Clouds of my own breath exit my mouth as I pull tighter my coat. I'm walking with my friends through Richmond's Canal Walk, a spot in Richmond famous for its nationally recognized murals. I pause to reflect on the craftsmanship of each mural. Where else can you see a structure filled wall to wall with murals outside a museum? Walking further through the Canal Walk, tiny sprouts of graffiti spring up.

Graffiti as street art is an integral part of Richmond's culture. It's seen everywhere from the sides of buildings and bus stops, to newspaper stands and river rocks. Richmond is a city molded by the artistic expression flourishing within it. This research aims to examine the graffiti found in Richmond, and the ripple effect it creates with university policies about graffiti at VCU. First, I'll examine Richmond's graffiti, VCU's policies regarding graffiti and compare it to other universities' graffiti policies, and look forward with how graffiti and art education in Richmond should interact in the future.

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In 1977, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) bought Grove Avenue Baptist Church. VCU changed the meaning of this place from a house of worship to a musical performance center, James W. Black Music Center. Inside the music center, the interior still looks like a church. There's stained glass windows, a raised platform (which I assume used to hold an altar), and pews. However, because a different higher power (VCU) claims ownership of it (Grove Avenue Baptist Church), the context and therefore the meaning of the place has changed. VCU has a habit of buying historic buildings in Richmond as a way to further develop the campus. Similar to a country colonizing a territory, VCU, as a higher power, bought Grove Avenue Baptist Church, subsequently changing the meaning and standards to fit their agenda and made new rules about the space. No longer will religious ceremonies be held here; now, only music will be played here. James W. Black Music Center has a new meaning, and therefore, a new place. Cresswell differentiates between space and place (2004). He says that space is neutral, and only by adding meaning does a space transform into a place. Places are able to adapt and change meanings.

People create place through other forms, such as graffiti, in Richmond. Before I further discuss graffiti in Richmond, I need to define what it is and what it isn't. Graffiti is a less refined version of street art. Gartus, Klemer, and Leder (2015) say that graffiti is writing on public walls, and street art is a more advanced form of graffiti. Street art is "…an artistic style that makes use of the streets as an artistic resource" (Gartus, Klemer, & Leder, 2015, p. 65). Vanderveen and Eijk (2016), however, finds no difference between street art and graffiti. They say there is, "…no clear-cut distinction between graffiti and street art and that definitions based on form (e.g. tag, mural) cross legal definitions — the works of the (in)famous writer Banksy illustrate this point (Banksy's work is often illegal but his work has also been sold and has featured in exhibitions, for example alongside Andy Warhol" (p.108). This complicates the line between graffiti and street art. It leads me to believe there is a graffiti gentrification, a factor of wealth associated with

sanction and meaning of graffiti. Meaning is derived from context, just the same for graffiti displacement or church displacement. I originally believed that graffiti belonged on the streets, and once placed in a museum, it loses a critical component of its meaning. Interviews conducted and studies read during this research changed my idea of how a work's worth is defined by the context of its placement. Does context really make a difference when viewing graffiti?

Gartus, Klemer, and Leder (2015) conducted an experiment in which researchers measured eye movements while participants evaluated "…beauty, interest, emotional valence, as well as perceived style for modern art and graffiti art embedded into either museum or street contexts" (p. 64). They found that artwork was look at longer when in a museum context because there was less distractions. Surprisingly, this didn't necessarily mean the pieces were evaluated higher. Modern art was the only type of art rated as more beautiful and interesting in a museum context (Gartus, Klemer, and Leder, 2015). The results surprised me. "[Other] authors argue that the street context is essential for this kind of art. Yet, in our study, graffiti art was not rated significantly less beautiful, less interesting or less affectively positive when seen in a museum as opposed to a street context" (Gartus, Klemer, and Leder, 2015, p. 72). Context for graffiti is not as important as I once thought.

I interviewed Dr. William Wightman, an Art Education Coordinator and Professor of Art and Art Education here at JMU. I asked him if there's ever a "right space" for graffiti to exist. Graffiti in galleries is contemporary art, but graffiti under a bridge is dirty anarchy.

He told me about Jean-Michel Basquiat, a graffiti artist who originally worked on the streets, but was elevated to the world of fine art. His graffiti art pieces became fine art simply by being placed in museums. I realized context for graffiti is fluid, occasionally flowing from streets to museums with ease.

