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## MAPPING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SPACE:  THE RAMIFICATIONS OF THE STREET STENCIL

By Peter Walsh

> "Despairing of ever making a name as a painter, I burnt all of my canvases.  Renouncing my poet's laurels, I tore up approximately a hundred and fifty thousand lines of verse.  Having thus established my aesthetic liberty, I invented a new art form, based on the peripatetics of Aristotle.  I called this art amphionism, in memory of the strange power which Amphion possessed over stone and the different materials of which cities are made.
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> ".....
>
> "The instrument of this art, and its subject matter, is a town of which one explores a part in such a manner as to excite in the soul of the amphion, or neophyte, sentiments that inspire in them a sense of the sublime and the beautiful, in the same way as music, poetry and so on.
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> "In order to preserve for posterity the pieces composed by the amphion, and so that they can be repeated more easily, he marks them down on a map of the city indicating the exact roads to follow.  These compositions, these poems, these amphionic symphonies are called antiopics..." -Guillaume Apollinaire. *The False Amphion or The Stories and Adventures of Baron D'Ormesan*, 1910 (1)
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> "Consequently, the particular serial effect which characterizes this pictorial genre is turned into a game of hunting down the images in the series.  Signs are repeated at different points of town; this repetition, tracing out a circuit, triggers the perception of a network: various series form a narrative network, and each image is at once a fragment and an echo of it." -Jean-Christophe Bailly. *Paris Graffiti*, 1986. (2)

SPRAY-PAINTED ON AN ABANDONED BUILDING: A bright blue silhouette of a pony-tailed girl with her brain visible in cross-section. (3)

ON THE CEMENT PAVEMENT OF A NARROW ALLEY DIVIDING TWO STRIPS OF ROWHOUSE BACKYARDS: The red image of a hypodermic needle labeled with the word "STIGMA". (4)

ON THE PEDESTRIAN WALKWAY OF A HIGHWAY OVERPASS AT NIGHT: The cut-out head of a man with a fedora, looking over his shoulder, marked in block letters "FOLLOWED?" (5)

ON THE SIDEWALK IN FRONT OF A NITECLUB: Jazzy lettering in a rectangular panel proclaiming "USE NONOXYNOL 9! KILLS HIV ON CONTACT!" (6)

The coded information of the street stencil, strewn through a city's organic topography, appears unexpectantly.  On foot as I walk to work, go for a beer, or do my laundry, these spray-painted images ambush me with secret messages, sometimes mysterious, sometimes confrontational.  Who made this?  I don't get it.  What does it mean?  Is it making fun of me?  Is it a pleasant surprise?  Should I take it as a personal note to me from someone else who, like me, is struggling with the daily difficulties of life or as an attack from some unseen cult surreptitiously undermining my world?

Street stencils are beautiful little booby-traps of information lying in wait, aesthetic gifts left behind as urban folk art,

simultaneously revealing and concealing their purposes.

Graffiti as a whole, whether "wild-style" street writing, stencils, bathroom scrawls, or sets of initials carved into the trunk of a tree, have multiple purposes. The tagger's signature marks territory and signs the self (I was here!), earning fame among fellow practitioners. The obscene joking and message making of the latrine is an eruption of repressed ideas and sexuality which have been freed by anonymity to speak in the most democratized (if gender restricted) of spaces.  With the image of a heart pierced by an arrow, lovers declare out loud their amorous state of mind and then immediately cloak themselves in suggestive mystery by leaving only their initials.

The street stencil has been used in various ways.  Being a simple form of printing, stencils, and the cutting of a template, allow for the theoretically endless mechanical reproduction of an image and/or text.  A complex visual pattern, picture or series of words can be cut at a leisurely pace in the safety of a living room or studio and then quickly be laid down in paint again and again (yes, this is an illegal art form) with little deterioration in quality. Because of these factors, essentially being what artist Anton Van Dalen has described as a "portable printing press" (7), stencil work has tended to move in certain aesthetic and ideological directions.

