerative properties of public art to be used as a tool to entice developers and ‘revitalize’ or gentrify poor neighborhoods. There are regenerative public art, but developers exploit them. Further, these examples imply that due to undemocratic governing public art is not accessible, most particularly to low income communities. They demonstrate how only a select few actually benefit, while others are being bulldozed and displaced for such public art developments.

Despite this history, the notion that public art should be in the institutional control of the government remains widely accepted today. That is, public art is equated with government sponsored art works that could have very well been manipulated by the bureaucrats to accommodate needs of the district. In November of 2003, Gloria Gerace published *Urban Surprises: A Guide to Public Art in Los Angeles*. The book indexes

pieces “in all corners of the city, from the steel sculpture of dancing figures in the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink station to oil paintings honoring the fishing industry in a San Pedro bank.”^{viii} All works listed in the guide were budgeted into a construction or renovation project and commissioned by either the Cultural Affairs Department’s Public Art Programs, the Community Redevelopment Agency’s Downtown Art in Public Places or the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s Metro Art Department. This implies that the condition for distinguishing a ‘public art’ piece from regular art, adopted by Gerace, is the financial sponsorship and bureaucratic approval by government officials, which is frequently colored by economic and political incentives.

Critique of Governmental Domination of the Public Arts

As the public art world has evolved in the governmental sector, non-governmental groups and individuals have begun to question and challenge the public art tradition. Author of the book *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Cultural Democracy*, Erica Doss catalogues various struggles for cultural democracy in the arts by retelling the in-depth histories of contested public art pieces throughout the country. She theorizes that the fervent “public art discourse - debates, petitions, hearings, media accounts, artists’ statements, political proceedings, and the art-making process itself,” is indicative of the reality and ardent public concern of the situation.^{ix} Three interrelated theoretical arguments have been made to explain this frenzied concern of which Doss speaks. First, government programs have used public art oppressively to reinforce systems of power and domination. Second, government domination of the public arts has displaced community representation in public art. Thirdly, theorists posit that capitalistic discourses that have shaped and limited how ‘art’ is perceived in American culture.

Traditionally, the idea of ‘public art’ within the United States conjures up images of government works located in parks and in front of government buildings. These statues and monuments are often known to represent prominent public figures and war heroes that glorify moments in national history.^x Artist Judith Baca, who has renamed this common legacy the “cannon-in-the-park” phenomenon, believes that such monumental artworks propagate systems of power and dominance in American culture. “Running our hands over the polished bronze, we shared in these victories and became enlisted in these causes. Never mind if for us as people of color they were not our forefathers, or even if the triumphs were often over our own people.”^{xi} In this statement Baca demonstrates how the systems of power imbued in public art can impact marginalized communities, like communities of color, most drastically.

In addition, she explains that the permanence, sheer size and regal placement of many public art monuments in front of office buildings serve, “like their military predecessors in the parks, [to] inspire a sense of awe by their scale and the importance of the artist.”^{xii} Doss further suggests that the lack of public engagement of many traditional and corporate art pieces also disempowers citizens. That is, “...people have been encouraged to view objects... uncritically without discourse, and, quite literally, at face value.... silent, inert, and out of context, and public art audiences are expected to accept their mute but obvious presence.”^{xiii} Baca and Doss’s critique speaks of the power of public art, in this case, to reinforce governmental and corporate hierarchies. In this paradigm, rather than *serve* the community for whom they were supposed to be created, modern and historical statues alike have *silenced* them.

A second problem with this genre of public art is that, in not representing the public, it silences them. This has predominantly been the result of increasing private power to influence in the public arts, achieved through corporate contributions for art. A loss of public representation is also a result of the focus on the artist within the public art process rather than the community. As Suzanne Lacy wrote in 1995, “competition for public art commissions often center around style and the uniqueness of the artist... rather than on public values or the communities.”^{xiv} A recent public art sculpture installed on the Bay front of the city of San Francisco provides one example of this complaint. Public artist Coosje van Bruggen, who designed the San Francisco sculpture with her husband Claes Oldenburg, even agrees with the critique that public tends to be removed from ‘public art.’ In December 2002 she was quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle saying, “I don’t think the term ‘public art’ is right. We always speak of private art in a public place.”^{xv} As an interesting side note, the large bow and arrow they designed titled “Cupid’s Span,” was actually commissioned with the assistance of Donald and Doris Fisher, founders of the Gap Corporation, as “a gift to the city.” Thus, situated in the south of the Market District (notably an area at the height of its redevelopment and displacement campaign), the sculpture further symbolizes the power of large corporations and wealthy families to influence public art and voice, and conversely highlights the limited access to public art for the masses today.

Thirdly, theorists find that the importance of public art has been diminished through the materialization of ‘art’ (or the notion that art is a commodity) under capitalistic discourse. That is, exposure to capitalist values and the impact of the commodification of art over time, has colored widespread perceptions of what is art.

Philosopher Dennis Mann points out that when art is sold, its creation is altered; it becomes a product for pleasing others rather than freedom of expression. A consequence of this evolution is the commodification of art, in which art becomes more about the material and luxury. “The roots of avant-gardism are in the nineteenth century, when artists began to produce with new freedom but in a social vacuum for an anonymous audience, their work a commodity in a market economy. To the bourgeoisie, art is increasingly a non-essential luxury, an object of conspicuous consumption, a status symbol, as well as an object of speculation and a means of investing surplus capital.”^{xvi} In this sense, art in the capitalist system has become classist, and consequently exclusive.

Critiques such as these have lead public art activists to hypothesize that the public art sector has become more about a struggle for control rather than a democratic milieu for the arts. Mann explains that a true democratization of the arts would theoretically imply “that all members of a society are of equal worth.”^{xvii} Mann says the “underlying the struggle for the same kind of democratizing in the arts [is] a conflicting fear and hope— fear of egalitarian leveling and hope for the rich potential... [for] more opportunities for more people.”^{xviii} However, as drawn out in the preceding paragraphs, such democratization has yet to be actualized. For many, this discrepancy signifies a much deeper social implication of the realistic tensions of politics, economics, and social difference that runs through many facets of society.

Reconceptualizing ‘Public Art’

So far, in search of a working definition of public art, we’ve found that it cannot be simply conceptualized. It cannot be summed up in aesthetic terms (‘it is a sculpture’ or ‘it is a large painting or mural’), nor can the boundaries of public art be clearly delineated

in political terms (i.e. ‘certified by bureaucratic documentation’). Therefore, to critically reexamine the notion of public art, and to work towards redefining it, a reevaluation of the meanings and purpose of public art must take place. In an attempt to redefine the term ‘public art’ as it has come to mean, various public art activists, most artists themselves, have aligned themselves in a new movement called “New Genre” public art. First, they reconceptualize what ‘art’ and its qualifier ‘public’ represent, and second they offer models to better serve these redefinitions. Among many others, New Genre theory poses the questions: what should public art achieve? And, who is it for? In depth texts that critique traditional conceptions of art, as well as offer alternative models of public arts make up the body of New Genre public art theory.

Redefining ‘public art’ begins by breaking down the meaning of the phrase. For instance, what is the meaning of ‘public’ in ‘public art?’ Indeed, the notion of a *public* arts has become the “operative concept and quest” for New Genre public art, but what does that mean? Lacy asks, “Is ‘public’ a qualifying description of place, ownership, or access?”^{xix} Though Lacy never answers her question, much of New Genre literature focuses on the latter description of access, or the capacity of being reached. They argue that the conceptions of the ‘public’ in the past have been exclusive of marginalized groups like low-income communities, communities of color, and women. When ‘accessibility’ is held at the core definition of ‘public’ however, the notion of the public expands to include all communities. As Baca notes, “What represents class-divided cities are collaborations that move well beyond the artist and architect to the artist.”^{xx}

Rethinking the term ‘public’ in this way revolutionizes *how* public art should function within society. That is, reinterpreted, public art is supposed to *serve* its audience

rather than dominate or exclude it. After understanding how art has in fact not been accessible to all communities, a new definition becomes clear. Thus, a new conception of public art would be an art that is accessible to all communities, rather than exclusive; and a creation that is meaningful to those communities, instead of protecting the private interests of big government and corporations.

Reforming the material conception of what public art should look like is also part of redefining it. As critiqued earlier, capitalistic notions of what is ‘art’ contributed to the inaccessibility and classism associated with the art world today. Art has since become classified into genres of ‘high art,’ ‘low art,’ and ‘folk art,’ often pigeonholing murals and alternative forms of street art and murals as “protest art,” “minority art,” or “poor art for poor people.” While capitalist ideals have constructed the high/low art hierarchy in the American art world, Baca points out that the system is not culturally sensitive. “What comes into question is the very different sensibilities of order and beauty that operate indifferent cultures.”^{xxi} That is, just as capitalist cultures have developed certain perceptions of art, other cultures have adopted very different conceptions of art that should not be evaluated on an American art hierarchy. Rather, a new understanding of ‘art’ should be inclusive of many forms of art, and not limited by capitalist ideals.

