

# The Pretty Vacant:

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# Exploring Absence in Subcultural Graffiti

## INTRODUCTION: BOMBING STOCKHOLM

Let me tell you about my encounter with John, a notorious bomber from the Swedish capital of Stockholm. I followed John a couple of days every month over the course of two years. He was in his mid 30s, had a white-collar job, and had been doing graffiti for more than half of his life. Most of which he had focussed on doing tags and throwups in the city.

A night out with John included some minimal preparations before leaving his apartment:

Assembling caps – only NY fat caps and Montana original – shaking cans – only black and white – gathering some markers – also black and white and at times a silver – putting on black gloves and a black scarf. And then we were off.

John's ventures into the city usually departed from one of the busiest inner city subway stations and then moving in a variety of directions. Based on my fieldwork and my observations, he mostly stuck to the southern parts of Stockholm, he would only rarely go writing north of the city centre. Following John in the streets was a thing in itself. At times we would walk a mile or two for about an hour. At times we would walk 10 miles stumbling home at dawn. And at times we would be thrown into a 400-metre hurdle race with the police or guards on our tails.

Going out with John was like a box of chocolates, you never knew what you would get, except all of the chocolates had adrenaline fillings.

From a graffiti perspective, Stockholm is a fascinating city. The actual inner city is quite small, with outer areas being tied to the centre through the subway, like planets circling the sun. The subway-lines order the city with a clear node in the middle, each line thus having two parts: one northbound and one southbound. But the city is also marked by the war that it has waged on graffiti over a 25-year period (Kimvall, 2014). At its peak, even condemning graffiti in any of its forms including yarn graffiti, gallery shows and legal walls. Walls within the city are to be cleaned within 24 hours, meaning that writing graffiti in Stockholm means being out and about. A lot of walking and writing on an almost daily basis as roughly nine out of ten tags will be buffed within hours. Nevertheless, having grown up within this zero-tolerance context, John and many others were not all negative to the city's cleaning, it was rather something inevitable, a circular movement, like the sun rising each morning:

*The part I like the best [of graffiti] is really the ephemerality in a way, that it goes away, it is buffed, and it needs to be redone, that the spots are again and again made available [...] The buff to me, is a natural part of the whole thing, it's just there, and I am NOT looking for places that get buffed less often, and when the thought crosses my mind I try to fend it off, to not think in that way. (Stockholm 19:34)*

To John and his friends, the buff worked to weed out the non-committed, erasing those who were not willing to go out night after night. As the buff would continuously deliver available surfaces again and again. But this quote also points to how the buff also led to a rather particular view of the city. Whereas Ferrell and Weide (2010) in their Spot theory of graffiti argue that writers primarily seek out spots that will not get buffed,

it was a common practice and attitude among the Stockholm bombers I followed to rather indiscriminately hit the streets regardless of how they were buffed. Subcultural identities were achieved through shared quantity over time; if you did a hundred tags in the streets, the city might just have time to erase 95, and if you did a hundred tags in another part of the city the next day, and then returned, you would be up. Kind of like a subcultural version of Sisyphus pushing up his name only to be erased and start over again and again.

To make a long story somewhat shorter. I decided to bring John to the city of Malmö in the south of Sweden close to where I live. Just across the water from Copenhagen, Malmö has had an entirely different approach to graffiti than Stockholm. The city has two big open walls in the midst of the city, and is somewhat more lenient on buffing. So, John and I started walking the streets in the more alternative sections of Malmö, looking at tags, throws, and pieces. I had been fairly certain that he would love it, but quite early on I could detect that he was not feeling comfortable. At all. He kept shaking his head and he would only do a small tag here and there. After about twenty minutes he had had enough: angrily he blurted out 'What the fuck is this. Don't they ever buff this place, where should I put up my tags, there's no fucking space left'. We sat down at a bar, he calmed down a bit, said something about how he really wanted to know how the local writers dealt with the lack of empty space.

Over the years, he would come back to Malmö and visit me and the new friends he had made in the city, and he would eventually learn to deal with this lack of available space. Nevertheless, I remember sitting at that bar feeling much like a loving pet owner having brought my city cat to the countryside to roam freely only to realise that she was scared shit of mother nature.