Towards advertising: Gallery openings, Rock and Roll band logos, and confrontational political messages are examples of this form. Sabrina Jones' political slogans and Seth Tobocman's strident commentaries, both from New York, plus ACTUP's agitprop stencils all fall within this category as does The Entire Population's "Complicity to Murder"  (1991), a yellow ribbon superimposed with a skull, that was stencilled along the parade route of the Gulf War "Victory" Parade in Washington, D.C.

Towards aesthetic picture-making: Elaborately cut images, sometimes with multiple templates for color, that operate by both showcasing the artist's sophisticated knowledge of the craft and by conveying visual pleasure to the viewer. John Ellsberry, an early and skilled practitioner of conceptual street stenciling in Baltimore, moved in this direction as he developed his skills. His multi-colored poster for the Sowebohemian Festival (circa 1988)-a woman holding a bouquet of flowers-is an excellent example, as are Seth Tobocman's WWIII magazine illustrations. David Kendell's gallery pieces also operate in this fashion.

Towards the conceptual mapping of social and cultural spaces: This direction, that takes elements from both of the previous modes of stenciling, is significant because it offers up both complex critiques of society's changing notions of public space and viable working models for enacting new uses of these spaces.

I would like to talk at length about this kind of use of the street stencil and make it the centerpiece of this essay.

Using an entire city as its' spatial "ground," a network of stenciled images can be viewed one site at a time, or be diagrammed on a map, but can never be experienced concretely, as a whole, in a single moment.  A series of this kind, by its very nature, simply cannot be seen with the naked eye.  Instead, the work exists in the mind of the viewer, who, while examining a particular spray-painted image, projects conceptually an entire pattern of individual stencils onto the city.

For the uninitiated, each stencil communicates its specific message.  D. S. Bakker's and Randy Hoffman's stencil pair, "Art Martyr Project" (1982), an image of an open palm with bleeding stigmata and another of a man with his feet together and arms outstretched, sent a bafflingly cryptic message that combined religious iconography with semaphore training manual diagrams.  Works such as these effectively alter the habituated perceptions of the pedestrians who see them, precisely because they offer no easy resolution to deciphering their content.  For the initiated, that is, the artists and others who have been given further information regarding a particular project, a stencil can have specific connotations.  In the case of "Art Martyr Project," the stencils appeared on local cultural institutions such as School 33 Art Center in Baltimore and on the homes and studios of various artists and art

sympathizers, thus designating the spaces as "safe havens for art and artists."  The project functioned in two manners: first, as the title suggests, as a parody of the generalized societal myths of the artistic "Genius" who romantically suffers and struggles to transform society before society devours them, and secondly, as a straight-faced attempt to communicate private information in public spaces by speaking in code.  This dialectic between revealing and concealing information is key to understanding the working processes of graffiti of all kinds.

(insert illustration of Hobo Symbols) Caption: A Selection of Hobo Symbols (8)

Stencil projects like this have a deep kindred relationship to the systems of hobo symbols that operated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.  Special symbolic marks indicating information like "be prepared to defend yourself," "you may sleep in a hayloft," or "must work to eat" enabled the vagabonds hopping trains to communicate with each other without letting the police and other authorities in on the message.  Stencil practitioner tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE's description of his, Polio Vasslene's, and other Baltimore stencilers' early forays (late 1970s) into stenciling as being "a sort of hide-&- go-seek game" (9) between individuals plays strongly on this notion. (NOTE: I will speak at greater length later on in this essay about the ramifications of game-playing on stenciling practices). Elaborating on these issues, cONVENIENCE has written, "I want to emphasize that, for me, this activity had a strong political angle.  Much of my purpose was to personalize the environment that I lived in but could never "own" in the only way politically acceptable to me: in resistance to the laws that I neither make, want, or benefit from!" (10) Like the hobo signs, cONVENIENCE's and Vasslene's signs had a definite element of exclusion, that is to say, the language they created was used not only to communicate but to withhold information from other social groups.

