

*Walls, Spray Paint and the Urban Space:  
The Graffiti Artists of Durban and Their Navigation of Boundaries*

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**Abstract**

Graffiti, while adding vibrancy to spaces, often carries the stigma of illegality due to its unsanctioned nature. Recognizing this complex interplay and the varying public opinions about graffiti, this paper explores the visible and hidden expressions of Durban's graffiti artists on city walls. The research focuses on how these artists navigate ownership and spatial boundaries in public domains, guided by the central question: How do graffiti artists in Durban reconcile the conflicting dynamics of spatial boundaries and (il)legality in their practice? Using qualitative methods and snowball sampling, five active graffiti artists were interviewed, and their insights were analysed thematically. A key finding is the shifting perception of graffiti from an illegal activity to a more accepted form of public art, as space custodians increasingly allow their walls to be used for graffiti.

Keywords: Durban Graffiti, Public Art, South African Graffiti, Graffiti in the Public, Graffiti and Boundaries

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## Introduction

Graffiti has historically been linked to crime, violence, and gang activities. The designation of graffiti as acts of vandalism and the banning of the practice originated in New York in the 1970s. Internationally, installing graffiti on public surfaces has been termed an act of rebellion (Lovata & Olton, 2015). For instance, Taylor, Pooley and Carragher (2016) explain the creation of graffiti as a function of attention-seeking adolescence, where the aspiring youth engages in socially deviant activity to gain social recognition and some sense of momentary ownership of a public space in which their tags occupy. The authors hint that such adolescents are often from unsettled and non-conformist family backgrounds. Thus, their activities are mostly fuelled by the rush of adrenaline experienced while putting up such tags without being caught, and the recognition and the longing for admission into graffiti crews.

In Taylor, Pooley and Carragher's (2016) attempt at describing the protocol for attaining the membership of a graffiti crew, the authors summarily equate graffiti crews to gangs. In similar manner, researchers have reported the use of graffiti to claim territories and contest place-based identities. Derogatory as this may seem, this negative perception stems from the disruptive, transformational, and non-conformist dimensions of the art (Shobe, 2018). Regardless of the negativities surrounding Graffiti, it can be a viable communicative tool for expressing and denoting social needs, concerns, and identities and negotiating differences and boundaries. Nonetheless, the presence of Graffiti in the public space is a confrontation with the restriction placed on who and what belongs in the public.

The 'broken window theory' by Wilson & Kelling (1982) argues that allowing minor infractions like graffiti to persist leads to more serious crimes. Graffiti, seen as a quality-of-life crime (Shobe, 2018), is viewed as a sign that needs immediate removal to prevent further criminal behaviour. However, Ferrell and Weide (2010) point out flaws in this logic. They find that quickly erasing graffiti often results in less detailed and aesthetically pleasing work being created in those spaces, as graffiti artists regard such spots as poor investments. This action does not deter graffiti production but leads to less sophisticated pieces that are easier and faster to produce.

Ferrell and Weide (2010, 54) note that "a spot that won't last long doesn't merit serious artistic investment," which leads to more transient, less refined graffiti. The state's efforts to maintain order are continuously challenged by graffiti artists, who frequently replace removed pieces, creating a cycle of imposition and resistance (Penfold, 2017). Boundaries in urban spaces, while contested, are essential for graffiti, as they provide the canvases needed for the art form (Penfold, 2017). In Durban, graffiti adds vibrancy to the urban landscape but often remains unsanctioned, reinforcing its perception as illegal. The acceptability of graffiti is context-dependent (Shobe, 2018), with some viewing it as a sign of criminality and others as public art. Graffiti artists prioritize high-visibility locations, making these spaces highly contested. This study explores how Durban's graffiti artists navigate ownership and spatial boundaries in their practice, addressing the research question: How do graffiti artists in Durban reconcile the conflicting dynamics of spatial boundaries and (il)legality in their practice?

