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**To cite this article:** Richard Cook (09 Apr 2024): Crafting a 'senseplace': the touch, sound and smell of graffiti, The Senses and Society, DOI: [10.1080/17458927.2024.2337104](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2024.2337104)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2024.2337104>



Published online: 09 Apr 2024.



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# Crafting a 'senseplace': the touch, sound and smell of graffiti

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the senses of touch, sound and smell through the craft work of subcultural graffiti to develop a new understanding of place. It draws from ethnographic data collected from 18 months of *research edgework* involving active participation in the field. Firstly, it positions graffiti as craft work involving practice, skilled use of tools, insightful judgments and use of the body. Secondly, because graffiti can provoke strong practitioner feelings it explores sensory engagements. In forming this somatic link between the senses and craft work this article reveals how a particular personal consciousness regarding place is produced by an individual practitioner. It then discusses how sensory engagements through graffiti craft practice produce a conceptual reconfiguration of space and this is posited as a *senseplace*.

## KEYWORDS

Graffiti; craft; senses; touch; sound; smell; craft work; edgework

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to use touch, sound and smell and the practice of making graffiti to reveal more about the meaning of place. Firstly, a background to graffiti is presented for those unfamiliar with it, and to explain what it is and is not and identify a lacuna. Secondly, graffiti is conceptualized as a form of practitioner craft work which requires somatic and embodied interactions with tools and environment, which is then used to foreground data collected through touch, sound and smell. Graffiti craft work is thus used as mechanism to explore the senses and place meaning.

Mark making with aerosol paint cans (Ferrell 1995; Ross 2016) emerged around the 1970s in New York (Brewer and Miller 1990). Research of graffiti since then has been extensive but there is a lack of consensus on what is or is not graffiti and what is or is not art or vandalism. However, by forming a legal/illegal, sanctioned/unsanctioned, art/vandalism and street art/graffiti typology Ross (2016) has ably captured the debates around graffiti. For instance, those who craft graffiti say it is illegal and unsanctioned (Ross 2016) with others saying it is oppositional to society (Kramer 2010) vandalism (Monto, Machalek, and Anderson 2013) resistance (Ferrell 1995) and deviance (Snyder 2006). Graffiti has also been portrayed as *not* street art (Rafferty 1991) and a behavior associated with youth identity and individual subjectivities

(McAuliffe 2015). Graffiti has also been described as performance (Noland 2009), a form of communication (Bowen 2010; Hacer and Erdem 2022) and as constituting a patrimonial fabric of the city akin to an unofficial museum (Huerta 2010). Through a taxonomy, it has been argued that graffiti enables an understanding of behavior, attitudes and social processes of members of specific groups or subcultures (Alonso 1998; Ferrell 2013). In pursuit of the meaning of graffiti, research has presented “iconographical” approaches (Gottlieb 2014) via Panofsky’s model (Panofsky and Drechsel 1955) and Shatford’s framework (Shatford 1986). There is considerable breadth and range and this extensive research has thus attempted to *explain* graffiti. These studies provide a richness but have neglected to consider graffiti as a craft. In particular, in relation to this article, there is an absence of studies focused on the sensory engagements involved within this type of craft work. Also, ethnographic research on graffiti to date has paid little attention to the sensory researcher crafting graffiti as active participant (Ferrell 1997).

It is evident that graffiti research is broad spanning criminology, visual studies, design and media, archeology, human studies and cultural studies. However, there remains three limitations. 1) Graffiti has not been conceptualized as craft work 2) Methodologically, there is a paucity of first-person accounts of a researcher’s active participation doing graffiti. 3) Theoretically, beyond embodiment, performance and it being emotive, there are no sensory studies of graffiti that specifically deal with touch, sound and smell. This article methodologically and theoretically seeks to contribute to this lacuna by ethnographically exploring the craft skills (Atkinson 2022; de Certeau 1988) and practice of graffiti, using insider understandings and knowledge of practices (Atkinson 1988; Nilan 2002) and studying sensory engagements. The aim is to reveal what doing graffiti *feels* like and what this can then tell us about people, place or society.

## Background

Graffiti is typographic in style (dos Anjos Craveiro 2017) and is formed of words or letter assemblages. In most modern urban built environments (T. H. J. Marchand 2018a) one can now see palimpsests (Shep 2015) of graffiti (Figure 1). Its aesthetic might lead the observer to believe that fabrication required little thought or skill.