Thus, New Genre public artists approach public art in a more holistic sense and greater cultural sensitivity and awareness to difference. They recognize and embrace the fact that this new outlook changes the face of public art. As Lacy declares, new genre public art is a “visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.”^{xxii} In this sense, the images of public art multiply to include any

and all forms of artistic expression. In the process of reconceptualizing these traditional archetypes, theorists challenge the art world's legacy of classism and exclusion. It is an analogous materialization of keeping an open mind, by keeping an open eye and embracing a diversity of art forms. As public art takes on this multi-faceted image and the audience becomes more broad-based, public art actually becomes an accessible visual expression.

While redefining these terms is integral, how to apply these ideals in a practical manner is central to actualizing broad-based accessibility and meaningfulness in the public arts. One way to achieve this is through the process of community engagement. By involving the community, they contest that public art has a deeper significance and meaning for the people in several ways. For instance, public processes can empower the community in a sense equal and opposite to the way that traditional forms of art assert power. Public processes help to create a sense of community identity and history by creating a sense of place. This is achieved “through connecting art to the history of places, and moving away from a feeling of marginalization toward a sense of centrality in the city.”^{xxiii} In addition, engaging the public throughout the entire process requires the people to organize an effective collaboration and invest themselves in the project. Cultural historians underline the necessity of community involvement by pointing out that “No public art can succeed in enhancing the social meaning of place without a solid base of historical research and community support.”^{xxiv} Hence, the *process* of creating the art, and more importantly the community's role in that process, becomes a defining characteristic of ‘public art.’

So now there is available a new kind of ‘public art,’ one that re-centers our understanding of the meaning of ‘public’ and ‘art,’ acknowledging that these original conceptions originate in a biased and unjust system of power. Public art is divorced from its capitalist heritage and separated from other art in that it is not consumer based or product oriented. “Central to this evaluation is a redefinition that may well challenge the nature of art as we know it, art not primarily as a product but as a process of value finding a set of philosophies, an ethical action, and an aspect of a larger socio-cultural agenda.”^{xxv} Further, this entails the reformation of public art and one that seeks to involve them. With these implications, public art “Public art could be *inseparable* from the daily life of the people for which it is created. Developed to live harmoniously in public space, it could have a function within the community and even provide a venue for their voices.”^{xxvi} Whether or not this has taken roots, the new genre public art debate has created a new public art rhetoric and opened up a new sphere and place for a new conception of public art to flourish.

Case Study: Achievements of the Mural Arts Movement

The mural art movement of the 1970’s helped to develop and exemplify this rethinking of what constituted public art, the power of art when put in the hands of the people, and the importance of an involving community process. In their book *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural movement*, the authors explain why they started painting, their intentions to making it an art “of and for the people,” and how their approaches towards it fulfilled those goals. Their thought process and history parallels those of the new genre public art movement of recent years, providing a concrete

example of how the process and image of an alternative view of public art works differently from traditional conceptions.

Similar to New Genre, the mural movement incubated in a discontented, and critical understanding of oppressive hierarchical systems in American culture. Their art was formed predominantly in reaction to the “homogenization of American culture.”^{xxvii} They observed how the ‘melting pot’ had rather forced immigrant populations to abandon their native/indigenous art rather than assimilate it. They conclude that this has led to a particular alienation of the masses in U.S. society from art of diverse creative heritages to the extent that “the separation between art and society has reached their most extreme form.”^{xxviii} Thus, they began Mural painting in the late 1960’s in response to the times, and with inspiration from the developing social movements around them. In other words, they started painting “out of a felt need to break out of the isolation of the studio, to make a public statement as artists in the only forum that then seemed viable: the streets.”^{xxix} Originating out of dissatisfaction with oppressive cultural and political system, the mural arts became a means of voicing their opinions, exercising their freedom to express. Philosophy behind muralism embraces the power of public art and channels it to use as a form of resistance and empowerment for otherwise oppressed communities.

These artists recognized that they were redefining the essence of public art in their practice. The mural movement sought to redistribute art throughout the cities by relocating art “outdoors and in ‘neglected sites,’ in working-class and minority neighborhoods, rather than inside government buildings.” They also sought to reach out to historically marginalized groups by putting the paintbrushes in the hands of “artists belonging to oppressed groups traditionally excluded from the established art world

(Blacks, Chicanos, other Latinos, Asians, and Women).^{”xxx} To be a people’s art, these murals would be ideally completed in collective character (in groups of artists/ locals). In line with new genre art theorists, they noted “community support and involvement (financial sponsorship, discussion of theme, practical support, inaugural celebrations, and people’s protection of the murals)” would be the distinctive factor to producing a meaningful and lively piece of work. Further, the group of engaged artists and community members would work alongside government processes rather than within the system.

The mural movement, like New Genre, reformed the way public art is looked at by reclaiming the process. They make accessible visual arts that have cultural meaning and communicate ideas and values. In these new ways, public art provides a means for voice, and a medium for activist art. With a background and community investment in the works, located in the streets where the people work and live, these murals become inseparable from the community and the sense of place. Hence, mural art provides one of the first examples for a working reformation of public art, as it has been understood previously.

Through this theoretical history, the beginning of a working, refurbished definition of public art is emerging. It is understood that aesthetics are not merely superficial but expressive, and that creating art can also form identity, voice, and a sense of place for entire communities. New Genre theorist Lucy Lippard concludes “Public art is accessible work of any kind that cares about, challenges, involves, and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment; the other stuff is still private art, no matter how big or exposed or intrusive or hyped it may be.”^{xxxi}

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- ⁱ Mann, Dennis Alan. "Introduction: The Arts in a Democratic Society." *The Arts in a Democratic Society*. Mann, Dennis Alan, ed. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1977, p. 59.
- ⁱⁱ Lacy, Suzanne. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 21.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 22.
- ^{iv} The Official Web site of the City of Austin. "Austin Art in Public Places." <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/aipp/> 12 Apr. 2003.
- ^v Newton, Michael. "What Arts Organizations and Artists Can Offer City Planning." American Council for the Arts. *The Arts and City Planning*. New York: ACA Publications, 1980, p. 12.
- ^{vi} Brooks, R. American Council for the Arts. *The Arts and City Planning*. New York: ACA Publications, 1980, p. 41.
- ^{vii} Ibid., p.42.
- ^{viii} Chien, Ginny. "Art of the City: A New Guide Indexes L.A.'s Public Treasures." *Los Angeles Times Magazine*. 3 Nov. 2002.
- ^{ix} Doss, Erika. *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, Doss, Erika. *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, p. 12.
- ^x Baca, Judith F. "Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 131.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Ibid., p. 132.
- ^{xiii} Doss, Erika. *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, Doss, Erika. *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, p. 16.
- ^{xiv} Lacy, Suzanne. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 22.
- ^{xv} Baker, Kenneth. "Take a Bow: Sculptors Oldenburg and vn Bruggen Talk About Their 'Cupid's Span,' Which Has Dropped Anchor on the Waterfront." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 23 Dec. 2002.
- ^{xvi} Mann, Dennis Alan. "Introduction: The Arts in a Democratic Society." *The Arts in a Democratic Society*. Mann, Dennis Alan, ed. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1977, p.23.
- ^{xvii} Ibid., p. 11-12.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., p. 17.
- ^{xix} Lacy, Suzanne. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 20.
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- ^{xxi} Ibid., p. 134.
- ^{xxii} Lacy, Suzanne. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 19.
- ^{xxiii} Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995, p.68.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid., p. 75.
- ^{xxv} Lacy, Suzanne. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 46.
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- ^{xxvii} Cockcroft, Eva, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft. *Towards a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1977, p. 25.
- ^{xxviii} Ibid.
- ^{xxix} Ibid., p. xx.

^{xxx} Ibid.

^{xxx} Lippard, Lucy R. "Looking Around: Where We Are, Where We Could Be." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

Contextualizing the writing on the Los Angeles River channel walls: Brief histories of hip hop graffiti and the Los Angeles River

If public art, in a new sense, is an art form that involves community members through the process, expresses community identity, and gives a sense of place, then it is the history of the people who made it and the place it is located that become central to the art form. Therefore, to best understand the significance of the graffiti of the Los Angeles River as a form of public art, it becomes necessary to have an understanding of the backgrounds and the histories from which it emerges. To know the stories of the people who made them what they are today, how it evolved, why it was and still is being developed, gives the pieces meaning and context, a human element and a sense of cultural history with which it is easier to identify with as a viewer and community member yourself. The ecological and political history of the river, with the artistic and cultural history of graffiti art intersects on the concrete channel walls to create a kind of public art unique to the Los Angeles River. The essay that follows explores the cultural, political, and ecological histories of the LA River and Graffiti, to further contextualize the art of the river and why it brings life.

