

Spray Paint:

How an Object Became an Object and a Subculture

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Objects, Consumption and Desire

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Introduction

Aerosol paint, commonly called spray paint, must have been an object that was created without any idea of what it would create. What it created was the modern graffiti subculture. The history of spray paint and its progeny, the modern graffiti subculture, is a story of how everyday objects become what they are today and how they take on a life of their own, far surpassing whatever benign use they were originally intended for and taking on a meaning of their own in a cultural context. This is a paper that seeks to explore that story and explain how objects and people can interact to produce something far beyond either the object itself or the people who use it. It necessarily entails a journey that explores how objects affect people and how people affect objects and how the complex relationships between them bring objects, people and culture together to enrich people's lives and enable them to reach out and affect the world around them. This is also a story of how "lash-ups" come together at specific times, in specific places, under specific conditions and circumstances and among different people, for spray paint and the modern graffiti subculture to come to be what it is today.

The Origin of Aerosols

The origin of aerosol paints can be best situated in the history of aerosol technology more generally as a medium for dispensing various substances. The concept of aerosol dates all the way back to the late 18th century when pressurized carbonated beverages were introduced in France, and in 1837 a man by the name of Perpigna

invented the valve that provided for an easier way of filling your cup. Rather than pouring your drink into a cup, you could spray it into the cup. As early as 1862, aerosol technology was being incorporated into metal cans for the first time, but they were far too large and bulky to be of any practical use. In 1899 inventors Helbling and Pertsch patented the use of methyl and ethyl chloride as a propellant for aerosols, and in 1927 a Norwegian engineer by the name of Erik Rotheim patented the first aerosol can and valve that could hold products and dispense them with the use of propellants. (about.com)

However the Second World War is what really pushed aerosol technology in the direction of its current form, and place and region had a lot to do with how that came to be. Molotch states the concept, in its most basic form, that “Places produce stuff.” (161) This doesn’t just mean that stuff is made somewhere. That much is obvious, everything is made somewhere. What is significant about places and regions is that they have certain circumstances, resources and characters specific to them that influence and enable the development of certain products.

For example, certain places and regions become nodes of production and innovation for certain products because certain conditions in those places and regions facilitate their innovation and production, such as leather working in San Croce, a small town in the Italian region of Tuscany. The production of leather products in San Croce is no accident. Rather it is due to certain circumstances specific to the region such as climate, culture and the availability of nearby sources of raw cowhides. (Amin, Ash, 1992) The leather tanning industry in San Croce is a result of a culture of specialized labor to produce leather goods, but also a result of the availability and quality of local raw ingredients and the climate conducive to working with them.

The development of aerosol devices as we have come to know them, was also the result of regional circumstances. During WWII the US government had stationed hundreds of thousands of soldiers and marines in the South Pacific and as a result of their activity in this region the American servicemen became highly susceptible to diseases, such as malaria, which are spread by insects. In order to try to find some way to protect servicemen from these buzzing pests, the US government funded research to find some portable technology to spray these disease carrying insects and thereby protect American servicemen during their tours of duty in the South Pacific.

As a result of this funding, in 1943, two researchers from the Department of Agriculture, Lyle Goodhue and William Sullivan, developed a small portable can pressurized by a liquid gas, a fluorocarbon, that was capable of spraying an anti-insecticide agent to combat the plague of insect-borne disease that was affecting American servicemen in the South Pacific. (about.com) These aerosol insecticides became available to the general American public in 1947.

This history is an excellent example of how “lash-ups” come together to manifest themselves into one object, specific to that time, place and circumstances or conditions. Molotch explains this phenomenon in the design and production of objects in this way, “Somehow all the elements come together more or less at the same time and in a given geographic place that operates not just as a container, but as a *crucible* that yields up one particular product and not another.” (2, emphasis added) In the case of aerosol cans, without the involvement of American servicemen in the South Pacific during WWII, and their susceptibility to insect-borne disease, the development of a practical and portable aerosol can would not have been developed at that time, lacking those circumstances and

conditions that were the impetus for its creation. It was those people suffering in that place, at that time, which led to the development of a true aerosol can, like the aerosol cans that later came to contain paint. Furthermore, the development and design of the portable aerosol can was the result of a globalized chain of production, from the servicemen's need in the South Pacific, to the labs of the Department of Agriculture in the United States. All of these circumstances, resources, places and people came together in order for the aerosol can to be manifested at that time. As Molotch puts it, "Somehow, everything must... 'lash-up' such that the otherwise loose elements adhere; only then can there be a new thing in the world." (2)

The story of aerosol paint continues shortly thereafter, when in 1947 a 27 year old inventor named Robert H. Abplanalp came up with the last essential part of what to become the prototypical form of aerosol cans, which is the crimp on valve. (about.com) The crimp on valve enabled the removal, replacement and manipulation of valve nozzles on portable aerosol cans, which in turn enabled liquids to be sprayed from a pressurized can for the first time, and in controllable ways. (The importance of nozzles to aerosol paints and the modern graffiti subculture will be discussed in a later section.) Abplanalp also began the use of an inexpensive, practical and durable aluminum can, which is the standard for all aerosol cans through the current day. Abplanalp's company became a multi-million dollar supplier of aerosol cans, although his cans were used for the dispensing of liquefied creams, foams and powders, mostly for hygienic use, and not spray paint. His Precise Valve Corporation manufactured billions of aerosol cans per year for decades. (about.com)

Finally in 1949 someone got the wonderful idea of putting paint in an aerosol can, and what we now know as spray paint was born. The man credited with the invention of aerosol paint in a can is Edward Seymour, although he credits his wife Bonnie with having come up with the idea. (about.com) Seymour founded his company Seymour of Sycamour, Inc. to manufacture his spray paints and the first color produced was aluminum, which, it just so happens, is perhaps the most popular color used to fill in letters in works of illegal graffiti due to its opacity, coverage and speed of application, compared to other colors. (The functional qualities for spray paint will be discussed in a later section.)