However, graffiti requires thinking and skill and requires tools and a raw material. Graffiti “writers”<sup>1</sup> who practice commonly fabricate complex “tags”<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1), “throwups”<sup>3</sup> (Figure 2) or “pieces”<sup>4</sup> (Figure 3). The craft practice of graffiti thus involves a relationship between raw material, body, tool and surface (T. H. J. Marchand 2021; T. H. Marchand et al. 2012). Carmel (2013) has described *craft* as work that requires tools, skills and insightful judgments. Throughout this article graffiti is therefore understood as a craft (Carmel 2013; T. H. J. Marchand 2021; T. H. Marchand et al. 2012; Sennett 2008) which involves craftsmanship.

Before proceeding, the term graffiti is often used incorrectly as a “catch-all” word to refer to a broad spectrum of media such as murals and street art,<sup>5</sup> paste-up interventions,<sup>6</sup> scratchiti,<sup>7</sup> and stencils.<sup>8</sup> This article focuses on “subcultural graffiti” (Merrill 2015) a letter-based signature-based style (see Figure 1), and a type defined by Merrill (2015, 370) as, “an unauthorised act of inscription onto public or private property.”



**Figure 1.** A subcultural graffiti palimpsest, City center, UK, authors unknown. (Photograph © author, 2023).



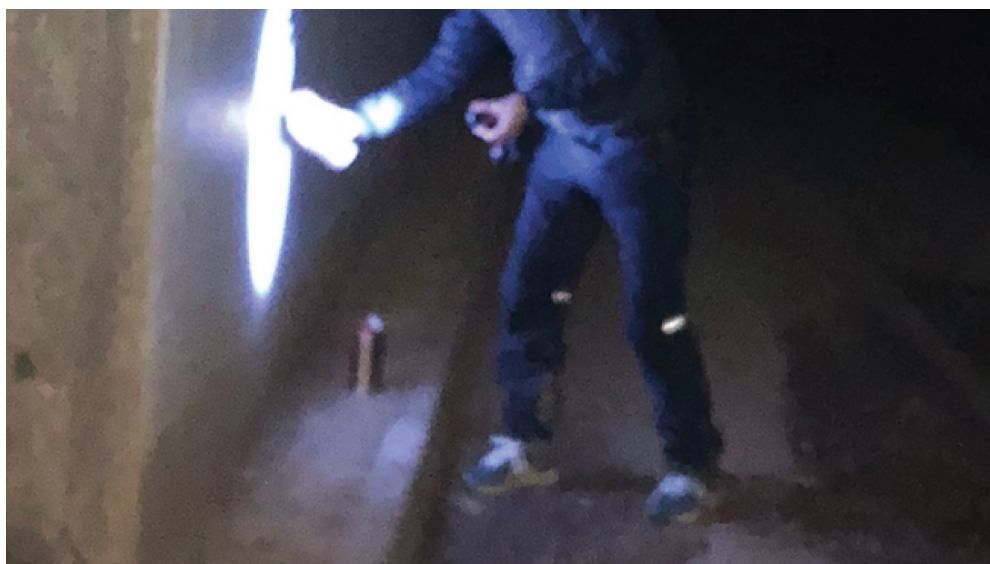
**Figure 2.** Throw up. (Photograph, © author, 2023).

During fieldwork I observed the movements of people's bodies and limbs that were embodied interactions and which involved the senses. During my own *active participation* crafting graffiti (Figure 4) I stretched to reach a wall, got a stiff and sore finger and forearm, got cold, wet and tired. I felt unsafe at night and sensed danger and was scared when confronted by an angry man. I felt anxious before fieldwork, was immersed and present during and exhilarated after. I touched the places painted and the texture of surfaces and smelled vapourised paint. My clothes, shoes, fingers and the surfaces I painted and the objects involved in graffiti craft work were paint-splattered and became changed visually and conceptually – I was attuned to my senses and used my senses. The practice of crafting graffiti on a surface therefore can be considered as embodied (Pink 2011), sensory (Howes 2018) situated (Howes 2022) and emplaced (Pink 2011). In this article, it is the senses invoked by graffiti that will be a focus.





**Figure 3.** Piece. (Photograph, © author, 2023).



**Figure 4.** The author working at night [Image pixelation intentional]. Fieldwork diary. (Photograph © author, 2023).

The “sensory engagements” (Cook 2023; Cook and Hockey 2023) experienced during graffiti craft work (smell, touch, atmosphere and so on) also occur in the everyday. For example, the “loud” smell of household gloss paint, nail polish or bleach cleaner and their pungent aggressive smell (Fletcher 2005). Such an olfactory sensory engagement can evoke emotions and feelings, or may provoke memories of another place or time, or cause recall of experiences or particular people. For example, the smell of household bleach recalling a swimming pool and memories of learning to swim as a child and time with a parent. Exploring the craft practice of graffiti accesses a relationship between the body, the senses and thinking and provides a new route to knowledge.

