

## Perspectives on the 2BUCK Interstate 65 Graffiti Tag and the Responding Rhetoric

by A.C. Frabetti

While driving along Interstate 65 South as it passes downtown Louisville, one may glimpse on the backside of the opposite highway sign (exit 137 on I65 North) the words “2BUCK 2010” in faded red spray paint.<sup>1</sup> The letters constitute a graffiti tag and are the signature of a “tagger” (the maker of tags) known as 2BUCK. The term “tag” is used to differentiate the practice of “tagging” (the production of tags) from elaborate, sometimes legal graffiti art murals (known as “masterpieces”). One way to understand the current phenomenon of “tagging” is to see it through the convergent lenses of art rhetoric and the recent anthropological studies of ritualized masculinity that focus on the graffiti tagging community. The tag of 2BUCK and various anonymous postings that can be found in the Topix.com online Louisville forum are useful examples of the “tagging” phenomenon as well as the corollary rhetoric that is generated from it. (However, it should be noted that neither the discussion of the 2BUCK tag nor Topix.com in this essay is meant to function as objective data; rather, the information as presented here is meant purely for the purpose of illustration.)



Photograph by A.C. Frabetti

### An Emblematic Discussion

The mainstream community is rife with misconceptions about graffiti “tagging.” It might be useful, therefore, to examine some specific examples of some typical misinformed responses (as well as specific graffiti-community retorts) that have been posted in online forum discussions. Indeed, the rise of the internet has allowed for conversations to occur between normally disparate groups thanks to the anonymity of forum users. Topix.com is one of many sites which aggregates news content in order to market itself to a local audience, in this case in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>2</sup> It was selected for this essay since three forum threads (“KFC tag/graffiti on I64 east and west bound,” June 23, 2010—April 19, 2011; “Graffiti In The Highlands/Bardstown Road Area,” Jan 22, 2008—present; “what could be some positives about graffiti art,” May, 2009) were relevant for the topic of this essay and appeared quickly in search engine requests for the 2BUCK tag.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most common misconceptions surrounding “tagging” concerns the ethnicity of its producers. For example, under the thread “KFC tag/graffiti on I64 east and west bound,” a member under the moniker “Oy vey” posted the following on June 23, 2010: “On the back of one of the interstate signs there is a large tag that says KFC toobuk.” Within a month, two other posters responded, using racial slurs to label the supposed producers of the tag. One (“Chad”) used the term “crazy coons” (June 24, 2010) while the other (“Mike,” posting on July 29, 2010) claimed it was “some illiterate negro.” Another member of the forum (“justagi”) assumed the graffiti was produced by a gang and asked about its “background, MO, habits, record and city of origin” (July 29, 2010). Similarly, in the thread entitled “Graffiti In The Highlands/Bardstown Road Area,” other assumptions of the racial composition of taggers were ventured.

To counter these racially oriented comments, other posts in Topix.com responded aggressively to these above claims. In the Highland/Bardstown thread, a member under the moniker “Phoenix97” posted on March 17, 2008 the following response to the racial accusations of previous posters:

Yeah that’s right, blame it on the blacks and gangs \*ickhead. I was shopping at Value Mart in the Mid-City Mall and spotted two white kids spraying graffiti on the sheds next to what was Winn Dixie. Just can’t blame your own kids can you stupid. And furthermore you can kiss our collective black azzes [sic].

Later, “Jay” posted on Dec. 6, 2010 in the “Highlands/Bardstown thread that “I am white and live in an all-black neighborhood, that used to be an integrated neighborhood 50 years ago. I have never once seen graffiti anywhere.” In the same thread, “Handy” posted on June 1, 2011, “out of all the people i [sic] know that do graffiti most of them ARE NOT KIDS and they are WHITE and im [sic] white so this isnt [sic] a oooooo blame the black people kinda[sic] thing.”