This controlling of information through coding is played out daily in society at large.  Scientists, doctors and art critics (like me) protect their turf by inventing jargon.  Banks, governments, organized criminals and military organizations protect their power bases by encrypting their secrets.  Abstract artists protect their rarefied domain by embedding esoteric historical information in their gestural languages.  By replicating these power structures on a small scale, but turning them on their heads by withholding information from those who generally control the flow and exchange of information, these particular stencilers, like the hoboes, highlight the presence of social class systems and point to the existence of informational haves and have-nots.  Of course in this dismal depiction of society, we are left with the image of stencil practitioners as prisoners, free to roam the city at will, but in actual practice held separately in ideological jail cells, tapping their secret messages back and forth.

A good example of a critique of these systems is John Ellsberry's "Blind Man's Bluff" (circa 1981), which concisely exposed both the paradoxical nature of language itself and social systems of information control. Spray-painting the Braille letters of the title, "Blind Man's Bluff," onto walls and sidewalks, Ellsberry left the sighted viewer unable to decipher his code and the sightless reader unable to receive the message for which they possess a clear system of decoding.

Other stencils, which I will outline next, point the way out of this dilemma by enabling the stenciler to communicate effectively without denying the elements of control that are implicit in contemporary society.

## Some Examples of Stencil Mapping Projects

1.  Western Cell Division's "Hypo-Stigma Project" (1989-93), which entailed collecting discarded hypodermic needles and marking the site with a "STIGMA" stencil, also operates in this space between information given and withheld, but what separates it from other cryptic stencils is its conscious symbolic function of mapping out public space.  The network created by this piece identifies a significant crisis in the public "body," that of HIV infection and AIDS.  It is not coincidental that multiple stencil projects by different artists working years apart would use imagery of the cut body stigmatized to describe the stencil's effect on a city's geographical space, and in doing so, point to a similar symbolic wounding of the social and cultural "body."  Jean-Christophe Bailly elaborates on this metaphor in his

introduction to a book containing photos of stencil work, "It is a bit as if a group of interlopers has been recorded for posterity in pictures of their tattoos: the city of Paris has been tattooed..." (11)

2.  Shepard Fairey's "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" project (1989- present), which uses both street stencils and mass-distribution of stickers, operates in a manner that allows a viewer to have an authentic personal response to Fairey's image, the face of the well-known and now deceased all-star wrestler lifted from a newspaper advertisement, without that image losing its aura of mysteriousness.  Says Fairey, "Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail.  The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker.  Because "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflects their personality and the nature of their sensibilities." (12) This "liberation" of an image from its original concrete reference point, Andre the Giant's face, causes Fairey's work to take on an iconic character that critiques advertising's commercial commandeering of public space by allowing individuals to project their own interpretations back onto the image.  The project's effectiveness is directly related to its wide-scale dispersion across not only an individual city but many cities (including Boston, New York, Charleston, Atlanta and Seattle), mapping out the commercial space of the advertisement and then subverting it.

3.  The Cultural Cryptanalysts Collective (CCC) laid out a critique of institutionalized cultural space by stenciling political comments at Baltimore's various art museums and spaces (such as the words "Local Art?" set in the image of a pair of hands revealing a message).  This project also included "Gene Therapy" (1996), a propaganda campaign that featured stencils of "locality" viruses infecting The Baltimore Museum of Art with "special viral codes of 'localness'" that CCC press releases claimed would "revive the moribund museum from its decades long coma."

4.  John Fekner's early and influential stencils from the 1970s and 80s such as the "Charlotte Street Stencils" (1980), where the words "Broken Promises," "Falsas Promesas," "Lost Hope," "Save our Schools," and "Decay" were painted in large block letters on abandoned tenements in the South Bronx, led the way out of the gallery and into a broader domain of public space unregulated by public art commissions and oversight boards.  Although his language based pieces have been designed to address the local communities in which they are created, they have also managed to garner significant national media attention.

5.  Ruth Turner's "Foxtrot" (1982-1992), playful diagrams of dance steps laid out on the sidewalk, enacted a mischievous space that allowed people to spontaneously break out into dance at dozens of different locations.  Cribbing dances from a Fred Astaire dance manual, Turner devised elaborate patterns of her own design, christening them with new names.  Underneath this optimistic veneer was a driving, almost belligerent urge to speak, to have a voice in the public arena and certainly she has been courageously prolific, making substantial numbers of large-scale stencil installations.