Literary Sources

Graffiti has often been a subject of interest in the popular press, particularly after the widespread emergence of the modern graffiti subculture in the 1970's and 1980's. A modest number of academic works have also been dedicated to the study of the modern graffiti subculture and each of them discusses the importance of spray paint for the graffiti subculture as a tool and medium for writing graffiti. The importance of spray paint to the modern graffiti subculture and the symbiotic relationship between the object and the subculture are important concepts that have not been ignored by scholars of the graffiti subculture. However, the depth of description and analysis of this relationship to date, has been at best cursory.

In a book from the 1970's entitled *Street Writers*, a veteran graffiti artist who has been an active graffiti writer in Los Angeles for over 50 years, Chaz Bojorquez, stated

the significance of spray paint when it was introduced to the general public in the late 1940's, "Old graffiti was always done with a brush. But spraycans and felt markers have changed everything." (Cesaretti, 1975)

Susan Phillips further examined the impact that the introduction of spray paint as a tool and medium had on the emergence of the graffiti subculture. She also notes that graffiti tools used by Chicano gang youths prior to the emergence of spray paint in the late 1940's consisted mainly of buckets of paint and brushes, a piece of chalk or charcoal, a shoeshine bottle with its characteristic rectangular sponge, or a pocketknife, used for inscribing one's name or neighborhood in a pliable surface. (16) However, as Phillips points out, lugging around a bucket of paint and brushes to apply it is less than convenient and more than conspicuous. Although other tools and mediums for writing graffiti were usable, they could be difficult to apply to many rough or irregular surfaces, and less than permanent. What was needed was something that was easily applicable to a wide range of surfaces and materials, somewhat durable once applied, and, equally important, easily concealable. The can of spray paint perfectly fit all of these criteria and its introduction enabled the development of writing graffiti and eventually, the emergence of the modern graffiti subculture.

The central form in graffiti is lettering, and the introduction of spray paint as a tool and medium for writing graffiti greatly accelerated the size, complexity and design of lettering in Chicano gang graffiti at the time. As Phillips states, "The most fascinating changes ever since the introduction of spray paint have been in the presentation of letters themselves." (188) Of course in the 1950's and 1960's, Chicano gang members writing graffiti in California might not have for-seen the eventual emergence of the modern

graffiti subculture and the corresponding development of the complex lettering designs and artistic expression that the availability of spray paint has enabled for generations of young people around the world. It is absolutely astounding how one simple object, an innocuous tool intended for small fix-it jobs around the home or workplace, could burgeon an entire subculture committed to the use and mastery of that object as an artistic medium.

With the heralding of the modern graffiti subculture in the 1970's and early 1980's, particularly in New York, and around the western world, interest in the modern graffiti subculture increased and was answered by the publishing of two popular books documenting the graffiti subculture, *Subway Art* in 1984 and *Spray Can Art* 1987 by photographer Henry Chalfant, along with his co-authors, Martha Cooper and James Prigoff. The title of the second book points to the significance and importance of spray paint in the graffiti subculture and the application of it as a medium to surfaces far beyond the metal sided subways where it emerged in New York in the 1970's. The works of graffiti documented in the book also demonstrate the centrality of spray paint to the graffiti subculture in its being perhaps the most common form (other than lettering) represented in works of graffiti from around the world. Cans of spray paint are featured prominently in photographs of graffiti from New York (13, 27), Chicago (47), San Francisco (51), Los Angeles (56), London (59), and Paris (71), among other places. Interestingly, many of the images from graffiti in America also identify the cans of spray paint pictured in the works of graffiti as a particular brand of spray paint, Krylon, which has traditionally been the preferred brand of spray paint for graffiti writers in North

America. (A full discussion of brands and their relationship with graffiti writers and the graffiti subculture can be found in a later section.)

In what was the first academic examination of the modern graffiti subculture, Craig Castleman also points out the importance of spray paint as a medium for writing graffiti. In describing the three principle forms graffiti takes Castleman explains the difference between tags, throw-ups and pieces. Tags are the most basic form of modern graffiti, which typically consist of a signature of a graffiti writer's name or crew affiliation in a single color. (26) He states that "Spray paint was the first tool employed for tagging, in the late 1960's" because "spray paint enables a writer to make a very large mark," and to do so easily and quickly. (26) However, in terms of graffiti inside of subway trains, which is the focus of Castleman's book, spray paint was inconvenient in that it emits a strong odor that draws attention to a writer executing a tag, whereas other tools such as markers were more covert for use on a crowded train. Spray paint was most useful for writing on the outside of trains, where size and ease of application are everything. (Images 1 and 2 depict tags. 1 shows the size that tags can take and 2 shows the different ways tags can look depending on what paint, nozzle or marker is used.)

Although spray paint is one of a number of instruments that can be used for tagging, it is the only tool that is practical for use in producing the other two main forms of modern graffiti, the throw-up and the piece. Throw-ups are typically two to four letters, indicating a writer's name, which are painted using spray paint in a bubble style lettering that can be executed quickly and with a minimal amount of paint. They consist of using one color to fill in the letters and another, contrasting color, to outline the forms of the letters. (29-30) On subway cars throw-ups are the most efficient way of writing

ones name in mass quantities so as to “get up” as much as possible. With a mere two cans of spray paint in contrasting colors, a writer can execute a number of throw-ups in minutes on the exterior of subway cars. (Images of throw-ups are depicted in images 3, 4 and 5. As the images demonstrate, throw-ups consist of simple bubble shaped letters filled in with one color and outlined with a contrasting color.)

