



Caught in the moment: painting "Holy Rollers" in Atlanta, Georgia. © Warren Upson 2009.

# GROWING UP WITH GRAFFITI:

## Reflections on Transitioning From a Part-Time Felon to a Full-Time Artist, and Then Back Again

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### The Playing Field

**Can art be a sport?** Your average artist seeks refuge in the blanket of self-expression, and successfully avoiding all disconcerting competition. However, in the 1990s when my interest in graffiti became a lifestyle, the theme was all about "the art of getting over" or "the art of getting up." Art was a game and it was called graffiti.

Grffiti is an anomaly in the art world because only a percentage is the aesthetic quality, while the rest relies on the sport of how and where it's done. Public placement and lack of permission are the fundamentals. "Getting away with it" might really be the art of graffiti. One could choose to judge graffiti on its scale. The bigger is simply better. Is it 10 feet? Is it 80 feet? Did you paint over an entire train car? Others will judge it on geographic location; the more daring or imposing the place, the more valuable it is to graffiti. Was it done defying death on a bridge overpass? Where you running across the freeways? Did

you put your moniker right on the local police station? While the initiation of a point system will always be absurd, if there was honor among thieves, we would be keeping score. Graffiti by nature is self-indulgent and narcissistic; the root is putting your name in the face of others, by any means necessary. You must be relevant and there is an overwhelming competition to get noticed in a city that is busy and preoccupied. Graffiti might be 50% art and 50% sport; most get into it to play the game, and a few stay around long enough to create something with more meaning.

## Graffiti as a Lifestyle

Many vegans will exclaim, “it’s not just a diet, it’s a lifestyle”; this rings true for graffiti artists, too. What once began as fun and juvenile, perhaps even fleeting or innocent, can transform into an addiction. Those who never recover will admit it’s always on their mind. Graffiti consumes the way you look at our urban topography and how you view an advertisement’s typography. It entails always checking in on the competition—my eyes are glued to the walls when I’m driving my daily commute. I’m either thinking “what a good spot that guy got” or “why didn’t I think of that?” or “oh, that’s the perfect place for me to hit.” It’s been almost 2 decades and I’m afraid I’ll never be healthy.

In my early teens, I gained my entrance to graffiti by the typical rebellious subcultures of skateboarding and hip-hop music. It passed the time through high school and helped me create an identity among friends. I dubbed my alias “ThirdOne” or “3rdOne”; it never held a significant meaning behind it—I just liked the letter combinations. I thrived for the attention any teenager wanted; I just happened to choose an unconventional means. I was drawn to the thrill and the freedom. The risk always reaped the rewards for me. Some people believe getting caught is a trophy or a badge of honor. While getting a purple heart for



In high school I proudly posed next to my masterpiece in Gainesville, Florida. © Gabriel Lacktman 1998.

being wounded in battle is a prestigious merit, for me it was the opposite: Never getting arrested was my greatest accomplishment. Doing whatever I wanted, wherever I wanted, was enough motive for me to continue.

The ‘90s was an era of “spray can art” or “aerosol art.” The term “street art” had not developed. Even the availability of designer-brand spray paint was not invented yet. It’s important to note that at this time in history, the use of stencils was considered “cheating” and stickers were a cheap shot at gaining attention. While graffiti artists used stickers, the most common form was to steal blank labels from the post office and decorate them with alcohol-based markers, such as

Prismacolors. We could spend a good 10-30 minutes creating a small piece of graffiti, just to make one sticker. Unlike today, I was unaware of anyone using companies to commercially screen print thousands of stickers at a time. If it wasn’t made by hand, again, you were made to feel like a phony—same thing with using a brush on a wall. Wheatpasting and posters might have been on the horizon in New York, but by no means would a self-respecting traditional graffiti artist use these defiant tactics. It was strictly cans of spray paint, found exclusively at local hardware stores. It was about your letterforms, your control of the paint, the colors you used, and the optional rendering of cartoonish characters.

