Visual Boredom: Commodification and Exclusion in Graffiti-Less Auckland

Ronald Kramer

A common argument against neoliberalism is that it makes cities all look alike. In this piece, sociologist Ronald Kramer discusses the fate of graffiti in Auckland, New Zealand. He argues that efforts to commodify urban space, routinely promoted by landed capitalists and facilitated by the neoliberal state, have resulted in a loss of social diversity and visual ennui.

Graffiti-writing culture in Auckland[1]

In the early 1980s, *Subway Art* (1984) and *Style Wars* (1983), two of the earliest attempts to substantively document New York City's graffiti-writing culture, were released and circulated across the globe. Their influence on fostering graffiti in many other cities is impossible to discount. By the mid-1980s, Auckland's own graffiti-writing culture was fairly well established. Not surprisingly, its aesthetic qualities initially displayed many similarities with the urban graffiti often associated with New York City.

Much like its predecessor, Auckland graffiti has tended to prioritize the writing of an individual name, usually in highly stylized form, with spray paint and markers. The value of such works are often judged by other graffiti writers on the basis of technical criteria and volume, rather than the extent to which they push the boundaries of abstraction as one might discover in art worlds. The Auckland graffiti scene, however, has diversified its visual repertoire by moving away from stylized letters to include pictorial works. In these respects, it is possible to discern a local distinctiveness. Contemporary graffiti in Auckland often utilizes themes and imagery associated with Māori and/or Pasifika cultures; it also finds inspiration in New Zealand's unique wildlife and fauna.

[1] This paper is based on a longstanding interest in graffiti-writing culture that dates back to 1989. Over the years, I have been an active participant in graffiti-writing cultures in Melbourne, Australia and New York City. During the early 2000s, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork on graffiti in New York. Since moving to Auckland in 2013, I have been following the scene by documenting it, informally talking to its practitioners, and analyzing social reactions—especially media portrayals—to graffiti in the New Zealand context.

Figure 1: Graffiti work inspired by mythological stories and figures associated with Polynesian cultures

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Figure 2: A work of graffiti in Auckland depicting the saddleback, one of New Zealand's native birds

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No longer driven by a "rebellious spirit," much contemporary graffiti is informed by a genuine desire to engage with the urban environment and community in ways that enhance city life. As

Figures 1 and 2 seem to suggest, Auckland's graffiti writers may even take pride in creating artistic portrayals of nationally shared and recognized symbols.

But, despite the development of what could be described as a desire to contribute in positive ways to the urban environment and civic life, graffiti and street art has generally been met with hostility from political elites, a tendency that has since extended into the population. The rise of neoliberalism and its favoring of business interests constitutes the economic and political backdrop to persistent opposition to graffiti as a form of urban creativity.

Neoliberalism and the city as an "exchange-value"

Historically, if not contemporaneously, New Zealand has been regarded as an egalitarian society. With the embrace of neoliberalism in the 1980s, that reputation—if it ever were an accurate portrayal of social relations—is certainly undeserved. Comparable to other so-called Western democracies, members of New Zealand's wealthiest 1% have seen their incomes double over the last 30 or so years while the majority of the population has stagnated or become worse off (Rashbrooke 2013). Such is the fate of social equality when states do little more than facilitate the accumulation of private capital.

While its effects on access to labor markets is well-worn territory, neoliberalism also influences urban dynamics, a point that becomes especially transparent when one considers how New Zealand's largest city—Auckland—has become increasingly governed by a logic of "exchange-value" over the same period. "Exchange-value" is marked by the extraction of profit from the exploitation of land and ensures that any economic gains are captured by political elites and landed capitalists (Logan and Molotch 1987). Gentrification is a well-known example of how land can be exploited. But private profit is also secured by using public funds to transform the city into a desirable tourist destination, a place where businesses can locate headquarters and, amongst other things, a locale for international sports events. Such expenditures are often justified by promising that everyone will benefit from large economic returns on public investments, even though this rarely transpires.

The pursuit of profit typically occurs at the expense of the needs of city residents. In 2015, the average house price in Auckland was more than $750,000 (Edmunds and Wynn 2015). This would not necessarily be problematic if available housing were of exceptional quality and average incomes relatively high. This, however, is simply not the case. Much of the public housing has been sold off and privatized, and, due to government "deregulation" of building codes, many properties suffer from "leaky building syndrome," when water gets in between the exterior cladding and house frame and can't escape, leaving the frame to get moldy and rot.

Figure 3. “Shrink-wrapped” buildings usually indicate a “leaky building” being re-cladded

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To cut a long story short, Auckland is a city plagued by relatively low-quality housing that is, nevertheless, unaffordable for most city residents. Premised upon a scale in which anything over three demonstrates housing unaffordability, a recent analysis saw Auckland receive a score of 8.2, rendering it one of the most unaffordable cities in the world (Gibson 2015).

Urban commodification and crime control: the “conjoined twins” of exclusion

The extraction of profit from urban land use is generally accompanied by dominant perceptions and images of what a marketable city looks like. Such images effectively suggest that one must do away with “social diversity” and differences; anything that may generate a sense of fear and anxiety amongst privileged social classes, such as homelessness and “everyday incivilities,” must be eradicated.