The other principle form of modern graffiti is the piece (short for masterpiece) which is the highly stylized complex lettering designs graffiti is known for. (31) In order to execute a piece, especially in a precarious position like on the side of a subway car, spray paint is an essential tool and medium. Pieces require the covering of substantial spaces, combined with intricate designs using many different colors within small spaces through out the larger area of the piece as a whole. And, as with all illegal graffiti, must be executed in as little time as possible. (Images 6 and 7 depict complex pieces done using only spray paint as a medium. One can get a sense from these images how difficult it would be to produce such a complex design on such a large space with brushes or any other medium, in the span of one day.)

Spray paint is the only medium that can be used to execute these large and complex designs in any practical amount of time. Using spray paint, a graffiti writer can carry over a dozen different colors and enough paint in volume to cover a substantial area, all in something the size of a backpack or shopping bag. This makes it clear that carrying a dozen different buckets of paint in order to paint a piece using brushes is horribly unpractical from a graffiti writer’s perspective. In addition, spray paint is typically extremely fast drying so that multiple layers of different color paint can be painted over one another without the colors mixing and intruding on one another’s

intended place in the design, whereas paint from a bucket applied with a brush can take hours to dry. Although since the 1980's subway graffiti craze, many writers have experimented and mastered the use of bucket paints in painting graffiti, spray paint is by far the most common and preferred method of writing graffiti.

Jeff Ferrell, in his study of graffiti writers in the Denver area in the early 1990's agreed that spray paint is the "end-all, be-all" object in the graffiti subculture. He describes spray paint as, "the essential practical tool in doing graffiti." (63) In conducting field ethnography with graffiti writers Ferrell found that, "spray paint often becomes the focus of writers' conversations." (63) Ferrell also found that writers used other tools such as markers, he had no doubt that spray paint was by far the most common and prototypical tool and medium used by graffiti writers. He found on numerous occasions that the central role of spray paint in the graffiti subculture was evidenced in its imagery and identity was often a focus of works of graffiti that he viewed or participated in producing. Ferrell found what anyone who looks at the modern graffiti subculture will find, that spray paint is the most important object in the subculture and the whole graffiti subculture revolves around spray paint.

Joe Austin, in his study of the New York graffiti subculture, also found the importance that spray paint had for writing graffiti. As much as spray paint enabled the production of large and complex graffiti pieces, writers needed to have a mastery of spray paint as cultural object in order to even attempt executing one of these masterpieces. A writer "had to have an extensive knowledge of the qualities of several brands of spray paint and of which types of spray nozzles would produce the desired aerosol effects." (65)

Nancy McDonald, in her study of the graffiti subculture, also found the necessity of being knowledgeable of and proficient in the use of spray paint in order to partake in a career as a graffiti writer. She states, “Writers need to familiarize themselves with the tools of their trade... which spray brands are suitable for which jobs, how to apply different spray nozzles to alter line widths and create different effects, how to paint without making drips or spotty paint marks.” (73) These researchers found that without spray paint as an available tool and a mastery of spray paint as an artistic medium, one could not participate in the graffiti subculture.

Form and Function

The ageless debate in regards to form and functionality is best characterized as, which is more important, form or function? Or, similarly, which came first, form or function? Molotch offers an engaging analysis of how form and function are not separate entities in conflict with one another, but are rather two concepts, embodied in objects, which are interwoven and mutually constructive. However many do not see it as binary but rather a dichotomy between two ways of looking at an object.

Molotch phrases the position of the function side of this debate in this way, “For some who champion practicalities of life, art may be a good thing, but hardly intrinsic to the production process.” (54) From this perspective, it is the function of an object that makes it what it is. Whatever form or artistic and aesthetic values it has are merely secondary to this primary purpose of utility. Molotch references Henry Petroski’s functional argument to this effect, that, “the ‘evolution’ of modern products comes from

their ‘usefulness’, by which he means utility quite apart from any aesthetic considerations.” (54) Petroski, and others like him, are adamant that function is what is central to an object’s importance, and considerations of aesthetic or artistic qualities are superfluous when compared to the master concept of function.

In contrast, for people who perceive artistic and aesthetic form as important, viewing an object in terms of its function is inadequate. Molotch points out, “That designers themselves think ‘it’s both’ is evidence in itself of art’s significance... They perceive a high correlation between stuff they judge as having good form and stuff they judge as highly functional.” (57) Molotch also references Cyril Stanley Smith’s argument that form preceded function. (60) He argues that, for example, those who first molded baked clay 20, 000 years ago did not do so for practical purposes but, rather, for artistic purposes. Only later was molded baked clay put to practical use for bowls, cups and other functional objects.

How then can one analyze spray paint as an object in terms of form and function? I argue that spray paint has a certain uniqueness to it in that its form is dependant on its function. This form is not the typical concept of form alluded to in Molotch’s book, the actual physical form of the object itself – what it looks like sitting there on a shelf in a store. That form is important too (and will be discussed in a later section on brands), however the form I am referring to is the form the paint takes once it’s been sprayed on a surface. Spray paint, as it’s used by graffiti writers in the modern graffiti subculture, is itself an artistic medium and the art graffiti writers produce is the spray paint, and vice versa, the spray paint is the art they produce. In this sense, the quality of the spray paint in terms of its function determines the quality of its form in the art it is used to produce.