The clandestine form in which graffiti tagging is produced makes it difficult to confidently ascertain the demographics of its practitioners. If the Topix.com forum posters are any indication (this is, of course, a leap), the majority of graffiti taggers in Louisville are white and non-gang members. Nationally, statistics compiled by Graffiti Hurts, an organization with obvious biases about the practice, reveal that 85% of tagging is by males ranging from age 12 to 21.<sup>4</sup> Only about 10% of tagging is actually gang-related. Graffiti Hurts also claims that “arrest data from 17 major cities

shows that 50% to 70% of all street-level graffiti is created by suburban adolescents, predominately males between the ages of 12 and 19.” The public, such as evinced in the brief forum exchange above, may assume that there are gang members producing the graffiti, and, due to its status as one of the original four pillars of hip-hop culture, also assume that it is created exclusively by black males. This is a huge misconception: as observed by “Phoenix97” and “Handy” above, a large percentage (perhaps even the vast majority) of taggers are young white males.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Anthropological Perspective: The Ritual Formation of Masculinity**

Tagger names such as “PIST,” “ROGUE,” “SABER,” and “COLT.45” reveal the typical preoccupation that taggers have with conveying an image of rebelliousness and strength. Anthropological studies (in which the anthropologist goes undercover with the taggers and interviews them) have found within the rhetoric of the taggers (as well as many other attributes of the practice) ritual behavior for the formation of the tagger’s manhood.<sup>6</sup>

The anthropological studies of masculinity, and masculinity studies in general, are relatively new, emboldened by the example of 20th Century feminism. According to Harry Brod, an early thinker in the field, the male experience, before feminism, was considered universal. With the emergence of feminism, *male* experience, divorced from universality, became possible to explore in its uniqueness (Brad 40). The most common element from the vantage point of anthropological studies is that manhood, unlike femininity, must be earned. Cross-culturally, this is achieved through socially manufactured trials and adolescent risk-taking behavior (See Gilmore 1-29).

The normative options for a male youth today in the United States to “earn” his manhood are embedded in some of its institutions. Sports, for example, offer rules in which one may excel, overcoming physical weakness and the will of an opposing player or team. The military, for better or worse, offers an opportunity during basic training for a male to endure trials, culminating in his status as soldier. Members of the male intelligentsia may find in academic grading structures, admissions to top-ranked graduate schools, and eventual publications in prestigious journals sites for competitions that engage and socially exhibit their intellectual maturity. Finally, corporate America is highly hierarchical, with promotions, advancements, and more as proofs of public masculine achievement.

However, the type of individual drawn to tagging does not find any of the above options attractive. There have been few, if any, portraits drawn of the personality of the tagger, although one may infer much about him based on the choice of his activity and the rhetoric of the practice. For example, he writes on legal signage, such as 2BUCK’s interstate tag, directly violating the symbols for normative authority. This implies rebelliousness and non-conformity. He prefers to work in secret, instead of directly facing his opponents, implying a tendency towards social timidity. We may understand this “type” simply through the literary-poetic figure of Odysseus, whose craftiness brought down the walls of Troy and eventually overcame the numerous trials of his return.<sup>7</sup>

2BUCK’s tag over Interstate 65 was extremely risky. While climbing along the scaffolding of the sign, he could have fallen, severely injuring himself or even losing his life (earning such a site the term “Heaven spot”). He also endangered the motorists. This risk-taking behavior of tagging makes it especially appealing to the males involved. However, in terms of the personality of the type of male drawn to tagging, the arts also serve as a locus. Hence in the Topix.com forum, discussions in defense

of graffiti tagging define it as an expressive art form. Such discussions as these seem to be an attempt to move the consideration of tagging beyond mere risk-taking and masculinity rituals.

### **The Art Perspective: Formal Analysis and Aesthetic Appreciation of The Decontextualized Tag**

In the “Graffiti In The Highlands/Bardstown Road Area” Topix.com thread, a member under the moniker “local modern artist” posted on Jan 14, 2009, in response to criticism of tagging, the following emblematic statement:

. . . we are expressing ourselves. Get off our case it’s stupid theres [sic] a difference between vandalism and tagging. We produce art the actual skill that goes into it is underestimated. Honestly can anyof [sic] you blend two type of spray paint that are opposit [sic] on the color wheel? I highly doubt it. This takes years of practice and should be respected. It represents Louisville no matter how you look at it.

Subsequently, “Sekone” posted on May 17, 2009 a similar defense of tagging, in terms of its artistic expression:

. . . no matter what you want to be done as long as there are walls there will be graffiti among us there is not a thing none of you on this site can do but complain about and putting down graffiti writers. Sure grab some paint and buff our tags, throws, pierces [sic], and things we will just go over it again, and again. you cant [sic] blame a [sic] artist for the dumb ass people putting up “gang” words and things that is not graffiti, graffiti is an art no matter what you people wanna [sic] say about it you cant [sic] stop us and never will [graffiti has been around longer then anyone of us cave men wrote on walls.