"*His [Jean-Michel Basquiat] early work was very graffiti-like, but he was also doing a lot of tagging. Andy Warhol "discovered" him and elevated him into this world-renowned artist. He did graffiti, but it was elevated to fine art and it became worth a lot of money. It's really hard to say if there's a definite space for graffiti, but when it goes into museum context, the whole context changes. It's not really necessarily graffiti anymore, it's like…graffiti cleaned up. I don't know how else to say it. Graffiti should exist on streets, on trains, on sidewalks, on buildings. That to me is where it exists, therefore, that's where it should exist. It's hard, though, to define that graffiti should only stay there. When graffiti infiltrate other spaces, it's interesting to see how those spaces adapt to that.*"

Once Basquiat's art became elevated to fine art, a vital component of graffiti, its spontaneity, was compromised. Talking to Dr. Wightman, I realized there are pros and cons to each side of idea of place and graffiti. It all boils down to the artists' values. Is it more important for one to be world-renowned, or "stay true to the streets"? If the artists are after world-renowned fame, then placing graffiti work into museums will suit them well. Contrary, staying on the street gains

fame for the underground scene, but not necessarily to the rest of society. How would a primary source for graffiti, someone who lives it, respond to this question?

Marcus is a graffiti artist in Richmond, VA. He helped me gain a perspective of graffiti from someone who actually goes out there and finds passion in his artwork. I asked him if he believed there was ever a "right place" for graffiti to exist. Does graffiti belong in a museum or on the streets?

"Well I wouldn't say either of those are completely correct. There are certain people who think those things for sure but there are plenty of legal spots, and half of what makes graffiti so compelling is the danger involved. Anyone can commit to paint a canvas, but would you jump a fence, risk getting mugged, arrested, beaten or even killed just to paint a wall? Also Banksy found a huge part of his popularity through a gallery showing of his work in which he painted an elephant. His works now go for thousands in some cases. Not to mention there's one case where a graffiti buff(remover) power washed one of his pieces and got fired. He had no idea who Banksy was, and the piece was illegally painted."

His response inspired me to ask a new question: is graffiti more about the process, the danger involved, the adrenaline rush, than the products (such as tags)? Once again, the idea that graffiti in museums can have benefits was supported. Banksy found fame through art gallery showings. Also, fame saves some people from legal prosecution, such as Banksy painting sides of buildings. Even though Banksy's work was illegally done, his work somehow had a sanction around it. So much, in fact, that it cost one worker his job for removing it.

Talking to Dr. Wightman, he kept stressing the point that gang-related graffiti is *not* graffiti; it's vandalism. Two of the largest gang rivalries in Richmond are the Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples (both Imperial Gangster Disciples and Insane Gangster Disciples). The Office of the Attorney General provided visual examples of gang graffiti in Richmond (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).

Figure 1. *Latin King Graffiti in Richmond, VA. An Introduction to Gangs in Virginia – Office of the Attorney General*. Office of the Attorney General.

Figure 2. *Insane Gangster Disciples in Richmond, VA. An Introduction to Gangs in Virginia – Office of the Attorney General*. Office of the Attorney General.

Figure 3. *Imperial Gangster Disciples in Richmond, VA. An Introduction to Gangs in Virginia – Office of the Attorney General*. Office of the Attorney General.

Ralph Cintron discusses the style of graffiti of various gangs in Chicago, which match many of the elements in the images of Figures 1-3. From this chapter, I identified the pitchfork and six-pointed star (see Figure 2) as symbols of the Gangster Disciples. The six-pointed star is the same star that Jewish people use as the Star of David. Cintron discusses gangs using mainstream symbols, and giving them new meaning in new contexts. The Star of David and the star of the Gangster Disciples is the physically the same, yet contains completely different meanings in these two separate contexts. Cintron says that, "…these meanings were appropriated from the mainstream, but they underwent a translation to emerge as gang meanings that, for the most part, could no longer be read by the mainstream" (Cintron, 1997, p. 168). These gang graffiti examples clearly show territoriality. I do not think there is any disrespect shown towards other gangs in these three figures, but cannot be certain. Cintron discusses gang representations of disrespect as reversed letters, upside down letters or symbols, or addition of "k" (killer) (Cintron, 1997). Gangs disrespect each other to assert dominance over another and mark territory. The fact that I cannot be certain attests to the gangster graffiti subculture that creates its own lexicon so deeply rooted in underground ideology that someone like myself can't help but scratch my head when I see it. This graffiti is a glimpse into the subcultural world of gangs. From the perspective of conventional society (as opposed to subcultural society, like gangs), I argue that these foreign gang meanings create a sense of Baudrillard's *semiurgy* to our conventional society (Baudrillard, 1978). Baudrillard discusses how today we live in a world where we are constantly bombarded with signs that require us to make meaning of them. In order to fight back the semiotics, he recommends semiurgy. That is, the "art of creating new signs and sign systems." Instead of consuming, we're creating. To us, these gang signs are meaningless, empty signifiers in a world full of meaningful signs. Upon further research, I now know these are not random doodles and signs; these symbols hold meaning for their respective gangs.

