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**Title:** Graffiti as a Palimpsest

**Year:** 2018

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Myllylä, M. (2018). Graffiti as a Palimpsest. *Street Art & Urban Creativity*, 4(2), 25-35.  
<https://doi.org/10.25765/sauc.v4i2.141>

## Graffiti as a Palimpsest

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### Abstract

Graffiti can be viewed as stories about embodied identities of the self and others which can be shared in intersubjective discourse, visual communication of varying content and motives, and utilizing specific technology and mediums. Graffiti's palimpsestuous nature, in its physical and symbolic forms of layering information, is present in production and perceiving graffiti. A creator and a reader of graffiti are both palimpsesting the work, acting as narrators of their own mental sheets. The concept of graffiti as a palimpsest can be exemplified for example in graffiti art where the interpretation of a work of art depends on the properties of the work, the perceiver and the social and institutional agreements. How graffiti are interpreted is informed by perceiving individuals' characters, such as knowledge and skills, as well as the cultural and sociohistorical context where these individuals are immersed and act.

**Keywords:** Palimpsest, narratives, embodiment, art experience, cultural cognition, cognitive science

### 1. Introduction

We can see the presence of written walls in tandem with drawings and paintings all around the globe (Lewisohn, 2008; Ross, 2016a; Wacławek, 2011). The existence of wall markings stretches from the prehistoric (Nash, 2010) to ancient (Baird and Taylor, 2016) to the contemporary present. Their styles vary from simple, crude scribbles to elaborated versions of refined typography in conjunction with complex pictorial images. In their elementary essence, graffiti can be seen as forms of visual communication (Brighenti, 2010; Wacławek, 2011). They utilize such technology as spray paints and markers, and use different surfaces found in city spaces as their medium (Tolonen, 2016). Graffiti has spread worldwide via magazines, books, photographs, movies, the internet (Ross, 2016a), television and travel, thus enabling the transculturation of graffiti and other urban art images (Valjakka, 2016).

The term graffiti and its different forms were defined as "wild signs" (Oliver and Neal, 2010, p. 1), as visual expression of writers' signatures with a distinct vocabulary (Wacławek, 2011), as special types of writing and picture making of urban journals entailing social and physical practices (Avramidis and Tsilimpoudini, 2017), as "highly nuanced, subtle form

of communication" (Young, 2005, pp. 64-65), as ornamental artefacts in a larger architectural canon (Schacter, 2016), and as urban art (Austin, 2010; Valjakka, 2016) or folk art (Ferrell, 2017).

This paper aims to explain how graffiti can be approached as a palimpsest as well as a result of palimpsesting. More specifically this paper focuses on the research questions of how the term and concept of palimpsest can be elaborated and utilized further when explaining production, perceptions and judgements of graffiti. Graffiti as a palimpsest can be studied as both a physical artefact but also as a mental phenomenon and a process, where a person reads, reinterprets and rewrites graffiti, palimpsesting it layer by layer. Analyzing graffiti via the concept of a palimpsest helps discover graffiti's underlying foils, as well as its externalized output as an overwrite.

The paper starts with the concept of a palimpsest, the act of palimpsesting, and how those are related to graffiti (section 2). An example of graffiti art as a palimpsest is pondered in section 2.1. Next, the discussion will present how graffiti palimpsests can be seen as mental narratives (section 3), then as an embodied palimpsest combining physical and mental actions (section 4). Section 5 concludes that graffiti palimpsests are results of layering physical and

mental content, where graffiti palimpsesting involves both individual, cultural and historical aspects, creating different inferential outputs.

## 2. Graffiti as a palimpsest

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines the term palimpsest as a “writing material (such as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased” or as “something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface.” The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) describes palimpsest as “a very old text or document in which writing has been removed and covered or replaced by new writing” and as a “formal something such as a work of art that has many levels of meaning, types of style, etc. that build on each other.” In sum, palimpsest can be understood as an overwriting on a cleansed writing surface where previous texts are still partially visible under new writings, where layers beneath its apparent surface create versatile levels of different meanings (Knox, 2012; Lundström, 2007). As Sarah Dillon (2007) explains, palimpsest is also an involuted phenomenon where texts that otherwise do not relate to each other are mixing and elaborately intertwining, interrupting and inhabiting each other as the older text is resurfacing.