I have argued against the assumption of a single subcultural definition of space numerous times: trains are not tracksides, and tracksides in turn are neither the streets or the walls inside an abandoned factory, these different spaces constitute different subcultural terrains with different ideals, activities, and rules (cf. de Certeau, 1984). The advantage of the concept of terrain over landscape, or subcultural places for that matter, is that it suggests a practical and affective relation to space, rather than a particular patch of land (Steinbock, 1995).

As such, terrains are something that we bring with us, something we realise through actions, rather than something that we unearth. Terrain refers to a familiarity, to feeling at ease and falling into a particular rhythm wherein the surroundings and its objects behave like they should (Nilsson, 2010).

Let us take a layman's example. I love foraging for mushrooms. Still, I do not approach meadows, forests, or clear-cut areas in the same way. My activities, pace, and vision differ. This also differs according to time; I scan the woods differently, and am attentive to different colours, in early summer, than I am in the autumn. Third, if I am out looking for porcinis, I move at a different pace, my eyes scanning the surroundings faster, and I look for different kinds of objects than if I am out looking for horns of plenty, where I move a lot slower and am more focussed. I search for the familiar, I seek to realise a particular terrain of foraging, in the



Malmö, Sweden, 2021. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

sense of a practical and affective expectation of things as they typically do. I might move within the same patch of land, and I may move along similar paths, but the way I perceive my surroundings, my rhythm, but also my expectations change in accordance with how familiar the terrain appears and feels to me (cf. Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2018). I draw from previous experiences, with what Bourdieu (1998) talks about as a feel for the game, I know what to look for, and what to ignore. Graffiti writers, much like foragers, or for that matter skateboarders or traceurs, do not have to start all over again in new surroundings, but can rely on their bodily memories

and experiences – on their practical and affective experiences of space (Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2018; de Certeau, 1984).

This means that when the activity, rhythm, and expectations do not fit to the terrain, we tend to feel rather lost or unnerved. Marcel Mauss (1973), in his fantastic article 'Techniques of the body', discusses a similar lack of connection between the body and the spatial rhythm in noting the problems of an English regiment attempting to march to the rhythm of French buglers and drummers: when the rhythm is not working the gait becomes at odds and out of step.



Secret location, South of Sweden. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

The example of John in the city of Malmö is one such example, but I would encounter dozens of similar situations when travelling with writers to new cities; how they would struggle to feel at ease in the graffitied streets of Kreuzberg, St. Pauli, or Hackney. But the opposite was also true: visiting Stockholm or Helsinki with writers from Hamburg, Malmö, or London, they felt out of step with the cleanliness, that there was too much empty space, and why was it that empty. There must be something wrong. Or else, why all this available space?

In this article I will delve into how graffiti writers perceive and make use of the city, focussing on the role of absence in this. The attraction of the void, the empty, the vacant. This focus on the role of the void, the vacant, the empty in graffiti is far from something new. Presence and absence have to some extent always been part of the discussion of graffiti: the authorities aiming for absence through the buff or increased security measures, while writers establish themselves as part of the subcultural through a symbolic presence on the trains and in the streets. To be up is per definition to be present. Still, seeing these two aspects as opposites, and as mutually exclusive, risks obscuring how writers proactively use both absence and presence as interrelated.

I will discuss the role of absence through three steps, starting with the definition of the vacant in terms of space, here I will move beyond the notion in previous research that graffiti is drawn to the already marked and dirty, and instead propose how graffiti follows a subcultural logic of a myth of an empty space that can be traced directly to the most central of subcultural rules: do not go over someone else's work.

From there I will move on to vacancy *within* space, the gaze for absence as in a place to be claimed. Rafael Schacter (2014: 42) has referred to this as 'a cenophobia, a fear of the empty that only decoration will alleviate' but I will rather talk about this as a *cenophilia*, of a love for the absent and empty.

I will then end by addressing the proactive use of absence and in particular the buff. The story of John touches on this in relation to commitment but I want to extend this beyond the streets to include the most iconic of subcultural spaces – that of trains.