Aside from unsanctioned graffiti, Richmond allows some graffiti to be done in the city. The city calls them murals, but, if I am looking at graffiti through Gartus, Klemer, and Leder (2015)'s definition of graffiti of writing on public walls, it is still graffiti. Even if we were to call the murals "street art" it would still be a category of graffiti. The city deems these murals to be sanctioned art, and by hiring specific artists to paint these murals, exerts control and a filter over the art produced in Richmond. The Richmond Mural Project is funded by the city of Richmond to boost tourism (Prestidge, 2013). Graffiti artists, varying from local to national to international, are recruited to paint these murals. When an artist finds a building he or she would like to paint, he or she talks to the owner of the building. If the owner agrees, the artist asks the owner about the history of the building and how he or she feels about the community. The artist listens, takes notes, and tries to paint a mural that would best express the owner's feelings described. Indirectly, the artist is helping the owner express ownership of place through art.

VCU's Policies Regarding Graffiti

Richmond acts as a living, breathing sketchbook for artists of all backgrounds. VCU and VCU Arts supports a zero tolerance policy regarding graffiti; students caught tagging can be sentenced to jail or expelled from the university.

VCU Arts' portfolio requirements stat that, "Drawing from observation is recommended, while copying anime, cartoons, graffiti or tattoos is discouraged" (Freshman Applicants: Visual Arts & Design, n.d., n.p.). I found it odd that VCU Arts was one of the only art schools to specifically discourage students from submitting graffiti as an art portfolio piece.

In addition, the VCU Arts program freshman handbook designates a section to graffiti, titled "Prohibited Materials: Graffiti". It's a short paragraph, quickly getting to the point that if you are found tagging, you will be prosecuted (and that *former* art students have served time for this). I found that there was an entire list of prohibited art materials (such as cement, plaster, bodily fluids, and extension cords), but graffiti had its own section (*VCU's Art Foundation Program Survival Guide*, n.d.).

Dr. Pamela G. Taylor is a professor of Art Education at VCU. I found her name in *Virginia Art Education Association* online newsletter, writing an opinion piece on graffiti and art education. I emailed her and received no response from her regarding why VCU might have this policy. Moving forward, I asked Dr. Wightman if he had any insight why VCU is so fervently against graffiti, more than any other art school I researched.

"I don't know. I don't know if they're trying to not support it, so to speak, or give it attention. I think also there's a tradition with portfolios that you want to see the artists' skills in a fine arts context. Tagging itself is a skill. If you went out and had no experience with it, compared to someone who has had years of experience of it, they're going to look different. VCU probably wants applicants' portfolios to align with what they're looking for in student work to match the

context that they're going to get in the coursework. I don't think there's tagging classes at VCU."

I agree. I think besides discouraging graffiti as a whole, VCU Arts doesn't see how this street style would fit into the art education classes offered, with courses such as fine arts painting and printmaking. Plus, for legality reasons, the threat of gang graffiti, the strict anti-graffiti laws in Richmond, and the 20-30 student arrests made for graffiti within the past 2 years, VCU has to say they do not condone it (Commonwealth Times, 2004). It's no big secret that a majority of graffiti done in the Fan (a district within Richmond) is done by VCU students (according to Sgt. Jon McAchren of the VCU police), and VCU wants to curtail that behavior (Commonwealth Times, 2004).

But how do other schools deal with graffiti? George Mason University allows chalking as the only permissive graffiti (University Policies, George Mason University, n.d.). The only stipulation is that the chalking must be on the sidewalk, not stairs, buildings, or walls. Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) clearly draws the line between what is and what is not considered graffiti. Graffiti to them is defined as any defacement of CMU property. Chalking, however, is a permissible form of graffiti (Carnegie Mellon University, Student Government Graffiti and Poster Policy, n.d.). VCU allows chalking, but with limitations. Students must contact the university's Event Planner, and the students must clean the graffiti at the end of their reservation period (University Student Commons & Activities Division of Student Affairs, n.d.).

