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"Whose right to the city? /Quel droit à la ville? »

The right to write the city: Lefebvre and graffiti

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Résumé

Modern graffiti has become a universal urban phenomenon, an almost ubiquitous feature of towns and cities across the world. This paper will situate the practice and production of graffiti within various urban contexts (aesthetic, political, economic, social and semiotic) through the seminal works Henri Lefebvre as a means for analysing and understanding the complexity of the modern urban and to contextualize and explore graffiti's role in challenging and contesting the socio-spatial norms of increasingly privatized and commodified public and social space. That is, to read graffiti as a means for reclaiming and remaking the city as a more humane and just, social space.

Entrées d'index

Keywords : Lefebvre, Space, Graffiti, Right to the City, Urban

Texte intégral

Introduction

- 1 Modern graffiti has become a universal urban phenomenon, an almost ubiquitous feature of towns and cities across the world, bridging time and space as well as crossing cultural divides. The popularity and spread of graffiti has led to an increasing academic, artistic and practitioner literature on graffiti that covers a range of issues, perspectives and approaches (identity, youth, subculture, gender, anti-social behaviour, vandalism, gangs, territoriality, policing and crime, urban art, aesthetics, commodification, etc.). What they all have in

common is an acknowledgement of graffiti as a quintessential urban phenomenon, one that is found everywhere within the ever expanding urban world of globalisation. However, with some notable exceptions, (Halsey and Young, 2006; Schacter, 2008; Ferrell and Welde, 2010) there is little attempt to specifically place graffiti within the context of theories of the urban and more explicitly within conceptualisations of the complexity of urban space as a social construct and relational process.

- 2 This paper will situate the practice and production of graffiti within various urban contexts (aesthetic, political, economic, social and semiotic) through the seminal works of the progenitor of the multi-disciplinary spatial turn in the social sciences, namely, Henri Lefebvre. His work on the production of space, the urban and the right to the city provides a means for analysing and understanding the complexity of the modern urban and to contextualize and explore graffiti's role in challenging and contesting the socio-spatial norms of increasingly privatized and commodified public and social space. It will be viewed as a means to remake the city through the everyday practices of producing ever changing ephemeral works of inscription or art on the material spaces of the city. It will assess Lefebvre's plea for 'the Right to the City' to argue that graffiti can be understood in terms of making and owning space, however temporary (see Bengsten and Arvidsson, 2014; Iveson, 2011). Similarly, graffiti makes space social and public, through the promotion of use values and meaningful acts of colonisation and inhabitation versus the homogenising practices of planning, design, commerce, and their overarching concern with surveillance, order and security. That is, to read graffiti as a means for reclaiming and remaking the city as a more humane and just, social space.

1 Graffiti and the academy: multidisciplinary perspectives and approaches

- 3 Graffiti or 'writing on walls' has a long history. However, its modern manifestation, as a creative expression is associated with and located within subcultures of deprived and disadvantaged communities in US inner cities. A number of authors have documented the rise of graffiti in New York's subways and across the city's neighbourhoods (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984; Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987; Cooper, 2009a; 2009b; 2013; Felisbret, 2009; Stewart, 2009) as well as its development and expression in other US cities (see Gastman and Neelon, 2011). Graffiti has not only expanded geographically and socially but has also developed a complexity of forms, styles and types. From tagging, to wildstyle, bombing, masterpieces, throw-ups, stencils and slaps (stickers), graffiti has become a global urban phenomenon. It has had an influence beyond its manifestation as an adornment to, or as vandalism of, the urban streetscape being the subject of coffee table art books, gallery exhibitions and auction house sales and featuring as scene-setting in films, music videos and advertising.
- 4 It is no surprise then that the spread and popularity of graffiti as an urban practice and aesthetic has engendered a response within the academy. There is now a fairly large and diverse literature that reflects a range of disciplinary approaches and analytical perspectives. Some of the earliest published work (Ley and Cybriwsky, 1974) focussed on the use of graffiti tags as a means to establish or signify the territoriality of gangs. More recent work has added analytic and ethnographic detail and contemporary context to African American and Chicano gangs use of graffiti as space markers (Phillips, 1999) and graffiti crews in North East Italy (Brighenti, 2010). A range of ethnographic and subcultural