Similarly, “Sadie” posted on May 19, 2009 in the thread “what could be some of the positives about graffiti art” that “it’s a true artistic expression, when done tastefully. Not to be confused with gang tags and ‘so and so loves so and so’.”

Even if graffiti is produced for psychosocial reasons (as is the claim of the anthropological view of masculinity), that does not affect its status as a work of art. The forum users “local modern artist,” “Sadie,” and “Sekone” voiced in simple terms what is considered a “debate.” The category under which a creative act expresses itself does not determine whether it has aesthetic merits or not, e.g. simply because something is *categorized* as a painting does not make it quality art. Hence, a debate about the overall category of graffiti-as-art is ultimately meaningless and unresolvable. There are capable tags and less attractive ones. Despite this, their legal status is property vandalism (usually of public property).

If authorities in the art world are the ones who determine whether or not something qualifies as a work of art, graffiti found its legitimacy as far back as 1980. In that period, the gallery Fashion Moda, Collaborative Partners Inc., and the Now Gallery hosted commercial exhibitions of graffiti in New York City. The Brooklyn Museum of New York curated the exhibition *Graffiti* in 2006; even more recently, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles hosted “Art in the Streets” from April to August, 2011.

In the realm of publishing, graffiti also has its enthusiasts and legitimizing agents. From book collections such as *Graffiti Planet: The Best Graffiti from Around the World*, sites and blogs such as graffiti.org, to taggers regularly posting reproductions of their work on image storage sites such as Flickr.com and Photobucket.com, there is no shortage of documentation. In the scholarly arena, Lisa Gottlieb, for example,

published her dissertation called *Graffiti Art Styles: A Classification System and Theoretical Analysis*, in 2008. She used Panofsky's iconographic analysis to codify the wild-style tag while classifying specific formal aspects, such as arrows, bubbles, flatness, etc. Lately, there are even developments of digitalized graffiti, such as Evan Roth's use of a camera to trace the tagger's elegant hand movements.

There is, however, a key problem within all these aforementioned developments and documentation. They dislocate graffiti from its specific location and hence context; this context is essential in understanding its relationship to masculinity. A tag in an abandoned building, reproduced in full color inside a book is reduced artistically to its *formal* merits. An identical tag made on the backside of a highway like 2BUCK's tag would have a wholly different meaning in a printed book format. Hence Gottlieb's work, the *Graffiti Planet* collections, and more, all divorce the tag from the space in which it is made and transform it into the status of a work based on its formal artistic properties. Its masculine performative flair—its production in a risky location—is lost.

The 2BUCK tag, however, was given specific formal properties for visibility and masculine risk-taking, not aesthetic enjoyment. Its red color allows it to stand out with relief from the background of the interstate sign. It would have been a nigh-invisible tag had he painted it with white and silver; likewise, a green tag would have been too inconspicuous. Its outline and form was a pre-established *type* by the maker of the 2BUCK tag, like others that he made; any other variance visible in the interstate sign tag was so that it would fit in the space allotted. Its significance was location, not form.

The formal qualities of the tag—those formal qualities so beloved by graffiti enthusiasts and some members of the art community—have merely practical functions. That some taggers have made some aesthetically attractive tags is incidental to the *function* of the *form* of the tag. In the language of the visual arts, the graffiti tag is *not* a formalist work of art but, quite simply, the *documentation of a performance*. The anthropological findings mentioned earlier in this essay identify the need of that performance as a demonstration of masculinity.

Perhaps for better understanding it would be helpful to provide a fictional example. Imagine that two male youths stand before a dangerous chasm. One boasts that he is willing to jump it, taking a risk (the other might even had "dared" him to jump). Assume he does so; he has demonstrated his masculinity to the other youth. No one else, though, is witness to this act. This is even more problematic for the jumper if he was alone. Imagine, then, that he writes, "John Smith jumped this chasm" on the opposite side. Then, everyone who knows John Smith will know that he made that jump.

Furthermore, if the jump was illegal, perhaps John Smith puts up a moniker, like "PISTOL," so as not to be charged by authorities for having made the jump. All his peers know that PISTOL is John Smith. If we consider that evading police, breaking into barbed-wire enclosed spaces, climbing the sides of buildings are all examples of such urban risks for male youth, it is easy to understand the evolution of tagging. Hence PISTOL, written on the other side of the chasm, *documents* his dangerous leap. Sometimes the John Smiths of the world make very attractive "PISTOL" markers, but that is a secondary act and inessential to its cultural function.

