

MA Collaborative Dialogues

Moving Image

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Confirmative Praxis Report

ADAA7002

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Prologue

During the explorative praxis module, I was stuck on what to base my work on. After a couple of weeks looking, I'd given up hope. But while I was walking through Newport one day, I saw a coal train pass through the train station. Couldn't have been less than 30 carriages all plastered with graffiti, every single one with somebody's name on it. I was enamoured, I'd never seen anything like it before. A whole train just covered in graffiti from all over the UK. I went home that night and researched as much as I could about graffiti culture, how it's done who is it done by. I knew of Banksy but that was about extent of my knowledge of graffiti. But the more I investigated, the more I became fascinated with the subject, all the bright colours, the intricate designs I was amazed. That's when I decided to base my explorative praxis module on graffiti.

I toyed with the idea of creating graffiti initially, I did some designs over a period of a few weeks, getting better and better with each attempt. I went out and took photos across South Wales to help me improve, but I still wasn't good enough. I then had the idea to do a documentary about other graffiti artists in Wales, but the idea came to me too late. I didn't have enough time to plan, edit and film a documentary. Instead, I submitted research and practical documentation for that module, and set my sights on filming a full-length documentary on south Wales graffiti for my confirmative praxis.

Growing up I was told that graffiti is bad, and only criminals write on walls. I was told that graffiti writers are worthless criminals who only take joy in defacing property of other people. As I got older, I've realised that this is far from the case. And the person who's

writing on the wall? They're just like you and me. Normal people. The average Joe who has the courage to go and paint that wall isn't a criminal. They're an artist.

Introduction

This body of work stems from 2 main components. One being a 32-minute documentary engaging with a local graffiti artist known as RVK. And the other a series of photographs of many different graffiti pieces throughout south Wales. The documentary serves to stand as a fight against the social stigma of graffiti and street art. Attempting to pull away from the social narrative of all graffiti is bad, and all graffiti writers are criminals. Showcasing its nicer side by introducing the audience to a light-hearted, cheerful graffiti writer. It looks at the type of documentary practice known as a "observational" documentary. The work also explores wider social issues, such as criminality and the law. The second part of the works strays away from moving image and focuses on photography. Showcasing that graffiti in its natural environment can look beautiful and be considered 'real art'. It also serves as a protection to these pieces of art. Forever immortalizing them in photo, on the off chance they ever get taken down. The aim of the work is to pull people away from the stigma that graffiti has, and introduce them to a new, fresh art form for them to happily enjoy.

Concept and parameters of work

Documentary

Documentaries provide an inside look into the reality of subjects. Giving the audience a first-hand experience. Documentaries, in contrast to fictional stories, are based in reality and aim to portray, analyse, and capture actual people, places, and events. To inform and educate while provoking thought about the subject. The work aims to give the best viewpoint possible, and what better way than to follow a graffiti artist with a camera?

Because documentaries address the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker, they differ from the various genres of fiction (science fiction, horror, adventure, melodrama, and so on) in significant ways. They are made with different assumptions, they involve a different relationship between filmmaker and subject, and they prompt different sorts of expectations from audiences. (Nichols, 2017)

(Rabiger and Hermann, 2020) say that the purpose of documentaries is to allow viewers to see, feel, and experience the lives of others by delving into their problems, ideas, and feelings. Suggesting that documentary is sort of a gateway into another person's life, giving you the opportunity to see the world through their eyes. The documentary was conducted as a sort of "observational" type of documentary, with more of a focus on following the subject rather than engaging and participating with the actual documentary. (Nichols, 2017) describes the observational type of documentary as "films with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and no interviews."

Despite what (Nichols, 2017) describes as “observational” documentary. The body of work could still be considered inherently observational. As even though the work uses music and interviews, it refrains from getting involved in the actual documentary apart from speaking to the subject while he is out talking about his work. The observational type of documentary works best in this circumstance, as the aim of the work is to maintain focus on the subject matter, the artist.

When a documentary “speaks about” something, when “We speak about it to you,” for example, it speaks through composition, editing, and with music, among other things. Everything we see and hear represents not only the historical world but also how the filmmaker wants to speak about that world.