6.  "The need for a secret language, for passwords, is inseparable from a tendency towards play." -Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, "Methods of Detournement" September 1955 (13)

Ruth Turner's exuberantly angry aesthetic from the early eighties was informed by her contact with the sensibilities of a particular arts community in Baltimore. During the late 1970s, this group of young artists, aware of various street art projects in other cities, began what was later dubbed as the "stencil craze" by practitioner Richard Ellsberry. Mannette Letter, Polio Vasslene, tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE, Paula Gillen, John Ellsberry, Richard Ellsberry, Tim Ore, Bonnie Bonnell, Doug Retzler, D. S. Bakker, and Randy Hoffman were among those that participated.  The playfulness of this spontaneous community project, with different individuals choosing various iconic images to leave behind as a kind of visual scavenger hunt (such as Mannette Letter's "black hole" and Polio Vasslene's "Pony-tailed Girl"), transformed the urban environment in which they lived.  Effectively embodying on a practical level certain ideas such

as "psychogeography" and "unitary urbanism" that the French Situationist International were theorizing about decades earlier, these artists acted out a vision of personal engagement in public places that seems in retrospect to be deeply utopian in its sensibility.  Says Paula Gillen, "My intention with the stencils was not to gain notoriety or to deface property.  I generally picked well-worn subjects to stencil.  It was fun to alter the found environment and have your friend stumble across a stencil in some obscure location as he was walking along the streets." (14)

The ramifications of the street stencil's activation of public space is significant.  Critical dialogues and artist interventions surrounding public monuments and sculpture are a parallel development that is attempting to deal with this new depiction of public space.  Dennis Adams' "Emancipation" (1991), a photographic reconfiguring of Thomas Ball's 1874 public monument of Abraham Lincoln freeing the slaves, Krzysztof Wodiczko's slide projections onto various buildings and monuments, and Claus Oldenburg's fantastic revisions of public monuments and spaces such as his "Proposed Colossal Monument to replace the Washington Obelisk, Washington D.C.: Scissors in Motion" (1967) which transformed that well-known monument into a giant pair of open scissors, and his "Proposed Colossal Monument for the Thames River: Thames 'Ball'" (1966), which envisioned giant toilet floats chained to the bridges of the Thames, are all attempts to reacquaint viewers with spaces that have become essentially invisible.  Baudelaire's notions of the urban wanderer cut adrift in the passionate space of the city, and much of the Situationist International's theoretical agenda seem particularly relevant here as is manifest in Marien's pre-situationist call to relocate the equestrian statues of the world in one barren desert space to create one huge artificial cavalry charge. (15)

From this reactivation of public spaces, street stencils point towards the creation and reclamation of local histories.

> "All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends.  We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us towards the past." - Ivam Chtcheglov, "Formulary For A New Urbanism" October 1953

Any mapping of space inevitably draws itself towards broader issues of history.  That building local alternative histories should involve the concrete marking of sites such as performed by the "REPOhistory's Lower Manhattan Sign Project" (1992) is not accidental.  Nor is it accidental that many artists submitting materials to the "On the Street-Off the Street" stencil show responded by contributing detailed personal histories of their own and other artists' involvement in the stenciling tradition.  At the heart of public stenciling and of the construction of history itself is the issue of who gets to speak and where are they allowed to do so.  That artist Anton Van Dalen would progress from the cutting and painting of stencils to using those stencil templates to project his localized history of the Lower East Side of New York with his "Ave. A Cut-Out Theater" (1995-present), is not just an aesthetic move from one form to another (visual art towards theater and storytelling), it is the almost inevitable playing out of the social and cultural issues implied in the act of stenciling images and texts on public streets.

Networks of stencils behave like sets of temporary public monuments executed on a local scale, created by individuals but taking on broader symbolic social functions such as newspaper, critique, surprise art work and social/cultural map.  Far more than simple defacement of property or self-serving advertisement, this mapping of public space draws connections between disparate elements of complex societies and binds them together, embedding meaning in the physical geography of a city.