### A MYTH OF AN EMPTY SPACE

But let us start in the more abstract notion of subcultural space. I already mentioned that I am critical of the single subcultural definition of space that has marked the previous research as well as journalistic accounts of graffiti. The reason for this hunt for the common and singular, I would argue, is a preoccupation with materiality. Regardless of whether we discuss the subcultural ideal space as a materialisation of risk and visibility – as do Ferrell and Weide (2010), or McDonald (2001) – or the more intriguing claim by Halsey and Young (2006) that graffiti writers are drawn to the disused and already marked: the rusty, damaged and dirty – the focus remains too much on the objects and surfaces rather than the patterns of meaning within which these material objects become ideas. A preoccupation with parole rather than langue.

Even though the idea that graffiti makes use of what Lefebvre (2004) refers to as zero-degree architecture – urban objects whose form are largely instrumental and constitute left-over surfaces: light posts, electrical boxes or substations, the back of a sign, walls, bus

shelters, bridge abutments, etc. – is appealing in the political aspects it entails, it fails to explain how a lot of graffiti is done on surfaces that most people, including Lefebvre, would see as the opposite to zero-degree architecture and are neither dirty nor damaged: facades, doors, trucks, and trains. Whereas my mom could accept the tag on the back of street signs, she cannot understand the tag on the door to her apartment building. Graffiti becomes what Mary Douglas (1966) would call dirt, in the sense that it constitutes matter in the wrong place. But if we approach space from the rules and rituals within graffiti, this becomes a lot easier to follow.

All previous research on graffiti agrees that the central rule in graffiti is name-based, and with that comes the sanctity of the individual tag, and, by extension, the collective name of the crew. Presence claims ownership, albeit symbolically, to the point that a tag on a postbox means that that particular surface is owned by that name. Going over a tag with another tag is a symbolic slap to the face, going over someone's piece with a tag is the symbolic equivalent to a kick to the face. I am not going to delve into details here, we all know that the subculturally cherished currencies of time and commitment could here be added as a sign of respect rather than disrespect. A piece or a throw up over a tag still respects the latter through the investment of more time, more effort, and thus more risk. My point here is rather how the already marked is spatially attributed. A single door can thus be divided into dozens of small patches of individual land, each owned by a single tag, or the door could be claimed in its entirety through a throw up that fully covers it.

When the Swedish transit authorities decided to fence off part of my local train line with flat green walls, writers rushed out to claim those, ideally with a piece, so as to own that space, much to the chagrin of those who came too late. I have never come across a graffiti writer that at least to some extent did not respect the ownership of the tag. And in the cases they did go over someone else, they at least recognised that others would react to it.

If we look closely at how graffiti writers define what is out of place in graffiti, it follows the same logic as the already graffitied wall: the sanctity of that which has a designated single owner. The single house and the private car are out bounds, not because they are privately owned, so are delivery trucks and apartment houses too, but because they come to represent a demarcated individual owner just as the graffitied wall along the train track is out of play as it is owned by a particular writer.

This is somewhat obvious in how the writers I followed would refrain from tagging their own apartment building, or that of their parents and friends, in some cases even apologising for having done so in the past, but yet would gladly hit the house next to it. The building of their friends or parents stood out, and were set apart within the otherwise indifferent and empty surfaces. The presence of a link to a designated single-owner triumphed absence.

This distinction between the presence and absence, the demarcated and the empty, was also extended to objects with a defined sacred meaning. Hence churches, mosques, or other religious buildings were out of play, in some cases this included public works of arts and statues, as well as trees and other parts of nature. They had a specific singular meaning setting them apart.