(Nichols, 2017)

(Glynne, 2013) Says that a distinct aesthetic of an observational documentary is the use of a small crew, and handheld cameras, typically manned by a single director/cameraman. This made producing the body of work far less complicated, as it can be done with just one person. There was no need to assemble a crew which costs time and money. The ability to produce the work with just one person made it far easier and more personal.

Graffiti

Graffiti has been adorning our walls and caves for centuries. Ever since the cavemen were still roaming the earth there has been some form of graffiti. (Belton, 2001) Says prehistoric art is the subject of the first category pertaining to the history of graffiti. Graffiti and prehistoric art are related by means of primitive man and his artwork. The prehistoric man marked items with a variety of symbols that symbolised the environment and world in which he lived.

Graffiti has been around for ages, from cavemen to Pompeii, to now the modern day. It has never left and now it has become a worldwide phenomenon with artists such as Banksy, and Keith Haring owning the spotlight, becoming notable writers who have left a mark on the street art world. Banksy is a very prominent figure in the graffiti world. The Bristol native is notable for works such as Flower thrower, balloon girl and kissing coppers. Famous for his political pieces on real world issues, Banksy has risen to fame in recent years gaining notoriety for pulling stunts like shredding art at an art auction and painting people's property, sending the value rocketing up in price. In most recent years Banksy painted a garage in the seaside town Port Talbot. The owner of which is said to have sold it for a "Six-figure sum" (Shaw, 2022) and again on the side of a house in Bristol increasing the value of the property by over double. He also created a mini theme park at the sea side of Weston-Super-Mare by the name of Dismaland that ran for a month and attracted people from all over the world including the likes of Jack Black, Brad Pitt and Mark Ronson. Banksy's popularity is at an ultra-high, even though no one knows exactly who he is.

Keith Haring was another popular artist "who was part of the legendary New York art scene during the 1980's" (Tate, n.d) as an openly gay man "Haring also chose to represent the hardships of the LGBTQ community in his work, including gay rights" (Tate, n.d) Recognised by his colourful works, Haring was a pioneer in the graffiti world. Sadly, Haring died on the 16th of February 1990 aged 31 due to AIDS related complications (Tate, n.d). Even in death, Haring still retains his spot as one of the most popular graffiti artists in the world. Haring founded the Keith Haring Foundation to "sustain, expand, and protect the legacy of Keith Haring, his art, and his ideals. The Foundation supports not-for-profit organizations that assist children, as well as organizations involved in education, prevention, and care related to AIDS." (Haring.com, n.d) Another artist who is prominent in the graffiti culture is Shepard Fairey. Fairey is best known for "his iconic 2008 "Hope" poster depicting then U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama." (Mancoff, 2023) Fairey first gained attention for this

creation of the André the giant and the word obey sticker. Founder of OBEY clothing, Shepard Fairey is one of the most influential street artists of our time.

It's a long-debated topic as to whether graffiti is to be considered an art form. With many people saying it isn't but others saying it is. (Casino, 2019) Says that graffiti is frequently denied the opportunity to be recognised as art because it is a form of self-expression, but it cannot be denied genuine status for a lack of form or basic aesthetic elements. He then goes on to say that graffiti artists have always viewed a large portion of their work as a piece of art that speaks to the viewer's emotions, thoughts, and memories, regardless of how it relates to an institutionalised environment. Stating that graffiti artists take a great amount of pride in their work to make sure it is the best it can possibly be. In contrast (Ernsting, 2015) had this to say about graffiti as an art form. "Graffiti is not art. It is pure, unadulterated vandalism with a high cost to both the perpetrator and the community." Mentioning the cost of clean up as a main problem in her argument. As art is highly subjective, both statements can be thought of as correct but there is an argument made for both sides as to whether graffiti is truly art.

While there is an argument to be made that graffiti is art or not art. Graffiti being a criminal act is something that is by the law, factually correct. But some individuals have a different opinion on this too. For example (Banksy, 2005) in his book wall and piece says "Crime against property is not real crime. People look at an oil painting and admire the use of brushstrokes to convey meaning. People look at a graffiti painting and admire the use of a drainpipe to gain access." It's no surprise that a graffiti artist doesn't think that doing graffiti is a crime.