In trying to discern the “chicken and egg” dilemma regarding spray paint in terms of which is more important, form or function, Molotch phrases it perfectly, “We are, with form and function, with art and economy, at home not just with chicken and egg, but chicken in egg and egg in chicken.” (88) The form is its function and its function is its form. What then are the qualities upon which one can evaluate the functionality of spray paint and the form it takes when used?

Spray paint, as it is used by graffiti writers in the modern graffiti subculture, has many qualities that are desired, and in some cases, necessary, for its effective use as an artistic tool and medium. Furthermore, these qualities must be assessed in relation to the three forms modern graffiti takes, which were discussed earlier: tags, throw-ups and pieces.

The first characteristic of spray paint upon which its quality can be assessed, and perhaps the most important for graffiti writers, is opacity. How well does the paint cover the surface it is sprayed onto? If a spray paint is of poor quality, it might take many coats to cover an area; thus contradicting its intrinsic value as a fast and efficient tool for writing graffiti. This applies to all three forms of graffiti, tags, throw-ups and pieces but has particular relevance in painting pieces. In regard to pieces, another problem with poor quality spray paint that does not have a high degree of opacity is that graffiti writers typically overlap many layers of different colors in order to produce complex designs in a piece. If any layer of the paint applied reveals the layer beneath it, or if the color of any layer is altered by a color in the layer beneath it, the interplay of the different colors in the different layers is confounded; thus ruining the complex design the graffiti writer is attempting to paint. Opacity is also a concern in that much of the time, graffiti is painted

over other graffiti, and graffiti writers don't want the graffiti belonging to the person they just painted over showing through their own graffiti. This is especially true when graffiti is painted over other graffiti as part of a feud between writers – commonly known as a “battle” in the graffiti subculture. (The difference in the opacity of different paints is depicted in image 5, depicting two throw-ups, one filled in very solid, and the other showing the wall underneath through its partly transparent fill in.)

A second important characteristic of spray paint to graffiti writers is pressure. Paint that is canned under high or low pressure is ideal for different uses in creating the three different forms of graffiti. In painting tags and throw-ups, writers are after quantity rather than quality in the style of their work. That is, they want to paint a lot and fast. For these purposes a spray paint that expels its contents under high pressure is ideal for tagging or filling in a throw-up as fast as possible. However, when one considers the production of pieces, the opposite is true. Perhaps graffiti writers might want a high pressured spray paint to fill in the initial layer, but the following layers, the ones that people see in the finished product are intended to be applied smoothly and consistently. Lines have to be straight, avoiding drips, blending colors and achieving many of the aerosol effects of spray paint in graffiti are difficult to accomplish when paint is released under high pressure. Therefore, when doing pieces, especially the intricate “wildstyle” pieces that are often done as legal murals, where artists have as much time as they need to get every line and every spot just right, a spray paint with low pressure is desirable as an artistic medium.

A third important characteristic for determining which paints are of superior quality is durability. Paints that wash away easily or fade with time and weathering are

undesirable for a graffiti writer's purposes. Writers want their graffiti to last, if it isn't painted out by authorities or painted over by other graffiti writers, and in order for it to last it has to be able to endure the elements and the ravages of time. Therefore writers are especially keen to notice how long different paints last and how well they stand up to the weather and time. Those that last the longest on different surfaces, and maintain the integrity of their color over time, are most desired by graffiti writers. However, consideration is tempered by the fact that different paints last longer on different surfaces. For example paints with a flat texture tend to cover better and last longer on porous surfaces like concrete or wood. Whereas, paints with a glossy finish tend to cover better and last longer on non-porous surfaces such as metal. (A lack of durability can be seen as a result of the use of substandard quality spray paints in image 8. One can see that the outline of the piece has faded with time and failed to cover areas of the fill in, which was done with a better quality paint.)

A fourth characteristic that graffiti writers use to determine preferences in spray paints is the range of colors different brands offer. Since graffiti writers use spray paint to produce art, they want to get as many different colors as they can possibly have available to them. Brands that offer a larger range of colors, and particularly bright eye-catching colors, are preferred by graffiti writers because they offer more possibilities of color combinations that can be used in the graffiti they produce. This is especially important for the painting of pieces, which demand many different colors used skillfully in complex designs.

A fifth characteristic of spray paint that is important to graffiti writers in the graffiti subculture is the smoothness and consistency of the paint as it is expelled from

the can. When expelled from an aerosol can, spray paint can come out chunky and in irregular consistencies, or it can come out smooth with a very consistent viscosity, thus rendering very smooth and consistent lines and patterns, however the writer uses it. Graffiti writers tend to prefer for paint to be expelled from spray paint cans in a very smooth and consistent way because this gives them greater control over the paint as it is applied to a surface. Especially in the production of pieces, smoothness and consistency, which enable the ability of a writer to control the flow of paint from the can is incredibly important in order to be able to paint designs of any complexity. With an irregular discharge of paint, uncontrollable mistakes can occur that are not the fault of the writer painting the graffiti. Where this is not as important for painting tags and throw-ups, where the quality of style is less important than the quantity of production, in the production of pieces it is extremely important. (Differences in consistency can be seen in image 2, which depicts various tags done with different paints equipped with different nozzles. Some of the tags consist of solid lines, whereas others seem to sputter or drip. The tags on top are flared out, a common technique done with the use of certain nozzles.)