## Research edgework and active participation

There is an ethnographic tradition of researching subcultures *by being in them* even if through “illegal field research” (Ferrell 1997) and this puts the researcher at risk or requires crossing moral lines. For example, Becker’s (1963) field work with marijuana smokers and Polsky’s (1969) study of hustlers and gangsters. However, by being participant observers, direct participants or witnesses to criminal behavior, a researcher who deals in “dirty knowledge” (Ferrell 1997) is “developing important and influential accounts” (Ferrell 1997, 7). This occurs despite the risk methodologically by being *at close range* to reveal what might otherwise remain hidden from traditional research methods.

Pursuing this established ethnographic tradition through what I call “active participation” in graffiti, I engaged with my own senses and also turned to the senses as a focus of study to portray the craft work and the experiences of subcultural graffiti (Merrill 2015). Fieldwork provided insider knowledge from the embodied (Fransberg, Myllylä, and Tolonen 2021; Okley 2007) craft work and sensory experiences of *doing* graffiti. Fieldwork was an active participation approach as both insider and outsider that provided knowledge about the senses, skills, practice and use of graffiti tools that jointly have not been considered in the graffiti literature. The methodological approach of hands-on craft work was fun but risky (Lyng 1990, 2005) and, following Lyng’s “edgework,” something I define as “research edgework.” Utilizing Ferrell’s (1997) explication of the dangerous dynamic of illegal field research it is a methodological progression beyond passive or “classic observational methods” (Pink 2009) often utilized during ethnography. With others I was actively engaged in craftsmanship (Sennett 2008) and the craft practice of graffiti as part of an ethnography of sensory engagements. In support of my methodology O’Connor (2005, 2017), Gowlland (2019) and Marchand (2018b) have collectively advocated for a participating method of immersion, embeddedness and *the doing of*, to understand handwork, the process of learning, for tacit knowledge and enskilment. In relation to this I attempted to advance material consciousness (Larsen 2018) by both *doing* and using and by “sensory” ethnographic participation (Pink 2018). So, through a research focus upon graffiti and the senses my active participation during fieldwork aspired to analytically (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003) get to the individual things (Spiegelberg 1975) to direct attention to the foundational elements of lived experience (Van Manen 1995) and specifically, use these to find knowledge about and through the senses of touch, sound and smell. In short, I crafted graffiti on my own and with others and recorded sensory engagements and craft experiences to produce my own “dirty knowledge” (Ferrell 1997).

In pursuit of dirty knowledge, my own moral boundaries were drawn and re-drawn as my own position was renegotiated constantly as I questioned myself reflexively about harm. The fieldwork I conducted involved learning to craft graffiti by beginning as novice and progressing to developing craft skills and knowledge (T. H. J. Marchand 2018b). It involved learning what paint to use and how various types resulted in particular effects and outcomes and development of “can skills” and “can craft.” It involved learning what “caps”<sup>9</sup> to use and why, and their relationship with the cans. Craft knowledge was gained from practice and involved both “sayings and doings”, that is, craft work and informal tutoring and tips from writers alongside advice and hints from staff in graffiti shops. Fieldwork was my attempt to develop mastery of the *hand-tool-skill* process and portray

the craft practice of doing graffiti and its sensory engagements. However, as mentioned, fieldwork was not passive participant observation free from risk and danger. Conducting “research edgework” meant that at times during fieldwork I sensed danger, felt unsafe and put myself at risk of physical harm, a sensory experience Lyng (1990, 116) has ably captured:

The more specific aptitudes required for this type of competence involve the ability to avoid being paralyzed by fear and the capacity to focus one’s attention and actions on what is most crucial for survival.