### **The Rhetoric of Art: A Functionalist Perspective and the Problematic Mix-Up**

The maker of the 2BUCK Interstate 65 tag was exhibiting that he had defied authorities and risked his life. He was not attempting to make an aesthetic statement

but instead to exhibit the force of his masculinity. His audience was primarily other taggers; in fact, if one looks the “2BUCK” photo, the interstate tag location of 2BUCK is near a large concrete drainage area. It is evident there that many tags have been painted over. Also, nearby, the underside of the overpass reveals a similar tag location. 2BUCK made his tag where he knew his peers would notice it.

Nevertheless, there is an important function in the misconstruing of graffiti tagging and graffiti art. In order for the 2BUCK tag to come into being, the activity of making a tag must be somehow construed as being “above” society’s rules, not mere property vandalism. Ironically, it is the status of the graffiti tag as Art that allows the tagger to suspend the ethical. Culturally, we consider the artist to be above the law and the ultimate non-conformist when acting creatively. This romantic narrative functionally underlies the use of the art label by the tagger.

This is in part possible because “graffiti” is a broad term, referring both to tags like 2BUCK’s as well as elaborate, stunning, *legally-made* “masterpieces.” This is part of its problem and one of the reasons for tagging’s continuance. The “masterpiece” is made with formal qualities as its *primary* focus. Graffiti *art* coheres to the visual laws of color, line, and form. At the other extreme is the quick graffiti tag, often in monochrome marker or spray paint. As demonstrated above, the relevance of such a tag is not its formal aesthetic qualities but as performance documentation. Since graffiti art, is (justifiably) celebrated as an art form, it allows the graffiti *tagger* to consider his practice as an expressive form of art. To further confuse the situation, some taggers continue their craft and develop it into complex art forms. Graffiti taggers and graffiti artists are often the same individuals.<sup>8</sup> There is therefore a discursive ambiguity between the simple vandalism of tagging and the art form of the graffiti masterpiece. The former in its extreme, as a performance, necessitates its illegality (otherwise, there would be no masculine risk). The latter, due to the extensive hours involved in its production, almost always necessitates that it is a legal commission.

Furthermore, though 2BUCK’s tag belongs to the extreme of masculine performance and tagging vandalism, 2BUCK as an *individual* may currently be in an MFA program, perfecting his formal knowledge of the arts (not to imply that entering an MFA program is the essential road to artistic validation). Perhaps his days over highways and evading police will give him an audacity in the studio that traditionally trained artists will not have, further blurring the separation between artist and tagger. It is difficult to evaluate this effect, but some graffiti taggers go on to be muralists, graphic designers, street artists, and, of course, graffiti artists. For example, Philadelphia, the birthplace of graffiti, commissioned the Love Letter project with ex-tagger Stephen Powers, resulting in fifty murals with other artists throughout the city.<sup>9</sup>

### **Full Circle: Masculinity Ritual and Art Classification**

How does the artistic label in graffiti tagging link to masculinity studies? While it is evident that branding the activity as art allows for the suspension of society’s laws, the direct connection to masculinity is more subtle. This connection is within the structure of ritual. In Victor Turner’s seminal study of Ndembu ritual behavior, the ritual process requires the intervention of the *religious* in order to fulfill the process. The supplicants or practicants require the intervention of the priest to consecrate their return into society. Religion had a function: what Turner calls “aggregation” (94). It allows the practicant engaged in ritual to return to secular society from which the ritual had excluded them.

In ritual fashion, the adolescent tagger joins a liminal community of other taggers, experiencing the *communitas* that the community affords. He is drawn to this community heavily for such community emotions. He adopts its lingo, clothing style, and swagger. Like many male dominated youth subcultures, the graffiti tagging youth culture's primary interest is the development of masculinity. *Graffiti-as-art fulfills the role of the sacred in the Turner structure*. Without the sacred—without the presence of the label of art—tagging would become a quickly meaningless practice for young males, necessitating a search for other forms of masculinity formation. It is essential to underline this aspect of meaningfulness through the label of art and its overall function in rites of passage.

If we return to the fictionalized example earlier, imagine that a religious sect asserts that John Smith's PISTOL logo was spiritual (perhaps witnessing in it some kind of symbolism, for the sake of illustration), and that secular society had no right to question its existence. In the case of tagging, in terms of the ritual *structure*, the art community constitutes the force of the fictionalized declaration of the religious sect. The problem is that the art community, like the sect, ignores that John Smith wrote it to document where he made a dangerous leap.