Birth of the Hip Hop and Cholo Graffiti Styles

Literally meaning “writing” in Italian, graffiti takes many forms. And much like writing, there is different content and style. For instance, there is gang graffiti, neo-Nazi graffiti, and graffiti by other unaffiliated individuals as well. However, the vast majority of graffiti along the Los Angeles River, and throughout contemporary urban culture in general, is ‘hip hop’ graffiti originating from New York City, with influences of ‘Cholo’ graffiti that grew out of the barrios of Los Angeles. Therefore this brief history will focus on the cultivation of hip hop graffiti, or ‘graff’ rather than other forms of graffiti.

The hip hop movement emerged out of black neighborhoods and the street gang culture of New York City in mid-1970. Out of it came new styles of music (like rapping-- a “new kind of verbal play,” and DJing— reworking and mixing old sounds using turntables); dance (e.g. break dancing); and visual arts (e.g. graffiti).ⁱ In his book *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Jeff Ferrell offers insight to the often untold history of hip hop graffiti movement. He quotes Max Roach articulating, “these kids were never exposed to poets or playwrights in school. They had all this talent, and they had no instruments. So they started rap music. They rhymed their own.”ⁱⁱ These new styles grew more visible as a new form of urban art in the late 60’s and early 70’s. ‘Writers’ began to develop their tags with intricate decoration and new designs. With an emphasis on style, the distinctive visual language of hip hop graffiti began to solidify and grow.ⁱⁱⁱ

Graffiti writing is fueled not only by creativity and the desire to paint, but also equally by the desire to resist and break free of oppressive hierarchies and materiality. The act of graffiti is inherently a counter culture commentary by virtue of it’s unlawful location, resisting notions of private property, law, and corporate art. Imbedded with the theme of subversion, graffiti writing can be interpreted as a sense of anarchical resistance, “engaging in ‘direct action’ against these authorities, graffiti writers together celebrate their insubordination in spray paint and marker.”^{iv} The art of graffiti writing, then, revels in the opposition of repressive hierarchical structures of domination. “If Goldman taught us that a revolution without dancing is not worth attending, graffiti writing confirms that resistance without creativity— resistance as a sort of analytic, intellectualized machinery of opposition— may not be worth the trouble.”^v Graffiti is a

colorfully subversive statement. It is not *only* what these images depict that makes graffiti what it is, but the act of doing it as well.

As the graffiti craft and its brother arts matured, the hip hop movement received more attention from artists, media, and public officials. Graffiti was becoming to be praised as an eloquent, legitimate art form by some; and simultaneously degraded or written off as street vandalism by others. In 1972, one of the first ever gallery graffiti art shows was sponsored by writer Hugo Martinez, who organized other top graffiti artists into the group United Graffiti Artists. Graffiti gained national and international attention with the publication of Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper's book *Subway Art* (1984), which "itself became a manual of style for aspiring writers outside NY." Pseudo-documentary films like *Style Wars!* (1985) and the Hollywood film *Beat Street* (1984) and growing music video industry that often used graffiti murals as backdrops "spread the imagery and style of hip hop graffiti" beyond New York. By 1986, the same photographers/ authors of *Subway Art* were able to document even more graffiti works for a second book *Spraycan Art* that included pieces from around the world, from the Los Angeles, to Europe, to New Zealand. By the early '90s a network of numerous hip hop publications such as *IGT* (*International Graffiti Times*, later *International Get Hip Times*, of NYC), and *Ghetto Art* (a.k.a. *Can Control Magazine* of North Hollywood, California) marked the successful growth of hip hop movement into a subculture.

The hip hop graffiti movement in Los Angeles that grew out of New York has also been influenced by 'Old School Cholo style.' Graffiti in Los Angeles grew out of these local and broader contexts of the Cholo and hip hop graffiti movements. A unique visual graffiti language within the Los Angeles Chicano community originates in the

early 1900's. "The Los Angeles walls are an unofficial history of the Mexican-American presence in the streets of East L.A."^{vi} One of the first documented references to Old School style also referred to as 'barrio calligraphy' appears in Beatrice Griffith novel *American Me* published in 1948.^{vii} The Latino Zoot-Suit culture of this time cultivated Old School style at a time of mass deportations and beatings of Mexican-Americans by U.S. servicemen in Los Angeles during World War II. "Even though the Cholo and New York styles look different, the purpose and intent are still the same. We all have the same mother, rebellion. Just a different father, style."^{viii} Chaz estimates that 98 percent of the graffiti in Los Angeles today emerge out of the hip-hop movement. However, these pieces still come from both the New York and Los Angeles graffiti heritages, as well as the individual and collective innovations of the artists who paint them.

As hip hop grew into a subculture, the movement adopted an informal slang vernacular as well. The doers or artists of graffiti are known as 'writers.' For instance, the basic word 'tag' refers to the writers' "subcultural nicknames, and the stylized renditions of these names which they mark or spray paint... 'Tagging,' then, refers to the ongoing adventure of marking these nicknames in and around the city,"^{ix} Other terms distinguish the various levels of graffiti art in terms of style and intricacy. Writers develop their 'pieces,' short for 'masterpieces' from the repetitive writing and creative practice with their tags. Requiring much more planning, paint, and attentiveness to style in comparison to tags, pieces are complex larger murals that play with color, form, and other design features such as the 3-D effect. Between small quick tags and elaborate pieces are 'throw-ups,' "bigger, two-dimensional renditions of tags which, despite their stylishness, lack the size and sophistication of pieces." And, in referring to their informal organization into

groups, writers speak of the ‘crew’ or ‘set’ to which they belong.”^x These groups of writers go out to paint together, or hang out, and often collaborate to create larger pieces. The crews create two or three word names for themselves, but most often refer to their crews by the two or three letter acronym derived from their name.¹ Please see Appendix 1 for more terms.

The widespread passion within the graffiti movement was equally matched by anti-graffiti campaigns throughout the US. Anti-graffiti organizations, corporate and political leaders, as well as the media have effectively constructed negative conceptions of graffiti in order to feed their movement. For instance, since the 1980’s politicians, transit officials, corporate executives and others in cities across the country have “increasingly responded to graffiti as a political and economic issues, and thereby constructed it as a social problem.”^{xi} To them, graffiti has been seen only as vandalism rather than art, or a potentially meaningful public statement. One vehement anti-graffiti activist wrote in an op-ed, “Territorial tagging leads to turf wars, and graffiti is a blight that saps the aspirations and deflates the pride of entire neighborhoods.”^{xii}

The broken windows theory is one of the dominant arguments to which they counterpoise graffiti. The theory assumes that “untended disorderly behavior can signal that nobody cares about the community and lead to more serious crime” just as a broken window can suggest that nobody cares about a building and would lead towards more serious vandalism.^{xiii} In the 1980’s, the National Graffiti Information Network was formed to combat graffiti with a large-scale organizing campaign. Their tactics to combat the illicit street art according to a 1988 press release outlined, “draft[ing] legislation, continuity of city ordinances, construction, and investigation of graffiti vandal sting

¹ For example, CBS, which stands for ‘Can’t Be Stopped,’ is a Los Angeles crew from the late ‘90s.

operations through use of surveillance sites.”^{xiv} Please see Appendix 2 for a listing of relevant national and state graffiti legislation.

Los Angeles has surely not been exempt from the proliferation of anti-graffiti hysteria since the inception of hip hop in the city. The recently instated police chief William Bratton, formerly the police Chief of the New York police department, even targeted “graffiti offenses” a police priority his first day in office. At a press conference in February of 2003, Bratton said “graffiti is an instrument of intimidation.” He contorted all writing with gang graffiti, “We have to show them that we are in charge of the streets,” he said, “and they’re not.”^{xv}

‘Operation Clean Sweep’ (OCS) is a central city “beautification program” in Los Angeles, out of which runs an Educational Outreach Program that travels to schools in LAUSD focusing on graffiti prevention. According to their website, OCS is “designed to promote and encourage community participation in neighborhood based improvement projects.” In 2001 OCS received 15,406 requests for service through their hotline and removed 27,229,052 square feet of graffiti throughout Los Angeles.^{xvi} Authorities such as OCS are estimated to spend about fifty-two million dollars annually in the County of Los Angeles to abate graffiti.^{xvii}

Though these few paragraphs have only given a brief overview of the background of where graffiti art came from and how it evolved, they give you a sense of the breadth and depth of its history. It is a *culture* that defines itself apart from, outside of the American establishment, and as a result, whose art has been criminalized within mainstream society. To understand this history is to understand that there is an individual and a culture behind the writing on the wall. To accept graffiti as a public art form is to

not only identify American constructions of what is public art (as discussed in the previous essay), but to recognize the mainstream American construction of graffiti an ugly social problem as well. Further, to appreciate the graffiti art requires an understanding that there exists a rich history and message behind the graffiti art that is of a different culture and story as well.