## **Perspectives on the Nature of Graffiti**

Before the 20th century, graffiti can be traced to cavemen who created signs on cave walls (Parker, Khanyile & Joseph, 2019). Modern graffiti originated in the 1960s and 70s among marginalized groups in the U.S., particularly in New York City, often regarded as the birthplace of modern graffiti (Zieleniec, 2017; Shobe, 2018). Subcultures like punk music, skateboarding, and rap coexisted with graffiti in areas like New York and California (Wrest, 2012; Penfold, 2017). While South African graffiti borrowed from these origins, it also incorporates indigenous elements reflecting the country's culture (Penfold, 2017). Initially focused on lettering, graffiti evolved as it gained popularity, encompassing various visual expressions (Fowler & Fowler, 2000). Graffiti can be categorized into tags, throw-ups, and pieces, each representing different levels of complexity and skill. Tags, the simplest form, were popular in the 1970s in New York. Throw-ups are more elaborate, using multiple colours, while pieces, or masterpieces, are the most detailed and time-consuming, often created by experienced graffiti writers (Wrest, 2012).

The spread of graffiti internationally was driven by external observers, graffiti writers' self-published magazines, and the internet, which enabled artists to learn and improve their work (Wrest, 2012). The South African graffiti scene emerged in the 1980s, challenging the stereotype that graffiti is solely a lower-class activity. In Johannesburg, for instance, many graffiti artists are White, postgraduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Penfold, 2017). Forssman and Louw (2016) highlight graffiti's role in reconstructing histories and addressing difficult experiences. In their study, women and children's graffiti in Telperion shelter during wartime served as a form of resistance, leading the authors to categorize it as graffiti rather than rock art due to its empowering and rebellious nature.

South African graffiti is deeply tied to political struggles, serving as visual resistance against oppression (Parker, Khanyile, & Joseph, 2019). The state often removes unsanctioned graffiti based on the broken window theory, which argues that visible disorder leads to further crime. Ironically, the removal of graffiti has become a business, benefiting from the notion that graffiti is inherently illegal (Shobe, 2018). The perception of graffiti's legality is subjective and context-dependent. For example, graffiti in Florence, Italy, which references the traditional sport Calcio Storico, is celebrated rather than condemned, demonstrating that public appreciation of graffiti often depends on cultural context (RugbyPass, 2023).

One controversy in graffiti discourse is the term for legal graffiti. Wrest (2012) suggests "graffiti-influenced art" to distinguish between commissioned works and true graffiti, which is rooted in resistance and vandalism. This distinction helps clarify the difference between graffiti and street art, the latter being broader and less threatening (Shobe, 2018). The creators of graffiti are variously termed artists, writers, or vandals. This terminology reflects differing perspectives on their work. Some prefer 'graffiti writers' to emphasize the writing aspect, while others, like Patrick Thompson, advocate for 'graffiti artists' to acknowledge the creative diversity within the subculture (Landry, 2019). This paper aligns with Thompson, recognizing graffiti creators as artists who contribute to the cultural fabric of urban spaces.

## **Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences and practices of graffiti artists in Durban. The snowball sampling technique was utilized to identify and engage with five graffiti artists who are actively contributing to the urban art

scene in the city. This approach was chosen to leverage the close-knit nature of the graffiti community, allowing participants to recommend others, thus facilitating access to a diverse range of artists.

Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews, which were later transcribed for analysis. These interviews provided the flexibility to explore specific themes while allowing the artists to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. In instances where the artists were initially unreachable, the interview questions were sent electronically, and responses were retrieved via the same medium. To ensure the validity and depth of these responses, follow-up one-on-one interviews were conducted.

The qualitative data gathered from these interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its ability to identify and analyse patterns within the data, enabling a nuanced understanding of how these artists navigate and reinterpret urban spaces through their work. To protect the anonymity of the participants, and in alignment with how they present themselves to the public, the artists are referred to by their creative identities rather than their real names throughout this study. This approach respects their chosen personas and maintains consistency with their public representation.

### **Defining Spatial Boundaries and Ownership**

Before analysing the themes that emerged from the qualitative data, it is crucial to define the concepts of spatial boundaries and ownership within the context of this study.