But councils around the UK are building ways to combat the spread of illegal graffiti. By building what's known as a 'free wall' or legal wall. A piece of pre standing wall or newly built that people can go to and paint completely legally. With no fear of getting arrested. While in theory this is a good idea. But restricting a culture that is famously very anti establishment seems a bit counterproductive. As RVK mentions in the documentary, there are some further issues with the free walls. Particularly in port talbot, he mentions that they get taken up by street artist who do full murals, leaving no space for graffiti writers to practice their art works, inadvertently forcing them back out onto the street to pursue other forms of wall, which are more often than not, illegal.

During the authors research into the relationship between graffiti and the law. The theory of Broken windows was discovered. Broken windows is a term used by (Kelling & Coles, 1997) to describe a theory in which "If a factory or office window is broken, passersby observing it will conclude that no one cares or no one is in charge. In time, a few will begin throwing rocks to break more windows. Soon all the windows will be broken, and now passersby will think that, not only is no one in charge of the building, no one is in charge of the street on which it faces." (Kelling & Coles, 1997) This theory states that if something is left to be vandalised, more things in the surrounding are will be vandalised, this would apply to graffiti as well. Given that graffiti is considered vandalism what Kelling & Coles are stating about crime broken windows would also apply to graffiti. However (O'Brien et al., 2019) says "We found no consistent evidence that disorder induces greater aggression or more negative attitudes toward the neighborhood." And "Studies that found such effects disproportionately utilized weaker research designs that omit key correlates or confound perceptions of disorder with other neighborhood attitudes." (O'Brien et al., 2019). In his book *wall and piece* Banksy

briefly touches upon the theory of *broken windows* he explains the theory on the one side of the page, and above it lies a photograph of one of his paintings with a television flying out of a 'broken window' seemingly making jest at the theory.

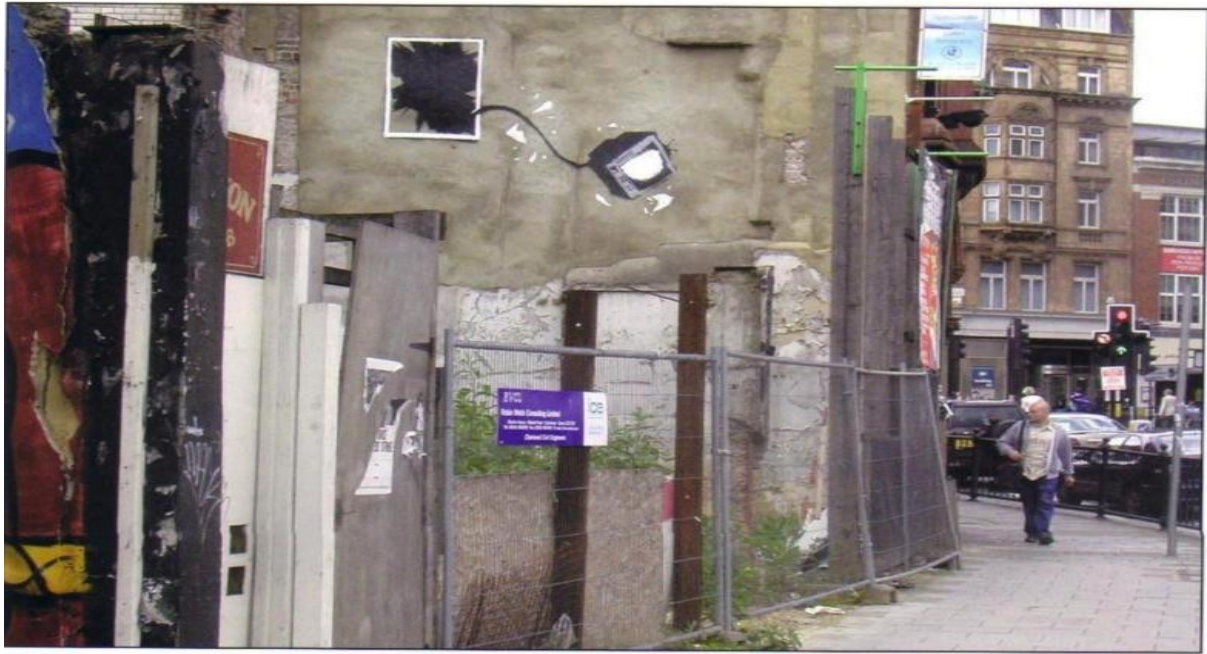


Figure 1

Martha Cooper And Henry Chalfant

Regarding the second body of work, the photographs. Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant were at the forefront of the research into graffiti documentation. Described as “a documentary photographer who has specialized in shooting urban vernacular art and architecture for over forty years.” (Urban Nation, 2021) *Cooper* has been shooting graffiti since the New York graffiti movement in the 80's. And Chalfant is noted as “One of the foremost authorities on New York subway art, and other aspects of urban youth culture, his

photographs record hundreds of ephemeral, original art works that have long since vanished.” (*Henrychalfant.com, n.d*)