A sixth characteristic of spray paint cans, which is very important for graffiti writers, is a can's compatibility with any number of custom nozzles that are often used by graffiti writers for a number of different effects and uses when painting tags, throw-ups and pieces. There are customized nozzles that release the paint from a spray paint can in large quantities at high velocity and which produce lines that are as wide as a softball or even wider. These nozzles are preferable for doing large tags or filling in throw-ups as quickly as possible. In contrast, there are custom nozzles that release the paint out of a can at a very low velocity and in very narrow, precise lines, or in a very fine mist. These

nozzles are preferable for painting complex pieces, where small and precise designs require paint to be released at a minimum velocity so as to have the greatest control possible over the release of the paint from the can. There are many other nozzles, which provide different combinations of velocity and line width, and even some that do not even produce a straight line, but rather release the paint from the can at extremely high velocity in giant messy swaths that pour and drip down walls when sprayed with them. These nozzles have recently become popular for writing huge messy tags that take up large spaces and can be sprayed at a distance high above one's head, as if done with a fire extinguisher or water hose. (Again, refer to image 2 for depiction of how the use of different nozzles affects the way the paint is released from the can.)

There are dozens of different customized nozzles that graffiti writers use and the compatibility they have with different spray paint cans is very important to graffiti writers. However, since the size of different nozzles' tube that inserts into a spray paint can and the size of the receptor in the top of a spray paint can where the nozzle is plugged into are not standardized. Some spray paint cans have a receptor that is large enough to accommodate any nozzle, where as some spray paint cans can only be used with certain nozzles, which have a smaller tube that inserts into the can's receptor. In addition, matching spray paint cans with different amounts of pressure with nozzles intended to release or retard the velocity of the paint being sprayed is another consideration. A nozzle that releases paint at a low velocity in thin crisp lines, is best used with a spray paint can that has a low pressure, and vice versa.

The main point in considering each of these characteristics of spray paint is that there is a tremendous amount of consideration that takes place on the part of graffiti writers when selecting different spray paint cans for different purposes.

Brands

Having considered the different characteristics upon which graffiti artists evaluate the functionality of different paints, one must then naturally turn to an examination of which brands are the most popular and why. This is an analysis based on function as well as form, in both the sense of the form the can of spray paint itself takes, but also the form the paint that comes out of the can takes once it has been used. Indeed both of these forms are a part of the functionality of the paint and serve to entice graffiti writers to prefer certain brands of paint over others, especially when considering designer spray paints designed particularly for use by graffiti artists.

Naomi Klein's analysis of brands and branding proves very informative for an analysis of spray paint brands. The observation that, "corporations may manufacture products, but what consumers buy are brands" is just as applicable to spray paint in the modern graffiti subculture as to anything else. (7) However, what is interesting is that in contrast to the story of brand-name advertising told by Klein, name-brand spray paints that are sold at hardware stores and mega stores across the country are conspicuously not marketed to the graffiti subculture, though it would be hard to imagine that graffiti writers are not major consumers of these products. In contrast, designer brands of spray paint were particularly designed and created for the modern graffiti subculture, and are

heavily marketed to graffiti writers using the same sort of techniques any other product might. In fact the brand name war among designer spray paints is so competitive that one company stole another company's brand name in order to start its own entry in to the designer spray paint business.

In considering different brands of spray paint, one might first look at shelf brands that are sold to the general public in hardware stores and superstores like The Home Depot and Wal-Mart across the country. These name brands are widely known and widely available to American graffiti writers, since they are sold at major stores that have locations all over North America. Their availability makes them among the most commonly used paints in the modern graffiti subculture in North America.

Perhaps the most popular brand of spray paint for graffiti writers in North America is the Rust-Oleum brand. Commonly known as Rust-O, this brand of spray paint is produced by a company that specializes in rust-preventive exterior paints, and only moved into the spray paint business when aerosol can technology became available after the Second World War. Not unlike the invention of the portable pressurized aerosol can, the story of the invention of rust-preventive Rust-Oleum paint is another interesting example of what Molotch calls "lash-up". (2) A Scottish-born captain of a sea-faring fishing ship, by the name of Robert Fergusson, happened to realize that when fish oil spilled on the rusty metal deck of his ship, the corroding effect of the salt water on the metal was retarded. Wherever the fish oil had been spilled, the advance of the corrosion simply stopped. That observation gave Captain Fergusson the idea of combining fish oil with paint in order to produce a rust-preventive paint that could be used to protect against and retard the spread of rust on his ship. After settling in New Orleans, the captain spent

years of smelly experimentation with paints and fish oil in an attempt to formulate a fish oil-based paint. In 1921, he perfected a fish oil-based paint that stopped rust, dried overnight, and didn't smell like fish. (rustoleum.com) As Molotch suggests, the invention of a paint like this depended on a number of different factors "lashing-up" together at the same time in order to produce this new product. (Image 9 shows Captain Fergusson at the first Rust-Oleum factory in New Orleans.)

The invention of a rust-preventive paint, and its later embodiment in an aerosol can was important for the modern graffiti subculture that emerged half a century after his invention, because a rust-preventive paint satisfies one of the key characteristics that graffiti writers base their preference for spray paint on, durability. Rust-Oleum paint not only makes the surface it is applied to more durable against the elements, but the paint itself is extremely durable against the ravages of weather and time. It stays adhered to surfaces and holds its color long after other spray paints have faded away. Compared to fine art supplies it is like the difference between oil paint and water color in terms of durability. This makes it very popular among graffiti writers who swear by its superiority over other brands, which tend to fade after 6 months to a year. It also is also a very opaque paint that covers surfaces much more effectively than other big name-brands. Opacity is also a characteristic that is important for graffiti writers. Another reason graffiti writers prefer Rust-Oleum is the vast number of different colors offered by Rust-Oleum and its sub-brands, American Accents, Painter's Touch, and America's Finest. Color selection is another major characteristic upon which graffiti writers evaluate the quality of different spray paints. (Image 10 shows a can of Rust-Oleum spray paint.