The Los Angeles River: From a Wetland Ecosystem to Concrete Jungle

The 51-mile long Los Angeles River carries with it intertwining histories of a lush riparian wildlife, indigenous cultures and colonization, immigrant populations and ghettoization, natural disaster, and ecological degradation. That is, though it is bordered today by vacant train yards, boxed by pavement, and guarded by barbed wire fences, the Los Angeles River has a rich cultural and ecological history. This history situates the river in time and space, creating a perhaps surprisingly meaningful sense of place (and sense at all) of the concrete box that now stretches 51 miles across Los Angeles County with only a trickle down its center.

Before Los Angeles was even a city, before the arrival of Spanish colonial and missionary settlers in, the region where the Los Angeles River now runs was pristine natural wildlife. Its watershed is estimated to have housed over twenty different plant and animal habitats that existed before settlement by biologists from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Large areas of the river intersected with lowland wetlands covered in a floodplain forest, making up part of the south coastal landscape in which bears and other wild animals roamed. It was an ecosystem of marshes, thickets, and dense woods where a rich animal and plant life flourished. In his book on the history of the Los Angeles River, Gumprecht describes what the river most likely looked like at

this time. “The arid nature of the river greatly influenced the creation of this diverse environment... oaks and walnuts rose above the river...dense shrubs and water loving trees such as willows and cottonwoods...were more common where floodwaters regularly spread over the landscape. Cattails, bulrushes, and other marsh vegetation thrived where the streams’ course was even more indefinite...reeds, wild grasses.”^{xviii} Habitats consecrated with the river formed some of the most biologically rich habitats in all of Southern California.

The river, as a part of the diverse ecosystem in which it flowed, also provided natural resources for the subsistence of the local indigenous tribe known as the Tongva-Gabrielino. As hunters and gatherers, they relied the ecological diversity supported by the river for food, raw materials, shelter, clothing, and tools. Gumprecht recalls, “The River’s waters were crucial to [the Tongva] way of life.”^{xix} The river was the key water source for the Tongva, providing clean drinking water and pools in which to bathe each morning. As a result, they tended to travel along the length of the river most and often built their villages in close proximity to it.

The land as the Tongva knew it and the life they lead ended upon the arrival of Spanish Missionaries in 1769. In the following 80 year period, enslaved by missionaries to work their land and converted to their religion, Tovangar culture, language, and spirituality (which was based on the principle that all life is sacred and that the soul is linked to the soil) was annihilated and nearly lost for good. The Spanish and American colonization of the area that followed radically increased use of the land for economic gain by urban sprawl and agriculture for booming populations. The expansion of the Southern Pacific railway in 1876 marked the most drastic urban encroachment on the

floodplain as of yet, confining the river stream to smaller areas as well as attracting the development of new industrial sources of pollution like warehouses and factories built adjacent to the depots.^{xx}

From 1880 through the turn of the century, the population of the city of Los Angeles grew exponentially from 100,000 to over 500,000, other Southern California cities growing even more rapidly.^{xxi} And as these populations grew, so did the waste. The local governments of the time reasoned to dump excess sewage into the waterway to be carried out to the ocean. Though there was some debate over this practice, it was decided too expensive to rebuild a new sewage system and too convenient not to simply use the river. This set precedence for future waste management schemes. Unfortunately, the river was also prone to high pollution levels during the dry seasons when the water was too scarce to satisfactorily dilute excessive amounts of hazardous refuse.^{xxii}

A series of floods in the late 1800's devastated the booming cities. In the 1886 disaster, floodwaters stretching from downtown to Boyle Heights killed four people.^{xxiii} The 1914 deluge, however, was the driving impetus for the creation of the flood control program. Flooding nearly twelve thousand acres in Los Angeles County, it was most the most damaging in history, demolishing much of the new urban growth at the expense of the city government and its developers with private interests.^{xxiv} The large-scale construction project began soon after and continued for several years through two more calamitous floods in 1934 and 1938 and into the 1960's. The rerouting and cementing of the flood control system was designed and carried out by the US Army Corps of Engineers, employing as many as 17,000 citizens in the process.^{xxv} In this procedure, the

river itself was lined with concrete and manipulated to create a straightened, deeper, and wider path to conduct the unpredictable floodwaters out to sea as quick as possible.

Today, the riverbed looks like a valley of concrete. With miles of storm drains spilling out hazardous “fluorescent, green-black slime,” bordered by large sections of freeways and industry, Gumprecht concludes that today, “the concrete river is ugly and forbidding.”^{xxvi} Expectedly, the channelization severely damaged, some even say destroyed, the natural habitat and wildlife that once flourished there. Because the river had been designed to accommodate overwhelming floodwaters up to twenty thousand times its natural summer’s flow, “what you see when you look at the river most of the year is a broad swath of dry cement, which looks like nothing so much as a deserted freeway.” This is especially the case for the section south of downtown Los Angeles, where the riverbed was widened to much as 510 feet in some parts. Guarded by chain link fences and barbed wire access to the channel is technically illegal along much of its course, preclude the county’s liability in case of drowning during storms.

This pavement of the river has become symbolic of the cultural and ecological struggles endured along the riverbanks throughout history. In reference to it’s former life as a wetland habitat, Gumprecht calls the concrete “a scar on the landscape, a faint reminder of what it used to be.” Artist Judy Baca, similarly, refers of the river as “a giant scar across the land which served to further divide an already divided city.”^{xxvii} In part, she speaks of the ironic pathway of the channel today through middle class communities mostly in the San Fernando Valley, as well as through areas of poverty traveling south of downtown, a majority of those populations being people of color.^{xxviii} In his book *Barrio Logos*, Raul Villa refers to the channel as ‘dead cement’ referring to the social death that

was suffered by native residents (including the Tongva) who were displaced throughout the development along the river whose stories were only briefly acknowledged in this section. This theme of displacement and domination inspired Baca's community mural project along the Tujunga Wash that leads into the Los Angeles River. Titled the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, the half-mile-long mural retells some of these quieted stories that comprise the cultural history of the Los Angeles River.

In recent years, despite the unseemly vision of the river, environmental and community activists alike have embraced the urban waterway and begun to organize for its revitalization.^{xxix} Environmental advocates are responding to its historical ecological degradation by making its pollution levels and removal of concrete measures of policy within governmental jurisdictions. River politics extend to community advocates as well, who seek to turn the river into a "community asset." They understand the river's potential to revitalize neighborhoods by making the river a place for people to go by constructing bike paths, walkways, benches and other similar developments. Through their activism, these advocates are "re-envisioning" the urban environmental landscape, and reinventing a sense of place for the river.

Graffiti on the river: Public Art and Public Space

In many ways these two dynamic narratives share common themes of devastation, confinement, resistance, and persistence. In this sense that they mimic one another, their coexistence amid the concrete retaining walls seems suitable. The colors on the wall, and the springs of trees and grass through the concrete slabs alike become signs of life persisting through the historical oppressions they've faced. This reinforces the concept that the historical richness of the river is carried through today. As a river that still flows

51 miles through Los Angeles, graffiti writers are circumscribed in its history. Just as the river becomes a home and a place to nurture their art, each piece becomes infused with river's historical significances. The writing on the wall becomes not only public art, but also part of the river, and an expression of the river that creates a sense of place.

ⁱ Ferrell, Jeff. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 6.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 7.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 172.

^v Ibid., p. 173.

^{vi} Bojorquez, Charles 'CHAZ.' "Los Angeles 'Cholo' Style Graffiti Art." *Graffiti Verite*. 2000. <<http://www.graffitiverite.com>> 6 Feb. 2003.

^{vii} Romotsky, Jerry and Sally R. Romotsky. *Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy*. Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1976.

^{viii} Bojorquez, Charles 'CHAZ.' "Los Angeles 'Cholo' Style Graffiti Art." *Graffiti Verite*. 2000. <<http://www.graffitiverite.com>> 6 Feb. 2003.

^{ix} Ferrell, Jeff. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 11.

^x Ibid., p. 12.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Domanick, Joe. "What about Reform, Chief?" *The Los Angeles Times*. 3 Nov. 2002. <<http://0-web.lexis-nexis.com>> 4 Nov. 2002.

^{xiii} Jeffe, Sherry Bebitch. "Southern Exposure- Bratton's challenge." *California Journal*. 1 Jan. 2003. <<http://0-web.lexis-nexis.com>> 26 Feb. 2003.