The book “Subway art” By Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant was a great inspiration to me while researching graffiti. Especially regarding photographs. The photographs documented in the book are beautiful images of graffiti, encapsulating the dynamic and transient nature of subway graffiti. This book was the inspiration for the second body of work, the photographs. The book itself has hundreds of photographs of New York Graffiti, all of which are from the New York subway movement. Containing everything from vocabulary to techniques to characters, this book really is the holy grail of graffiti books.

To get the photographs that are in this book, the authors spent thousands of hours stalking trains through the labyrinth of the transit system. For years they worked separately, unknown to one another, photographing these elusive works of art (Cooper & Chalfant, 1997)

In addition to subway art with Cooper. Chalfant wrote another book exactly thirty years later alongside Sacha Jenkins a producer and filmmaker from the USA. Containing interviews with prolific writers from New York accompanied by more of Chalfant’s photographs. Chalfant says “Over a seven-year period, I accumulated more than 800 images of subway art.” (Chalfant and Jenkins, 2014)

The photography body of work took great inspiration from Cooper and Chalfant’s book. With the intent to capture the essence of graffiti in south Wales, the work aimed to replicate Cooper and Chalfant’s work, to emulate what they achieved. Using a 35mm film camera the artist captured graffiti all over south Wales using the same techniques as Cooper and Chalfant. Big letter centre in the frame, shots with urban landscape all around. Vibrant film that makes the colours pop in contrast to the urban landscape.

The decision to use a 35mm film camera came from the want to create a raw feel to the images. To show off the graffiti in its home turf. A raw urban landscape. Taking these photo’s also let the artist immortalise these specific pieces of graffiti preserving them for as long as

they can be preserved. Much longer than on the wall where they are in constant risk of being either painted over or washed off.

What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could. never be repeated existentially (Barthes, 1981)