Appropriating notions cooked up by an influential right-wing think tank in New York (Wacquant 2009), Auckland’s political elite and mass media have embraced the “broken windows” thesis. Now a familiar trope, “broken windows” claims that addressing minor signs of disorder is necessary to the preservation and development of urban vitality; the failure to do so will result in serious crime and neighborhood collapse.

Given its visibility, mystique, and often indecipherable nature, it is not surprising that graffiti routinely figures as the primary signifier of “disorder.” In both the New York and Auckland context, graffiti has been cast to play the role of “urban bogeyman.” What is especially striking about the Auckland situation, however, is that “serious crime”—and crime rates in general—were decreasing as graffiti came to be constructed as an urban problem (Police National Headquarters 2015).

In 2005, it was announced that New Zealand had won its bid to host the 2011 Rugby World Cup. As the city where many of the games would be played, Auckland immediately began preparing for

the global sporting event. PEST 5, a graffiti writer with many years of involvement in the subculture, succinctly describes how this impacted Auckland's graffiti scene:

> Auckland had a tagging problem in the 1990s, which they got half under control in the early 2000s. Then there was a surge in the scene in the mid-2000s, which was more about bombing and piecing than just tagging. But when the Rugby World Cup came in 2011, that's when the council got the funds to really make an impact like never before. — PEST 5

PEST 5 indicates that official efforts to combat graffiti in Auckland have quite a history. What is particularly striking about this quote, however, is the emphasis it places on one of the key strategies to generate profit from the urban environment. As noted, private profit is often secured by using public funds to transform space in ways that will appeal to tourists and attract global sporting events. It would appear that this logic, insofar as it financed Auckland's most successful campaign against graffiti to date, finally delivered the aesthetic order that political and economic elites had long desired.

As a result, graffiti has been pushed into back streets and out-of-the-way places, ensuring that city residents encounter main thoroughfares devoid of any non-state or no--commercial images and messages.

Figure 4. Out-of-the-way graffiti/street art in Auckland. The piece appears to be located in a private back yard of a car-repair shop. It is visible from the far corner of a parking lot, although two chain-link fences interrupt the view

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The whitewashing of social diversity and the hatred of alternative urban visions

Prioritizing the private accumulation of capital through the exploitation of urban space—a process that would appear to be invariably coupled with draconian law-and-order campaigns directed against "disorder"—has left urban residents with a physical environment dominated by the "aesthetics of exchange-value." This notion deliberately alludes to the "aesthetics of authority," a concept used by Ferrell (1996) to encapsulate the obsession, often shared by political elites and privileged social groups, with manufacturing a visual environment defined by uniformity in its appearance.

Like the class, racialized, and gender inequalities that Ferrell (1996) construes as undergirding authoritarian aesthetics, the ability to exercise control over land use constitutes another important form of social domination, a particular way in which class relations are manifested and reproduced. In Auckland, the unrestrained quest for exchange-value has led to whitewashed walls, a lack of aesthetic interventions within the urban environment, and a loss of diversity and engagement with public space. As figures 5 and 6 suggest, Auckland is devolving into the kind of city that may as well be any other neoliberal city.

Figure 5. Before and after shots of graffiti mural on Karangahape Road, which has a reputation as one of Auckland's "arts" neighborhoods, but is losing its social diversity owing to gentrification and unaffordable housing

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Figure 6. "Cookie-cutter" apartment blocks

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The visual boredom that characterizes Auckland is not a simple reflection of an instrumental, mechanically cold approach to the physical environment. The opposition to graffiti, it would seem, has worked itself deeply into the emotional core of the collective psyche.

In 2008, Bruce Emery, a 50-year-old white man, chased and fatally stabbed Pihema Cameron, a teenage graffiti writer, for tagging his garage. Emery was charged with murder, but convicted of manslaughter and released after serving two years of a 51-month sentence (Koubaridis *et al.* 2008; Irvine and Tan 2010; Reid 2010). The incident has become one of New Zealand's most well-known tales of crime, spawning heated public debates about the fairness of the criminal justice system.

Events such as this are likely to be portrayed in ways that are not easily reconciled. Insofar as they defy rational comprehension, they evoke a sense of wonder and fascination, but they also invite the public to take sides on important moral-legal issues. Was the sentence fair? Under what conditions, if any, might vigilantism be an appropriate response? Not surprisingly, the public had mixed reactions about the case and its outcome, but it seems that many were quite sympathetic to Emery.

Any mystery surrounding Emery's extreme reaction, or the fact that many people may have regarded it as unproblematic, evaporates when one considers the broader context in which such events transpire. When powerful actors encourage hatred of those whose existence is forced to unfold at the margins of society, when tolerance for "urban otherness" is abolished because it is perceived as interfering with the pursuit of profit, the emotional sensibilities that underpin such tragedies are put in place: The construction of graffiti as an inherent evil transforms repressive actions—even those with fatal consequences—into legitimate efforts towards restoring some imaginary, moral good.

Pihema Cameron's death represents a relatively isolated incident, but the structural conditions and emotional dispositions that underlie it permeate neoliberal urban orders. Their material consequences are felt in a myriad of other ways: homelessness, social exclusion, hunger, police harassment, the criminalization of poverty. The crucial links between neoliberal states, growing inequalities, and repressive criminal justice policies illustrate the need to re-examine our emotively charged moral boundaries and challenge the powerful interests that refuse to appreciate urban diversity.

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