^{xiv} Ferrell, Jeff. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 13.

^{xv} Sanchez, Rene. "L.A.'s New Top Cop Undertakes Tough Task." *The Washington Post*. 3 Nov. 2002. <<http://0-web.lexis-nexis.com>> 3 Nov. 2002.

^{xvi} Operation Clean Sweep Overview. *City of Los Angeles: Board of Public Works*. <<http://www.ci.la.ca.us/bpw/ocs/>> 5 Mar. 2003.

^{xvii} Baca, Judith F. "Whose Monument Where? Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society." Lacy, Suzanne, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 137.

^{xviii} Gumprecht, Blake. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 20-22.

^{xix} Ibid., p. 26.

^{xx} Ibid., p. 152-153.

^{xxi} Ibid., p. 165.

^{xxii} Ibid. p. 113.

^{xxiii} Ibid., p. 157.

^{xxiv} Ibid., p. 167.

^{xxv} Desfor, Gene and Roger Keil. "Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes of Urban Ecology." Toronto: York University Faculty of Environmental Studies. April, 1999, p. 16.

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- ^{xxvi} Gumprecht, Blake. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 236.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- ^{xxviii} Desfor, Gene and Roger Keil. "Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes of Urban Ecology." Toronto: York University Faculty of Environmental Studies. April, 1999, p. 3.
- ^{xxix} Gottlieb, Robert. *Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 17.

Captions for Photo Essay

This text expands on the photos included in the photo essay. The photos that are displayed here were taken to be included with the research question in mind, ‘Is graffiti art?’ Of the 300 plus pictures taken in the course of my research, here is a selection of the best images, chosen for the significant content and insight they offer on graffiti along the Los Angeles River as a public art. The text includes observations I have made in light of my exploration of public art, elaborated in the first two essays, as well as insights from various river advocates and graffiti writers I interviewed. The captions are organized by page number. Letter and the corresponding page number can identify the photos.

Pg. 33: Concrete Walls

“I just think of the concrete as a canvas. ...Ecologically the river’s a river whether it’s ugly or beautiful. Water still flows; it drains into the San Fernando Valley just like it always has. But I think the decision to make it ugly was a human decision, and I think the decision to make it an attractive, inviting place would also be a human decision, but it’s a river either way.” Lewis MacAdamsⁱ

a) Located at Colfax Ave. and Ventura Blvd. in Studio City. This is the start of the river, where the Tujunga Wash feeds into the Los Angeles River. CBS Studios border the river at the left, protected by security and the barbed wire fencing. In this section, the water flows in a “rectangular channel” specifically constructed entirely of reinforced concrete that runs the first 3.5 miles of the river. Now vast concrete slabs cover the sides and bottom of where the river once flowed.ⁱⁱ

b) This shot taken about half a mile north of where the 5 and 110 freeways cross at Elysian Park shows the sloped banks, paved with concrete and grouted rock that run from Burbank Western Wash to Elysian Park. The base of the riverbed was left unlined, which allows for moments of vegetation to flourish in the center of the channel. The walls, however, are still concrete. Are they potential canvases too?ⁱⁱⁱ

c) This is a locked, barbed wire fence at Ventura and Vineland. To go down into the riverbed is forbidden by law and considered ‘trespassing’ or ‘loitering.’ Under state law, those who enter the riverbed whether or not to paint, risk a \$500 fine, six months in prison, or both. And yet seeing the proliferation of creativity in an unlawful location (albeit made illegal in order to protect the city/state from liability in case of drowning) and a location of rich history, gives a sense of excitement and freedom to create unbound by law. “Graffiti writing occurs, then, in a context which challenges, defies, and even

celebrates the illegality of the act.”^{iv} In many ways this illicit creativity makes the visual experience equally as thrilling for the viewer.

Pg. 34: Throw Ups and Pieces

“For the commuter and the office worker, graffiti provides a series of mysterious, ambiguous images-- and some of the few available public images not bought and paid for by corporate art programs, city governments, or NEA grants.” Jeff Ferrell^v

- a) Located upstream from where the 134 freeway crosses the river in Burbank
- b) Under 6th Street Bridge, Boyle Heights
- c) Under Fletcher Dr. Bridge in Atwater Village/Silver Lake
- d) Upstream from where the 134 crosses the river in Burbank

Pg. 35

“Developed not out of particular intellectual traditions or political programs, but from the direct collective action of young writers, graffiti writing tears at the boundaries of mass culture. As they piece and tag together, graffiti writers carve a bit of cultural space from the enforced monotony of the urban environment.” Jeff Ferrell^{vi}

- a) South of 4th Street Bridge. UTI (which stands for “Under The Influence”) is a crew that has been around South East Los Angeles and painting on the river since the late 1980’s.
- b) In this piece, the spraycan is synonymous with the identity of the writer himself/herself. Additionally, the personified spraycan holds a microphone, as if to say that he/she speaks through writing, and writing gives him/her voice.
- c) Found where the 134 crosses the river in Burbank.
- d) These characters exemplify common styles that beginning graffiti artists often use, the “rag doll” and the “rag-a-muffin.” An experience writer can tell that these artists are new to graffiti because of the simplicity of the image that would otherwise be accented with shorter lines cutting into the piece or other design techniques. This photo was taken in a storm drain/ underground passageway along the river near Buena Vista Park and Disney Studios in Burbank.
- e) Much of the graffiti along the river is not as sophisticated as some graffiti pieces. Here, tags and phrases like ‘toy’ on the left make fun of piece as if to say it looks like it could have been done by little kids. This piece was also found near the 134 crossing in Burbank.

Pg. 36

a-c) These pieces are on the east side of the river north of the Los Feliz Bridge. Note how Saber, a world-renowned writer, interchanges the purple and green in his block letters. Again, taken far away, please use the oversize. The location right above the water and sheer size is mind-boggling. The writers most likely used modest equipment such as ladders, rope, or perhaps a raft.

d) These pieces are part of an extended wall surface near the North Broadway Bridge in Downtown LA. Taken from a distance, the short wall on which the pieces are painted is 5 feet tall and approximately 50 feet wide. “Bash” “Envy” “Prayer.” Small writing on Prayer’s tag reads, “For my baby boy, thank you lord” and on the right, “Live to tell about it.”

Pg. 37

a) Under the 134 in Burbank, the river water has worn down the bottom of the piece since it’s creating 5/3/02. “CDP” and “BLA” (“Bombing Los Angeles”) are crews from South East LA.

b) As demonstrated in this piece, design and style are fundamental elements to the graffiti arts. In this case, the tag is nearly obliterated and the geometry of the design becomes more important than legibility.

c) North of Glendale Blvd. Bridge in Los Feliz, “CBS” (which stands for “Can’t be stopped,” or sometimes “California bomb squad”) is a crew from the time of UTI in the mid-late 80’s. “Graff guerillas” written at the bottom left has political/revolutionary context.

Pg. 38

a) South of 6th St. Bridge, Boyle Heights. Open hole in fence would be optimal spot to enter the riverbed.

b) As you’ve seen throughout the pictures so far, doing one piece on top of others is part of the culture. “Cab” recognizes his crew “IFK” (International Freeway Killers) in the bubble to the right of his throw up. Under Fletcher Drive over pass near Silverlake and Atwater village.

c) Should some graffiti be made legal (the “good stuff”) and some not? Should distinctions be made? One writer answers, “You have to start somewhere. Sure there are different levels, [but there are] not distinctions of *this* is graffiti *that’s* not, because it’s all part of it. That’s how people develop themselves and become artists. The curve of the letters and lettering [involved in designing a tag] is an art form in itself. It takes practice.”^{vii}

Pg. 39

“Graffiti resists not only authority, but the aesthetics of authority as well.... It overtly links ownership of the wall to control over its appearance, and defines beauty and ugliness in terms of power... They constitute a sense of beauty grounded not only in control of property and space, but in the carefully coordinated control of image and design, in the smoothed-out textures of clean environments.” Jeff Ferrell^{viii}

a) North of the N. Broadway Bridge, Downtown LA. “Jaek” uses block lettering. Located south of the 110/5 freeway interchange near Elysian Park.

b) Near the 6th Street Bridge in Boyle Heights, this piece was still wet when it was photographed. It measures 6 ft. tall and 11.5 feet wide.