Images 11 and 12 depict two of Rust-Oleum's sub-brands, Painter's Touch and American Accents.)

Statements by graffiti writers in interviews and on blogs in websites attest to their preference for Rust-Oleum, among name-brand paints. On one website that interviews famous graffiti writers with a standard set of questions, one question asks writers, "which brand of paint do you prefer using and why?" (Skateallcities.com) In response, a number of the writers interviewed state their preference for Rust-Oleum. One reputable writer from Miami states in response, "Anything by Rusto is the best!" Another famous writer from Los Angeles simply responds, "Rusto. It lasts."

Graffiti writers evaluate the quality of this paint based on the form that it takes when used, which is synonymous with its function. Aesthetically, the paint looks good when it's sprayed on a surface and it stays looking good for months and even years after, despite harsh weather conditions. This is a perfect example of how form is function and function is form. (Molotch, 2005) The form the paint takes on a wall reflects the quality of its function as an art medium.

Krylon is a historically very popular brand in the graffiti subculture, which has fallen out of favor in the last 5 or 10 years due to a decline in the quality of the paint. Although it is a must-mention when talking about spray paint and the modern graffiti subculture. Krylon was perhaps the first widely favored paint in the graffiti subculture, featured in many works of graffiti, particularly during the 1980's. Pieces featuring a can of Krylon, with its distinctive 5-dot logo, are in abundance in photographs from the time, such as many of the pictures of graffiti in Chalfant's books. The preference for Krylon has always been tied to its smoothness and consistency of release from the can. With the

proper nozzle attached, Krylon spray paints produce clean, uniform, sharp lines that tend to drip less than other popular brands like Rust-Oleum that can sputter or chunk when coming out of the can. Krylon is not as popular as it once was though, in large part because the quality of the paint, in terms of opacity and durability, has greatly diminished since about the mid to late 1990's. However, graffiti writers who specialize in doing complex pieces especially prefer Krylon, even today. Although Krylon isn't as opaque or durable as other paints, when painting a complex piece, especially in a legal location, many layers of paint are used, which makes up for the lesser opacity and durability that a single coat might have. Krylon is also a very widely available spray paint, being carried at any number of mega stores like Wal-Mart and K-mart, as well as arts and crafts chains like Michael's and Pearl Art. Krylon has been since 1965, the largest US producer of spray paints. (Krylon.com) (Image 13 depicts a can of Krylon spray paint.)

The images of cans of Krylon spray paint in works of graffiti, identified by its iconic logo, is in itself evidence of the popularity of the brand in the graffiti subculture in the past. In addition, interviews with graffiti writers, particularly piecers, on the internet, show that even today, despite its poorer quality, Krylon is still the "old-faithful" of spray paints in the graffiti subculture. When asked the question about which brands of paint they prefer, graffiti writers who were interviewed sometimes praised both Krylon and Rust-Oleum. One responded, "Krylon for the sharp clean cuts and Rusto to blast shit out." (Skateallcities.com) (Image 14 shows a can of Krylon depicted in a work of graffiti.)

In addition to these two popular and widely available brands that are sold in hardware stores, art stores, and mega stores all over the country, there are also a number

of poor quality brands that graffiti writers lump all into one group. Some call it “trash paint” (Ferrell, 64), others call it “dollar paint” or “99 cent paint” (reflecting its price). This paint is generally not the preference of graffiti writers and excessive use of it is a sign of lesser status, but many graffiti writers, in the interest of frugality given limited budgets, use trash paint to do the simple jobs, like fill in large spaces, draw out sketches, or pay down a first coat. Most graffiti writers, if they have to pay for paint, would prefer to pay \$1 than the \$3 Krylon usually goes for, close to \$4 Rust-Oleum typically goes for, and the \$5, \$6 and \$7 designer paints go for. (Image 8 depicts a piece outlined with trash paint, and demonstrates its substandard quality.)

I say “if they have to pay for paint” because stealing spray paint is an age-old tradition in the modern graffiti subculture. Rejecting a “culture of consumption”, the modern graffiti subculture has made the practice of shoplifting its essential tool, spray paint cans, an important part of its subculture. Many graffiti writers consciously reject a “society organized around purchase” as described by Stuart Ewen in his book, *Captains of Consciousness*. (74) Ewen states bleakly that, “The acceptable arena of human initiative is circumscribed by the act of purchasing.” (75) However, the modern graffiti subculture rejects this state of affairs, acceptable or not, and strongly encourages the stealing of spray paint to support one’s graffiti career.

Evidence of this sentiment is evident in many forms. Ethnographic research on the graffiti subculture has always turned up the ideal of stealing spray paint rather than buying it among graffiti writers. Castleman found that virtually all of the spray paint used by the early subway writers in New York in the 1970’s and early 1980’s was shoplifted, a practice known as “racking” among the writers. (46) He also discovered that there was

even a sort of black market for spray paint among the writers, pointing out that, “Some rackers are better than others, and those who are best at it will often take more paint than they can use, selling the excess to other writers who are less skilled at stealing or more timid about it.” (47) Evidence of racking among contemporary writers is also evident in interviews of writers on graffiti websites. When asked if she “racks” or buys her paint one female graffiti writer states, “I can’t remember the last time I bought paint.”