## Methodology

In this section, because of the illegal status of subcultural graffiti and the needs of those involved, specific information has intentionally been omitted because it would be simple to connect participants to places and pieces. Graffiti as vandalism was/is neither condoned nor encouraged by the author for research purposes. The research study spanned 18 months [years/dates redacted] and during this time fieldwork in the UK [location redacted] occurred one or twice a week for up to two to three hours at a time. Fieldwork occurred when it was dark either late at night or early morning. Fieldwork involved both doing and observing graffiti with writers or solo. I practised with four partners [names redacted] and these partners changed and were varied and I spoke with them during graffiti or planning graffiti, learning craft skills and techniques and gaining insider knowledge. I also spoke with practising graffiti artists who worked in graffiti shops [names/locations redacted] when I had technical gaps in my knowledge and to ask about specific techniques or effects or pieces I had seen to check and qualify my analysis of the data. YouTube was also a rich source of supporting information [participant writers channel names redacted]. In terms of research participants, all the graffiti artists I spoke to and my graffiti partners were adults and participated willingly but did not want any information or data published. Alongside the graffiti I produced as I practised, data was collected using fieldnotes and diary entries, drawings and designs, digital photographs, mobile phone text messages, e-mails and informal interview notes.

The data was thematically analyzed following Clarke and Braun (2017). An initial analysis produced a set of codes. These were further analyzed to identify emergent themes around touch, sound and smell. As part of the process of surfacing themes I set out with a research focus on *things* (Appadurai 1986; Schiffer 1999), the tools of craft practice, the material objects used to fabricate graffiti. Things were the aerosol spray can and caps. I began with tools because they were a way to reveal more about a subculture and to develop a material consciousness (Sennett 2008) and skilled vision (Grasseni 2018). New knowledge may be found through tools and Classen (1997) has argued that when attuning oneself to things, not only are the senses evoked but the things used are culturally conditioned and are socially constructed (Appadurai 1986; Howes 2022). However, rather than remain the sole object of study, the graffiti tools became a way to belong to the subculture and become embedded in the field and were a focus for talk and conversations. Sensory engagements whilst using the tools enabled new knowledge to be revealed because as Howes (2022, 329) has outlined, “by sensing and making sense along with others [that] the material world comes alive for us.”

Analysis of the data revealed themes around touch, sound and smell but importantly revealed the extent to which place was important to writers. Place was a significant and major theme emergent across the whole data set. As discussed in research of cyclists and classrooms, place stimulates “narrative meanings” (Cook and Hockey 2023) and knowledge of a place helps develop meaning and provoke place meanings (Cook 2023). Using place therefore becomes a way to find out what narrative meanings might be evoked through the senses of graffiti writers when doing craft work. In the next section therefore the fieldwork sensory data is presented under the three themes of touch, sound and smell. Following the presentation of the data because of its importance to graffiti writers, there is a discussion of the sensory significance of place in relation to touch, sound and smell.

## Presentation of the data

The following sections are extracts from the data collected as graffiti craft work was practiced. Themes of touch, sound and smell were revealed through the analysis as was the importance of place which appeared as a cross-cutting theme.

### *Touch*

Graffiti involved the hand, tools and surfaces. The writers consciously engaged through the sense of touch. They handled spray cans and various caps each with a distinct feel, shape, form, weight and texture. Fingers felt small details of caps, hands judged weight or position on cans. Touch was an integral part of painting especially when carried out in low light or darkness, under a headtorch, streetlamp or other artificial low light source. Touch became a sense much used and a key information source for meaning.

Date not given: UK. Early, 5.45am, Dark. Early summer. Warm.

The writer is stood in a shallow stream to paint on a flood relief wall. He can feel the cold of the water on his feet and the press of the current on his legs. He rubs a palm along the wall to judge it - feels its smooth concrete texture, feels its coldness and judges it to be slightly damper lower down. He feels in a pocket for a cap. Too dark to see it. Rolls it in his fingers. Holds the cold can, feels the place to fit the cap. Feels the cap for the nozzle and finger hold to know where the paint will come from.

Each tool was known and understood through touching it. A cap is small, difficult to feel but unique by shape and form, unmistakably a cap to a writer. Many caps can be known individually by touching them to find their shape, size and form. The assemblage of attributes the cap has, like a woodworker’s chisel, means it can be identified through touch and be known for a specific purpose or outcome. The cap is how the writer controls the paint and is therefore a key material object, an understanding of which can be gleaned through touch. Touch provided a writer with data about tools that were utilized for craft work.

Not only did a writer touch the tools they also touched the places they painted. From walking on paths, holding rails or grabbing handles, leaning on a wall, the objects in the built environment became an interface between the writer and place. Place was



significant for the process of crafting graffiti as the writer considered aspects of a place such as visibility (how many people will see it), longevity (whether it will be “buffed”<sup>10</sup> or how long it will “run”<sup>11</sup>) and security (likelihood of being seen and stopped or apprehended). So, although each place was evaluated by a writer visually, during craft work place was engaged with by touch by the writer. Place, thus consisted of the elements of the urban environment both large and small: individual parts, structures and surfaces. For example, a cycle path, a door or door handle or motorway underpass or bridge wall. Touch occurred via a sweep of the hand over the surface or a fingertip to feel and explore the texture before painting or it might be during the process of painting as the writer leant on the surface or braced a wall as they climbed or moved position to paint.