Graffiti tagging, masculinity ritual, and the discourse of graffiti-as-art form a self-sustaining triad. As art—legitimized by the broader field of graffiti art and the blurring of the practice of tagging and “masterpieces”—such behavior becomes above the law and a meaningful ritualistic practice. As a form of risky and illegal behavior, tagging allows masculinity to be demonstrated and hence appeals to male youth. If its risk-taking elements are negated, or its status as art is elided, then the practice would collapse. For this reason, there is a particularly strong psychological need for graffiti tagging to subsist for its producers under the category of art. The subtle sense of the sacrality of the undertaking seems to underlie the vehemence in which taggers (practicans or former ones) defend the practice as well as undertake it. It is also why tagging has proven to be so popular predominantly with adolescent youth; the national tendency is for taggers to cease the activity upon entering adulthood (age 21).

### Collected Perspectives: Further Questions

This essay concludes with a non-conclusion, namely open-ended questions. What other choice would this particular group of young rebellious males have in their “vision quest” for masculinity formation, since aesthetic production and risk-taking behavior need to be combined in its practice? Is manhood (a social construct) even achieved when one's identity is not socially recognized (e.g. the clandestine tagger)? Is the tag name itself no more than a negation of true identity, or perhaps a temporary mask one adopts in a ritualized play in which the mask-wearer becomes what he dons? How is public space—that which the tagger considers publicly “visible” and one which he reclaims from corporate advertising—to be understood considering the huge shift of human consciousness away from traditional external space (common, public, private, and sacred) to *virtual* space? Is tagging and youth subcultures in general examples of the masculine longing to subvert community (the polis) in favor of a tribal, kinship-driven clan (note the huge presence of clannish loyalties in online video gaming)? If so, what does this say of the roots of masculinity and the future of its transformation? These questions, and many more like them, are neither asked nor discussed in online community forums, but their answers will be slowly revealed in what becomes of the future of graffiti tagging.

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## Endnotes

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1. For the curious, this tag is not visible on Google streetview.
  2. The following statement can be found on the website: "Topix is the leading news community on the Web, connecting people to the information and discussions that matter to them in every U.S. town and city. A Top 10 online newspaper destination (comScore, March 2008), the site links news from 50,000 sources to 360,000 lively user-generated forums." (<http://www.topix.com/topix/about>)
  3. There are highly active forums on graffiti sites such as 12ozProphet.com with sections specifically dedicated to Louisville, Kentucky. However, such forums are only used by graffiti enthusiasts and practitioners and are hence one-sided. 12ozProphet.com states on its site that it is "the official flagship Montana Colors and Krink online shop for North America." Montana is a premier brand for graffiti artists.



4. Because of such statistical indicators, this essay assumes that 2BUCK is male. It is, however, clearly possible that he or she is female.

5. One of the forum postings by a person under the moniker of “graff artist himself” explains who the taggers are behind the KFC tag. He writes on July 20, 2010 (in the “KFC tag/graffiti on I64 east and west bound” thread) that “it stands for killer freights krew. im not in their crew but i know who they are. and its 2 buck, binge, pist, rogue, and areyou.” A “crew” is a group of taggers that work together to create larger tags; one of the members was probably the mentor of the others. This mentoring, and the sense of the group effort of the adolescent males involved, is important for understanding its aspects of masculinity formation.

6. See, for example, Lachmann, “Graffiti as Career and Ideology” and Macdonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*.

7. There are many perspectives in masculinity studies. One, a Jungian-inspired approach, proposes archetypal forms in the development of the male psyche from the hegemonic, destructive male to a positive, generative masculinity. Jungians Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, both practicing analysts, might classify the tagger as the Trickster archetype whose transformation would require a shift from a rebellious-youth mentality to that of the Magician (or Wise Old Man). Such a transformation requires conscious, considerable effort.

8. It is no accident that graffiti taggers refer to their practice as an expressive art form. Expressivity implies that the status of the art object is determined as such because it is made by an artist. Since graffiti artists also tag, the tag is considered a work of art. This paper is placing the expressive emphasis on performance documentation, not on the tag’s artistic merits—yet, the distinction between a “tag’s” status as a performance vis à vis its status as an art object remains a fundamentally ironic one.

9. A result of taggers considering their practice an art form prevents them from tagging art murals. This has engendered mural art in many urban cities as a form of graffiti tagging abatement. In essence, one of the accidental results of graffiti tagging is the reactionary beautification of urban centers. According to its web site, the Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia has commissioned “over 3,000 murals” since 1984.