studies have sought to document the real life experiences and embodied practices of graffiti writers and the meanings, values, aesthetics, risk and excitement they encounter in their mainly nocturnal painting of the urban (Ferrell, 1993; 1996; Halsey and Young, 2006; Young, 2014; McDonald, 2001; Schacter, 2008, 2014). This approach has been extended to reflect the globalisation of graffiti as it has migrated and morphed into other non-US urban spaces (see Chmielewska, 2007 on Warsaw and Montreal; Valjakka, 2011 on graffiti in China; Benavides-Venegas, 2005 on the role of walls in Bogota, Colombia; Best, 2003, on the graffiti in the Caribbean context; Ferrell, 1993 on Moscow graffiti). Graffiti writers speaking for themselves provide a discussion of graffiti as a self-reflective creative practice (see Banksy 2002; 2006; 2012; City, 2010; Desa 2006; Jaka, 2012; Schacter, and Fekner, 2013; Gastman, and Neelon, 2011). There are also those who consider graffiti as a pedagogical tool to promote identity, learn about culture and explore and understand the city (see Calvin, 2005; Civil, 2010; Iveson, 2010a; Nandrea, 1999; Burnham, 2010).

5 In all of these there is an implicit if not explicit recognition that graffiti is not only an urban cultural product but that its practitioners seek to use and transform the space of the urban. By creating signs, symbols and motifs that convey meanings and messages, urban space is transformed by its adornment and co-option as a canvas for the expression of identity, status, style and culture. However, perhaps the most prevalent discussion of graffiti arises from what might be called the diametrically opposed views it elicits. On the one hand portrayed and understood as an expression of a vibrant urban street life and culture, an important practice in the creation of subcultural and youth identity, as urban decoration and quotidian art in the streets, representation of youth, urbanity and creativity. On the other hand, it is viewed as vandalism, anti-social deviant behaviour, symbol of community breakdown and decline, symptom of urban blight, a lack of direction, discipline and deviance in youth.

6 Wilson and Kellings (1982) 'broken windows' thesis is well known and argued that commonplace examples of low-level criminality such as graffiti, vandalism, street begging, public drinking and urination are precursors for community decline that have a causal effect on levels of serious violent crime. Harcourt (2005), Harcourt and Ludwig (2006) and Bowling (1999) have provided devastating critiques of the efficacy of the Broken Windows thesis underpinning claims made for the success in crime reduction in New York. However, the widespread identification of "[s]pecifically, such harmless displays as subway graffiti impart to the citizen the inescapable knowledge that the environment ... is uncontrolled and uncontrollable ... thereby discouraging them and undermining their dedication to public order" (Ferrell and Welde, 2010: 49). Glazer (1979) identified earlier a similar response and emphasis and Austin (2002) has explored in detail how graffiti in the subway was identified and associated with a crisis in urban policing. Despite the lack of evidence for the Broken Windows thesis and Zero Tolerance policing in the US it was supported by overseas politicians and migrated to other cities around the world (see Waquant, 2006). What developed was a range of surveillance and 'Designing out Crime' strategies that Iveson (2010b) refers to as a 'War against Graffiti' and led to the use of new technologies, innovations in urban design, and the securitisation of urban public space (see Ferrell, 1993; 1995; 1997; 2001; Young, 2010; Dickinson, 2008). Similarly, the creation of specialist municipal and police Anti-Graffiti units (see Barnard, 2007) and a lucrative business in anti-graffiti strategies (graffiti resistant paints, materials, street furniture, etc.) surveillance and policing (CCTV, razor wire, security guards) as well as its removal have been developed and employed. The identification and criminalisation of graffiti writers reflects how graffiti practice and performance conflicts with the values and priorities of property holders, developers, the state, the police and courts (see Bergsten and Arvidsson, 2014) that view it as a threat to law, order and security and have sought to purge it from the public urban realm. It also represents conflicting ideas about who and what the city is for.

7 The contradictions in responses to graffiti (is it art or crime) is also an example of competing understandings of what 'value' graffiti can bring to the urban environment. Social activity, including the aesthetic, needs to be framed in and by space (see Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997) and what is deemed to be art/culture or indeed crime and deviance is what is designated, framed or contextualised as such by those with the means and power to delineate and 'place' them, whether in the appropriate containers of galleries, museums and auction houses or in social policy and criminal justice discourses of norms, delinquency, deviance and order. Thus Banksy's work is now recognised by the art market, sold at special auctions and is collected, from the street (BBC 2015; Sothebys 2014). Eine's graffiti is now deemed appropriate as a gift from a UK Prime Minister to a US President: a transformation from the street to the White House (Henley, 2010). This can also apply to differentiations made between street art and public art: the latter is sanctioned and commissioned, controlled and legitimated whilst the former is illegal, unconstrained in content, form and location (see Bengsten, 2013 and 2014). The acceptance or accommodation of graffiti and street art can also have impacts on urban communities and neighbourhoods. As Zukin and Braslow (2011) argue, they act as signifiers of a creative urban culture that proves attractive to an urban bohemianism and lived experience. A vibrant street culture is often a precursor to gentrification which ironically drives the indigenous artist from those areas they have helped to create and popularise, ultimately producing a more sterile, sanctioned street aesthetic and upmarket 'community'.