I run my hand over the concrete. Super cold, smooth but a bit of texture. The already painted part, that’s gonna get buffed, is smoother still.

This red brick is rough. Textural. Abrasive. Stippled and with lots of holes. Like dried out bread. Brittle feeling. Plenty of cracks and grooves.

Super smooth concrete - poured into a form? It’s cold and super slippery. Almost feels like plastic, would cover well but it is super absorbent.

This old metal is rusty. But, takes paint well. Cover it quickly with white, surprising. It’s abrasive to touch like a sandpaper. (Diary notes on surfaces)

The writer touched the surfaces of the places throughout the process of graffiti. However, and significantly, because the paint (the media) is propelled through the air by the aerosol can there is no direct touching of tool to surface. The tool itself does not touch the surface, only the writer and the surface touch. In other crafts (woodworking, oil painting, blacksmithing and so on) tools such as a chisel, brush, hammer connect person and surface as craft work and creativity is directly *felt*.

Holding the cap close means a thinner line and far away a dispersed fatter line. The secret [he says] is to hold that air gap between cap and wall consistently for a smooth line - unless of course you want a “flare” effect. So different to brush work – no feedback loop through feel with canvas. (Diary notes)

In summary, the physical manipulation of a spray can’s cap and a writer’s interaction with place through their body meant that touch was a key part of graffiti craft practice. Through touch, a writer had some knowledge about what they were physically doing and where these actions and behaviors were occurring.

## Sound

During the making of graffiti sound was important materially and spatially. Firstly, in relation to materiality, sound provided information about whether tools were working or not. The hiss of paint from a can confirmed it was working. The hiss might be loud for one cap/can combination or quieter with another combination. Pressing lightly on the cap and a quiet hiss was heard, pressing hard a louder hiss is heard. No hiss and the nozzle or needle was blocked so the cap was useless. The “pea” (ball bearing) clattering about inside told a writer how much paint was in the can and whether the can was ready to be used. Pitch was a key indicator of

volume. Taken from a shelf having sat for a while a can was initially silent until shaken when the set paint was agitated by the pea. When full the pea made a duller sound than when a can was near empty when the pea made a tinny amplified loud rattle. In this way the auditory was used to assess and evaluate the tool.

[Practice session, home] Shaking two cans (gripping one in each hand) and it's freezing cold and dark, late at night, I'm wearing a head torch and see only what's illuminated in front of me. There's a few flakes of sleet or snow I can't tell which. I've got gloves on but my hands are dead cold, stiff. The night is silent bar a few cars down my street. No wind, it's still. These cans are making a real racket - (the pea is) rattling really loud and sounds 10x louder now than earlier inside. The silence makes them louder? My arms are aching and my forearms are burning with lactic acid. I change the direction of shaking, up and down and then side to side alternate with the right arm then rest it while shaking with left and vice versa, trying to stop them burning. I can hear the *ball* inside is moving quickly because the rattle is higher pitched and this means the paint is moving quickly. (Diary notes)

Secondly, spatially, sounds within the environment were a way to become alert and attuned to the built environment and the people around and about. Hearing where people were was important because when writers paint illegally avoiding people means less chance of a sanction. Graffiti is emotive and whether on a legal wall or space or on an illegal spot passersby may become agitated or abusive which can make the writer feel unsafe or threatened. Noise from cars, or motorbikes, the padding of a runner's feet or barking of a dog, were all sounds of potential threat and sounds which induced a sense of peril.

7pm. Evening, Summer. Freewall - Underpass, city centre. Man stopped and his dog runs about yapping nonstop. He's waving his arm and pointing in M\_'s face. Angry loud words. He doesn't know this is a legal spot and M\_ is covering up a large red "Fuck you" with a character piece. A runner pads by (plat/plat/plat sounds), dog keeps yapping - all the noises sound louder. Senses heightened - on alert, switched on. (Diary note)

10pm, night. Streetlight. Wet. Drizzle. T\_\_\_ painting for 45 mins. Eyes on the wall, walking it up and down painting - in the zone. A sideways look once in while but listening. A noise - he stops, frozen in time. When safe he starts, this routine repeats often. Listening hard, always, trying to pick up anything, any noise means someone. This spot is silent (cyclepath) so any noise means someone is walking, riding or running towards us. (Diary note)

As with touch, sound was a way to know of place and to become engaged in that place and to form the meaning of that place.