With a ripe addiction, coupled with a mature tolerance, how do I continue to feed my disease?



Random sketches from my notebooks. © Gabriel Lacktman 1999-2003.

## Boston and Art School

Art was all I knew, and in 1999 I moved to Boston, a much larger city than where I grew up. I was concentrating on graphic design and studying to get my BFA at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. The transition from getting reprimanded for drawing in high school classrooms to being required to draw in college classrooms was unequalled.

Boston was a mecca of talented graffiti artists. I gained a mentor and a circle of friends who all pursued graffiti together. It was a pivotal moment, because now I began to understand the true fundamentals of art and design. Through typical curriculum including color theory, advanced typography, and art history, I was able to apply traditional principles of art to my graffiti. I was beginning to recognize the spectrum of underlying tools that develop successful visual communication.

In some aspects I consider college a plateau of my graffiti career. I did most of my best spray can art in those 4 years. I achieved the placements, the sizes, and the attention that made me content at that time. I learned new techniques and successfully evaded law enforcement for another 4 years, regardless of some very unsettling close encounters.

The egos and pride of a graffiti artist are insurmountable. To this day, controversy over college-educated graffiti writers exists. It's always been odd to be, [AQ: odd to me?] but some remain stringent that "art school is cheating." Perhaps it stems from only jealousy

or insecurity but I can recall many casual conversations with other graffiti writers that "so and so goes to art school," with a tone that suggests it's an unfair advantage to the competition. Is the formal education of art a steroid to one's graffiti? I think it probably is, but my opinion is that anyone and everyone can and should attain some form of higher education. If the knowledge is available, why should you deny yourself of it? Even considering how ethically bankrupt vandalism is, the strict ethics of its participants are unusually ironic. Perhaps this is just a moment of when "keeping it real" goes wrong.

## Los Angeles and The \$tatus Faction

Paralleling the abnormality of an alcoholic's behavior, graffiti is cunning, baffling, and powerful. With a ripe addiction, coupled with a mature tolerance, how do I continue to feed my disease? In 2003, I moved across the country to Los Angeles, the second-most populated city in the US. Lacking snowfall and rain, the season for graffiti is year-round. With great independence came great responsibility and I invested my energy and time in becoming a professional and commercial graphic designer. Graffiti was lost in my priorities, but addictive behavior remains dormant only while you suppress it; you're never really "cured."

After settling into a routine and commendable design career, street art exploded. My close friends in L.A. were raised in the same demands of traditional graffiti, but everything



above  
Risking safety always comes with the territory. In 2002, I climbed four stories of scaffolding to paint graffiti on this Mass Ave. rooftop in Boston.

far left  
In 2002, during my junior year of college, I painted this piece in Sarasota, Florida. It's often haunted me as a symbol of my plateau with spray paint.

left  
This patriotic theme was painted in Boston September 12, 2001: one night after planes left from Boston's Logan Airport and crashed into the New York World Trade Center.

[AQ: ©? on above photos?]



started to evolve. For continued decades many individual graffiti artists represent an organization or crew, usually under a three-letter acronym; there are infinite ones that exist. You would tag your name and then write the three letters of your crew (usually much smaller) next to your tag. You were the meat and the crew was the potatoes.

In 2007, we formed a new artist collective and called ourselves The \$tatus Faction (T\$F). We stood apart from the tradition, because we agreed to abandon the majority of our personal identity as individual graffiti writers and foster only one name, functioning as a team. There would be only a big artery-clogging steak to eat—no side dishes. We recognized our individual limitations of spray paint and opted to use any tools necessary to make our mark. Typical to growing up, certain stigmas of fitting in became of less concern.

This meant new rules and new tools: stickers, tons and tons of stickers in any format, stencils of all sizes, bucket paint with brushes, posters, found objects, and of course spray paint—but nothing was off limits. Everything once forbidden became grounds for a renewed interest and revolution. Thus entering my personal divide from graffiti writer to street artist.