Pg. 40: Styles

“Above all, [graffiti] replaces the search for authoritative universality and order with a yearning for particularity and disorder. The orientation is ambiguity. Ambiguity is the stance, the subtext, of anarchism; it is the context in which anarchism can be carried out. Ambiguities of knowledge and style, of sexuality and status-- all are characteristic of a plural and eclectic world. Where multiple styles replace Style, and multiple meanings replace Meaning, ambiguity ensues-- an ambiguity which acknowledges cultural pluralism, and the triumph of confusion over consistency.” Jeff Ferrell^{ix}

a) This tag reads “Tetris” designed in hip hop style. 134 freeway crossing in Burbank.

b) The Latino “Old School Cholo” style emerged from the mid-1930’s Los Angeles at a time when Mexican-American Citizens were facing mass deportations and, in Los Angeles, beatings by U.S. servicemen during World War II. “Its letter face has always been called ‘Old English’ and is always printed in upper case capital letters. This squarish, prestigious typeface was meant to present to the public a formal document... The large black letters, highly abstracted and carefully designed, reveal strength and control.”^x It is located north of Elysian Park

c) “Destroyr” and “SkyPage” in 50’s poster lettering. Located north of the Main Street Bridge near Chinatown.

d) Bubble letters under the 134 freeway in Burbank. To write in the hard to reach spaces is also part of the subculture.

Pg. 40: Three-dimensional

- a) Use the large trucks at the top of this photo as a point of reference to get a sense of the size of this piece, south of where the 134 crosses in Atwater Village. When doing large 3-D pieces, all the perspective relies on the geometry of the lines, which can be difficult to match up when working close to the piece. Sludge flows out of a drainpipe on the left.
- b) Near the 4th street bridge, Boyle Heights. This 3-D style that comes from New York omits the use of outlines and rather uses three different colors.^{xi}
- c) This piece near the 4th Street Bridge in Boyle Heights extends past the short wall down onto the sloping banks to increase the 3-D effect. It measures 20.5 feet tall and 19.5 feet at its widest section.
- d) “Goul” gives a good example of a correct use of 3-D. The cracks in the letters often used in 3-D pieces give more dimension to the letters, making them look chunky like they’re breaking apart.

Pg. 42: Faces

The visage can be used as a tool to express emotion and humanity. Some faces are more alarming than others. None of these are similar to faces we are used to seeing on our streets. Rather, they express angry (the round red face), anguished (the face with the tongue), and other emotions. The piece with three faces represents “death,” “anger,” and “mutilation” in the form of people whose mouths are bound, who cannot speak or express themselves, who are blue and distorted and suffering from the stitching or binding across their faces.

Pg. 43: Expressions of Discontent

- a) Located in the series of pieces near the 134 overpass in Burbank, this piece that reads “Fuck Y’all” could be interpreted in many ways. Who is the writer speaking to? The government? Other graffiti artists who are most likely to come to this spot, or the writers who defaced the piece underneath that he might have painted?
- b) Located under the 5 freeway overpass, “FTW” (Fuck The World) was once a crew in LA. Visible in the change of writing and spraycan, the word “free” in this tag was written in by someone else, changing the context and message in the words.

c) On this pipe it reads, “Fuck Burbank Cops, they’re donut eating cops.” It’s funny, and insulting, and a display of discontent. It is located near Buena Vista Park and Disney Studios in Burbank.

Pg. 44: Cultural Signifiers

Among the characters and symbols found along the river, there are some that have much more obvious cultural references. For instance, the skull, exhibited in photos 48 and 49 is a traditional Aztec image, still manifested in Latino festivals today. Graffiti artist Charles “CHAZ” Bojorquez, who has been painting graffiti in Northeast LA since 1969 wrote, “To the Latino people, a skull’s representation is not about death, but about rebirth.”^{xiii} In contrast, in most American traditions, the skull is a symbol to be feared, or considered abnormal. This provides one of the clearest examples of how art and symbolism is colored by cultural perspectives, and how graffiti can be misunderstood, whether it be a clash between ethnic cultures or between popular culture and subcultures.

a) This is part of the graffiti yard under the 2 freeway overpass. Note that this group of skulls was part of a larger production extending to the right, which consists of a pile of bones and rib cages. These skulls illustrate the relationship of death and rebirth clearly. The skulls are alive-- their mouths have expression, and some even have eyes that look up and out. Please use the woman who stands in front of the mural at about 5 feet 7 inches as a reference for the large scale of these productions.

b) Near the 134 freeway overpass in Atwater Village, this skull exemplifies a graphic shading technique that uses lines and curves to give shape and form rather than gradient aerosol. The top of the skull is cropped and looks unfinished. Though to some it may look sloppy, this actually tells the viewer a story behind the piece. This picture does not capture the large size of this skull so it may be hard to understand, but most likely the artist could not reach to finish making an accurate curve perhaps because of the restraints of his/her ladder, and so the top remains flat.

c) This long dragon can also be scaled to the trucks parked above the concrete retaining walls. Painted near the 134 freeway overpass in Atwater Village, part of the Chinese zodiac, this might be a symbol originating from the artists cultural heritage, though it is just speculation.

Pg. 45: Abstract Art

Here are some other examples of graffiti *not* in hip hop style, but nonetheless noteworthy because of their creativity and utilization of the large slabs of concrete along the river. None of these appear to use spray can. They most probably used house paint, brushes, and/or rollers.

- a) This mural situated on the east bank of the river just north of the 5/110 freeway interchange is visible by tens of thousands of commuters each day. The artists also unknown, these have been interpreted to represent petroglyphs of indigenous tribes from the surrounding area. For example, the man on the horse at the bottom could be identified from Tongva/Chumash heritage.
- b) South of the 4th Street Bridge in Boyle Heights is a pyramid of simply painted black outlined faces. The faces are stacked tightly on top of each other at the start of the piece upstream, and extend approximately 175 feet downstream. The fading faces, measuring about 9.5 feet long and 7 feet wide each, indicate that they have been exposed to the sun and times when the river has reached heights significant enough to wash out the faces along the base of the wall more so. Thirty-five to forty-five faces were counted.
- c) This multi-colored bulls-eye is located south of the 101 freeway overpass near Chinatown. The downtown skyscrapers loom in the background.
- d) Located near the 6th on the west side near the Sixth Street Bridge, these abstract lines look like a face with a tie.

Pg. 46: Gang Graffiti

Again, while this while this photo essay focuses on hip hop graffiti, the dominant form of graffiti found along the Los Angeles River, these representations of gang graffiti are worth noting. The Toonerville gang (TVR) is the dominant gang in the Los Feliz area, where these graffiti were painted. This turf graffiti is exemplary of the type of graffiti that is highlighted in the media and get the most press attention. Academic Jeff Ferrell suggests, “Certainly gang graffiti, and the gangs themselves, merit something more than the usual knee-jerk condemnations by business and political authorities. If we bother to look beyond carefully cultivated anti-gang hysteria, we can surely read in the gangs and

ther graffiti the experience of being young, poor, and of color in a culture which increasingly marginalizes this configuration.”^{xiii}

Pg. 47-48: Productions

There is a significant amount of graffiti that is formatted and presented similar to what is usually classified as ‘muralism.’ That is, large, clean cut images with bright colors and figures interweaving the piece together. ‘Murals’ of this kind are referred to as ‘productions’ in the graffiti world, usually devised by groups within crews.

“They thus become meaningful for the writers not as moments of generic graffiti writing, but in the immediacy of distinctly shared experience. As with other criminal acts, the meaning of graffiti writing is embedded in the details of its execution.”^{xiv} Many of the benefits of community murals result from this process as well. The top production, measuring over 50 feet long and 9 feet high, is found near downtown. The production documented on the bottom is located under the 2 freeway overpass and its size can be referenced to the woman who walks along on the right-hand side.

Pg. 49: Life on the wall

Some parts of the graffiti tags are concentrated in particular areas. Individually, developing the tag is a craft in itself. “Graffiti script demonstrates the Oriental work ethic of one hour of preparation for one minute of execution. Some of Japan’s most famous war generals were poets. Before the battle, they would write their feeling through their calligraphy by writing a poem of solemn beauty or righteous strength.”^{xv} Concurrently, these tags create a colorful collage of these processes, emotions, and stories of many different individuals. Graffiti writer Nuke said of the writing on the walls and their tags, “It’s a dialogue.” Sanchez agrees, “Like the mural, graffiti tells a story. It is a means “of communication and affirmation of existence.”^{xvi}

67. More legible, this tag wall is a little easier for non-writers to relate to. However the same tag craft is not applied here. Rather, the writers likely used house paint and rollers. Even though it is not in hip hop style, a similar sense of community and dialogue is communicated along this wall.

Pg. 50: Political Statements

As previously discussed, graffiti is inherently a political, counter culture commentary by virtue of it's unlawful, historic, and ecological location; and the history of cultures from which it emerged and undermined. However, these photos show how some graffiti is more explicit in their message.

a) This piece reading, "Destruction must continue," is located near the 134 overpass in Burbank.

b) This anarchy symbol is found near the 134overpass in Burbank. It explicitly illustrates how much of graffiti, in challenging issues of authority and domination, could be interpreted as anarchical.