In summary, sound was a key component of crafting graffiti because it is information used by the body to perform skilled movements and make judgments about craft practice. Sound enabled the writer to have some knowledge in a reflexive way about where they are and what they are doing. Sound as words or noises also allowed them to form a sense of safety or knowledge of perceived or actual threat or danger.

## **Smell**

Smell occurred as natural and non-natural odors. The majority of the sensory engagement with smell whilst crafting graffiti was non-natural in the form of propellant gas and acrylic paint.

Night, 10pm. First attempt a few weeks in. Working inside with M\_, smell is strong, really strong. In fact, the propellant isn't dispersing - seems to be in a paint mist. [When I get outside I realise how full the room is with propellant and paint. It stinks. Really really stinks. Should I wear a mask? Note to self - ask at shop. (Diary note)]

11.30pm, night. Cold. 4 Cans out, pocket two, two in hand. Cap on, shake, shake, this time just to hear it's moving freely, then a test spray. Hsss. A small emission of paint. Test again, Hssssss. Drawn to the smell - CHEMICAL! Super strong. Nothing smells and this fills the air! This stinks out loud. The paint has gone but propellant hangs in the air long after. It's likely we can be smelled but not seen in the dark. (Diary note)

In the car - strong paint smell. Is it residue in the nostrils? Get home unpack and see cap still on an upside down can of green sprayed itself into bag. Puddle of dry paint in bottom of bag. (Update) 7 days later - bag still reeks of spray paint. Getting whiffs driving to work. Passengers ask what the smell is. (Diary note)

However, smell was a way in which the writer recalled or recollected places and activities. There were distinct smells associated with craft practice, place and also time.

Winter smells different to summer. I'm smelling damp plants and grass and wet mud.

The city smells different to the suburbs. It's fast-food and fumes in the city. Weed, vapes and fags, like spray paint, signature smells hanging in the air that tell you people were here just a few seconds ago.

The suburban air smells of people. In winter, air is cold in the nostrils and it smells of wood fires and chimneys, summer it's warm in the nose and smells of barbeques. Smell changes. (Diary notes)

In summary, smell provided the writer with information used in the crafting of graffiti in relation to place and time. Smell contributed to the writer knowing where they were and when in time craft practice took place.

To conclude the data section on touch sound and smell, individually the data provided insights into the craft practice of graffiti. Taken collectively, the significance of "place" is particularly evident. Place thus emerged as an axis around which the sensory data was oriented. This is discussed in the next section.

## Discussion of place

People make meaning in landscapes (Bender 1993), attach memories to places and feel they belong (Olsen 2003). At this macro-level of landscape, cities and towns are built environments (T. H. Marchand et al. 2012; Sennett 2005) and spaces where people are present and immersed and "in-the-world" (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009). Cities are spaces where sense is made and place becomes important (Christensen and Thor 2017; Cresswell 1992). However, at a micro-level of material objects there are places of surfaces, for example, walls, doors, windows, window shutters and signs. These are the "spots" (Ferrell and Weide 2010) or places where writers craft graffiti and where the craft work and practice of graffiti is situated (Bloch 2018) and are thus potential sites of knowledge for a wide range of researchers (Myllylä 2019).

### ***Place based symbolic interactions***

As the data has shown, in a place, a graffiti writer will engage in practice and routines of repetitive actions that are part of a process of crafting graffiti. For instance, prior to painting on a wall, writers shook cans, added caps and performed test sprays. During painting there would be a routine of outlining, filling and finishing touches. There would be spatial routines, finding and preparing a spot to paint, or temporal routines such as time spent packing bags, purchasing or selecting paints, designing and planning which may be over days or weeks. Routines (Hockey 2019) were connected to space and place and time and graffiti happened within place and space. Also, during the routines of craft the writer contiguously attended to their senses, feeling, thinking, listening, looking, touching and smelling. So, although graffiti may be first thought of as a visual experience, one sees or observes, the act of *doing* graffiti revealed that it involves somatic perception (Waskul and Vannini 2006) and a sign-process (Peirce 1931; 1991) for meaning making and was thus “socio-somatic” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 208). The typifications (Schutz 1967) involved were the routines of the craft of graffiti and involved a series of interactions that although place based and visible as between writer and surface and tool still occurred within a social context. There was thus the involvement of “the social” and this is related to where it takes place. For more on the social construction of place and “sensespaces” see Feld (2005) and Desjarlais (2005) and also Fletcher (2005) for the senses disordered.