Now that focusing on our compartmentalized self-promotion was absent, we had the gift to create a message, provoke a thought, and utilize alternative mediums. Our love became not about seeing our name in public, but reaching a greater audience. Los Angeles was falling in love with street art and many people rejoiced in being able to understand it beyond typical vandalism. We continued to relish in the freedom to express whatever



## We had the gift to create a message, provoke a thought,

top

Standing tall along Sunset Blvd., “Get Over Yourself” was a humorous and vitriolic message to the people of Los Angeles. © [AQ: who holds copyright?] 2010.

above

This “xerox machine monster” was our metaphor to street artists who often overuse photocopying as their means to produce posters. © [AQ: who?] 2012.

right

This work is aptly titled “Off the Beaten Path,” because police brutality has long remained a hot topic in Los Angeles. This partially torched wall created a perfect backdrop for the addition of life-sized stencils. © [AQ: who?] 2011.



we wanted with or without consent, and it snowballed from there. We would organize art shows, paint live inside nightclubs and bars, host music events, and create legal (even commissioned) murals. Essentially everything that was frowned upon in our graffiti upbringing became our liberty under the guise of The \$tatus Faction, an aptly coined name stemming from our initial goal of “satisfaction.”

Five years later, The \$tatus Faction feels natural to me. We focus on accomplishing goals that would be impossible for one man to pull off alone. We’ve travelled together and spread out over multiple cities; we’ve done what seemed impossible when I was 16. We’ve illegally painted walls that are well over 20 feet tall, and I’ve been able to apply my talent as a graphic designer to create posters that don’t need to sell a product. We infuse a great sense of humor and satire in our work. We love to say what people are afraid to. We often point out some of the injustices in society because we can, and we do it sarcastically. Those ambitions were never accomplished by just illuminating the autograph of my alias as a tagger. The thrill is still there, the risk is still rewarding, but we get the appreciation from outsiders. It’s no longer about graffiti artists communicating only to other graffiti artists—we can reach *anyone*.

We tackle community issues we find relevant. It’s not always the most important or obvious political agendas, but it’s our ingenuity that separates us. It’s not even our technical ability or skills as artists. A large percent of the time we don’t even care how it looks. It’s about the act itself. It’s freeing to release the fears of being judged. We don’t care what people think; it’s still a mainly self-indulgent activity. We’re aware that we may not be the best at any one part of the process in particular, but that carefree attitude is what inspires us to never stop.

Examples of our mentality are frequently drawn from life in Los Angeles. The issues of celebrity fetish, police brutality, and self-obsession run rampant around here. We’ll even focus on self-deprecating humor and poke fun at our own culture of street art. It’s counterproductive to take yourself too seriously, and the pressure from the past to do graffiti the “right” or “wrong” way has turned us into uncensored visual comedians. We can’t do anything wrong anymore, in part because we feel there is nothing left to prove. So many subcultures require you to “pay your dues” before you are even given the recognition of existence. The \$tatus Faction kept the receipt of that payment.



## and utilize alternative mediums.



top  
Along the famed L.A. Sunset Strip, this enormous sticker reminds the city about its dark love affair with money and cocaine. © [AQ: who?] 2010.

above  
Hundreds of stickers give the appearance of wallpaper on this dumpster. © [AQ: who?] 2010.

left  
Los Angeles proves to be mixing up its priorities. This installation of hand-painted posters juxtaposes the social issues of our overwhelming homeless population and L.A.’s notorious paparazzi. © Phillip Sklavenitis 2011.



During any local election the city becomes riddled with political advertising. The Status Faction stenciled timely posters satirizing—yet simultaneously contributing to—said visual pollution. © Birdman 2013.

## Issues in Street Art Today

Does street art lose its luster after it becomes mainstream? Some think graffiti jumped the shark after the Museum of Contemporary Art had its largest grossing exhibit, titled “Art in the Streets.” It’s hard to make sense of it all when the reason I became interested in these things in the first place is because they were DIFFERENT and rebellious. On the other hand it’s been a lifelong battle trying to explain to people why graffiti is great and has redeeming quality. Perhaps we should celebrate this acceptance into modern society.