8 Graffiti continues to flourish in cities and urban areas around the world despite its criminalization and attempts at its eradication, the categorization of good or bad graffiti (McAuliffe, 2012; Mitchell, 1990; Gomez, 1993) and the accommodation of graffiti within approved and restricted areas such as legal walls (Halsey and Pederick, 2010; Young, 2010). Graffiti as embodied practice, as risky excitement, as an informal creative community, as everyday art and as a form of individual and collective resistance, reflects conflicts over meanings and values as well as differences in understandings of what and who public space is for. Graffiti presents challenges to different conceptions of what kind of city we want and also who has the power to mould, shape, adorn, decorate and control what does – and what does not - appear there, how spaces and places are organised, policed and regulated.

9 What is common to the majority of analyses and perspectives on graffiti is the emphasis on modern graffiti as being inherently associated with the city and the urban. Thus, there is an increasing body of work that presents graffiti as an expression of and indicative of the modern urban condition, one that represents a clash over the use and exchange values of social and public space. Graffiti is seen as increasingly representative of a ubiquitous juxtaposition of not only competing and conflicting understandings of the urban but also as sign and symbol of spatial as well as social divisions and differences. Whilst much writing on graffiti covers a range of perspectives, understandings and approaches to the phenomena, what is evident is the almost universal implicit, acknowledgment that graffiti is associated with some form of intervention, colonisation or usurpation of urban space. However, there is a lack of discussion, focus or critical analysis of what this urban space is, how it is perceived, conceived or experienced in relation to social theories of space and spatial theories. The discussion and analysis of graffiti, its practice, location, and performed experience fails to provide an analysis of the production of graffiti related to the production of urban space.

10 To this end, what follows will be a return to Lefebvre's work on the urban, the city and space to argue that graffiti should not only be studied, understood and appreciated in its variety and skill as 'open', 'free' public art but also valued as a 'claim to urban space', an intervention in the practice of everyday urban life that attempts to make and use urban space to represent more than merely the interests of capital, finance or institutional power. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, the city and modernity and his claim to the

right to the city provides a means to see and read graffiti as an active and creative engagement in and with urban space that emphasises the possibility of refashioning, recreating, reclaiming the city and the urban for people and not just for profit. That is, less for the needs of money, finance and capital and more as a politically creative practice through which as Harvey puts it we have ‘the right to change ourselves by changing the city’ (2008: 23).

2 Lefebvre and the production of urban space

11 Lefebvre’s seminal work ‘The Production of Space’ (1991 [1974]) has been highly influential in reprioritising space in interdisciplinary social scientific analyses. Through numerous works (Lefebvre, 1971 [1968]; 1977; 1991 [1974]; 1995 [1962]; 1996 [1968]; 2003 [1970]; 2004 [1992]; Lefebvre and Levich, 1987) he asserted the need to have knowledge of space not only as an abstract principle, or a means for ideological and material control but also as the contested terrain in which everyday life and practices create meanings, values, signs and symbols. His contribution to the reprioritisation of space in the multi-disciplinary socio-spatial analysis of the urban and modernity has been explored, expanded and applied by a range of authors (see Shields, 1999; Elden, 2004; Elden, Lebas and Koffman 2003; Harvey, 1990; Kipfer, 2002; Merrifield, 1993; 2014; Stanek, 2011; Zieleniec, 2007).

12 In brief, Lefebvre’s position can be laid out as follows. Space is not merely natural, material, a void waiting to be filled with contents but is socially produced. The product of a complex of factors and elements that prioritises how certain forms and structures of space can be linked to functions and how this impacts on the use of space in everyday life. Every society in every epoch produces its own space to meet its needs and priorities. It does so to ensure societal cohesion, functional competence, and to assert and maintain ideological and political power and control. Under capitalism space has come to be the dominant form by and through which production, consumption, reproduction and circulation are organised and structured, ultimately to meet the requirements of capital (see Harvey 1978; 2001). Space therefore is a material product and the means by and through which capitalism survives. But space is also simultaneously a process involving social relations between people and between people and things in space. Space is subject to the actions and operation of power in which the control, ownership and regulation of space permits some actions to occur whilst limiting or prescribing others. But this is not a one way process. Space is subject to conflict over ownership, over meanings, values, uses, etc. and thus one area (for Lefebvre, a crucial battleground) in which social justice and equality are contested: “Space has been shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological” (Lefebvre, 1977: 341). Who owns, controls, regulates space, to what end, for what purposes and how this is achieved is crucial for understanding how modern urban conditions are created, how they change and how this impacts the everyday lived experience of their populations.