I want to take another example of exceptions in my data, and that refers to different parts of the same building or object being gazed at differently. This was especially so in relation to train tracks and highways, where ownership was defined as a matter of access and visibility, in some cases turning the private and already demarcated into the public and empty. Alex, one of my informants, commented on this as we passed graffitied allotment houses bordering the tracks:

*This doesn't bother me, because it's like on the side that is not theirs, I'm thinking that that's the backside that faces an abandoned train track, so there's no one caring about it really, it's just a space that is. But the side facing the garden I would not hit because someone is owning that. (Go-along 5, Malmö)*

To anyone not familiar with graffiti this might at best be a rather peculiar, and at worst a disillusioned take on ownership, as defined by visibility and access. The side of the building facing the garden is owned by a single owner and out of play. The inside is thus private, but the outside is deemed public and open due to its placement. Also note the distinction here between the present set apart as singular – here marked by 'someone is owning that' – and the absence of that 'someone' in 'no one caring about it' and that 'it is not theirs'.

The point here is that space that is deemed as within play in graffiti is marked by an absence. Graffiti thus centres around a myth of an empty space, a perception of a space devoid either of meaning, or a single owner, the resources and riches of which are open, and thus morally rightful to claim. It is the perceived lack of a single demarcated owner that makes the door to the apartment house or the windows to the corner store within play. Same with the bridge, tunnels, signs, and other objects of the streets. Similarly, it is the perceived lack of a sacred meaning that makes it possible to include one wall of the allotment house while excluding another, because the former is emptied of the meaning of the latter. The distinction between private and public is defined by absence rather than by ownership and access. A binary distinction whereby if it is not clearly someone's, then it is no one's.

### IDENTIFYING GAPS AND VOIDS

This brings me to my second point. How the city is gazed at and used. Or if you prefer, the practical pursuit of the myth of an empty space. To be sure, identity work in graffiti revolves around presence as positive and absence as negative. Validation is based on visibility and symbolic ownership such as owning a district, a street, a train line, or a yard. Or as above, in owning a particular surface. Still, the doings of graffiti are based on being able to trace out the voids, the anomaly of the object or surface that is marked by an absence. I have touched upon this already: the newly constructed flat noise barriers along the train tracks marked by their absence of graffiti, or for that matter John's frustration of the lack of absences in the streets of Malmö, and visiting writers being unnerved by the abundance of absence in the streets of Stockholm. Rafael Schacter argues that the empty surface or object begs to be marked, that graffiti is characterised by a will to add to that which otherwise is incomplete. This is a crucial remark in the sense that in doing graffiti,

the subcultural gaze is focused on the lack of a tree rather than the forest, a space they can claim by adding their name. It is a remarkable talent, of being able to pass a door full of tags, gaze at it, stop, and bring forth a can or marker to fill out a space identified within seconds as being available. It requires a steady hand, as well as a sense of composition, not just in being able to fit in all letters in a style but also – remember the sanctity of the name – so as to avoid touching the names present. Bourdieu (1998: 80), in his discussion of habitus, talks about this as a feel for the game. The difference of seeing the future as something that might or might not happen and of seeing the future in the present, of anticipating what will come. A good tennis player is not where the ball is, but has rather anticipated where the ball will be so as to return it. Graffiti anticipates absence, pre-perceptively seeing the void where others see nothing. A good example of this is train lines between larger cities where the walls are not buffed and as a consequence the line is filled to the point that there is no more absence, and the line is temporarily abandoned by writers. Still, my data is full of examples of writers transgressing the subcultural gaze of presence and absence, and in so doing managing to open up a new space for writing. As in this example where a Stockholm writer discusses the opening up of new space:

*What I think is cool, is when a piece leads to that a place somehow is discovered, that it illuminates the spot. It has happened at times, you are travelling along the line and then someone has realised that the space in between those two houses, or the rock sides, that that's a place that you could hit. And no one has ever thought about it before and then suddenly you realise 'right, up there there's a corrugated iron thing, what is that, I have never noticed that?' You see what I mean? I really like that kind of thing. The spot has not existed before, and now it exists because of the colours that someone added to it. (Stockholm 22:32)*

It is this move from landscape mode to the vertical works, that opens up spots that were previously unseen and absences within that which was previously deemed full. As in the early 2000s when writers started hitting rooftops, or painting roof-down. In this quote the defined absence moves the previously non-existent into being, that space is 'discovered', 'illuminated', and made available and open. The consequence of which is – as is often complained about and is of course also hinted at here – that when writers had spent the time discovering a new absence, hitting that place meant that it would be filled within days as others then saw the potential of the void. To be sure, absence is replaced by a presence, but there is so much more to that.