Graffiti is funny because when you’re young, you’re really not good at it, but when you get good at it, you’re usually old enough to know better. I’m in my 30s now and it’s been an arduous journey for the members of The Status Faction. I have a family to provide for

and a serious career. I can’t frequently stay up to the wee hours of the night risking my legal freedom to paint a wall. It’s complicated for some of us, and we’re not ready, or accepting, to let go. It’s at this junction that I define the triumph of a street artist. Only with time can I measure success. There is a never-ending flow of seasonal participants, and what is a fad to some might truly be a lifestyle to others. I acknowledge I am not the best of the best, but it never stops me. I am successful because I keep playing the game. I congratulate anyone who has committed artistic acts of vandalism for over 10 years. I don’t know if I will actually get “better” at graffiti or if my skills will improve, but I don’t care anymore. It’s a competition of endurance now. The mission is to keep it interesting. I’ve dissolved the divide between fine artist, street artist, graffiti artist, and graphic artist. I’ve renewed by enthusiasm [AQ: my enthusiasm? Or I am renewed by enthusiasm?]

with an evolution. I consider myself an artist, just plain and simple.

If graffiti was a sport, it might be reckoned to golf. The challenge is never over. Some games are great and others are just off. You practice and practice and have memorized the muscle movement, but interferences cannot be predicted. You could be young and athletic but lose to a senior citizen. You could be a seasoned golfer and lose to a new player. You might be the greatest, but how long will it last? Are you only as good as your last game? Or are you as good as your BEST game? It doesn’t matter because you love the sport of it, frustration and all. No matter how many years you play the street art game, you’ll never perfect it. ■



top  
 Since gas prices started to skyrocket, commuting by bicycle has become more popular than ever. With the increase in cycling came the increase in theft. These hand screen-printed wheatpastes poke fun at your average wanted poster. © [AQ: who?] 2011.

right  
 It took four daring individuals and two haunting nights to execute this massive graffiti along Atlanta's busy freeway. © [AQ: who?] 2009.

Graphic designer and graffiti artist Lactman, aka "ThirdOne," has created graffiti in Florida, Boston, and L.A. He holds a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and belongs to The Status Faction, a diverse group of graffiti artists in L.A. E-mail: [thirdone@earthlink.net](mailto:thirdone@earthlink.net)

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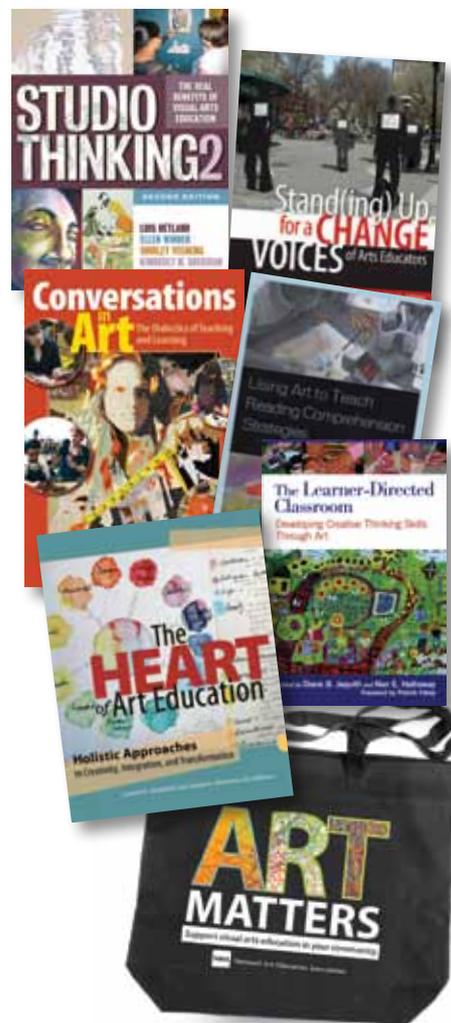
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