Concepts of a palimpsest and palimpsesting can be used to investigate the process and experiential content of creating, perceiving and interpreting different phenomena, such as art. Marie-Sofie Lundström (2007) uses the concept of a palimpsest and the act of palimpsesting to describe how the creation of works of art is influenced by different factors, resulting in layered images of imitations, sketches and fixed details that can be seen as palimpsests, incorporating the past knowledge, experiences and the individual creativity into a novel artistic presentation about a common theme. Lundström (2007) proposes that these works made by artists can be seen as representative souvenirs of both external views and individual experiences where the latter are entailed in the artist's own history and life experiences. By creating a representation of some space and time, the artist also distances the work from its perceiver and brings about something that is not present, something that is alien and strange. This is done by exaggerating an artist's experiences of culture, filtering and presenting that something through her own translation. At the same time the artist creates a story of her own history, her own narrative of meanings (Lundström, 2017).

Sarah Dillon (2007) inspected the usage of the term palimpsest in different contexts. In the palimpsest of a mind, palimpsest is part of several “occurring fantasies” (p. 6), where the writer of a palimpsest returns to the same topic over and over again, thus keeping the theme of her fantasy alive. When palimpsest is connected to a concept of a crypt, a vault under a church, the term combines simultaneous closeness and distance, an allegorical relationship. Palimpsest can be seen as a text that can be used to investigate the relations and differences between reading and writing classical and modern detective stories. It can be used in connection with the concept of intertextuality when the concept is reviewed by using the terms of palimpsest textuality. Palimpsests, just as sexual identities, must be kept constantly rewritten in order to stay vibrant and usable thorough changing times. The charm of a palimpsest is also in its power to exemplify a mystery, resurrection, and the excitement which is born of discovery (Dillon, 2007). It is easy to relate these descriptions to graffiti as reoccurring and repeating name-writing, keeping the phantasy imago of the writer alive and at the same time renewing it via individual creativity; making it close and distant at the same time, translating the cryptical mysteries of the graffiti subculture involuted with individual and shared identities, as graffiti writers exemplify these into visual souvenirs of life.

Creating graffiti as palimpsests, palimpsesting, can happen in a concrete, physical sense of the term as the remains of previous paint and ink stratify between the foils of dirt, detergents, paint strippers, and the peeling off by natural deterioration caused by weathering. All this is covered by overlapping newer drawings, paintings, stickers, posters and flyers. Examples of such physical palimpsests can be found practically in any legal and illegal graffiti writing spots. Writing for example a tag, a throw-up or another piece over an existing graffiti can be seen as palimpsesting. Illustrations of layered graffiti can be found for example in Jonna Tolonen's (2016) visual research about illegal graffiti in Madrid, as well as in Anna Waclawek's (2011) examination of graffiti writers' works and how these are practiced worldwide.

According to Schacter (2008), the erasure of a previous graffiti image can motivate graffiti writers to produce even more images with more innovative and imaginative styles. Hence, this removal and rewriting of graffiti can be seen as a part of a creative palimpsesting process, which itself results in a yet another palimpsest. As the graffiti writers overwrite previous images with their own products, writers create palimpsests

where the underlying surfaces and old, weathered images are entailed and even essential in the creation of a new image (Schacter, 2008). This new layer too will later be covered with yet another image, leaving the previous graffiti echo in the background, either partly visible underneath the new image, in people's memories, or in some cases as a recording such as digital image or a written description.

Graffiti can be seen as physical representations of mental palimpsests which entail their writers' and reader's interpretations of the atmosphere of that area, time and space, reflecting the fluctuating identities of the city and its inhabitants, the zeitgeist of the post-modern era, the culture that the person is immersed in, and the sociocultural knowledge that the person has learned throughout her lifetime. For example, in Finnish graffiti writer / artist Trama's work "Zinku" (Trama, 2008) which can be seen almost as a photorealistic illustration of a building wall where layers of paint and buffing (a slang term for removal of graffiti) with chemical detergents have produced a new kind of visual surface. In EGS's work titled "1985 March 1st" (EGS, 2016) the artist has sprayed black ink over a found, Russian language newspaper to create a novel combination of these elements, a palimpsest of multiple temporal and cultural stories, thus creating new possibilities for different interpretations via visible and invisible layers. The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti (Schacter, 2013) lists sites and works of street artists and graffiti writers from all around the world, displaying examples of graffiti palimpsests, from such artists as Ron English (Schacter, 2013, p. 40) and Turbo (Schacter, 2013, pp. 180-181) to sites from Sao Paolo (Schacter, 2013, p. 113) to Berlin (Schacter, 2013, p. 206) and from Barcelona (Schacter, 2013, p. 298) to Tokyo (Schacter, 2013, p. 388). Those illustrations also bring forth the distinctive nature of graffiti palimpsest – works of individuals are conjoined or concurrent deliberately or by chance in the same surface, creating a larger visual totality, a shared palimpsest, that can be read in detail or as a whole.

