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Under Siege?

Exploring the Hidden World of Irish Graffiti Artists

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MA in Sociology

(Youth, Community & Social Regeneration)

This article aims to uncover the hidden and lived experiences of graffiti artists in contemporary Irish society. It strives to give a face to those artists who are often depicted as masked or hooded villains. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six artists ranging in ages from 18-38 years old. Overt participant observation was also used to witness a mural being undertaken by one artist and to gain a more in-depth understanding of what it means to be a graffiti artist. The findings concur with previously studies undertaken, while significant stand-alone results in relation to Irish graffiti culture are also presented.

Introduction

In this article I examine the lived experiences and untold stories of Irish graffiti artists. Many of us understand graffiti to be an art form which can widely differ, but which is mainly composed via the use of spray can paint. As with all art, graffiti is entirely subjective. The overwhelming sense of negativity associated with graffiti art is incessant in contemporary Irish culture, yet the movement of a stereotypical urban art form conducted in the dark of night into a realised art, which was exhibited in galleries is a pivotal moment in this movement's history (Longo 2011, p.4). In that context, the research on which this paper is based

aims to give Irish graffiti artists a voice and hopes to dispel many of the stereotypical images and myths associated with this art form, in the process allowing those associated with this culture to have their lifestyle understood.

Literature Review

Graffiti allows artists to create work which is representative of them; it is autobiographical in a sense. Being free to express oneself and one's identity is key to a graffiti writer's embodied self. Graffiti's origins lie in the underground art movement of the late 1970s in New York City, which has developed into a culture in its own right in the 21st century (Kramer 2010, p.236). The origins of graffiti as a human art form go back much further; to when the first cavemen marked the walls of caves and rock with whatever materials they could find. Indeed, Ouzman (2010), an anthropologist, suggests that graffiti can be seen as a valuable archaeological artefact. Academic interest first began in the 1980s when anthropologists began looking at rock art and recognised it as a form of expression and resistance (Ouzman 2010, p.8). Imagery used on these rocks ranged from painted figures of European colonists to lions and other animals. Graffiti's politics are clearly inscribed onto these walls and rocks and visualise the local people's frustration and anger with European intruders. As such, graffiti can be seen as that which is temporary, something which portrays a mindset, an emotion or resistance to a political regime. Words and language do not need to be used, rather strong images which express an emotion or feeling can bring about the same outcome (Ouzman 2010, p.30).

Graffiti as an urban problem still proliferates and continues to be researched by urban geographers. Ley & Cybriwsky (1974) suggest that urban graffiti is a territorial marker, an area of space taken by a group of people or an individual to showcase their power in a community, as a gang for example. Geographers

have long observed the crucial importance of space and the meaning of graffiti in relation to power and power relations (Dickens 2008, p.482).

Sociological Approach to Graffiti

Graffiti as a form of art has been particularly interesting to sociologists and art connoisseurs alike since its emergence in the 1970s. Dickens (2008, pp.471-473) focuses on the artistic nature of graffiti in a very critical way, suggesting that there are those who are true graffiti artists, the urban writers and taggers, and those who are 'post graffiti' artists, those such as Banksy that have made ways of moving street art into galleries. Banksy, an acclaimed graffiti artist from the United Kingdom, is used as a case study. Dickens (2008) notes that the graffiti world is in flux and there are new phases in motion, namely 'post graffiti' and 'neo graffiti'. This intersection between the street and the gallery is crucial and often gives graffiti writers more agency with which they can produce 'better' work as it is not rushed.

Previous Studies

Kramer's (2010) study on legal graffiti in New York City focuses on both graffiti's tumultuous past in subway stations and modern day murals. Interviews were conducted with twenty New York graffiti writers (sixteen men and four women) who were active from 1990-2005. Interviewees' ages ranged from 23-50 years of age and they were from different ethnic and class backgrounds and had a wide spectrum of occupations (Kramer 2010, p.245). Unobtrusive observations and photography were also employed to capture the sprawling graffiti in the subway stations of the city over a two and a half year period (Kramer 2010, p.241). Prior to 1990, Kramer notes that graffiti in New York City had been deemed highly illegal and not an art form that could be practised in a legal, non-harming way. Miller (2002, p.153, cited in Kramer 2010, p.239)

argues that graffiti art is “intrinsically rebellious public art that address race and class tensions”. This is continually seen in contemporary cities such as Prague and Berlin. Graffiti can be increasingly viewed in the socio-political sphere, as is the case of graffiti in Berlin, more specifically the Berlin Wall, in the late 1980s.