63. Under the First Street Bridge across is a traditional Mexican figure clad in sombrero. Next to him read slogans such as, "People of color unite," "Revolucion Cabrone!" (Revolution everyone!), "Kill your slave master!" and "Kill White." These slogans reveal a heated fury and dissatisfaction with the social and political system.

64. This tag refers to Latin American guerrilla leader and revolutionary theorist Che Guevara of the 1960's.

Pg. 51

a) Muralist Eva Cockcroft writes, "Art is a weapon to the degree that it is rooted in people's struggles. The re-appropriation of culture by the people is about the restoration to the people of a fully human image and creative possibility."^{xvii} In this production under the 2 freeway overpass, the cops and graffiti writers are juxtaposed in opposition to each other, each equip with his weapon-- the cops with his gun and official badge, and the graffiti artist with his spray can and mask. Looking closely at the sleeve of the cop on the left is a barcode, indicating that he is mass-produced, homogenous, or an inanimate commodity that is manipulated.

b) Though much of graffiti holds connotations of resistance against government authority, this piece shows that perhaps not all graffiti can be interpreted in this way, and that pro-government graffiti exists as well. This American flag with the United States Marine Corps motto, "Semper Fidelis," meaning "Always Faithful" demonstrates bold patriotism on the outside of the river wall south of the Los Feliz Blvd. bridge. Though it

is not particularly hip-hop style, the artist notably used spraycan medium. How does the nationalistic message behind this graffiti change your perception of graffiti?

c) In contrast, this piece located near the 4th Street Bridge in Boyle Heights reads “USA” and points down with an arrow to the bottom of the riverbed, perhaps to the sewage water that runs downstream. It is also not in hip hop style, but was likely painted with house paint.

Pg. 52: Commemorative Pieces

For writers who identify with the river, it can become a special place to commemorate loved ones.

a) This commemoration under the 7th Street Bridge reads, “RIP Senyl, Aug 26 1985- June 30 2002). It repeats, “Much Love,” “You will be missed,” and “RIP Senyl.” It is over 40 feet long and approximately eight-nine feet tall.

b) This reads, “Letty #21 lives on” on the east bank of the river near Los Feliz Blvd. Bridge.

c) On one post of the North Broadway Bridge, one writer dedicated a piece to his/her son. It reads, “With love to my son Lene,” “Happy New Year, 2001.” Note that the piece was curved so the photos do not match up correctly.

Pg. 53: I Am Tree

One writer who paints “I am tree” had done three tree pieces along the river in Boyle Heights from the 4th Street Bridge to the 7th Street Bridge. Reflecting upon the following quote by graffiti writer Hex in the context of the tree pieces is particularly ironic: “They call those who destroy man-made things, things that can be replaced like the walls and the streets and the lampposts, all these city structures, you know, they call us vandals. But those people that destroy god-made things, things that aren’t so easily able to replace like the air, the water, the land, they call ‘em developers.”^{xviii}

a) This piece, completed in white house paint, is difficult to see at first. But stretching over some fifty feet are three or four fading, sparsely painted stick trees. Lettering just above the small trees on the left read, “I am tree.”

b) This piece done in black spraycan also reads, “I am tree” in script.

c) Located just north of the 10 freeway overpass, this is a full production in blue, green, 2 shades of brown and white. The tree clutching the earth with its roots demonstrates the artists understanding, awareness, and concern for environmental issues along the river.

Pg. 54: Graffiti Abatement

“You look places and you see spots on the wall, is it your eyes? something wrong with your glasses? No, it’s graffiti abatement. ...It’s all up and down the river,” says Leo Limon. He believes that graffiti ‘removal’ is actually just another cover up, because paint chips off the wall, and because taggers will continue writing over it anyway.

Pg. 55: Map of Los Angeles River from Studio City through Boyle Heights

Pg. 56: River Tour— Public Space and Public Art

Here is a tour down stream of a variety of sights capturing the moments of interaction between graffiti and the river channel. It follows the river from North Lankershim in North Hollywood downstream to the area just before the 10 freeway overpass crosses the river in Boyle Heights. These photos visually put the pieces that were analyzed in the first section of this photo book back into the greater context of the riverbed. The fact is that, though there are hundreds of pieces, throw-ups, and tags large and small along the river, they still do not come close to covering the concrete walls. These pictures hope to celebrate the interplay of the graffiti on the riverbed, the reclaiming of public space, and the cultural and the ecological histories of what the river once was and the communities who thrived off it. By beginning to experience and to recognize the interaction between the river channel and the graffiti along its walls, understanding the writing on the walls as a public art begins to make more sense. You find yourself thinking about all the writers, where they come from. How they got to their spot. You listen to the sounds. It brings your eye to the river, your body to the river. “[Graffiti] comes closer to engaging the public in the process of art than do the pieces tastefully arranged around courthouse lawns and bank lobbies. And with its origins not in corporate funding or governmental grants, but in the direct action of street artists, it certainly approaches a more concrete and progressive sense of ‘public’ art.”^{xix}

Pg. 56

a) This shows untouched walls on the river at Lankershim in North Hollywood near Universal Studios (a billboard is visible in the background).

- b) Traveling south, here is the river adjacent to Zoo Drive near the Gene Autry Museum.
- c) Here is a yard where many graffiti pieces displayed at the beginning of the book are located, near the 134 freeway overpass in Burbank.

Pg. 57

- a) To get a sense of the immense size of this pieces, use the buildings and trees above the walls as a point of reference. “A River Killer” denotes that the writer gets up on the walls of the riverbed a lot.
- b) Pieces float atop the river surface, often reflecting their colors in the water. Peering over the fence, the viewer sees a low but wide river, its tall walls with writing, and the San Gabriel Mountains in the background.
- c) On-ramp to the 134 west in Glendale, graffiti hides on the sides of bridges where many people can not even see it.
- d) This photo is taken in the Silverlake area, where the bottom of the river was spared from pavement, and trees and other vegetation now grow, though devastatingly littered with trash and clothing. A graffiti piece in a storm drain can be seen at a distance in the background.

Pg. 58

- a) A man walks his dogs in the riverbed covered in graffiti. If it is his daily walk, maybe he notices new pieces that appear, or he never sees them at all, or he has a favorite piece.
 - b) A typical scene on the river, streams of sludge leak out of the storm drains. The storm drains, however, also provide triangular shaped concrete walls good for painting.
- 81-82. Photo 81 provides a close up view of the pieces in 82. Forest Lawn drive runs parallel behind the pieces.

Pg. 59

- a-b) These photo shows a view of the fenced off bike path from the riverbed as it travels under the Glendale Street Bridge. These pieces on the Cypress Park area bridge present the puzzle as to how the artist might have reached the wall to paint through the river water.

c) In the Glassell Park area, three faded football helmets oppose each other on the east bank. Could it be a graffiti remnant from when the Raiders were in Los Angeles in the 1980's?

Pg. 60

a) Here is a view of graffiti under the supporting posts of the Glendale Street Bridge from the opposite side. As you've noticed, the supporting walls under bridges are popular places to paint, most likely because they provide large flat spaces to paint.

b) Here, a horseback rider emerges from the underground passageway running underneath the 5 freeway that connects the Los Angeles Equestrian Center and Griffith park. To access this passageway, however, horseback riders must forge through the riverbed, and are faced with large pieces like the black and white block letter piece in the background.

c-d) This is the south side of the Fletcher St. Bridge through the trees at the base of the riverbed and a view underneath the Fletcher St. Bridge.

Pg. 61

The 2 Freeway overpass near Silverlake. The space below the freeway looks unassuming, but one of the largest graffiti yards along the river is located here. Photo (a) shows coloring on the walls that creeps up into the rafters under the freeway and spills onto the floor creating a rainbow of rocks.

Pg. 62

a) Here is the 5/110 freeway interchange used as a point of reference in much of this photo essay. The river channel at this section to accommodate a heavy flow in case of flooding, so vertical walls in this section of the river reach as much as thirty-one feet tall.^{xx}

b-c) These show the area of the river south of the 5/110 freeway interchange.. 106 shows one example of a long stretch of colorful pieces five feet tall (the height of the short wall on which they were painted). Photo (c) showcases the channel construction as the channelization changes from vertical walls to gradual increasingly sloping walls.

Pg. 63

“Here, it feels like when you’re a youth, you don’t have that much of a future, you know. And so things like hip-hop and graff are extended families. They’re a lot better than gang extended families.”^{xxi}

The riverbed becomes a place for writers, most often with their crews, to congregate and hang out. This group of 5 youth (four juniors in high school ages 15, and one freshman in high school age 13) was talking a joking around on a Sunday afternoon after painting. They had their paints with them and they had been painting the piece together with rollers. See their piece in photo © where two of the youth posed next to it, one making an “L-A” sign with his hands for the city of Los Angeles. This collaboration of the youth pictured exemplifies how the graffiti arts builds community in a similar way to the mural arts programs, and provides a place for young people aside from the mall.