(Skateallcities.com) This may be an exaggeration, and while many graffiti writers do buy paint, there is an emphasis in the graffiti subculture on stealing paint whenever possible. Writers who purchase their paint are often considered suckers by their peers. (Image 15 depicts boxes of paint stolen by graffiti writers. Notice that all of it is of the Rust-Oleum brand.)

Having discussed the preference for stealing and aversion for buying spray paint in the modern graffiti subculture, I can now turn to what is paradoxically the most preferred and, at the same time, least used spray paints in the graffiti subculture, designer spray paints. Designer spray paints are designed and produced specifically for use by graffiti writers. Different cans for different purposes are produced and marketed specifically for the graffiti subculture. However, these designer spray paints are the most expensive spray paints available, costing as much as one and a half, to two or three times as much as a name-brand spray paint. Further preventing writers’ access to them is the fact that they are generally not sold in large retail stores where they can be shoplifted. The only retail stores they are sold in are small retail shops that cater to the hip hop and graffiti subcultures, and one art store chain. However, wherever they are sold, their obvious potential as a target for shoplifting leads store owners and employees to keep

them under tight observation, if they aren't completely locked up or behind a counter in order to prevent shoplifting. Therefore, most graffiti writers, who are poorly funded, must use them sparingly, if at all, since they are so difficult to steal and so expensive to purchase. The dominant brands of spray paint that are commonly used in North America, as well as in Europe, were all created and are all produced in Europe and shipped to North America.

The story behind the creation of designer spray paint, known to North American writers as "Euro-paint", is another example of a "lash-up." (Molotch, 2005) The first designer spray paint was created in Barcelona, Spain, under the brand name Montana. In 1993 two graffiti writers in Barcelona decided to open a retail shop catering to the hip hop and graffiti subculture. They desired to have a line of spray paints produced for use by graffiti writers and approached a local paint company with the idea. Although the company was not convinced of the profitability of marketing spray paints to graffiti writers, Jordi Rubio, the commercial manager at the spray paint factory was very intrigued by the two writers' idea and contacted them a year later in order to ask that they become partners with him and help him develop a brand of custom spray paints for the market of graffiti writers. In 1994 the two writers organized a graffiti event called "Aerosol Art" and invited writers from all over Europe to come and paint, offering to provide free paint. At the event they distributed the first cans of Montana spray paint and graffiti writers have been using it ever since. Shortly after they developed their premiere line, "Montana Hardcore" and later in 2001 released another line of spray paint under the name "Alien". The Alien sub-brand is canned with less pressure so as to be more useful

in painting complex pieces, where writers want the paint to exit the can at as low a velocity as possible. (MTNcolors.com)

The “lashing-up” of all these different actors at the same time is what led to the development of designer spray paints in the graffiti subculture. It is no surprise that graffiti writers wanted access to paint that was specifically developed for their needs and uses, but it took the combination of graffiti writers knowledge of the subculture, and a producer’s knowledge of production, for that dream to become a reality.

However the story doesn’t end there. Since Montana spray paint was first introduced, a large market for it quickly developed as a result of skillful marketing using different methods, as well as writers becoming aware of its superior quality due to word-of-mouth interactions among writers. Some of the company’s marketing tactics include running advertisements in graffiti magazines and on graffiti websites, and sponsoring famous graffiti writers by giving them paint to use in their own graffiti. In 1997, due to high demand among graffiti writers, the company began exporting spray paint across Europe and to North America. In the same year the company signed an agreement with a German company, L&G, for the exclusive distribution rights in Germany, and a number of other countries in Europe. L&G then conspired with Motip Dupli (known to Americans as Dupli-Color) to manufacture and label spray paint cans for L&G to be sold to the market Montana had established. Motip Dupli, recognized the profit potential of the graffiti market for spray paints and made an offer to buy Montana from Jordi Rubio and the two writers who helped him start the company. The offer was refused. L&G then began a campaign against the fledgling Montana company that sought to discredit the company and steal its customers. Among other efforts, L&G conducted a patent search

and discovered that Montana did not have a patent for the brand-name “Montana” and the patent for that name was held by a Swiss company, unrelated to the spray paint business. L&G then signed a deal with the Swiss company to pay it royalties for exclusive use of the name “Montana” and began labeling and marketing its paints, manufactured by Motip Dupli, under the brand name Montana. Not only had L&G stolen customers and markets from the company it had signed an agreement with to be merely a distributor, but it had also stolen company’s popular brand name. Thus a dichotomy was born between the authentic Spanish Montana, and the imposter German Montana. Since then the Spanish Montana company has begun labeling its spray paint cans “MTN” in order to avoid further lawsuits and harassment from the company owned by L&G, although it still largely goes by the name Montana. The dispute between the two companies still remains unresolved to this day. (Images 16 and 17 depict cans of Spanish Montana’s Hardcore and Alien sub-brands. Images 18 and 19 depict cans of German Montana’s Black and Gold sub-brands.)