Figure 2

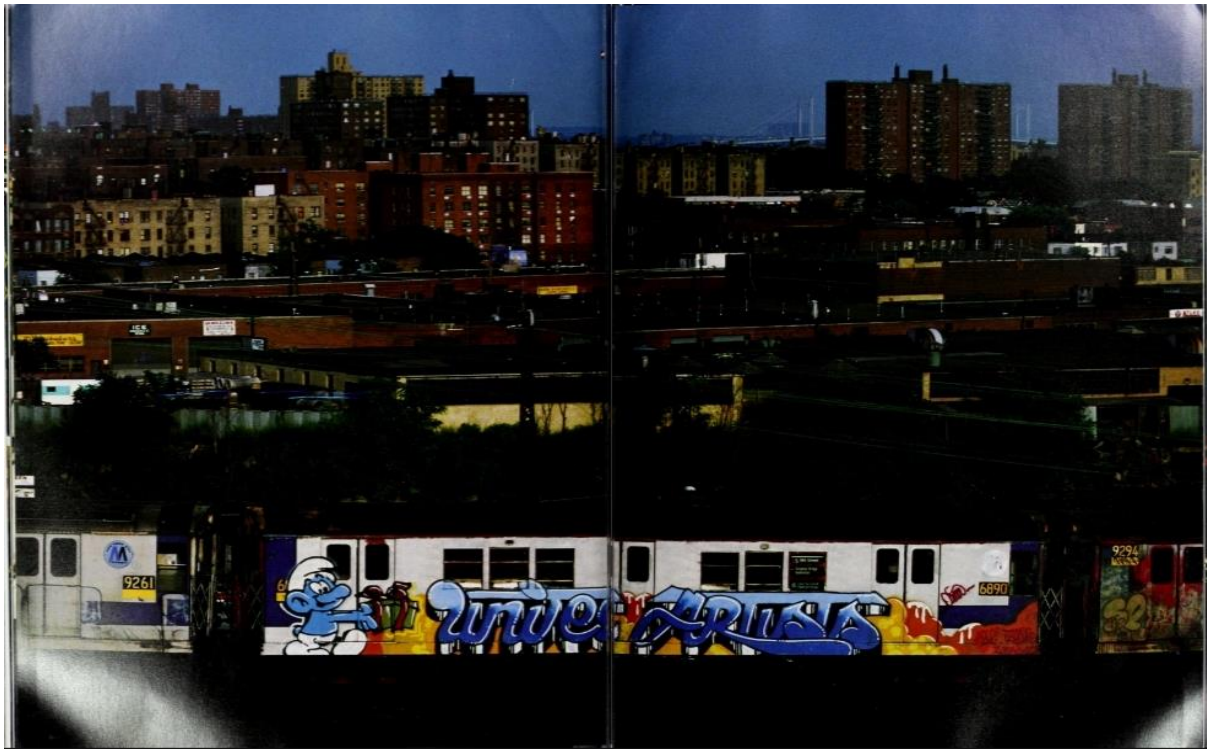


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6 (Image by author)



Figure 7 (Image by author)

Research

One of the main theoretical research subjects that was heavily involved in my praxis was the theory of space and place, and site-specific art. Having done research into this in my explorative praxis module it became easier to understand and apply it to this module. Graffiti lends itself the theory of site-specific art very well. (Artsy, N.d) Describe site specific art as “The physical location and surroundings of an artwork are inseparable from its identity.”

Site specificity is something that graffiti artist incorporate into their work. If you take Banksy’s boy opening curtains piece for example. The art itself relies on the site for it to make sense. Without the derelict building and the metal “curtains” the piece itself would lose all meaning, but because of the site it retains it’s meaning and creates a piece of site-specific art. Without the site, the art is meaningless. If banksy were to have put the boy in the window there without the metal curtains it wouldn’t make any sense.

If one accepts the proposition that the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their ‘local position’, by the situation of which they are a part, then a work of art, too, will be defined in relation to its place and position. Reflecting this notion, semiotic theory proposes, straightforwardly, that reading implies ‘location’ (Kaye, 2013)

Another theory that lends itself greatly to graffiti is The Space and place theory. In his book Tuan (2001) states “The relations of space and place. In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” What Tuan is saying here is that a “space” or a physical space. Becomes a “place” when given something meaningful. Regarding graffiti, almost anything a graffiti artist is to paint on, would go from a “space” to a “place” as the paint on the wall or building would endow that object with value, creating place from space. This is inherently the core aspect of graffiti to create place from as much unused space as possible. It also acts as a sort of, live portfolio for the artists. Having their work around the whole town/city/country turning space into place

everywhere they go. Space and place are important factors in graffiti, the space acts as a sort of canvas, and the place an exhibition for the world to see. In regard to space and place and graffiti. 5pointz in New York City is an excellent example. “Just across Newtown Creek in Long Island City stood an abandoned industrial site that many considered the world’s greatest treasury of graffiti art.” (Cobb, 2019). An abandoned building that was turned into a massive mural for graffiti artists that stood for more than a decade. It is a prime example of turning space into place on a massive scale. Unfortunately, it was destroyed and turned into a different building, but for those 10+ years it served as a giant canvas for graffiti artists.

During my research and development whilst creating my praxis, I watched a few graffiti documentaries. Exit through the gift shop was the first one I watched, followed by style wars by Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver and Wild style which is more of a hip hop documentary but incorporates graffiti into it. I watched these to gain inspiration to help me develop my documentary. Watching them to get the feeling of what a graffiti documentary is supposed to be. Emulating camera angles to obstruct the subjects face as they don’t want to be recognised. Looking at how they use montage to show loads of graffiti in a short amount of time. Taking inspiration from the interviews to help me develop my own. They were very helpful pieces of media for my praxis. Exit through the giftshop was particularly helpful as the subject I was recording was a stencil artist. The same as Banksy, so I could watch how they filmed Banksy and use it as inspiration for my recording. I took inspiration from how the camera acts around Banksy to preserve his anonymity and used that in my own practice.

I also developed as a practitioner during this module. Branching out to use other forms of media rather than just camera work and moving image. Practicing photography was something I’d never really done before and given the opportunity I took it. And it will be something I do more of in the future. I learnt a lot about how camera’s work during this module and how film reels work using them for the first time. Branching out of my comfort

zone was something I've never really done, I've always stuck to what I know and what I'm good at, afraid of failing. But now I know I can with confidence, try new things.