Pena (2023) argues that borders and spaces are inherently interrelated, forming a cohesive whole; borders exist within space, and space is defined by borders. This interconnection is a fundamental attribute of the modern state. According to Yilmaz (2018), a key characteristic of the modern state is its tendency to establish political and social borders and territorialities. The claim to space and territories has been one of the most contentious issues throughout human history, leading to wars, the decimation of populations, and the development of extreme measures, including nuclear weapons, to either expand or protect territorial claims. Yilmaz (2018) introduces the term ‘forgery’ to describe human territoriality and the claim to space, suggesting that spaces are forged as manifestations of the human quest for spatial order. The term ‘forge’ carries a dual meaning: it can refer to the creation or manufacturing of spaces, but it also implies falsification. This duality is significant when questioning the ownership of forged spaces and boundaries: To whom does public space truly belong—the state or the people?

In the context of graffiti, the selection of spots is based on the writer’s intimate knowledge of the urban landscape and active participation within their crew. The negotiation and selection of these spots become a ritual through which the city and graffiti are interwoven. Ferrell and Weide (2010) liken graffiti to a sport, where the chosen spot becomes the arena. They argue that “graffiti writers charge the urban landscape with new cultural significance as they navigate it” (Ferrell & Weide, 2010, 51). Another factor in selecting graffiti spots is the promise of longevity and durability. Graffiti writers often choose locations where their work is likely to remain visible for longer periods, avoiding spots that the municipality might quickly repaint. The potential for longevity motivates artists to invest their best efforts in these spots, as they see it as a worthwhile investment of their aesthetic skills (Ferrell & Weide, 2010).

However, in the world of graffiti, certain spaces are considered off-limits, such as cemeteries and places of religious worship. Other spaces are selected based on strategic factors like wall size, location, visibility, potential longevity, availability of materials, time, risk, and ownership. On the whole, the locations and boundaries navigated by graffiti artists can be categorized into four groups:

1. Publicly owned spaces: e.g., government buildings, parks, public infrastructure (bridges).
2. Privately owned spaces: e.g., private residences, office spaces, and buildings.
3. Cultural institutions: e.g., galleries and museums.
4. Operational boundaries defined by graffiti writers: e.g., crew territories.

The concepts of ownership and territoriality are central to this categorization, raising critical questions: In which spaces do graffiti artists typically operate? Who are the true owners or custodians of these spaces?

### **The Politics of Navigating Ownership and Spatial Boundaries in the Public**

Based on the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, this section explores the strategies adopted by graffiti artists in Durban in navigating territorial boundaries within the earlier-defined spatial categories.

#### **Alternative Surfaces & Spaces**

Graffiti artists in Durban, like their global counterparts, are often seen as rebellious figures disrupting urban spaces. However, graffiti is guided by unwritten codes that dictate where artists can operate. Certain locations, such as houses of worship, cemeteries, and private properties, are typically off-limits, as noted by Ferrell and Weide (2010) and Penfold (2017). These restrictions push artists to creatively navigate around these boundaries, finding alternative surfaces and spaces for their art. A way Durban's graffiti artists overcome these spatial limitations is by expanding beyond traditional urban walls. Rose highlights this by noting that their work isn't limited to conventional mediums but extends to "shoes, shirts, walls, digital and computer," and even "tattooing." Damn Vandal also illustrates this adaptability, mentioning the customization of high-profile items like a Lamborghini and painting in shopping malls, showcasing how graffiti can defy traditional constraints of public space.

Strategic location choices are crucial for navigating spatial boundaries. While some artists, like Meek, choose spots "where it's either accepted or it's out of the eyes" to avoid trouble, others, like Damn Vandal, explore cities like Johannesburg, where there are "fewer restrictions." This geographic flexibility allows artists to continue their work in environments more conducive to their creativity, avoiding legal and social repercussions in places like Durban. The concept of 'liquid spots,' as discussed by Ferrell and Weide (2010), provides another way to bypass spatial limits. These mobile surfaces, like freight trains, delivery vans, and storefront grates, offer dynamic platforms for graffiti that transcend static urban walls, increasing visibility and reach as the art travels across regions. Graffiti thus becomes a fluid, ever-moving art form that defies traditional notions of space and permanence.