The difference between the two Montana brands though is not lost on graffiti writers and the word is out in the subculture that the “real” Montana is the Spanish one, which continues to market its Montana Hardcore and Alien sub-brands around the world. It still remains the preferred brand of designer spray paint between the two brands, but the fraudulent German Montana maintains sales due to its distribution rights in certain countries and the ignorance of some writers regarding the difference between the two. Graffiti writers’ own comments on graffiti web blogs testify to their preference for Spanish Montana, out of loyalty to the authentic brand, if not for reasons of quality. On a popular blog for graffiti writers there is even a thread specifically devoted to the

difference between the two Montana's. One writer comments, "Yeah, I was reading that German montana found out that Spanish MTN didn't have a copyright on the name "Montana", so they stole the name, then copyrighted it and that's why Spanish Montana uses the MTN logo now. That, and to avoid confusion on which brand is which. German Montana is good paint, but even most of the colors in the "Black" line are bitten from spanish MTN. They even cite the item #'s of MTN next to the German item #, so you can color match.I'd rather go with the original." Another writer praises the Alien sub-brand of the Spanish Montana company, "Alien all the way, pressure control and coverage second to none. You can't fuck with the color pallet either." (Bombingscience.com)

In returning to the concept of form and function, the design of the cans the paint is contained in is another interesting aspect of this conflict. Whereas previously I have discussed form in terms of the aesthetic form the spray paint takes once it has been used on a surface in the production of graffiti, I now turn to the form the actually can itself takes in terms of the design and decoration of the label it is wrapped in. The label the Spanish Montana uses does not have any graffiti lettering or any representations of graffiti on it. In contrast, the German Montana has labels designed for attracting the attention of graffiti writers, with graffiti lettering incorporated into the design and logo. I can only speculate, but I would think that the fraudulent German Montana company uses a more outwardly graffiti stylized form in order to trick unknowing graffiti writers into thinking it is the "real" Montana. It is also worth pointing out here that the name-brand paints like Krylon and Rust-Oleum that are sold widely in harware stores, art stores, and mega stores, also lack any kind of graffiti styled designs on their labels. (Images 10, 11,

12, 13, 16, 17, 18, and 19 depict the form of all the different spray paint cans. Notice the graffiti styled lettering on the cans of German Montana spray paint in images 18 and 19.)

Conclusion

In analyzing spray paint as a cultural object it is clearly apparent how incredibly important spray paint is to the modern graffiti subculture. It took the fortune of a number of “lash-ups” to come together to bring spray paint to where it is today. However, spray paint is not just another object, it is the object that the whole subculture is based on and the subculture would never have come to exist how it does today if it wasn’t for that simple object, the spray paint can. In this regard one can conceive of spray paint itself as possessing some sense of agency as an object. This agency is apparent both on the more superficial level, that the availability, or lack thereof, of different spray paints influences the graffiti that the subculture produces; but it is also apparent on a more subtle level, in that spray paint is the modern graffiti subculture. The two are intimately and inseparably linked together, and in fact they are one entity.

Molotch explains how retailers often affect the merchandise that is produced for sale in their stores. What products and forms they take is often determined by retailers who want products to fill different niches that they need in their stores. Therefore designers and producers of merchandise produce items to be sold specifically in those stores. If it wasn’t for those retailers the products would have been designed or produced differently. In a sense, what they produce is at the mercy of what retailers want them to produce.

However, with spray paint, this idea goes a step further, in that the graffiti that writers paint is largely affected by what spray paint is available to them. In order to paint the best art they can, graffiti writers need access to the best paints they can get. If they can't get good quality paints, the art they produce suffers. They are, in a way, both enabled and constrained by the range of mediums available to them. Although spray paint is an indelible part of the graffiti subculture, the availability of spray paint itself and different spray paints in particular has enabled the modern graffiti subculture to flourish; the lack of availability or difficulty in obtaining spray paints of higher quality can retard a graffiti writer's potential to create the best graffiti he or she can paint.

However, conceiving of objects and agency in this way only skims the surface of the concept of an object having agency. On a deeper level, one can really conceive of an object as having agency in that it is such an integral part of a cultural experience that the object and the culture are inseparably bonded together as one. The meaning that spray paint embodies as an object is deeply imbedded in its role as a cultural object in the modern graffiti subculture. It might seem odd to think of a physical object as having agency or role or status, those terms seem to be applicable to people not things, but that's what spray paint is in the graffiti subculture. It has agency, plays a role, and confers status.

Alfred Gell discusses the meaning of objects and their capacity for agency in the context of art in his book, *Art and Agency*. His analysis sheds light on the concept of agency in regards to objects, and applies equally well to spray paint in the graffiti culture. He places emphasis on art as having agency in the sense that it transcends the boundaries of being merely another inanimate object. Gell argues that this is a superior way of

viewing an object such as a piece of art, “because it is pre-occupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process, rather than with the interpretation of objects ‘as if’ they were texts.” (6) Objects aren’t just some inanimate thing that can be deciphered by physical examination; they actually play a meaningful role in social processes within a culture. They don’t just have meaning, they confer meaning. Furthermore, the meaning an object has and confers is determined within the context of the culture it is a part of.

Is a can of spray paint really just another tool for use around the home or workplace, for small crafts or odd jobs, or is it much more than that? It is much more than that and that much more is because it is a part of this wider sub-cultural phenomenon that is modern graffiti. As Gell puts it, “Nothing is decidable in advance about the nature of this object, because the theory is premised on the idea that the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded.” (7)

One can not understand an object like spray paint by itself. Rather, one needs to understand spray paint, and the agency it embodies, as a function of the relational context of the social interactions within the modern graffiti subculture. Only then, can one truly understand the significance of spray paint as a cultural object.

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Images

1. Big Tag - Revok



3. Throw-ups – Honke



4. Throw-ups – Resq



5. Throw-ups – Hael and Tlok



6. Pieces – Clown



7. Pieces – Revok



8. Trash Paint



9. Captain Fergusson



Captain Fergusson with the Stockyards Kilty Band

10. Rust-Oleum

(c) 2000 Gregory Gulik



11. Rust-Oleum – Painter's Touch



12. Rust-Oleum – American Accents



13. Krylon



14. Krylon in Graffiti



15. Stolen Spray Paint



16. Spanish MTN Hardcore



17. Spanish MTN Alien



18. German Montana – Black



19. German Montana – Gold