13 Whilst this is not a comprehensive analysis it underscores the need to understand and appreciate the complexity of the production of urban space for understanding capitalism. Space, for Lefebvre, is both a product and a process of social activity within the structures and hierarchy of societies increasingly subject to an urban revolution that continues to develop under capitalism. To understand space and its impact on the form, structure and lived experience of everyday life, Lefebvre identifies three necessary elements for the production of space: *Spatial Practices* (perceived space), *Representations of Space* (conceived space) and *Spaces of Representations* (lived space). For true knowledge of the

production of space one needs to understand the dynamic interaction and mutual interdependency between all three elements. For Lefebvre, under capitalism the dominant element of his triad, representations of space, reflects the needs and priorities of finance, of capital, of economic and political elites, of those with power. Thus space is produced through attempts to shape, mould, represent and dominate space. It is the result of competing ideas and values in modernity and ultimately in the city, which produces dominant spatial forms. For Lefebvre, this was a means and process by and through which power, capital and class were imposed and promulgated: “[...] there is no getting around the fact that the bourgeoisie still has the initiative in its struggle for (and in) space [...] The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces – but spaces which they can then organise according to their specific requirements” (1991 [1974]: 56).

14 The urban becomes the means by and through which capitalism survives. It is also where conflict and social change occur. Hegemonic values and meanings are imposed on those who live in cities through dominant representations. This impacts and influences the lived experience and everyday use of space. Instead of being able to inhabit and use social, public or collective space freely we are forced to endure a habitat created by and for the needs of capital. Representations of space (the power to organise, regulate, delimit and delineate space according to function, aims and priorities) dominate the lived experience of the everyday use of urban space. Mitchell argues that the needs and priorities of increasingly global capital, through its various ‘managing committees’, seek to impose ways to limit and control spatial interaction as “one of the principal aims of the urban and corporate planners during this century. The territorial segregation created through the expression of social difference has increasingly been replaced by a celebration of constrained diversity” (1995: 119).

15 Whilst cities only occupy a small percentage of the earth’s land surface (ENEP 2007) demographic, economic and political changes has ensured that the majority of the world’s population now live in a predominantly urban world. One increasingly organised by and for the control of flows and mobilities of capital that are invested in designed and planned urban infrastructures, services and architecture. These are essential to the interconnected and integrated networks of accumulation operating on a global scale, fashioning, making and remaking urban space. As Lefebvre argues: “Capitalism and neo-capitalism have produced an abstract space that is a reflection of the world of business on both a national and international level, as well as the power of money and the *politique* of the state.” (2009: 187).

16 The urban is increasingly subject to interventions aimed at order and control to ensure the most efficient and effective conditions for capital. The social and public spaces that make the lived experience of the city ‘a way of life’ (Wirth, 1938) are progressively codified, regulated, surveilled and policed. This control over the form, function, use and accessibility of public and social spaces is important because we learn who we are and where we belong by how our lives are structured, ordered, regulated and controlled in time and space. As Harvey puts it, “the common sense notion that ‘there is a time and a place for everything’ gets carried into a set of prescriptions which replicate the social order by assigning social meanings to spaces and times” (1990: 214).

17 Planning, policy and investment decisions, regeneration and redevelopment strategies, etc. may impact negatively on the quality of life, opportunity and intra and inter-communal relations and interactions, on access to services and social, economic and spatial resources. This is not a new phenomenon. The ‘problem of cities’ identified by municipal and national governments, by health and social reformers, was associated with attempts to mitigate the worst effects of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Foucault (1977, 1980) argued this was focused on the fear of the expanding exploited urban masses viewed as a threat to medical, moral and political

stability. What resulted was the development of 'specialists of space' whose knowledge of space and of populations resulted in observation and surveillance as well as the development of new forms of architecture and urban design. What has increasingly developed is a conflict between truly open and accessible public space and that of "other powerful interests at work to supplant genuinely public space with its privatised surrogates" (Sennett, 1990: xii). Ferrell (2001) and Mitchell (1995; 2003) have argued this leads to the exclusion from public space of many groups deemed inappropriate to commercial, financial or exclusive priorities. Zukin makes a similar argument when she states:

The right to be in these spaces, to use them in certain ways, to invest them with a sense of ourselves and our communities - to claim them as ours and to be claimed in turn by them - make up a constantly changing public culture [...] The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended (1995: 10-11).