The digital realm further enhances this fluidity. As Shobe (2018) notes, social media and photography allow graffiti artists to document and share their work with a global audience, overcoming the ephemeral nature of graffiti. These platforms give artists more control over

public narratives, turning the digital space into a new kind of 'liquid spot' where graffiti can exist and be appreciated far beyond its physical location.

Cultural institutions like galleries and museums often act as gatekeepers, curating which artworks gain exposure. To circumvent this, graffiti artists choose to display their work in public spaces, bypassing the control of traditional art venues and asserting their independence. This choice challenges conventional art hierarchies. Lastly, the selection of graffiti spots is not only about visibility and legality but also about credibility within the graffiti community. Ferrell and Weide (2010) observe that artists often choose secluded areas known only within the graffiti subculture to showcase their skills and gain recognition among peers. These spots, whether legal walls or hidden corners of the city, offer a space for competition and pushing the boundaries of their craft in a supportive yet challenging environment. Public spots are chosen for their potential to attract a wider audience, with riskier locations often earning the artist greater respect and recognition.

### **Aesthetic Considerations**

Graffiti artists in Durban strategically create visually appealing pieces that resonate with the communities where they are placed. Rose highlights the importance of aesthetics, stating that if the artwork is "not appealing to the people around that community, they're not going to be happy." However, when the art is pleasing, "the chances of them being unhappy and actually charging you is much less." Meek echoes this sentiment, explaining that spreading "good vibes" through art can lead to positive interactions, with people gathering to watch the artist at work rather than reporting it as vandalism. This approach not only helps artists avoid legal repercussions but also fosters a sense of ownership and pride among community members. The Westdene Graffiti Project exemplifies how graffiti can blur ownership lines and create a more fluid relationship between public and private space (Penfold, 2017). In this project, residents donated their public-facing walls for graffiti, resulting in shared ownership of the artwork and increased community pride as passers-by admired the walls.

Graffiti artists in Durban also distinguish between vandalism and artistic expression. They see their elaborate, detailed pieces as contributions to society rather than acts of vandalism. Rose explains that when graffiti is done well, even initial disapproval can turn into appreciation for making surroundings more attractive. In contrast, simple tags, which are less aesthetically developed, are more likely to be seen as vandalism and result in legal issues.

This distinction is further highlighted by the different approaches of South African cities. While Durban and Cape Town have by-laws criminalizing all graffiti, Johannesburg adopts a more relaxed stance, embracing graffiti as long as it is 'aesthetically tasteful' (Penfold, 2017). This difference underscores the importance of aesthetics in how graffiti is perceived and regulated. In cities like Johannesburg, where visual quality is emphasized, graffiti thrives as a legitimate form of urban expression rather than being dismissed as vandalism. Artists like Damn Vandal and Meek also stress the importance of style and quality in their work. Damn Vandal describes his work as having a "very unique style that looks like digital work," which people appreciate for its vibrance and detail. Meek argues that graffiti should be 'attractive,' incorporating elements like animals, plants, and colourful names to gain acceptance from the community.

## **Free Public Access**

Graffiti artists in Durban strategically use public space to bypass the spatial boundaries imposed by traditional art institutions like galleries and museums. Unlike other art forms confined to controlled environments, graffiti thrives in the open, democratizing art by bringing it directly to the public. Rose highlights this, noting that while traditional artists often “pay for promotion” by exhibiting in galleries, graffiti artists go “directly into the public eye,” using the city as their canvas. This unrestricted access allows graffiti artists to reach a broader audience, bypassing the traditional gatekeeping of the art world and challenging the exclusivity of cultural institutions.