### HIDING IN THE LIGHT

This brings me to my last example of the importance of absence in subcultural graffiti: the proactive use of it. In this respect, subcultural theory has a lot to learn from cultural criminological theories. To move beyond seeing deviant meanings, activities, and identities as a reaction to objective problems or obstacles, and instead investigate them from the point of view of what these accomplish. How deviance and crime can be meaningful in itself. Ever since the arrival of the buff – originally an oversized car wash for trains built in the



Lund, Sweden, 2020. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

Kraków, Poland, 2019. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.





The Bronx, New York, USA, 2022. Photograph ©Erik Hannerz.

New York City subway in 1977 – it has been discussed in terms of how it threatens graffiti as a whole, replacing an earned presence with a negligent absence. Of course, chroniclers of the early NYC train era have noted how this initially revitalised the subculture – as it in an instant wiped the train cars clean and thus provided new canvases to write on – but with the advent of what Kramer (2017) so aptly has named the clean train-era in the late '80s, the buff has mostly been discussed with regard to how it moved graffiti from the trains to the

tracksides and streets (Austin, 2001). However, trains are still graffitied – in NYC as well as in other cities – the difference, however, is that graffitied subway trains in most metropolitan cities rarely go into traffic.

I have discussed the interrelation between presence and absence in train graffiti at length in earlier work. How writers seek to control a specific space – a yard, a lay-up, an end-station – through a consistent monitoring of risks: mapping out the routines of guards, cleaners, and workers, as well as identifying surveillance



technology so as to be able to single out a window of opportunity or a dead angle that can be pursued so as to gain entrance to the exclusive and demarcated. Controlling risks means controlling space so that when the guards are absent and outside, the writers are present inside, thus flipping the binaries.

Similar to the city, where exploiting absence in doing graffiti at night means presence of the symbolic – the tag – in the day, ideally, trains are to emerge from the outside, from the depot or out of traffic, to the inside: the city, the stations, or rather into traffic. However, most often this remains an ideal as the graffitied train in the depot is cleaned at sight, or if in a layout is taken directly to the buff. As I have noted, films and photos come to magically recover this ideal presentation. On YouTube, Instagram, or in graffiti zines the ideal situation is recreated through photos and videos of graffitied trains becoming public. I have spent so many hours waiting for graffitied trains to be moved into the buff so that writers would be able to capture the train running, and in so doing replacing what is actually a *rite de mort* with a video of a train seemingly in traffic.

Still, I want to take the opportunity here to discuss a much more intriguing use of the buff by train writers, that of proactively using a physical absence so as to conceal your actual presence and doings from other writers.

This might come across as bizarre even for those familiar with graffiti, and surely, in my data train writers were also often criticised by other writers for being too secretive, a private sect preoccupied by rules. The train writers I followed, however, stressed secrecy, privacy, and rules as crucial to what they were doing. Far from referring to the city as something that is to be taken, destroyed, and bombed, they talked about the importance of nurturing the yard, of making sure that trains were not painted too often, or too big. In short, the absence of an obvious presence worked to not alert the guards, and thus ensured a continuing access to the trains. As in this example where three train writers from different generations and cities discuss the risks of trains:

**IP1:** *But just to jump back a bit, it's like when I paint trains, and I really like if it's not rolling. It's good, if no one else sees it, it is good, because then no one knows that I am painting, then there are more opportunities for me, how do you say, the less that knows, the better for me, you know. It is the same with, I don't want people to know that I am painting this spot. To nurture. [...] I just enjoy when no one knows that I have been painting, cause then I got the most of it, and the possibility is still there for me. Less is more there.*

**IP2:** *And the only ones who are gonna know is your friends anyway [...] Next day in the bar you'd be showing your pictures to your friends.*