- 18 As neo-liberal global capitalism colonises more of the world so more towns and cities in an increasingly dominant urban world are subject to the planning and design strategies of capital that mould and shape their form to meet their own ends. Harvey (2001, 2007, 2012) argues that in part, this represents another phase in capitals attempt to conquer and shape space for its own ends. What is produced as urban landscapes is a perpetual sameness, lacking much in the way of real choice or of individuality. The branded and bland homogeneity and uniformity of towns and cities everywhere is laced with an intolerance of different views, opinions or lifestyles that clash with the designed intentions of market economics, and, as proxies, state functionaries, planners, urban designers and architects. There is little room for critique or for difference (see Auge, 2009 and his discussion of 'non-places'.) As Lefebvre puts it:

"[...] capitalist and neo-capitalist space is a space of quantification and growing homogeneity, a commodified space where all the elements are exchangeable and thus interchangeable; a police space in which the state tolerates no resistance and no obstacles. Economic space and political space thus converge toward the elimination of all differences" (2009: 192).

- 19 We live dominated by the privatisation of experience, of consumption, in policed space subject to the needs of the market and of capital at the expense of a truly collective social and spatial solidarity and proximity, of a shared potentially creative experience of being together in space. Thus, for Lefebvre "[...]everyday life, the social territory and place of controlled consumption, of terror-enforced passivity, is established and programmed" (1971: 197). Our public places are increasingly organised to meet the functional ends of production, reproduction and consumption and in this era of a perpetual war on terror to ensure order and control.

- 20 For Lefebvre, this was not how the city always was, nor how it could or should be. "The city must be a place of waste, for one wastes space and time; everything mustn't be foreseen and functional, for spending is a feast" (Lefebvre in Burgel , Burgel , and Dezes , 1987: 36.) Ancient and medieval cities were more than mere market places, more than sites for the accumulation of capital. They grew and developed according to the needs of their inhabitants who prioritised social and public spaces (the agora, forum, etc.) as a key feature and element of collective belonging and the shared experience of the town and the city. Urban life in modernity was, as many urban theorists have commented (Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997; Benjamin, 1979, 1999, 2002; Wirth, 1938; Mumford, 1937, etc.) one of chance encounter and interaction, of diversity and difference, of possibilities of seeing, learning, being open to new sensations and experiences. Urban life and the city was a living creative process. For Lefebvre the city should contain again possibilities of such creative and collective being in space: "The city is itself 'oeuvre', a feature that contrasts

with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce, towards exchange and products [...] They do not only contain monuments and institutional headquarters, but also spaces appropriated for entertainments, parades, promenades, festivities” (Lefebvre, 2006: 73).

- 21 The city and the urban in modernity were understood as *the* centre for excitement, dangerous and pleasurable interactions and experience. The well-off sought sensual novelties in new leisure opportunities. The poor sought refuge in the streets and public places, respite, recreation and distraction from overcrowded and unhealthy housing and working conditions. For Lefebvre this meant that “[u]rban life suggests meanings, the confrontation of difference, reciprocal knowledge and acknowledgement (including ideological and political confrontation) ways of living, ‘patterns’ which coexist in the city” (1996 [1968]: 75). In contemporary cities these possibilities are in danger of being lost. Replaced with increasingly banal and sterile urban spaces, produced, shaped and regulated to eliminate difference and secure an orderly space for the market.

3 The Right to Write the City: Lefebvre’s cry and graffiti’s claim to space

- 22 The previous section reflects Lefebvre’s emphasis on applying knowledge of the complexity of the production of space, its impacts and consequences on urban form, organisation and everyday life. It was key to his approach of reasserting an understanding of the city that addressed the imbalances, inequalities and injustices in its governance and experience. He wrote ‘The Right to the City’ (1996 [1968]) not as a nostalgic and sentimental call for a return to the past but as a plea for a reinvigorated, more just and humane urban environment. He states that “[...] the right to the city is like a cry and a demand [...] [and] [...] cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre. 1996 [1968]: 158). It is a claim for the right to inhabit, use and appropriate space. To have a right to say how the city develops and changes, how it is formed, organised, regulated and ultimately used. It is recognition of the need to reassert the right of inhabitants and not merely the rights of those with power and capital, to produce, shape, and use space according to their needs, wants and desires. What Merrifield (2014), Harvey (2012) and Stavrides (2016) argue is the basis for a renewed and invigorated ‘urban commons’.