Why is chalking allowed at these universities? Claire Potter's *Chalking Borders* discusses the appeal of chalking for students and universities, which could help explain why chalking is allowed on campus. Similar to graffiti in the potential of anonymity, Potter describes the benefits of chalking as, "Chalking became the perfect strategy for those…invisible activists…every chalker was a revolutionary, and no one was accountable" (Potter, 2008, p. 61). The difference between graffiti and chalking lies in the easiness of removal by water or smudging by passing feet. Chalking allows students to take ownership of space within permission of the university. Chalking also gives a voice to marginalized groups that don't feel comfortable in the public sphere, similar to graffiti giving a voice to the voiceless. Potter says that, "Because of this, until recently, chalkings appeared primarily on National Coming Out Day…" (Potter, 2008, p. 58). Students who felt intimidated announcing their sexuality were empowered and given agency through chalking messages. These chalking messages help students to find their identity and claim power.

Staiger (2015) discusses how students and administrators in schools struggle to find power and identity. The high school students use graffiti to gain power and identity, while the school uses sports competitions and school colors to gain power and identity. Both are symbols of a higher allegiance, and identifying with them makes the university and students a part of something bigger. When students tag on school property, they challenge the school's authority and right to be there. Athletic competitions allow administrators to channel teenagers' rowdiness into an organized, disciplined team. The whole scene is a power play. VCU Arts, partnered with

Richmond's Fan District Association, buffs graffiti as a way to establish authority and reclaim spaces claimed by taggers. VCU does not see this graffiti as art, and holds no qualms for its removal.

What do these policies say about graffiti and art (and is there a difference?) Bicknell (2014)'s article, *Is Graffiti Worthy of Protection?* explores the definition of art by the government. Under VARA (Visual Artists Rights Act), defining what is art used to be if "(1) the visual art in question has'stature,' i.e. is viewed as meritorious, and (2) that this stature is 'recognized' by art experts, other members of the artistic community, or by some cross-section of society" (Bicknell, 2014, p. 341). Graffiti lawsuits became more prevalent, so additions were made to this act. These additions for graffiti protection included significant public exposure, removal of the work without destroying the building it's on (if it's made on a building), and location *not* contributing to a work's meaning. I can understand how university policies regarding graffiti can relate to protecting graffiti if it can be safely removed without destroying the surface it's made on. The example used in the text was tying a ribbon onto a statue as sending a message/protesting. Since the ribbon can be removed without ruining the statue, this graffiti is worthy of protection. I don't understand how universities can judge a graffiti's meritorious nature when deciding to protect it or erase it. Having a work being recognized by other members of the art community is a highly subjective matter that can be altered by simply the words used to describe it.

The way people talk about graffiti frames how it's perceived. The words we use to describe graffiti and street art in general are loaded with connotations, both positive and negative. Framing is not only words used to describe what graffiti is, but also what it isn't. Cresswell talks about graffiti as a "discourse of disorder" (1992). In an official VCU press release (Burkett & Nuckolls, 2014), words such as "vandalism", "destructive", and "defacing" were used. This puts a negative frame on graffiti, with no support in this article of graffiti as a positive force. Vanderveen & Eijk (2016)'s article discussed the different ways graffiti can be perceived, and how that contributes to people's opinions. They say that the broken window theory and the appearance of disorder contributes to the government's (and universities') motivation to remove graffiti. Broken window theory is, "readily observable corporeal characteristics signal neighborhood disorder and lead to increased criminal behavior" (Michener, 2013, p. 777). Researchers found that most people were torn between their perceptions of graffiti, with statements like "It's criminal, but so beautiful." They also found that, "…positive evaluations are mostly connected to aesthetic qualities, while negative evaluations are connected to aesthetic and moral judgments" (Vanderveen & Eijk, 2016, p. 120). Negative perceptions of graffiti fell into one of three categories: (1) graffiti is unlawful, but does not pose a problem, (2) graffiti shouldn't be here because it is ugly, or (3) graffiti is a sign of disorder, crime, and danger.

Out of curiosity, I asked Dr. Wightman if he recognized a difference between art and graffiti.