The idea of understanding graffiti as a palimpsest can be further elaborated by focusing on how the concept of a palimpsest is present in case of graffiti art. In order to define what can be seen as graffiti art palimpsest, however, we must first address briefly what is meant by "graffiti." Typically, graffiti is defined as illegally written or painted, aesthetically stylized words and images of its maker's name as a pseudonym, a tag, using marker pens, spray paint or etching and where the name can be accompanied by a character that often draws

its theme from popular culture (Avramidis and Tsilimpoudini, 2017; Ross, 2016b). Depending on the definition though, also stencils and stickers placed on different city surfaces can be counted as graffiti (Tolonen, 2016), although more often these forms along with posters, paste-ups and mix of all the former are categorized as examples of street art, not graffiti (Avramidis and Tsilimpoudini, 2017; Ross, 2016b). In this paper, graffiti may be understood in the stricter sense, but the same idea of a palimpsest can be applied to many forms of street art, as well.

Nowadays there are more and more legal graffiti writing spots available for graffiti writers, for example several in Helsinki, Finland (see for example Supafly, 2018). These legal spots provide places where graffiti writers can focus on developing their technical and artistic skills and expressions. To some, legal spots are seen as stripping off the excitement and almost anarchistic nature of producing graffiti, thus making legal graffiti not "real" graffiti (Ross, 2016a). This notion emphasizes the other side of graffiti; it is also a controversial act (Ross, 2016a) and an ephemeral and embodied performance (Bowen, 2010; 2013; Neef, 2007) which challenges the norms of the society. As graffiti enables activism through and by art it can be called a form of activism, "a critical process that destabilises everyday urban interactions and practices" (Mekdjian, 2017, p. 1).

Whereas others might see graffiti as aesthetic products and highly developed forms of visual culture and contemporary art, graffiti can also evoke negative feelings such as disgust or repulsion (McAuliffe and Iveson, 2011; Young, 2005, 2017). Due to the illicit nature of graffiti, instead of art it is often judged as vandalism, ugly or associated with dirt and moral deterioration (Kimvall, 2014; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Sliwa and Cairns, 2007), creating somewhat conflicting but nevertheless coexisting discursive practices (Kimvall, 2014; Sliwa and Cairns, 2007). However, when seeing graffiti as form of activism, illegality can be seen as essential part of graffiti as an artistic intervention, displaying themes as solidarity as well as empowering the city dwellers (Mekdjian, 2017).

### 1.1 Graffiti art as a palimpsest

As noted earlier, art is a form of palimpsest (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), therefore, we can investigate the concept of graffiti palimpsest by taking graffiti art as an example. So, what is graffiti art? Laypeople who are non-experts regarding visual graffiti culture and even art-historians might be familiar

with works of artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat (Dempsey, 2003; Kimvall, 2014) or Banksy and Blek le Rat (Merrill, 2015) who could be described more as street artists or graffiti inspired artists (Kimvall, 2014). But the expert inside a subcultural graffiti scene might nominate quite different actors as authentic graffiti artists naming such artists as Taki 183, Seen, Lee, Lady Pink or Blade (Kimvall, 2014). As Jakob Kimvall (2014) notes, the art-historical narratives about graffiti art have so far been quite scarce and often somewhat contradicting. Fortunately, more information is constantly made available with a growing number of publications focusing on explaining graffiti and street art with vast display of artists and art works (see for example Lewisohn, 2008; Schacter, 2013; Waclawek, 2011), events and art exhibitions, academic seminars, conferences and panels and many other kinds of events.