Valle and Weiss’ (2010) study is important to the overall understanding of graffiti culture. This study is based on ethnographic work with two ‘crews’ of graffiti artists in South Mexico City. Valle and Weiss (2010, p.131) emphasise the notion of ‘social participation’ over the idea of ‘gang participation’. Members do not see themselves as gangs as there is a strong sense of community bonds and relationships. Graffiti culture is learned through a rite of passage and the community is based in a hierarchical format, with established artists passing on their skills and talents to newer artists. Sense of pride, value and prestige are emotions found in this study which are important aspects of a writers’ persona. The intensity in which each member engaged with the community depended on many of these aspects of family life and educational expectations. One of the main findings of this research was that many of the older crew members longed to engage in legal graffiti work which had a monetary value attached. It was also less demanding in terms of time allowed and also gave a sense of freedom of expression without persecution which would not have been achieved if the work was done illegally (Valle & Weiss 2010, p.133).

Halsey and Youngs’ (2006) noted four main themes which are important in relation to graffiti culture; motivations, the on-going issue of graffiti as art or vandalism, issues surrounding blank spaces, and graffiti’s relation to other crimes. Pride, as found in Valle and Weiss’ (2010) study, was acknowledged to be a key motivator in practising graffiti. Common assumptions such as boredom

and lack of respect for urban space as motivations are dispelled. Sense of community is also indicated as a motivator for those in this particular subculture. Through interviewing numerous graffiti writers, Halsey and Young (2006) ascertain that the intention of writers is not to cause damage to urban space but to express their opinions in a non-violent manner and mark spaces so that others may see their work in a public thoroughfare; graffiti after all is not usually caged within institutions such as art galleries (Halsey & Young 2006, p.284).

MacDonald's (2001) study "The Graffiti Subculture", explores masculinity, youth and identity in the graffiti movement and found that the subculture has its own criteria for individuals to strive towards, in the process offering highly regarded rewards such as prestige, status and respectability (MacDonald 2001, p.68). Women in this subculture are often met with resistance and unfortunately little theory has been developed in this area as to why women are not readily engaged or recognised. Acceptance is only realised if the boys do not feel threatened by her place in the community (MacDonald 2001, pp.129-131). Graffiti offers a place for young boys to enter the culture as a nobody and leave as a respected man who is somebody.

Methods

I adopted a qualitative methodological approach, combining both semi structured interviews and participant observation. As noted by Bryman (2008) "qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data". I utilised both snowball and purposive sampling strategies in order to recruit my participants. My participants ranged in age from 18-38 years of age and were from very different class and ethnic backgrounds.

Rapport had to be gained and maintained with participants if I wanted to access vital information about their lived experiences. I recorded each interview with a digital voice recorder and transcribed each interview verbatim. One interview was conducted through email. In addition to the interviews I used observation of a legal mural which being undertaken by an artist along with field notes as a method of data collection. “Participant observation refers to the process in which an investigator establishes and sustains a many sided and situationally appropriate relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a social scientific understanding of that association” (Lofland et al. 2006, p.17). Finally, I employed photography as a form of visual ethnography to capture the different stages of the mural being created. Adopting a reflexive stance with the project overall was vital to ensure that I did not allow my own biases and preconceived notions to become part of my research.

Data analysis was aided by Weft QDA, which allowed me to input my data and keep accurate notes and groupings of similar themes whilst analysing each transcript. Thematic analysis, a means by which hidden meaning and experiences can be analysed from a large amount of data (Bryman 2008, p.554), was then undertaken.