### ***Making sense of place***

In relation to place, the wall to a writer was a surface and a place where they could write, a place of interaction, a perception that was formed through interpretation and symbolism. Writers thus have both a “mind” and a “self” (Mead 1938/1972; Mead 1962/1934) and can thus “be an object of their own actions”. The writer was able to think about their own intentions and in relation to others mind and self, for example, thinking “Am I safe? Is this a safe place to paint? Will I be seen?.” The writer was able to confront their own world and did so through “objects” that were symbolic, constructed of meanings (Blumer 1969, 80):

The object is a product of the individual’s disposition to act instead of being an antecedent stimulus which evokes the act. . . . the proper picture is that he constructs his objects on the basis of his on-going activity. . . . giving them meaning, judging their suitability to his action, and making decisions on the basis of the judgement.

Judgments and thinking occurred with knowledge of self, and both others and objects. Actions and acts of graffiti by the writer thus occurred in a social context, even if they deviated from norms can still be regarded as group action and social. The writer is a “self” so interpreted, made meaning and reflected on interactions with objects that were symbolic and through stages (Mead 1938/1972) of stimulus, perception, action and completion, the senses were involved. Writers make and are made through graffiti as meaning is emergent in interaction. Writing is thus both temporal and spatial and the sensory symbolic interactions were “moments” (LeFebvre 1991). They involved social relationships and reflective thought about the writer’s self. Clock-time of seconds,

minutes or hours was less important to the writers than place because place was felt. In place, sensory symbolic interaction occurred as the writer sprayed paints onto surfaces that became changed and also changed the writer as they interpreted their actions and the place they painted.

At the micro-level of a surface such as an individual wall, window or door, the skilled craft practice (Marchand 2018b; Gowlland 2019) of spraying paint onto a surface engaged the senses. This occurred as the data has shown, through the touch of a cold rough brick wall, the smell of paint and propellant gas or the paralyzing fear (Lyng 1990) of being caught. These sensory moments interweaved to form a real-time assemblage of sensations, feelings and emotions, a “sensory tapestry” (Cook and Hockey 2023) interrelated and composed in a sense ratio (McLuhan 1962; McLuhan 2005). For instance a sense ratio of touch, smell and atmosphere (Anderson 2009). Graffiti is an intersection of the tactile, olfactory and emotional, and is thus sensory. At a micro-level this sensory craft work oriented around objects and tools (Dant 2006) that had symbolic meaning (Blumer 1969; Classen 1997) or which through symbolization (Snow 2001) when used for craft work, are then interpreted by writers of the graffiti in a place (Pink 2008) where it occurs.

### **‘Senseplace’**

In the built environment people come into contact with each other (Sennett 2005) and places are where people encounter conformity, regularity and exhibit urban fear (Bauman 1999). Built environments can thus be uncomfortable places (Sennett 2005), empty spaces and non-places (Giddens 1991, 1992) where people act rather than interact as disembedding mechanisms make space feel phantasmagorical (Giddens 1991). In such spaces, ambivalence or detachment, choreographed or controlled movements in and by space and place are the norm, so people may not feel or *sense* a place. The crafting of graffiti can challenge the above portrayals of sociability and subjectivity because the senses are evoked – the data has shown that a writer of graffiti feels place through the senses as meaning is made. This happened through touching, hearing and smelling.

Graffiti writers possess a craft oriented alternate understanding of the city and its places resultant from how they perceive place and sensorially interact in it and with it. This understanding extends to the built environment’s objects such as a wall, window or door, and at this micro-level, it is a sensory interpretation of reality. It is thus an abstraction and it extends to how a writer conceives of the notion of place and their perception and conceptualization of space as it is produced during and by the writing of graffiti. As an abstraction or reality, space is not inhabited or physical but experienced as process, and is produced (LeFebvre 1991). The production of space, through the writing of graffiti is “being-in-the-world,” or *dasein* (Heidegger 2006) and it is about the who, how and where. It is thus temporal, reflexive, embodied and emplaced and spatial. A place is therefore not simply a place such as a building in the “perfect city” (Bauman 1999) as non-writers of graffiti might conceive of one, but a process of space/place meaning making. For the writer, the process began in a natural space (LeFebvre 1991), for example a surface such as a wall seen as a potential site for graffiti. Or, often, as experienced during fieldwork, natural space became differential space as LeFebvre (1991) has described it, where one people inhabit space of *an other* people in a democratic or public sense. For example, where the excluded occupy space reserved for the exclusive (Sennett 2005).