According to Amy Dempsey (2003), contemporary graffiti is part of the postmodern art historical era often directly commenting on societal and political questions (Dempsey, 2003). According to Austin (2010), graffiti art has its roots in the development of modern art from the early 20th century: dadaism, post-dadaism, pop art and pluralistic art forms from the 1970s. In this spirit, graffiti can be seen as collages of visual material from everyday life (Austin, 2010). In turn, those material pieces can be seen as layers beneath the visible surface of a graffiti palimpsest. Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) suggests that postmodern artists have reacted to modernism's alienation and distancing design by trying to create a new connection to it, to confiscate and reclaim estranged architectonic spaces by making them materially present (Pallasmaa, 1996). Also, graffiti artists can be seen criticizing the alienation and estrangement they feel in modern cities, finding new ways of participating in the urban life and reclaiming their environments (Schacter, 2008) as well as creating counteractive responses to aesthetic standards of modernism (Lamazares, 2017).

Not all graffiti should be considered as art, though. It would be better to say that graffiti, at least some of it, can hold the potential to become works of art through intersubjective experiences and current or later discourse, resultant from individual and socially shared palimpsesting. It is a question of shared experiences and social agreement based on both the work's properties, perceivers' personal features and understanding, as well as the sociocultural and historical discourse where a work of art is separated from a mere product.

For example, according to Denis Dutton (2009), humans have universal "art instinct" for making, assessing and experiencing an object and its properties as a work of art. A work of art needs to present, for example, demonstrated technical skills, recognizable styles including novel and surprising elements, and individual expressions. They have to be challenging intellectually, inducing direct pleasure and imaginative, artistic experience wherein intellectual challenges are then solved (Dutton, 2009).

Philosopher John Dewey (2005) saw art experience as a subjective result of interaction with artwork and its perceiver. Sari Kuuva (2007) explains the experience of art as a cognitive apperception process proceeding through restructuring, reflection and construction, generating a mental representation that is colored by our personal experiences, memories, preceding conceptual knowledge and emotions. As Gadamer (1977) saw, art has its own language which can be understood by using hermeneutical reflections, where things are brought to consciousness by self-understanding as well as understanding of history, thus making it possible to take a more objective stance to a person's thinking, comprehend her own prejudices and learn (Gadamer, 1977). Palimpsesting too can be explained as a process of having certain presuppositions that work as a baseline for further decoding of the perceived information. The information is self-reflected and reconstructed in the mind, generating novel reconstructions, which then might add to, alter or overwrite the preceding presumptions. In case of graffiti art, the palimpsest (either physical or mental) including an understanding of graffiti subculture and its norms and artistic language are processed together with an individual's previous information and self-understanding during the palimpsesting. The differences in these can lead to different interpretations and outputs, different kinds of palimpsests.

Martin Heidegger (1996) writes about how in order a work becomes art it requires that the work has been created and has a creator, but it also needs to be fostered by people and the community. This fostering reveals and organizes the truth, *aletheia*, often translated as "the unconcealedness of beings" (Cazeaux, 2011, p. 718) that is born within an ongoing dispute between revealing and hiding of something existing (Heidegger, 1996). In this sense, fostering can be seen as active social palimpsesting that keeps graffiti art alive, unconcealing something relevant to the graffiti subculture and the graffiti art world. Further, fostering

works of art requires knowledge and will to expose oneself to the openness and the truth of the work, allowing people to not only experience the art, but to "belong in the truth" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 71) that happens in the work of art. Interestingly, the ability to expose oneself to art can be linked to a special personality trait: openness to experience, which according to some psychological research seems to be essential to creativity, positive engagement in arts and aesthetic appreciation, especially in abstract art (Fayn and Silvia, 2015).

In addition, according to Heidegger (1996), expertise in art makes it possible to enjoy and explain even more detailed nuances of a work's character and quality. Findings from neuroaesthetic research support this notion, as the art experience and how art is assessed, judged and felt emotionally has found to be affected also by expertise in the arts and art history, especially in the case of modern, non-representative art (Fayn and Silvia, 2015; Kuuva, 2007; Leder et al., 2004; Pihko et al., 2011). However, experts do not always provide objectively truthful or correct inferences. Expertise can also result in biased judgements, for example due to used heuristics or expert's over-confidence (Kahneman and Klein, 2009; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Thus, when discussing graffiti and creating new palimpsested narratives it is important to acknowledge the possibility of bias and to allow critical consideration of alternative explanations and to reveal hidden layers, whether the topic was about art, legality, politics, motivation or other topics.