**IP3:** *Commuter trains are a bigger risk cause they don't grey paint that much anymore, I think, so if you paint that in Stockholm, it is the biggest risk someone else sees, cause it has to roll to the main yard to get buffed, and the subway if you do it in the yard, where they have a buff inside the yard, they just move it to the buff and then it's just the workers seeing it. (Stockholm 11:101)*

Nurture is here directly linked to the control of a particular space, and a vital part of that becomes limiting other writers' access to that place. Here visibility and presence are seen as something negative and even as a risk, presence means the potential loss of control. Similar to the discussion of opening up a new space along the train lines above, presence here alerts others of this potential absence. Having access to a yard, as in being in control of the absence and presence of risk, means that the buff is doubly exploited: first as it delivers empty surfaces again and again, and second because it erases the physical traces that you have been there in the first place, meaning that you are in control as to who will know about what you do and who will not. The photos and films work to proactively use absence so as to provide more opportunities. This is also obvious in online flows, where individuals who have been lucky enough to capture a graffitied train running in traffic and posting it online are told by the writer responsible either publicly or through DMs to remove it, so that the latter can remain in control of their presence. It happened to me earlier this week, and has happened at least a dozen times before.

To cite another example, two younger writers I had been following for some years, decided to paint their first train just before they turned 18 and could be legally tried as adults. Aware of the rules and that senior writers were in control of certain yards, they chose a yard that no one owned, a yard no one would ever hit as it was easy for the guards to monitor and because it was filled with hi-tec surveillance gadgets. They scoped the place, and as expected they could not detect the invisible cameras and alarms. In the end, they just went 'fuck it, let's just be fast', ran into the yard, did a quick two window panel in a couple of minutes, ran out and waited to be arrested. Nothing happened, no one stopped them when exiting and no one came to their house. Shocked, yet super stoked about that they had hit the impossible yard no one had painted, they messaged me and others photos of the piece. Five minutes later a senior writer calls me up and asks me to 'immediately shut those young ones up', and tell them to call him. It turned out that the yard was not that impossible to hit, there was no hidden surveillance, and the senior writer and his crew had been secretly hitting it again and again over quite some time. Yet since they wanted to be able to continue to do so, they had photographed the graffitied trains only when they had left the yard so as to obscure their presence. They had then told everyone that yard was crazy surveilled and that they had never been able to paint it, so as to be able to continue to use it. The two younger writers had by coincidence burnt the best yard in the region. The call between the different parties turned out to be amicable, no hard feelings, just 'change the story, change the place, and then we can bring you along to paint other places'.

Other writers lied outright about where they did graffiti, only to eventually be caught lying, but this was treated as part of the game. In keeping the garden rich and full of plenty you could not just ravage the whole place at once, you have to nurture it. And that might mean hiding it out of view of others who also are out looking for its riches.

## RETHINKING ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN GRAFFITI

The point I have been trying to make throughout this argument is that if we want to understand how graffiti writers appropriate space, how they read and use the city, we have to understand the interrelation between absence and presence. Different terrains in graffiti provide different rules, rituals, and activities but are held together through the pragmatic logic of absence and presence. There is an inherent problem to idealistic notions of graffiti as merely exploiting the disused, dirty, and zero-degree, as it by consequence places graffiti within the used, clean and functional as an anomaly, just as a stress on the links between graffiti and art tends to strengthen the notion of tags as the simple and childish. Similarly, the layman analogy of writers as pissing dogs marking their turf – easy to accept as we see no reasons why they tag the front of our house – is here also overturned. Whereas Tim Creswell writes that ‘graffiti flagrantly disturbs notion of order [and] a love of disorder – of anarchy, of things out of place’ (1992: 335), I would rather point to the opposite, i.e. that graffiti flagrantly mimics notions of the order of a normative geography and is marked by both morals and rules.

The potential of graffiti lies not in its similarities to art, entrepreneurship, or of discovering the potential of the abandoned, it lies in its distance to mainstream society. Its refusal to stay in line. And how this comes to empower individuals who feel bored, out of step, left out, or bullied. Of initiating an urban play that, if anything, transgresses binaries such as art/vandalism, order/disorder, private/public, or for that matter, presence/absence. That is rewilding.

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