- 23 Lefebvre’s ideas for a more just and democratic city have been subject to vigorous discussion (see; Dikeç, 2002; Mattilla, 2003; Purcell, 2003; Staeheli, Mitchell and Gibson, 2003; Goonewardena, et al. 2008; Harvey, 2008, 2012; 2010; Pugalis, and Giddings, 2011; Butler, 2012; Brand and Fregonese, 2013) and has influenced debates and policy forums concerning the right to the city as one in which the city is for people and not merely for profit (see UN-Habitat 2005, 2010, Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, 2009; Marcuse, 2009). The focus in this article is on the right to claim, appropriate and use urban social and public space as it is made and remade according to potentially changing and conflicting priorities, needs, aspirations and goals. As Goheen puts it: “Citizens create meaningful public spaces by expressing their attitudes, asserting their claims and using it for their own purposes. It thereby becomes a meaningful public resource” (1998: 479). However, as Mitchell (1995, 2003) has consistently argued the right to access and use public space, is increasingly subject to conditions, prescriptions and at times outright bans. It reflects not only on concerns with appropriateness and the visibility of certain groups but also the lack of power of those whose existence conflicts with the priorities of business and commerce. Mitchell

states that “[p]ublic space is the product of competing ideas about what constitutes that space - order and control or free, and perhaps dangerous, interaction - and who constitutes the ‘public’” (Mitchell, 1995: 115).

24 It is in the streets and other public spaces that the life of the city was first observed and analysed as signifier and site of modernity and where urban experience was distinguished from the traditional world view of the rural and the feudal. The demographic changes wrought by urbanisation and industrialisation, a process still extant in the developing world, bring new opportunities and experiences for such concentrated and densely situated populations. For many original investigators of the modern urban condition it was in public places and spaces, in particular the streets, where the social life of cities was to be found, analysed and understood. The street was and remains significant as an indicator of how social life in cities develops and is experienced, of how the possibilities of collective life can be accommodated, promoted or restricted. It was and remains a contested battleground. Over meanings and values, over use and exchange value, over regulation and control, over ownership and inhabitation, control and spontaneity and how this reflects and represents community values, how it promotes or restricts social interaction and change. Lefebvre viewed the street and public space as crucial not only to healthy and humane cities but to a truly democratic and inclusive urban society. It is in what he calls the disorder of the street that change and possibility, the sharing of ideas, meanings and experiences, that epitomises the best of urban experience, one that should be open and accessible to all, providing a forum for exchange, interaction and of collective being. Lefebvre argues that the street “[...] serves as a meeting place (topos), for without it no other designated encounters are possible [...] The street is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder This disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises [...] In the street [...] appropriation demonstrates that use and value can dominate exchange and exchange value” (2003 [1970]: 18).

25 Whilst social media fulfils many communicative functions and prospects for social interaction not envisaged by Lefebvre the coming together in physical, material space provides opportunities and possibilities that electronic communication cannot. Just as the telephone opened up long-distance communication it is not the same as face-to-face conversation and discussion. Being in ‘real’ space with others is a different form of interaction than being connected in ‘virtual’ space. The street, public and social space is vital not only to urban culture but to the health and well-being of urban society. The ‘right to the city’ is a claim to the right to inhabit space, to make and use and to be represented in and through public space. The street is a medium and mode of communication and of play and the pleasure and possibility of being together with others. To live in an open, creative, democratic space of a truly inclusive urban society is one which encourages playful expression and communication, artistic and aesthetic interventions in, on and through urban space. It was activities and events that take place in the street that for Lefebvre was of crucial importance. Given recent events such as the Occupy Movement, The Arab Spring, and threats from terrorism, I would argue that the role of the street and public space is still significant. Resistance to oppression and the challenge to hegemonic social and political orthodoxy find its power and strength by claiming, colonizing or taking back the streets. As Lefebvre makes clear it also often finds its expression on the walls of the city as signifier, symbol and symptom of conflict, contestation and protest: “The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become ‘savage’ and by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls” (2003: 19).

26 The city like every other aspect of life involves the consumption of signs. We all need to ‘read’ and understand the semiotics of the city as a means to make sense of information that comes in the myriad meanings and messages that confront us in our everyday experience of the complexity of urban existence. However, there is no need for the signage and

communication to be merely directional, prescriptive or only associated with commodification and the conditions of the market. Otherwise it becomes, as Lefebvre suggests, part of the dominating power of representation rather than a possibility of free creative expression:

One consumes signs as well as objects: signs of happiness, of satisfaction, of power, of wealth, of science, of technology, etc. The production of these signs is integrated to global production and plays a major integrative role in relation to other productive and organising social activities [...] Finally, there is the writing of the city: what is inscribed and prescribed on its walls, in the layout of places and their linkages, in brief, the use of time in the city by its inhabitants (1996: 115).