According to Immanuel Kant (1790/2016), aesthetic judgement related to an artwork is always subjective and only the experience of "beauty" is free from other kinds of judgements. Indeed, art can evoke special emotions such as beauty, pleasantness, interest and surprise, and even negative emotions such as anger and disgust (Fayn and Silvia, 2015). These kinds of emotions are often described in graffiti and street art related discussions too (Dickens, 2008; Halsey & Young, 2008; Taylor, 2012; Young, 2005). However, in contrast to Kant's (1790/2016) proposal that experience of aesthetic beauty is free from learned concepts such as attitudes, Gartus and Leder (2014) suggest that attitudes towards the artistic style can influence how people evaluate graffiti art. Thus, in case of graffiti these layers of beautiful or other art related thoughts and emotions might be adduced or stay concealed on purpose or unintentionally because of the attitudes of who is doing the palimpsesting.

Context plays an important role in the cognitive and

emotional appraisals of art (Brieber et al., 2014; Gartus and Leder, 2014; Gartus et al., 2015; Gerger et al., 2014; Van Dongen et al., 2016). Similarly, in case of graffiti, the context where graffiti is placed can affect the emotional reactions of its perceiver (Gartus and Leder, 2014) and in the recognition of something as graffiti art (Gartus et al., 2015). However, the context alone does not explain what is seen as graffiti art but this seems to depend on the individual's personal interest in graffiti (Gartus et al., 2015). Bloch (2016) emphasizes the importance of location and context in graffiti related assessments because, according to Bloch (2016) especially in case of controversial subcultures "how one frames and narrates their activity and larger role as a participant in a given community changes depending on the location where the story is told" (p. 4). Thus, what is included in a graffiti palimpsest depends heavily on the context.

Culture can be understood as an all penetrating lens through which we interpret our world, think and act (Oyserman, 2017; Richerson and Boyd, 2005). It is information that contains such mentally preserved concepts as thought, knowledge, beliefs, values, skills and attitudes (Richerson and Boyd, 2005). Culture works through a set of psychological mechanisms which guide and affect people's behavior, experiences, inferences and understanding of cross-cultural meanings (Tooby and Cosmides, 2005). The cultural information is transferred by forms of social transformation such as learning and imitating (Richerson and Boyd, 2005; Whiten, 2017), creating something as a "social mind" (Whiten, 2017, p. 148). As graffiti writers share the same surfaces, imitating, altering and renewing the overlying images as part of a social activity in interaction with other writers and the public, the act of palimpsesting can be seen as a shared process where resulting palimpsests are representing both their individual and shared minds of graffiti subculture members, offering for varying, expanding, complementary or conflicting interpretations for both the writers and the perceivers of graffiti.

Art's identity and meaning are gained in socially constructed art traditions, histories and institutions, as in any organized social human practices (Dutton, 2009). What works are categorized and included in graffiti art is not a static concept, but it is continuously negotiated and transformed in an ongoing discourse with individuals, communities and institutes (Kimvall, 2014). The art world, a concept introduced originally by Arthur Danto (1964), means that in order to understand and identify an object as art, the perceiver

must master “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (Danto, 1964, p. 580). “Art world” is a construction that revolves around art, but similarly, any other organized interest group could be seen creating their own “worlds,” which could be called for example “graffiti world,” “political world,” “architectonic world,” “information technology world,” “legal world,” and so on. In explaining graffiti, from the perspective of these different worlds, participants from different fields create their own palimpsests based on their apperceptions, fusing cultural beliefs and historical community norms; thereby, investigating graffiti mysteries with their own thinking tools, creating their own explanatory stories which might strengthen and make sense of their own viewpoints and identities. These result in palimpsests, comments that can add to, conflict with or overwrite existing views.

For example, Arroyo Moliner et al. (2015) notes how the content of graffiti discourse depends often on the interests of the stakeholder and can be discussed for example as a threat and safety issue by graffiti prevention authorities, as vandalism by law enforcement and as a tool for communication with youth by social workers. Jakob Kimvall (2014) recognized four approaches to graffiti in Swedish public discourse from early 1970’s to end of the 1990’s: combating, domestication, subcultural and considering approach, displaying even contradictory views towards graffiti between agents with different backgrounds, attitudes and beliefs (Kimvall, 2014). Also, as the case of “The Reichstag Graffiti book” by Chmielewska (2008) illustrates how different agents create their own palimpsests, drawing from different memories and subjective histories which can then change what graffiti represents to each. These notions bring us to the topic of the following section, the nature of graffiti palimpsests as different mental narratives.