## Footnotes

The author expresses thanks to Western Cell Division for allowing him to review exhibition materials from "On the Street- Off the Street" while writing this essay.

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, "The False Amphion or The Stories and Adventures of Baron D'Ormesan," in *The Heresiarch*

*and Co.* (Cambridge: Exact Change, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1991), 127.  Originally published in 1910.

2. Jean-Christophe Bailly, "Traces," introduction to *Paris Graffiti*, photographs by Joerg Huber (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 8-9.

3. "Pony-tailed Girl," Polio Vasslene, street stencil, executed in Baltimore, 1979-1980.

4. "Hypo-Stigma Project," Western Cell Division, street stencil, executed in Baltimore, 1989-1993.

5. "Followed?," D. S. Bakker, street stencil, executed in Baltimore, 1983.

6. "Use Nonoxynol 9," Bob Kathman, street stencil, executed in Baltimore, 1991.

7. Western Cell Division, unpublished conversation with Anton Van Dalen, New York, April 20, 1996.

8. Illustration drawn and compiled by the author. Sources include Paul B. Janeczko*, Loads of Codes and Secret Ciphers* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1984), 9, Richard Wormser, *Hoboes: Wandering in America, 1870-1940* (New York: Walker Publishing Co., Inc. 1994), 129, Elizabeth S. Helfman, *Signs and Symbols Around the World* (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., Inc., 1967), 137-141, and Jane Sarnoff and Reynold Ruffins, *The Code and Cipher Book* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975).

9.  tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE, unpublished letter submitted as a  contribution to the "On the Street-Off the Street" stencil show, February 10, 1996, 1.

10.  Ibid., 2.

11.  Bailly, 9.

12.  Shepard Fairey, artist's statement, 1995

13.  Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, "Methods of Detournment," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 13.

14.  Paula Gillen, unpublished letter submitted as contribution to the "On the Street-Off the Street" stencil show, April 15, 1996, 2.

15.  Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," in *SI Anthology*, Knabb, 7-8.

16.  Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," in *SI Anthology*, Knabb, 1.

## On the Street-Off the Street Participants

Anonymous
Archives of the Radical Cult of Marms (Baltimore, MD)
D. S. Bakker (Baltimore, MD)
Bal Tim Ore Underground Club (Baltimore, MD)

Bug Club (Barcelona, Spain)
Church of the SubGenius - Baltimore Chapter (Baltimore, MD)
tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE (Baltimore, MD)
Alex Cortright (Baltimore, MD - Los Angeles, CA)
Cultural Cryptanalyst's Collective (Baltimore, MD)
John Ellsberry (Baltimore, MD)
The Entire Population (Baltimore, MD)
Shepard Fairey (Providence, RI)
Paula Gillen (New York, NY - Chicago, IL)
G.N.A.T. (Baltimore, MD)
Richard Hambleton (New York, NY)
Randy Hoffman (New York, NY)
Sam Holden (Baltimore, MD)
Mike Horsley (Washington, DC)
House of Frau (Baltimore, MD)
International White Trash (Barcelona, Spain)
Sabrina Jones (New York, NY)
Bob Kathman (Baltimore, MD)
David Kendall (Baltimore, MD)
G. O. Kendall (Baltimore, MD)
Ricky Kilreagan (Baltimore, MD)
Kathy B. Krampien (Baltimore, MD)
Mannette Letter (Baltimore, MD)
Francine Nandrews (Chicago, IL)
Omnidirectional Organism of Krononauts (Baltimore, MD)
Richard (Baltimore, MD)
Madenney Ssshhhmadenney (Baltimore, MD)
Keith Tishkin (Baltimore, MD)
Seth Tobocman (New York, NY)
Ruth Turner (Baltimore, MD - San Francisco, CA)
Anton Van Dalen (New York, NY)
Polio Vasslene (Baltimore, MD)
Western Cell Division (Baltimore, MD)
And More