27 There is a need to engage with the creative potential of urban people and urban spaces. We need to ensure that the urban remains as a place of encounters, a focus and locus for communication and information, for meaningful interactions and for difference, diversity and for creative and surprising potential. Graffiti, the unsanctioned intervention of those who are relatively powerless and disenfranchised is a claim through colonisation and an attempt to make space meaningful by inscribing, writing and painting the walls of the city. It challenges dominant representations of space as purely functional and commodified. It is this possibility of coming across something new, something unique, something surprising, shocking, informative, something that can make us smile, think or react that graffiti, 'writing on walls' offers. Graffiti as a very public practice and embodied act of engagement and intervention in the urban environment, as living, albeit temporary or ephemeral art or comment can add meaning, value, beauty, distraction and amusement to cities increasingly dominated by the homogenising effects of global capital. Graffiti can be considered then as free quotidian public art and/or politics, as a challenge to normal, banal, functionalised and increasingly commodified and privatised space. Spaces that perhaps pass for public but are increasingly owned and controlled by and for business. At the expense of those who have to or choose to make their lives in the cities. Graffiti then can be understood as an expression or embodiment of Lefebvre's cry and demand for the 'right to the city', the right to appropriate, appreciate, know and use its spaces and places. Graffiti as an example of a return to city as oeuvre, a living creative work of art, always in the process of being made and remade.

28 Graffiti provides alternative ways of seeing the city, not just for those who write or paint on walls but also for those who read and see it. Graffiti is a means to communicate a range of ideas, perspectives and opinions and to ensure a more egalitarian use of the city and its streets. We make sense of the world and of the city by reading what is written, displayed and represented to us. This should come in various forms. It is this as Lefebvre makes clear that allows or permits society to exist and to function. We exist as a social collectivity by recognizing and understanding the signs and symbols, meanings and messages that our shared urban existences and experiences engender. Graffiti then, is an embodied creative colonisation of public space. One that has the potential to surprise and change the way we not only view the city and others but also ourselves and society as a whole. By creating new ways of utilising walls for meanings and messages that represent aesthetic, cultural or political values the city comes alive to new ways of not only reading space but of being in it. To appreciate the city in ways that counters the dominating discourses and activities of capital: gentrification, development that prioritises consumption, the privatisation of collective resources, etc. This was well known and understood by Debord (2007 [1967]). The Situationists, with whom Lefebvre had an albeit short-lived connection (Ross, 1997) knew that graffiti and wall art could challenge the status quo by making us stop, think or smile (see Ford, 2005; Knabb, 2006; McDonough, 2009). It was not only in the practice of psycho-geography (Coverley, 2011), mytho-geography (Salman, et al 2010) and *the derive* as new ways to see and use the city but the use of graffiti as a means to shock and challenge,

to re-enchant and stimulate debate, discussion and discord (see pp. 445-457 in Knabb, 2006 for examples). Graffiti was part of what Raoul Vaneigem (1994) argued was the revolutionary potential of everyday life to challenge and escape the commonplace, what is expected and what is organised and laid out for us.

29 Graffiti reaffirms the use value of space, the lived experience and quality of collective or communal life. Graffiti as a practice represents and makes space social by active engagement and intervention with and in the urban environment. It does so by challenging the right to colonise space and leave signs, symbols, messages, images, traces of life, that are not driven only by and for the market, but by and for those who inhabit urban space, and thus make communities and neighbourhoods. Graffiti can create alternative discourses that encourage debate, discussion, potentially conflict, but ultimately encourage participation in the life and culture of the lived material environment. Again Lefebvre makes the point that:

“To put art at the service of the urban does not mean to prettify urban space with works of art. This parody of the possible is a caricature. Rather, this means that time-spaces become works of art and that former art reconsiders itself as source and model of appropriate topics’: of temporal qualities inscribed in spaces” (Lefebvre, 1996: 173).

30 The argument here is that Lefebvre’s analysis of the production of urban space offers a way to see, read and understand graffiti, painted by night and read by day, as an embodied praxis in the living experience and knowledge of the city. To view graffiti as an everyday practice in the living city, using walls and surfaces for expression, for ‘free’ art, for communication as part of continuing arguments and analyses that seeks to prioritise ‘Cities for People, not for Profit’. Or as Lefebvre might have put it: the ‘Right to the City’ of those who ‘Write the City’.

31 Graffiti can then be understood as an engagement with and intervention in urban space which as a social product, a creation of particular concatenations of circumstances, ideologies and instituted discourses of privileged power seeks to limit differences within homogenising and standardised forms and uses of public space. The right to the city as Mitchell (1999) argues is “[...]the right to participation, participation in the making of the city, the actual producing of that space” (Tonnelat, 2010: 2). Graffiti as praxis and as visual product is an active engagement in and with the physical and material form of the city, in urban space. It is, I would contend, a reflection and example of Lefebvre’s claim to the right to the city’ which “[...] stipulates the right to meetings and gatherings [...] the need for social life and a centre, the need and the function of play, the symbolic functions of space” (Lefebvre, 1996: 195).