### **3. Graffiti as narrative mental palimpsests**

Graffiti can be seen as palimpsests that are construed of unique but interrelating visual narratives. Dan McAdams (1988, 2017) has researched the meaning of narratives in human personality psychology. According to McAdams (1988, 2017), people create internal and developing stories of their lives to construct a sense of continuity including “who they were in the past, who they are today, and who they eventually hope to become in the future” (McAdams, 2017, p. 33) to define their identities and give their lives meaning and purpose. Life stories seem to have their characteristic

content of agency, including power and achievements, and communion, and a sense of connection to other people which is seen, for example, in love and belonging (McAdams, 1988, 2017). Autonomy, sense of competence accomplished through learned expertise and innate talents, relatedness to others and social contexts are all important for a person’s intrinsic motivation and well-being as universal human needs (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kaufman and Duckworth, 2015).

Life stories are psychosocial constructions, shifting roles and multiple coexisting narratives that are edited and reinterpreted in interaction with other people. They are building blocks for a person’s identity, autobiographies which develop and change as the individual authors mature, influenced of and in continuity with the evolvement of the surrounding society’s cultural master narratives (McAdams, 2017). Graffiti too can be seen as their producers’ stories, visualized narratives of their travels through life. These narratives are modified and retold as visual palimpsests, where they form layers of their creators’ personality, life experiences and the surrounding society and culture. Graffiti brings forth and strengthens their creators’ as well as their interpreters’ identities, agency and connection to other people as alternating stories in varying contexts, in reflection with their personal experiences and specific contexts, such as graffiti culture. Graffiti writers can see their own works “simultaneously valuable and worthless, art and vandalism, indicative of ownership of the environment and challenging property rights” (Sliwa et al., 2007, p. 80). However, these separate seemingly contradicting narratives can co-exist in graffiti writers’ lives regardless of the tension caused (Hedegaard, 2014; Sliwa et al., 2007) illustrating the ambivalence and complexity of humans’ different life stories (Sliwa et al., 2007).

Arroyo Moliner et al. (2015) and Campos (2012) suggest for many graffiti writers graffiti is a life-style, even an addiction. However, the incentives to do graffiti and participate in graffiti subculture vary. For example, different cultural backgrounds can cause different motivations to do graffiti (Hedegaard, 2014; Valjakka, 2016). Many of those reasons seem to relate to some common, reoccurring themes which can be seen in psychological life narratives (McAdams, 1988, 2017), in self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and in universal characteristics of the art instinct (Dutton, 2009).

Graffiti can play an important role in the development and presence of persons’ individual and collective identity during their lifetimes (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Campos, 2012; Schacter, 2008; Taylor, 2012). Also, peer acknowledgement,

respect, social status and a membership in tribal like communities with peer activities and practices seem to be important factors for graffiti engagement (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Hedegaard, 2014; Malinen, 2011; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016; Terpstra, 2006; Valle and Weiss, 2010). Writing graffiti can act as a medium for aesthetically creative expression, allowing learning, competitiveness and achievements in personal artistic skills (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Hedegaard, 2014; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Valle and Weiss, 2010). Graffiti writing can evoke positive emotions such as pleasure, enjoyment and excitement (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Campos, 2012; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Schachter, 2008). Some graffiti writers see graffiti as a tool to embellish the environment, but only a few seem to be in to it for the sake of danger and to damage something (Rowe and Hutton, 2012). However, even in those cases that might otherwise include high negative risks, the writer's experienced self-determination, intrinsic motivation and experience of flow (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) might outweigh negative impacts of the often otherwise detrimental activity of producing illicit graffiti (Engeser and Schiepe-Tiska, 2012; Rheinberg, 2008).

Different life narratives can be seen as different layers in a graffiti palimpsest. Graffiti as urban palimpsests (Schacter, 2008; Shep, 2015) can speak "volumes about history, identity, cultural memory, desire, nostalgia, and erasure" (Shep, 2015, p. 209). According to Knox (2012), everyday landscapes carry layers of symbolic meanings. They echo and recreate the core values of their communities and in that way work as important, essential tools for social regulation (Knox, 2012). The creation and omission of graffiti generate temporal, shifting images into these everyday landscapes, communicating meanings as a form of social interaction (Schacter, 2008), at the same time competing with the other visual signage in cities (Shep, 2015). The surface where the image exists or has existed becomes the base layer for the palimpsest, a base for removed and new writings, offering possibilities for not overwriting but also for continuous reinterpretations and experiences for the reader, as new people and communities create new mental palimpsests based on their own stances. As Schacter (2008) stated: "the graffiti walls are [...] frequently renovated, as different writers compete and collaborate on the public canvas. In this way the walls can be perceived as a form of ongoing dialogue, a continual artistic discussion and public forum"

(Schacter, 2008, p. 48). Thus, these surfaces become sites for negotiating public and private city spaces (Shep, 2015) as well as spaces for learning about others' identities and interactions (Bowen, 2010).