Dane shares an anecdote of a graffiti artist who views the gallery as a ‘caged bird,’ refusing to confine his work within walls. For these artists, painting in public spaces is not just an aesthetic choice but a core part of their artistic identity. Dane argues that graffiti should not be treated differently from studio art, seeing it as an extension of traditional practice, but one that exists outside the constraints of the gallery system. This approach aligns with Dawud Osaze Kamau Anyabwile’s comparison of graffiti to social media, as cited by Degand (2022). Anyabwile likens graffiti’s immediacy and visibility to social media, where the lack of institutional gatekeepers allows for direct engagement. Graffiti, like social media, serves as a form of visual communication that bypasses traditional pathways to exposure. Creating graffiti in public spaces can also be seen as resistance against exploitation by cultural institutions. Graffiti artists avoid the micro-management, commercialization, and exploitation that can come with gallery representation. By displaying their work in public, they reclaim control over their art and its reception, using public space as a platform for free expression without institutional interference.

## **Permission and Respect for Spatial Ownership**

Graffiti artists in Durban often navigate the tension between legal and territorial boundaries. As Rose and Meek explain, graffiti can be a battleground where artists assert dominance and claim spaces through their work, leading to conflicts when one artist encroaches on another’s territory. Rose emphasizes this competitive nature, where dominance is secured by making one’s name visible on walls. In contrast, seeking permission serves as a strategic way to avoid such conflicts. Damn Vandal illustrates a shift towards legal and community-focused graffiti, preferring to obtain permission from property owners to mitigate the risks of illegal work. This approach reflects a broader trend among artists who, as they mature and assume more responsibilities, prioritize urban beautification and legal compliance. Meek, even when targeting potentially illegal spots, ensures he has the consent of relevant parties, thus respecting property rights and avoiding legal issues.

Ewok introduces the concept of self-permission, where artists claim public walls as a form of resistance against the commodification of urban spaces. He argues that graffiti’s social commentary lies in its act of reclaiming space rather than in the content of the art itself. By choosing prominent walls without explicit permission, Ewok challenges societal norms about ownership and asserts artistic presence against commercial control. Additionally, peer permission is crucial in this context. Meek’s practice of collaborating with other artists, especially when their work overlaps, highlights the importance of respecting fellow artists’ contributions. This fosters a collaborative environment, reducing potential conflicts and leading to more cohesive murals.

## **Collaboration With Community and Peers**

Collaboration is a key strategy for graffiti artists in Durban to navigate and circumvent spatial and social boundaries. By working together with other artists and the local community, these artists enhance their creative output and foster shared ownership and legitimacy, allowing them to operate within and sometimes transcend environmental limits. Rose emphasizes collaboration as central to his practice, noting that most of his work is done in partnership with others. This strengthens the local graffiti scene and bridges generational gaps between younger and older artists, aligning with the idea that graffiti can uplift and engage the community. Involving multiple artists in a project results in a collective expression that reflects diverse voices and styles. Ewok further highlights the importance of building relationships with the local community, noting that when community members are involved in the conceptualization and execution of a mural, the artwork becomes a part of the community's identity rather than an external imposition.

Seeking permission from other graffiti writers often leads to creative collaborations, transforming potential conflicts into opportunities for cooperative creation. Meek exemplifies this by actively seeking out other artists to work with, rather than being territorial. Damn Vandal also discusses the benefits of brand collaboration, noting that it can provide valuable exposure and resources, though he cautions against partnerships that may not align with an artist's values. Dane and Ewok's experiences of organizing large-scale projects involving multiple artists further illustrate the collaborative nature of graffiti in Durban. These efforts not only produce impressive and diverse artworks but also reinforce the sense of solidarity within the graffiti community, helping artists navigate the challenges of limited legal spaces and societal acceptance.

## **Skill Development and Building Relevance**

Graffiti artists in Durban navigate spatial boundaries by refining their skills and strategically building relevance within local and global communities. As their craft evolves, these artists cultivate legitimacy, allowing them to transcend the illegal connotations associated with graffiti and effectively bypass legal and social constraints. Rose highlights the importance of developing a strong portfolio or 'catalogue' to secure a lasting legacy in the graffiti world. He references artists like Banksy and Cope, who began with illegal activities but eventually gained recognition where their past actions became secondary to their art. For Rose, overcoming the stigma of illegality lies in becoming so skilled and recognized that the art itself gains cultural and societal value, diminishing the relevance of legal boundaries. Damn Vandal echoes this idea, noting the pressure to continually improve. As South African artists refine their skills, public perception shifts from viewing graffiti as vandalism to recognizing it as an art form that enhances the urban environment. This gradual acceptance reduces legal enforcement and opens new spaces for artistic expression.