Pg. 64

- a) This is a view south of the 101 freeway overpass near Chinatown.
- b) The close up of the series of graffiti pieces at the bottom of this page runs under the 101 freeway and beyond. Note the silver robot labeled “LAPD” to the right of the overpass. Further down on the “No. Tres” piece reads, “The only real law is Mathematics,” and “Revolt.” The ‘r’ and the ‘t’ in revolt are personified by adding proportional circles to the letters indicating heads, and extending the length of parts of the lettering to suggest arms and bodies.

Pg. 65

- a) Upon his experience at the river, Nuke reflects, “[The river] is beautiful... you figure in this whole area, there’s always things going on-- people, cars and everything. It’s the only place apart from a park that you can be, and it’s quiet, and you’ll see life there. Little life springs there, and I can only imagine what it was like before it was cemented.”

Pg. 67

- a) Many transients have built modest shelters along the riverbed. Their homes surrounded in graffiti, they are probably some of the few spectators of much of the graffiti art along the river.

Pg. 68

“Graffiti gives life to gray, cold, concrete walls that are so unnatural and separate from humanity and nature... making graffiti an art of rebellion against emotionlessness.”^{xxii}

Similarly, the reflection of the vibrant colors in the sewer water also brings life to the riverflow.

ⁱ MacAdams, Lewis. Personal interview. 23 Feb. 2003.

ⁱⁱ Gumprecht, Blake. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 209.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gumprecht, Blake. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 209.

^{iv} Ferrell, Jeff. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 148.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 176.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} Montalzo, Joseph 'Nuke.' Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2003.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.180.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 162.

^x Bojorquez, Charles 'CHAZ.' "Los Angeles 'Cholo' Style Graffiti Art." *Graffiti Verite*. 2000. <<http://www.graffitiverite.com>> 6 Feb. 2003.

^{xi} Montalzo, Joseph 'Nuke.' Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2003.

^{xii} Bojorquez, Charles 'CHAZ.' "Los Angeles 'Cholo' Style Graffiti Art." *Graffiti Verite*. 2000. <<http://www.graffitiverite.com>> 6 Feb. 2003.

^{xiii} Ferrell, Jeff. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 5.

^{xiv} Cockcroft, Eva, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft. *Towards a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1977, p. 167.

^{xv} Bojorquez, Charles 'CHAZ.' "Los Angeles 'Cholo' Style Graffiti Art." *Graffiti Verite*. 2000. <<http://www.graffitiverite.com>> 6 Feb. 2003.

^{xvi} Sanchez-Tranquilino, Marcos. "Space, Power, and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972-1978." *Art and Cultural Identity*. Bright, Brenda Jo and Liza Bakewell, eds. Tucson: The University of Arizona, 1995, p. 62.

^{xvii} Cockcroft, Eva, John Weber, and Jim Cockcroft. *Towards a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1977, p. 279.

^{xviii} Montalzo, Joseph 'Nuke.' Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2003.

^{xix} Ferrell, Jeff. *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993, p. 186.

^{xx} Gumprecht, Blake. *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 209.

^{xxi} Montalzo, Joseph 'Nuke.' Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2003.

^{xxii} Claycomb, Andrew. Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2003.

Conclusion: A New Response to Graffiti Art

The opening essays of this project have served to frame the images that followed. This study began in search of an understanding of progressive tenets of ‘public art’ such as placing the public involvement and process at the center of a public art project, as well as reflecting community values and historical significance in the piece to create a sense of place. As a result, the histories of hip-hop graffiti and the Los Angeles River that followed were the preliminary steps to understanding how the graffiti art of the LA River fit into this new paradigm of ‘public art.’ The photos furthered our exploration by putting images to the term ‘graffiti,’ a term that mistakenly connotes negative stereotypes of the groups who do it and the art form itself. While the histories demonstrate how graffiti *is* an involving, community oriented process that to achieve a revolutionary resistant art form, the photographs show specifically the variety of colors, content, and design tools graffiti artists have used to communicate these messages. In these ways, it can be understood how the graffiti pieces along the concrete Los Angeles River creates a sense of place, and can be accepted as a public art form. In reflection on the photos and stories documented in this book, the question that follows is; what do we make of this? How should citizens, and how should the government respond this body of artwork?

The first inclination of many policy makers is to make distinctions between the various types of graffiti in order to legalize some of it but not others. The fact of the matter is that it is all illegal art, and it is all art that derives from the same movement with the same message of resistance and community power at its core. There is a notable difference between the levels of artistic development in the pieces along the river walls. On the various levels of sketched tags versus refined pieces, Nuke says, “You can’t have

one without the other. The tagging was a step up for learning our craft.”ⁱ In this holistic understanding, all graffiti, like all other art forms, is important.

Rather than attempt to categorize and place value judgments on the various graffiti that exists, it is more important to take note of the art forms and look at them for what each has to offer. As we’ve established, art is a form of communication. To look at the graffiti along the river would be to listen to the artists and communities who created it, to observe their dialogues on the walls, read their poetry, because they are telling us something. It is important to never forget that graffiti for many artists is a creative outlet to express their political beliefs, their emotions, and their artistic energy. One writer along the river pointed out that painting on the river is a fundamentally human act. The writers get nothing more out of the experience than getting their pieces on the walls. They risk high fines and arrest, they do not receive any money for the materials or time spent, and they do not even get that many viewers than the other graffiti writers, transients, and occasional passersby. So why paint on the Los Angeles River? “Because we like the art...for the satisfaction of writing, creating,” says one writer. “It’s peaceful at the river,” says another.ⁱⁱ

Graffiti writing is an extremely multifaceted art and subculture that deserves more attention not only by researchers, but also by those who seek to put it out, those with funds, those who want to make social change. Hip-hop graffiti, an art form of resistance of the youth for generations now, offers a new outlet to reach youth and around which to create opportunities for them. As hip hop arts have been used as a method of resistance against oppressive social and economic structures, the art can and have been harnessed by communities to create change. Youth centers such as the Peace and Justice center,

Radiotron, Self-Help Graphics, and the Azatlan Cultural Center are some of the local centers that have been started in Los Angeles, providing legal spaces for youth to paint throughout the 1990's, but Self-Help Graphics is the only organization that has survived the years. As the overwhelming numbers of pieces on the river demonstrate, there is a demand for spaces to paint, and that studio space could provide a sanctuary for many writers to build community and develop as artists.

Similarly, hip hop graffiti mural projects could provide youth with public spaces, making accessible legal outlets for the creativity exhibited in the photos essay. To continue the relationship of the graffiti along the river, the large concrete walls can be transformed into large-scale public mural art projects. Granted, this proposition poses several complications. For instance, in light of Ferrell's principle of the 'aesthetics of authority,' strict government censorship could limit the freedoms of the graffiti writers to paint what they wish. Nonetheless, with further investigation into the interests of graffiti artists, river advocates, and government officials, graffiti murals along the river could prove successful.

Paramount to the question of a viable community response to the graffiti of the river is to be open to a new appreciation of the art. In existing on our river walls, it creates a sense of place for us. It creates a sense of place by existing in the environment, its vibrant use of color and geometry, large scale and unique locations, and the inherent implications of cultural, ecological, and political history. Even by the simple act of appreciating it, listening to it, looking at it, it begins to create a sense of place. To feel connected to the art brings the viewer closer to the community, the artists, the environment, and their history. Further, such an openness is important because it

unleashes the stereotypes of it as dirty and constructions of fear that inhibit us from looking at it and appreciating it for it's beauty and meaningful content.

ⁱ Montalzo, Joseph 'Nuke.' Personal interview. 4 Apr. 2003.

ⁱⁱ Anonymous Eagle Rock graffiti writer. Personal interview. 7 Apr. 2003.

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Glossary¹

Appendix 1

Bomb Prolific painting or marking with ink.

Buff Any means employed by authorities to remove graffiti from trains or walls.

Burner A piece that beats the competition.

Cap, fat or *skinny* Interchangeable spraycan nozzles fitted to can to vary width of spray.

Crew Loosely organized group of writers, also known as a clique.

Going over One writer covering another writer's name with his own.

Hit To tag up any surface with paint or ink.

Kill To hit or bomb extensively.

King/Queen The best with the most.

Piece A writer's sketchbook.

Production An intricate, impressive burner often completed in collaboration within the crew.

Tag A writer's signature with marker or spraycan.

Tagging up Writing signature with marker or spraypaint.

Throw -up A name painted quickly with one layer of spray paint and an outline.

Toy Inexperienced or incompetent writer.

Up Describes a writer whose work appears regularly.

¹ Adapted from *Spraycan Art*