To Pan (2016), palimpsests are also spatial memories which "include architectural visuality, narratives on space, visual images, artistic works, and practices in everyday life" (p. 32). Spatial memories are "simultaneous processes in which the production of memory narratives parallels the production of space in terms of its existence, appearance, use, and function" (Pan, 2016, p. 32). The spatial memory that a graffiti palimpsest can hold can be illustrated with Neef's (2007) story of the Berlin Wall graffiti, where she proposes that despite that physical material might be demolished and the actual piece disappears, the memory of the graffiti can still leave a trace that echoes in the background of people's memories, "taking the shape of new discourses and new 'museum's talks' on the dialectic split of the double exposures of 'in/visibilities'" (Neef, 2007, pp. 430-431). Thus, graffiti palimpsests can be seen as stories that cumulate and affirm the subcultural identities and values of the graffiti writers, as well as alter and renew the physical and mental space where they are located, impacting as artefacts in the present as well as spatial memories from the past.

#### 4. Graffiti as embodied palimpsests

Producing graffiti is a physical act, where the movements of body and the content of mind are embodied into a unified, gestural happening, executing a person's agency (Noland, 2009). As Rowe and Hutton (2012) propose: "graffiti is understood by writers as an engaging physical event, something that happens and is corporeal" (Rowe and Hutton, 2012, p. 81). As humans, we move in our environments, handling and altering objects, making plans and decisions by using symbols, receiving information from the world and organizing it to solve problems (MacLachlan, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2009), as enactive beings (Noë, 2004). We use our bodies to anchor ourselves to the world and interact with it, we perceive objects through bodily sensory systems and manipulate those objects by our bodily actions (MacLachlan, 2004). By doing this, we gain a sense of agency, a feeling of being in control of our own bodies and environment, also affecting our bodily self-consciousness (Kannape and Blanke, 2012).

Ferrell (2017) proposes that graffiti are results of performative actions that require planning and aesthetic skills, as well



as, mastering body movements. Graffiti writers' gestural performatives result in rich kinesthetic experience (Noland, 2009). These experiences are enriched further "with the physical challenge of producing complex artistic forms in difficult circumstances" (Rowe and Hutton, 2012, p. 81), provoking such emotions as pleasure and enjoyment (Rowe and Hutton, 2012). In addition to the individual properties of the actor, Noland (2009) suggests that the corporeal performance of writing graffiti embodies culture and its bodily practices, expressing and reinforcing the acculturation through behavior as learned gestures.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2008) noted: "rather than a mind and a body, man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things" (p. 67). Human consciousness and body together create a "mindful body" (MacLachlan, 2004, p. 171) where our mental processes are embodied (Rowlands, 2010). Embodiments of our mental contents and the self can be projected in a person's appearance, communication, gestures or actions or extended also in other objects (MacLachlan, 2004). As noted by Rafael Schachter (2008), the interviewed graffiti writers in his research considered graffiti images "to be a corporeal element of the artist themselves, an objectified and material constituent of their producer" (p. 38). It is those projections of their makers' embodied mental contents that are included in graffiti palimpsests.

Graffiti as an embodied palimpsest involves not only the act of producing graffiti but also perceiving it as an embodied experience. As Tracey Bowen (2010) explains: "Reading graffiti is embodied within the performance of bearing witness to another's existence as well as reading texts that present information through visual codes within the ever-changing contexts where they are found" (p. 85). To understand the bodily performance of others we must be able to reflect it with our own bodily experiences, which in case of graffiti and its specialized physical forms of execution might be challenging to many.

Graffiti are physical artefacts, objects that are perceived by their readers. Objects are seen in terms of what they afford, what is their content and how they can be used (Gibson, 1986; Saariluoma, 2004). Every object is perceived in its context, perceived through a person's previous information and concepts in apperception process, and creating a subjective, meaningful mental representation (Saariluoma, 2004, 2010). However, as Bowen (2010) suggests, graffiti

should be understood not just as meaningful images but also as marks of physical performance. Therefore, understanding graffiti also requires physical and haptic exploration from its readers, an embodied experience where readers interact with the artists, works, and cultural communities of artists. For this, readers are using their known conventions, codes, discovery and rethinking as basis of understanding (Bowen, 2010). Thus, palimpsestuous reading of graffiti is both a physical and a mental event, or better to say, an event in a unified entity of the embodied mind.