The project was conducted with ethical considerations to the fore. Before each interview began each participant signed a consent form, having previously been given an information sheet, detailing what my research entailed and the aims and objectives of their participation. Participants were notified that all names would be changed and pseudonyms would be used for the purpose of anonymity. Permission was also sought to use photographs which did not show the artist’s face.

Key Research Findings

Motivations

What motivates a person to engage in graffiti? All participants noted that their interest began when they were as young as 12 and many began to 'paint' at 14 years of age, with one participant returning to graffiti at the age of 36 years old. The artist involved in the participant observation commented that his forte was large scale murals which not only satisfied his need for self-expression but also were a source of income for him.

Luke, a 38 year old artist, discovered that even though he may have been a 'bomber' as a young adult, it wasn't until he turned 36 years old and discovered a DVD by acclaimed graffiti artist Banksy, that his urge to paint became something which lead him to a career as a graffiti artist.

"Exit through the gift shop...it's the reason I started...it moved me, inspired me"

Alan, the youngest artist whom I interviewed, noted that graffiti was a key deterrent from anti-social behaviour. He wanted to keep away from drugs and crime, and graffiti offered him sanctuary from the path, which many men of his age were going down.

"..It keeps me off the streets doing crimes and doing drugs....my parents would be happier with me piecing rather than drugs like a lot of my friends"

James, a 29 year old muralist, noted his growing need to have his work seen by the public and the street art community. He also stated that previous large scale pieces motivated him to become more actively involved.

These motivations, whether they are born out of boredom with the local art culture or the ever growing need to have others see their work publicly, enticed

my respondents to become involved in what many see as a problematic, illegal subculture. Alan's response in particular is quite profound. It is extremely interesting that an artist so young decided to steer clear of any anti-social behaviour and find solace in graffiti as a means to keep him on the straight and narrow, with the blessing of his parents.

Previous studies (Halsey & Young 2006, p.284) reflect some of my results; in particular, the ever growing need to express oneself through art. These motivations are illustrated, principally by James and Sam who felt the need to have their work seen by wider society and to improve the level of work being done.

The sub-theme of fame / status identifies the impact of graffiti culture on the artist at a very personal level. Both of these signifiers were extremely important to all artists interviewed, and are key reasons why many of these artists still continue to work as they do. If fame and status are vital, to be recognised within your own subculture or community is the end goal overall. Those artists who mainly work on murals, especially those who are paid for such work are indebted to their status for getting them where they are and the work they have done already. For such artists, fame and status meant the difference of being picked (or not) to undertake a project by a business or company. Sally notes that status and fame are the key reasons why she is gaining paid work from commercial businesses.

“Without the status I have I wouldn't have been given work and without this little bit of fame I'm not gonna get anymore work”

Previous studies (Halsey & Young 2006 and Valle & Weiss 2010) have also noted fame as a key signifier in their research. However, as noted by Sam, such fame and status can also be a curse, as being too well known can be somewhat

problematic. He discussed the difficulties of being too well known, which can see the police taking an interest in you for the destruction of property if you are doing some illegal work at a private site.

Community Importance & Involvement

Community plays a pivotal role in all our lives and offers us a sense of belonging to society. Community importance and involvement was quite a dominant theme, which is quite controversial in many ways. There are many different views and perspectives evident in my data on how community plays a role in the lives of graffiti artists.

The notion of ‘crews’ or ‘gangs’ as noted by Valle and Weiss (2010, p.129), is unravelled. Out of my sample just three respondents said that they were not members of any crew or gang and, most importantly, were not influenced by any friends to become involved with graffiti. Sally for example, noted that she was a member of a crew of taggers at a young age and now as an adult, was a member of a graffiti society in university where she felt the sense of camaraderie and community. Alan noted that his crew, named ‘Artists2DACore’, felt almost like a family.

“It’s more like a family...they want to get their art shown...”

Seamus, who also belonged to an unnamed crew, noted that he felt part of a community, especially undertaking large scale pieces of work together. Personal safety also played a role in his crew involvement.