The global context is also crucial. Parker, Khanyile, and Joseph (2019) observe that the international success of artists like Banksy and the booming graffiti tourism in cities like Melbourne have blurred the lines between vandalism and public art. Durban's graffiti artists must master practical skills to succeed, including developing a distinctive style, mastering spray can control, and strategically selecting work locations, as noted by Ferrell & Weide (2010). These skills not only create visually appealing pieces but also help navigate the urban environment. As Damn Vandal suggests, the local graffiti scene is evolving, with artists pushing boundaries to create more detailed and ambitious work. This collective advancement



helps establish graffiti as a respected part of Durban's cultural landscape, weakening the spatial boundaries that once confined it. The more sophisticated and recognized the graffiti community becomes, the harder it is for authorities and the public to dismiss their work as mere vandalism, making it an acknowledged and valued aspect of urban culture.

### **Decreased Appetite for Risk**

As graffiti artists in Durban transition into adulthood, their approach to the art form evolves with the responsibilities and expectations that come with age. The need to support a family and maintain a stable income reduces their willingness to engage in high-risk graffiti activities. Instead, many artists shift towards sanctioned, community-oriented projects that allow them to continue their creative practice while navigating the spatial boundaries that typically restrict graffiti work. Damn Vandal's reflections illustrate this transition: as his responsibilities grow, such as raising a family and managing property, his appetite for risk diminishes. He now prefers obtaining permission to paint on dilapidated walls, aiming for 'urban beautification' and creating lasting, impactful pieces.

This trend aligns with broader observations in graffiti culture. Taylor, Pooley, and Carragher (2016) note that adulthood prompts many graffiti artists to seek stable income and engage in financially rewarding creative activities, leading them to transition from illegal graffiti to more legitimate forms of art. This shift not only accommodates their adult responsibilities but also helps them navigate the spatial and legal boundaries that often constrain graffiti. Damn Vandal's comments further highlight how time constraints from family and work limit his opportunities for spontaneous, high-risk graffiti. His approach becomes more deliberate and calculated, reflecting a broader trend among older graffiti artists who prioritize stability over the thrill of illegal activity.

Gender dynamics also influence how artists navigate these boundaries. Lohmann (2020) notes that contemporary graffiti is predominantly young and male, with fewer women involved. The risky nature of graffiti, appealing more to men driven by ego and the desire to assert themselves in public spaces, may explain this imbalance. As artists age and their risk tolerance decreases, the shift towards legal projects may also reflect a move away from the more aggressive, male-dominated aspects of graffiti culture. Lohmann's historical analysis suggests that women have historically had less access to graffiti due to lower literacy levels and restricted access to certain spaces. This historical exclusion might explain why, even today, women are less likely to engage in illegal graffiti and more likely to operate within sanctioned boundaries.

### **Conclusion**

This study illuminates how graffiti artists in Durban navigate the complex and often conflicting dynamics of spatial boundaries and (il)legality. Graffiti, by its nature, exists in a liminal space where the tension between legality and illegality, public and private ownership, and artistic expression versus societal norms plays out in real-time. This study reveals that Durban's graffiti artists have developed nuanced strategies to reconcile these conflicts, grounded in their evolving identities, skills, and responsibilities. A key finding is the role of personal growth and maturation in shaping an artist's relationship with illegality. The study also highlights the polarized public perception of graffiti. While some view it as a form of urban decay, others recognize its potential for placemaking and community building. The broken window theory, which suggests that visible signs of disorder like graffiti can lead to

further crime and social decay, has been a dominant narrative against graffiti. However, this study takes a critical stance against this theory, arguing that graffiti, when created with intention and skill, does not degrade urban spaces but rather enriches them by fostering dialogue and reflecting the diverse stories of the community.

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