Praxis and exhibition

The initial plan for the documentary was to follow 3 separate graffiti artists around south Wales, showing me spots and where they go to paint, how they do it and why. Each artist would get 20 minutes totalling to a full 60-minute documentary. I reached out to these artists on Instagram. After a few back-and-forth interactions I finally got them to agree to the documentary, it took quite a bit of time. Setting up the initial meeting was easy though and I got to meet all 3 before we commenced filming. We talked about boundaries and anonymity ensuring that I would abide by all their wishes to remain anonymous.

Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances. 2 of the artists had to drop out quite close to the commencing of filming. Which left me in a bit of a rut, not knowing what to do. So, I changed my plan to make it a documentary following just RVK. It turned into a 30-minute documentary instead of a 60-minute documentary, and just one subject. But I feel as if that turned out for the best. I was able to spend more time with just one person and get to know him more than I would have if there was 3. We spent 3 days together, going from place to place showing me all his different pieces that he'd done all around Swansea, neath and port talbot. Educating me on all the different way of doing graffiti and making stencils.

Over the course of a week, I ventured out to Swansea, Cardiff and Newport to take pictures of graffiti that I could find in the streets and on the cities. I ended up taking roughly 40 pictures of graffiti and street art to use for my exhibition.

During the editing I was struggling for music to use in the documentary, not wanting to resort to stock copyright free music I stumbled upon an album by King gizzard and the lizard

wizard, that they had made completely free to use for anyone. Thanking my lucky stars, I used that and finished the edit totalling 32 minutes long.

Come the exhibition the tv was set up for me on the wall, and I put up my pinboards to display my photographs. I messed up with the pinboards though and accidentally made them a bit lobsided. But it was a happy accident as it made it look like it was just intentionally very DIY. The documentary was playing on the tv on a loop with speakers playing the audio so everyone could watch.



Figure 8

Conclusion

To create a piece of film that would shed a new light on graffiti in the public eye was my intention. To create a piece of art that would maybe change at least one person's viewpoint on the incredible art form that is graffiti and street art. I have challenged the preconception that graffiti artist are nothing but criminals by putting the spotlight on how kind and funny they can be. Spending time with RVK was one of the best experiences of my life and I learnt a lot from him. Not just about graffiti. But how to just laugh at everything that life throws at you. I've never met such a wonderful human being before, and I am grateful that he let me into his life to document his passion.

This work has been my greatest challenge yet. To produce a film all by myself, to edit, film, plan and direct. Has been the most tough but rewarding thing I've done so far. There were times where I thought I wasn't going to be able to do it. There were times where I thought I should give up. But I stuck through and made something I am proud of. I'm happy with what I made regardless of the outcome of the mark. I'm proud that I did something creative.

I learnt how to branch out of my comfort zone and venture into new pastures, not confining myself to the singular specialism of film. Picking up a 35 mm camera was a great decision and something I will forever continue.

I've learnt so much about graffiti and street art that I never would have known, the passion and the lengths these artists go to create their work is admirable and I wish I had a fraction of the level of talent they do.

Although there were good outcomes of this praxis. If I were to do this again there would be a few things I'd change. My time management skills are still not up to scratch I really do need to try and improve them drastically. I need to broaden my research skill also; I would have liked to have delved deeper into theoretical approaches to graffiti more than I did. I feel like there still much more I can learn.

I found the exhibition went well, a lot of interest in my film was put forward, I spoke to a couple of people about it and saw them watch a majority of the documentary. The people that I've showed it to have given me nothing but praise on my work.

I started this journey attempting to draw my name in bubble letters. Not knowing where it would take me and that it would ever bring me here, with my own documentary about painting on walls. This is only the beginning of my journey documenting graffiti and I do plan on pursuing it after I've finished this course. And I am excited for what the future holds.

List of figures

Figure 1: Broken window (Banksy, 2005, p. 20)

Figure 2: Cooper & Chalfant, 1997 p. 14-15

Figure 3: Cooper & Chalfant, 1997 p. 52-53

Figure 4: Cooper & Chalfant, 1997 p. 96-97

Figure 5: (Image by author)

Figure 6: (Image by author)

Figure 7: (Image by author)

Figure 8: (Image by author)

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