"I think there's a difference. I don't think the art of mark-making is different. The difference is where the mark is made and the context for which the mark is made. If [graffiti] is not gang-

related, then it's something different. It's more like what artists are doing, making their mark visible."

Aligning with what was stated before, reasoning plays a vital role in defining graffiti versus street art. Where the mark is made holds just as much importance as the reason why the mark was made. Gartus, Klemer, and Leder's study proves that context is not important with graffiti, but I disagree to a point. I think it is a factor that unavoidably has to be taken into account when looking at graffiti, because the context contributes to the meaning. It's as if an actor was saying, "don't pay attention to where I'm at, but just listen to what I'm saying." It's unavoidable, the audience will notice the location.

The Future of Art Education and Graffiti

Then I thought, "Well, should the policy change, or should the art education dynamically adapt to the changing culture context of the city in which VCU teaches? Even more, how should art educators talk about graffiti?" Art educator journals contributed a clearer understanding of potential solutions to art education and graffiti.

Hampton (2013) says that when graffiti is taught in the right setting (such as classrooms or mentorships), graffiti can be taught in a positive light. Graffiti is "…a form of creative public expression that is like visual storytelling" (Hampton, 2013, p. 52). Graffiti can provide a sense of teamwork for young adults who need guidance. Hampton argues that graffiti should not be taught to teens younger than 16 because they won't be able to differentiate between graffiti and vandalism. When I spoke to Dr. Wightman, he supported the elements of design of graffiti to be taught K-12. I suppose the difference between the two was Dr. Wightman was approaching graffiti pedagogy from strictly a design base.

Eldridge (2013)'s *An Unselfish Act: Graffiti in Art Education* provided a real life example of how students' lives were positively changed educationally, once they learned about graffiti. It talked about how, especially in urban schools, graffiti will be a part of students' everyday life. By addressing graffiti and elements of design we can learn from it, typically uninterested students will become more engaged in their learning experience. I paraphrased a quote from this article, and asked Dr. Wightman his opinion on it:

Art education needs to be re-conceptualized to be less concerned with creating visual images. It should be called visual culture education, because it will teach to look at the entire context of an image, including values and beliefs of the people creating it, and the lived social experiences of those interpreting them. – Art Education Online Journal. Do you think this is a smart move?

"Yes, it's a good idea. There was a time in art education when the thought of bringing in popular art or manifestations of art "tied to the streets" wasn't meeting the needs of the educators who believed art education should be about fine arts. I'm an educator who believes that most of what students bring to their art experience comes from what they see. There's a lot of people who see graffiti, movies, video games, signs in shopping centers. The popularity of tagging is so pervasive, particularly in urban areas, I think if you taught art education in a K-12 experience in a city, I don't know how you cannot deal with it as a topic. That's not to say encourage them to go out and do it. I think the students need to understand that it's an expression of the artist, that it's very territorial, that it's very contextual, there's styles with it, so you know it's the same language that we use when we talk about fine arts.

I think if I was doing a lesson plan about little kids and drawing, I would include a few graffiti pictures in there with fine arts pictures and say 'hey look, this is another form of marking and painting.' We may not agree with it, we may struggle with its production in our community, but nonetheless it's still very much artistic in nature. But not the gang stuff. The gang stuff is different. It really is. But the people who do these stylized letters, it's their style, it's the graffiti artist style."

If Richmond city public schools integrates graffiti into their art education for elementary, middle, and high school, a different perspective of graffiti has the potential to come about. If teenagers understand the valuable design lessons to be learned from graffiti and are exposed to it early on, it might reduce the tempting, danger-appeal of it. If Richmond city public schools trail blaze graffiti in their art programs, it would lay the foundation for VCU Arts to follow suit.

Conclusion

This search for understanding university policies about graffiti, and broader perceptions of graffiti will continue on long after this paper is turned in. The best way to separate negative public perceptions of graffiti is to educate the younger generation (especially those in urban schools) on the difference between vandalism and graffiti. Through this early education, there is the potential for colleges to incorporate graffiti coursework into their arts department, thus increasing understanding of the value of this street art (and maybe one day coming to an agreement of what street art is). Talking to Marcus and Dr. Wightman, and reading numerous articles about graffiti has changed (and complicated) my once firm feelings about place, voice, and acceptability of graffiti in the public sphere. I hope to continue to question and challenge the notions of sanction for art of any type in the future.

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