Understandings of space and place are thus interpretive, are socially produced and are simultaneously mental and physical constructs. Writing graffiti reveals that a sensory interpretation of place happened as what a place actually was, is reconfigured conceptually.

Within the sensorial 24-hr city reconfiguration occurs in the everyday as we produce meaning and understandings of places through the many biological systems we have available (Adams et al. 2007). Beyond touch, sound and smell this includes for example, tasting the dust and dirt of traffic, becoming vertiginous around skyscrapers or getting goosebumps in dark alleyways, or “hyperesthesia” as Howes (2005) has described it. In the city, the body’s sensory systems allow us to produce meaning in real-time, giving us *situation reports* and *status updates* enabling us to make sense of the world.

A graffiti writer touched caps and spray cans and walls, heard the hiss of paint and smelled the paint or was scared, exhilarated or pensive – they made sense this way and place is felt as it is sensed. Through the practice of graffiti there is a sensory production of space, and through conceptual abstraction and reconfiguration, the crafting of a “senseplace” happens. Rather than being a wall, through the sensory engagement of crafting graffiti, via touch, sound and smell a wall resonated as a senseplace. Rather than remaining as natural spaces (LeFebvre 1991) empty spaces and non-places (Giddens 1991, 1992) physical structures and places such as a wall were encoded as a senseplace. By feeling and sensing in space, a graffiti writer reflexively, emotionally and sensorially produced a senseplace as sensory engagements reconfigured place during the craft practice of writing graffiti.

## Conclusion

Graffiti has been presented as a craft. The craft practice of graffiti has been explored and through its tools, its process and place, has been theorized through the senses of touch, sound and smell. It was found that the craft practice of graffiti involved meaning making and narrative meanings, that is, symbolic interaction with objects and place. Graffiti has been portrayed as how writers produced a senseplace when sensory engagements become situated. A senseplace can be thought of as moments in space where the self *becomes*, and is then a focus of reflexive thinking with, about and through the senses as practice occurs.

In presenting the notion of a senseplace this article has moved beyond current perspectives and analyzes of graffiti by analytically connecting craft work, place and the senses. A senseplace is offered as a framework that may be analytically useful to explore other craft practices or work more broadly. There may be some scope for its application where people report some level of feeling or emotion for space or place.

Whether groups of people can co-produce a senseplace remains to be seen as does whether there are gender differences that come into play.

Notably, data was drawn from sensory engagements with just touch, sound and smell, there are more sensory systems that could be explored. Finally, not every senseplace will be formed intentionally or be produced as expected. The author’s hospitalization from crashing a bicycle caused the site of the crash to become a “bad” senseplace composed of pain, sound, fear (Desjarlais 2005) and which involved proprioception and the vestibular system. It seems reasonable therefore to believe that a bad senseplace can be produced

involuntarily, unwittingly and unexpectedly and involve a wider range of senses. This and the cartographic visualization and mapping of multiple senseplaces remain an area for future research.

## Notes

1. A person who paints/writes subcultural graffiti.
2. Signature style letters.
3. Outlined and filled letters.
4. Letters of several colors, can have embellishments, highlights and a background.
5. Large photo-realistic or multi-colored pictures or scenes, often commissioned by a client.
6. Printed or drawn posters, paper or card glued over existing wall advertising, billboards or posters to subvert the intended message.
7. Using a key or metal point, a tag is scratched into glass or Perspex or plastic.
8. A spray painted image, icon or picture made using a cardboard stencil.
9. Spray cans have an interchangeable “cap.” Different caps produce different outcomes. A “fat” cap emits more paint so a larger area is covered and can be used to produce a thick line. A skinny cap emits less paint, less is covered and can produce a thinner line. Caps may be known by their name, e.g. Pink dot, Astro, NY Fat cap or Lego.
10. If graffiti is overpainted with a flat color it is said to have been “buffed.”
11. The time that graffiti remains visible is referred to as its “run”.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Richard Cook**’s research interests are ethnography, material culture and the senses. His PhD thesis was an ethnography of Amazon’s Echo Dot and Alexa and the role voice technology played in the classroom and the impact upon students question asking and epistemic curiosity. Richard co-founded the experimental ethnography group ‘Eth.lab’.

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