The issue of new community practices is also an extremely important subtheme. As Sam (who lived in a small town) noted, if there are no longer local tight-knit communities, then there is an ever growing need to connect with others who

have similar interests. Artists recalled using both online Irish forums and their own social media sites in order to communicate with other artists and to show the world their work. Sally comments:

“There’s a few websites that showcase artists like Irish Street Art that I’d have my work on...I tend to use Facebook to chat with other people I know and they can check out my photos...”

Use of social media is an issue which also arose in my participant observation. The artist had set up his own website and used social media to strive to get his work seen by his friends in the local graffiti community but also by artists around the world. He felt that in order to communicate his artistic message to the masses, the emergence of websites such as Twitter and Instagram were pivotal.

However, there was an overall sense of disappointment at the lack of online communications and forums for Irish artists, with many resorting to using social media as a way of representing themselves and showing off their work. Seamus commented

“I’ve used alot of English forums before to get ideas and to look at what’s going on out there. There’s nothing really like that for Irish artists....I tend to use Twitter and Facebook to contact other artists...”

The illegality of graffiti

The debate surrounding illegal and legal work was a theme which I identified undertaking this project. Graffiti in essence is illegal; you are often trespassing on private property and spray painting illegally unless it is a designated zone or paid for work. This sense of illegality is often connected with feelings of adrenaline as noted in previous studies (Lachman 1988, Halsey & Young 2006).

Feelings associated with this illegal work are often depicted as a rush of adrenaline, feelings that you would image in relation to an extreme sport.

Seamus notes:

“Of course it’s illegal. That’s one of the main reasons why I think artists including myself get into it. It’s all about the rush, the adrenaline you get when you’re tagging.”

One of the strongest feelings, more so than the illegal nature of graffiti, was the ever growing movement away from illegal work to legal work. All but one artist interviewed had undertaken a project which had been financed, either by a friend, business or organisation. This legal work has offered both a source of income and a freedom which is only associated with work which is financed. If an artist has decided to undertake a project which is deemed ‘legal’, then he/she has no constraints which are often found with ‘legal’ work. There is no sense of fear or hastiness associated.

Legal mural work was the preferred method of work undertaken by the artist in my observation. His forte was large scale legal pieces which he undertook on the behalf of clubs and bars and different organisations. He commented that he was commissioned to paint for different organisations to enhance the business and also to attract business to clubs and pubs.

Negativity

All participants felt there was a degree of negativity towards them from the State and society as a whole, which was based purely on their association with graffiti culture. This resounding sense of negativity seems almost coherent with the essence of what graffiti culture often fights against - prejudice and ignorance by those who see graffiti as vandalism and a nuisance. Media representations of

graffiti culture for example are often negative, in spite of a proliferation of often decadent murals. This sense of injustice was internalised by all participants.

Sam notes:

“If there’s ten nice pieces in a skate park for example and one person has gone and scribbled on someone’s door that’s the thing that will be in the paper...”

Many of the participants commented that it was mainly ‘tagging’ which has led to this negative portrayal but that they hoped that with the emergence of a more skilful base of artists this will change. Luke, Sally and James noted that it is the process of mainstreaming graffiti and graffiti culture, which has been helped by the works of Banksy and Irish artists such as Conor Harrington, which is leading to the shift in perceptions. Sally comments:

“...with the likes of Banksy becoming famous... showing that there is more to street art than tagging and how it can really be an art form”

One of the most significant negative practices noted is the treatment of women within this culture. Previous ethnographic studies (Lachman 1988) looked at how this subculture is overwhelmingly male orientated. When conducting my own research I discovered just one female artist to interview. She commented that being a woman within a male orientated section of society can often be difficult.

“I’ve experienced a lot of hostility and slagging from male graffiti artists over the years. There isn’t a lot of women in this profession...I know I’ve definitely faced hurdles just ‘cause of who I am...”

One of the reasons why she felt she is meeting this hostility from male artists is because she feels women’s participation in this area is having a negative impact on the male ego.

“Men don’t like to admit that women can do exactly what they can do and better even.”