Conclusion

32 There are many who continue to see graffiti merely as a social problem or as vandalism or antisocial behaviour. And at times it can be all or any of these. However, if we consider to what extent we participate, agree or sanction all the adverts, illuminated signs and digital screens that adorn buses, taxis, billboards and buildings across all cities a number of questions arise. Is this the only art or decoration allowed in cities? Why are only words and images permitted on every available space promoting consumption and commodification as an endless priority and end in itself? Are we asked to agree the installation of new street furniture, shop or road signage, neon advertising that turn night to day in city centres? As Banksy states:

Twisted little people go out every day and deface this great city. Leaving their idiotic

little scribbles, invading communities and making people feel dirty and used. They just take, take, take and they don't put anything back. They're mean and selfish and they make the world an ugly place to be. We call them advertising agencies and town planners (Banksy, 2002).

33 These are questions that relate to what and who cities are for? Ones in which freedom of expression, creativity, play, the possibly of free interaction, in which all have a role in making, using and appropriating urban space, as a lived process of inhabiting. Cities in which 'culture as ordinary' is allowed to inform the lived experience by decoration and embellishment of the cityscape and thus represent the meanings, values, ideas and opinions of the city's inhabitants. Or is the city to be given over solely to the market, to advertisers, designers, planners and architects, developers and gentrifiers whose aim is ultimately exchange value and profit rather than use value and the quality of the lived experience of urban life. That is, as Lefebvre would argue, to see the right to the city as involving all its inhabitants in which writing, painting and drawing on walls is an antidote to the 'terrorism of advertising', to the sterility of blank concrete and glass, to the restriction of free expression that comes with all the homogenising plans and designs for the urban environment.

34 We can understand graffiti and urban art as vandalism or anti-social behaviour or as an ephemeral and temporary antidote to what Lefebvre (1971 [1968]) called 'the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption.' It is also worth remembering what cities once were for. They are more than just money generating machines, centres for business, capital, production and consumption. They are also social and cultural centres, sites for social interaction, experience and opportunity and above all for change. Lewis Mumford was aware of the need for a more enlightened understanding of the need for an inclusiveness to underscore the complexity of modern cities existence when he wrote that "[t]he city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theatre and is the theatre. It is in the city, the city as theatre, that man's [sic] more purposive activities are focused, and work out, through conflicting and co-operating personalities, events, groups into more significant culminations." (Mumford, 1937: 185) Mumford's ideas echo Lefebvre's understanding of the city as *oeuvre*, a living work of art that allows and encourages and is made by the recognition of the need for play and for festival but which has now become subjugated to the needs, demands and requirements of capital. The urban everyday lived experience of social and public space has become subjected to the imposition of functional organisation and the regulation of formal space. Social and public space has become delimited and delineated. This has circumscribed access and use to some at the expense of the ideal of free interaction and inhabitation.

35 Lefebvre's, 'cry and demand' for the right to the city is one which seeks to reprioritise social space as truly public, owned, used, inhabited and accessible to all. Graffiti, in its various forms, styles, meanings and values demonstrates aspects and features that represent Lefebvre's assertion of the need to appropriate and use space in everyday life. To write and paint on walls, to decorate the city, is creative communication and interventions in and on public space that reclaims the city from the structural and formal perquisites of capital. This reprioritises the understanding, as Harvey asserts, that "[t]he social spaces of distraction and display become as vital to urban culture as the spaces of working and living" (1985, 256). Graffiti signifies creative engagement with and the colonisation and appropriation of space through imaginative, playful and artistic interventions that conflicts, contests and challenges dominant discourses, representations and the regulation of space.

36 It treats the walls of the city as a free art gallery. Not everyone will necessarily find all graffiti to be artistically or aesthetically pleasing or worthwhile. It is not exclusively but is predominantly a youthful male activity that requires intimate knowledge and use of the urban environment and practices that challenge and contest the schemes and structures

imposed by urban designers, planners and architects. It confronts and resists the restrictive political regulation and imposition of the spatial order of commerce and (local) state authority and offers a non-commercial alternative aesthetic adornment in contrast to and conflict with economic, commercial and financial interests.

37 The perspective presented here views graffiti in Lefebvrian terms as everyday acts of intervention and engagement with urban space in which representational (lived) space is literally, figuratively and artistically created through imaginative acts that recreates social space through embodied praxis and visual objects. That is, graffiti is a political as well as artistic and aesthetic exercise. An example of the creation of socially meaningful space through the reassertion and reprioritisation of use values rather than exchange values. The right to the city by 'writing the city' through graffiti provides an urban semiotic that engenders new spatial practices and offers the possibility of new ways of seeing, reading and understanding the urban, the city and everyday life. It gives voice and acknowledges the existence of those who live in the city but are often overlooked or ignored. To be in space is to make space meaningful to oneself and to others. To inhabit space is a right and a necessity for all.

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