According to Schachter (2008), graffiti can be seen as internal messages externalized in a physical object, as embodied manifestations of its maker's personhood and agency in images all around the city. These manifestations can be seen as palimpsests which merge the surface with the output of the maker's mental and bodily activities, resulting in a graffiti image with its perceivable and imagined properties. As Brighenti (2010) explains, when graffiti are created by bodily actions in a physical environment, placing one's embodied expressions on surfaces and walls of the cities, they are also creating boundaries and territories. This way graffiti are also ways of mapping oneself to the space and others with visible traces, "interventions that define a type of social interaction at a distance" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 323). These territorial inscriptions are constantly changing, erased and rewritten in rhythmic body-mind actions (Dickens, 2008) creating additional mini-territories (Andron, 2017). In these territories, in their different contexts, graffiti fosters a possibility for creative alterations and confiscation of the city spaces (Dickens, 2008) as people are palimpsesting their environment by the actions of their embodied minds.

## 5. Conclusions

Graffiti can be described as a palimpsest that is built on layers of hidden and revealed physical and mental content. In their physical forms, graffiti palimpsests are layered writings and images on city surfaces, partly or completely overwriting the underlying canvas and its previous images. This way graffiti palimpsest spreads through the different cityscapes, creating territorial, ephemeral, changing images as mysterious souvenirs from their makers. Even after their partly or full disappearance, graffiti and the identities they embody can stay as part of the place's atmosphere in memoirs of both graffiti writers, city dwellers and other spectators.

Graffiti as a palimpsest can be examined also from another,

more philosophical aspect, as a process and a result of mental palimpsesting. This can be illustrated with the examples of creating and assessing graffiti art. Graffiti as mental palimpsests can be seen construed of narrative life stories, self-reflection and rebuilding, resulting into creative outputs where the cumulated information gained during individual and shared life journeys are combined in overwrites reflecting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and motives of the palimpsesting individuals. These creative pieces as art can act as interventions in the society and city, thus making graffiti a form of activism. Further, when the individual palimpsests are conjoined into a network of parallel, sometimes conflicting palimpsests, they can create a socially shared palimpsest, reflecting their cultural master narratives and social agreements. For example, in case of graffiti art, the individual palimpsesting can result in an experience or inference of that work being art, but in the end it is the intersubjective, shared agreement, the shared palimpsest of the sociocultural community that agrees and fosters what is conceived as art in that specific historical time period and context.

Graffiti is also an embodied palimpsest, conjoining the actions of the embodied mind into a participative performance, for both the graffiti producers and graffiti readers. Writing graffiti is a physical act where the bodily movements illustrate the writers' agency, as the writers are materializing their mental manifestations into graffiti works. In turn, perceiving graffiti and being able to read its content require not only knowledge and interest, but also active engagement in its interpretation at a corporeal level. This interaction with the writer and the graffiti image allows an embodied experience in the perceiver of graffiti.

Individual and shared versions of explanations for the truths of the world are discovered and rewritten via physical and mental graffiti palimpsests. Palimpsesting happens in interaction between different actors and agent, combining individual mental and physical properties, as well as, the sociocultural and historical context where the participants are acting. As a result, new layers of information are cumulating over the previous layers via learning, recalling, reconstructing and reforming, but where the past agonists keep influencing to the outcomes in the present. These palimpsest might reveal something from the history, strengthen or challenge the story of the current, and discover new opportunities for the future. Seeing graffiti as physical and mental palimpsests enables new perspectives for understanding incentives and

rewards, behaviours and interpretations related to graffiti. It can also help to understand the underlying reasons for how people from different backgrounds, knowledge and context, from graffiti writers, city dwellers, institutions and organisations, but also to researchers and other interest groups, assess graffiti in so different ways.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Pertti Saariluoma, Professor of Cognitive Science in University of Jyväskylä, and Annika Waenerberg, Professor of Art History in University of Jyväskylä, for supporting my ideas, guiding me in the right direction, for inspirational discussions as well as providing me with essential sources of information to my research.

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