This notion of being accepted in a male orientated sector can be seen across many different areas of life. It is something which has been so for years and when women attempted to make their mark they are often met with this hostility which Sally discusses.

Discussion

One of the main themes to emerge from my research was community involvement and participation. Graffiti artists participate in the social world; they are in effect communities which practise together. Many of my participants noted that graffiti culture offered them a sense of belonging and community, something which had been lacking in their lives. I also identified not only the traditional methods of community making (face to face) but also how the use of social media is playing an ever growing role in these artists’ lives.

Fame and status were also found to be of significance. Artists who acquired status did so on a personal level but it is significant that recognition from their peers was deemed to be the highest regard. It is also significant that artists who undertook paid, legal work, still felt the need for fame and status in many of the same ways that those who were engaged in illegal graffiti work. Those who have been successful commercially have an advantage in the market and have further opportunities to work with businesses and organisations that are willing to pay for legal graffiti work. This finding is in line with Valle & Weiss’s (2010). Halsey & Young (2006) discuss this notion of pride as a key motivator for those who engage with graffiti culture. Being a graffiti artist allows you to express yourself with a limited amount of freedom whilst allowing those involved to enjoy fame (and notoriety) from their creative output.

Research conducted by Kramer (2010) played an integral part in my understanding of what is legal and illegal in the world of graffiti art. My research study is one of few examples of research of legal graffiti work and its effects on the artists involved. The issue of legal and illegal work is one which has been quite controversial. Not only have there been numerous arrests and clamp-downs occurring across the world on illegal painters, as previously noted, there is now a monetary value attached to legal work, which may be seen as an attraction to graffiti artists. Legal artists are also offered the opportunity to hone their skills in a non-confrontational way and without time constraints.

In keeping with the findings of previous studies (MacDonald 2001; Lachman 1988; Halsey and Young 2006) my research identifies that young men (in particular) experience and adrenaline rush from participating in illegal graffiti work. This is significant when taken in the context of many artists expressing a belief that it is only illegal street work that is the work of true graffiti artists.

These findings are vital in both understanding where graffiti culture has emerged from and also the future direction that it may take. Many of the main themes which I uncovered through undertaking this study concur with those of previous studies (Valle & Weiss 2010; Halsey and Young 2006; Kramer 2010; MacDonald 2001) whilst also offering a fresh insight into newer areas such as the use of social networking to achieve fame and prestige amongst wider society around the world. The use of these social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have allowed the local street artist to have his work seen by not only those who pass his work on the street, but by those who see it online. The internet has given us a multitude of possibilities and I would argue that in Ireland at present we are at a precipice in regards to street art. We have only begun to see its true value and more work is needed to enable those in positions of power to see its true potential.

In that context, one of the main issues at the moment is the need for legal spaces for graffiti art. Limerick is set to be the European City of Culture in 2014 and one of the local government's main aims is to ensure a legal space for artists. Unfortunately at the moment, Limerick, like many other cities in Ireland, is deemed to be experiencing an 'epidemic' of illegal tagging. Nick Rabbits, a journalist at the Limerick Leader, notes that a 'blight' of recent defacements which have been produced by just two young men. However my research can throw light on their reasons for engaging in said crimes. One of my participants for example comments on his engagement in such activity.

'I feel bad after it. When you are out doing it, you don't want to stop. You can never stop, it is an addiction. Like a drug to me. Like a rush through your body.'

Whilst there is a perception that such acts are little more than 'selfish vandalism', there seems to be no plans to deter other graffiti artists from doing similar work. My research clearly demonstrates that the threat of criminal prosecution is merely a motivation for such artists to continue to do what they do.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this research aimed to uncover lived experiences and untold stories of the lives of Irish graffiti artists. There have been very few examples of previous literature on graffiti and graffiti culture with none undertaken in an Irish context. Irish street art is still in its infancy and this research offers a different perspective on the movement from illegal to legal graffiti work, emphasising in the process changing community practices. The research should be viewed as a starting point for other researchers. In particular, there are issues surrounding women's experiences in a mainly male dominated community to explore, which could be facilitated with further research.

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