

Buffing. Unintentional and independent urban painting

Erik Balbuena

Universidade de Vigo, Spain, correobalbuena@gmail.com

Abstract

Graffiti and urban painting that exist outside legal boundaries or lack institutional protection can be subject to removal or coverage, typically by local authorities. Ironically, this removal process, when not executed efficiently, frequently gives rise to a new form of paintings, which we refer to as: unintentional and independent urban painting.

The pictorial outcome of this phenomenon holds value beyond the aesthetic appeal of these marks and color planes. The primary interest lies in the unconscious, involuntary, and random manner in which they are created. The individuals behind them do not intend to create a new painting; perhaps they seek a visually functional result rather than an attractive one, and certainly, they do not aim to generate pictorial interest, let alone seeking artistic recognition.

This buffings has become a new type of painting in the public spaces of any city, enjoying greater popular acceptance compared to graffiti or other mural interventions in the urban environment. It stands in contrast to what is permitted versus what is not. It aims to be non-communicative, devoid of any message, but beyond its pictorial value, it ultimately carries significant political weight.

Keywords

Graffiti removals, buffing, erased graffiti, unconscious painting, public painting.

Introduction

The phenomenon known as buffing, takes place in public space when attempts to clean graffiti or other types of urban painting are not carried out effectively, resulting in the creation of a new painting. The formal result of the buffs has a pictorial and conceptual value that has served as inspiration and reference for many artists.

Buffing, like graffiti, is universal; it happens everywhere and entails a series of political, conceptual and pictorial issues that I will attempt to explore next. What is known today as buffing, must be as old as the appearance of the first mural paintings, it is not a new thing. In this research, I will focus on analyze contemporary buffing, which is closely linked to graffiti, found in any city and underpinned by a series of political issues related to spectacular urbanism, which censors and denies citizens participation in the public space.

Urbanism is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its logical development toward absolute domination, can (and now must) refashion the totality of space into its own peculiar decor.

Debord, Guy. (1967). Comments on the Society of the Spectacle.

This control and maintenance of order in urban space also affects graffiti and any type of public intervention that might disrupt this unity and interrupt the consumption of spectacular images by citizens.



Fig. 1 Example of buffing. Image from the author.

Unintentional paintings

These days, graffiti and urban painting that do not fall within legality or lack institutional support are likely to be erased, covered, or removed at some point, usually by the local authorities. Ironically, because this removal process is not always carried out effectively, a new type of mural painting often results, which I refer to as: Unintentional and independent urban painting.

This phenomenon occurs when the person responsible for cleaning, using chemical products or tools like sandpaper or pressure washers, fails to completely remove the graffiti. On the other hand, it happens when, they try to cover it with paint, but using a different color as the original wall, and they only cover the area where the graffiti to be erased is located.

This can result in the creation of various marks, patches, stains, strokes, or shapes, which may exhibit significant pictorial interest. These elements, although they appear random, are adding a layer of complexity to the urban landscape, transforming what was intended as a simple act of graffiti removal into an unintentional artistic intervention.

There is a wide variety of buffs, with different shapes, techniques, colors, and compositions. The pictorial result has a value that goes beyond the aesthetic appeal of these stains and color planes. The main interest lies in the unconscious, involuntary, and the random way in which they are created. The people who create them do not intend to produce a new painting; they may seek a functionally visual result rather than an attractive one and of course do not aim to generate pictorial interest or artistic recognition. They are always anonymous, whether carried out by an official body, a private owner, or a citizen.

These buffs have become a new type of painting in public space and, unlike graffiti or other mural interventions in the streets, they enjoy greater popular acceptance. This acceptance could be caused by various reasons. One reason might be the implicit cleaning intention behind this phenomenon—even though the result is often far from clean—is enough for citizens to accept the pictorial result without making aesthetic judgments or evaluating the

legitimacy of one painting over another. Another reason could be that, in many cases, they simply go unnoticed by the average citizen and become part of the accepted urban landscape.

Authorized painting, as opposed to unauthorized painting, is often just a matter of covering paint with paint—one accepted, the other not. It's painting done outside legal boundaries against painting done within the system. The unauthorized painting disrupts the homogeneity of the spectacular urban landscape, while the accepted painting does so because of its neutrality. This painting is intended to be non-communicative, with no message, but beyond its pictorial value, it ultimately carries significant political weight.

Cities are filled with advertising images that shape the urban landscape and, therefore, its citizens. We are so used to seeing posters, bus shelters, billboards, or advertising flyers that we have integrated them into our collective imagination, making them part of what we understand as the urban landscape.

Categories

These buffs can be produced using different techniques, leading to varied formal results. To better understand the phenomenon, I consider it useful to categorize the main types of buffs based on their forms or techniques. I reference the categorization proposed by Avalon Kalin (Kalin, 2015), who published the first photographic compilation of buffs, in his book *One Hundred and Four Digitally Printed Color Photographs of Graffiti-Removal*, where he categorizes as: conservative, ghosting and radical. Starting from these categories, I propose a wider categorization, keeping some categories and expanding with three more:

1. Geometric:

These are created by covering an area larger than the size of graffiti. A color different from the original wall is used, sometimes in a similar tone that doesn't quite match and other times in a radically different color, with gray or white being the most commonly used. Simple geometric shapes such as rectangles or squares are created with well-defined

edges, typically using a roller. The result is minimalist and static, sometimes reminiscent of European abstract informalism or even Rothko's paintings. Occasionally, someone might repaint over these buffs, leading to a juxtaposition of geometric shapes. This type of patch aims for a neutral and homogeneous finish, though it doesn't always achieve it.



Fig. 2 Example of geometric buff. Image from the author.

2. Organic:

Like geometric buffs, a paint color different from the original wall is used. These can be painted not only with a roller but also with brushes. Unlike geometrics, the shape is not as static. In some cases, the original composition of what was painted is imitated; in other cases, on a surface with multiple tags, each tag is covered individually, creating a composition of independent stains that form a compositional unity. In other cases, despite being

separated, the painted elements are strongly connected when covered, making connections where there was nothing painted. In these cases, the hand of the person responsible is quite evident, as they have created a more open composition rather than just following the shape of the graffiti. While geometric buffs have a connection to the minimalism of sober abstract painting, these have a link to the more gestural and dynamic abstract expressionism.



Fig. 3 Example of organic buff. Image from the author.

3. Re-drawn:

These are created by covering only the outline of the graffiti with paint. Rollers, brushes, or sprays are often used with a color different from the original wall and sometimes more similar to the tag or painting being covered. The contrast

with the original color of the surface, combined with closely following the outline of the letters, often makes it possible to still discern or clearly read what was previously painted. These buffs have a connection to some pictorial techniques seen in abstract expressionism and informalism.



Fig. 4 Example of re-drawn buff. Image from the author.

4. Crossed-out:

These not only aim to cover or remove what was painted but sometimes try to modify the letters to make them unreadable or change their meaning. They are usually done with spray paint, sometimes using a different color

from what is being repainted and other times with the same color, creating what appears to be a coded language or a new alphabet. This is more common in writings with various messages than in graffiti tags.



Fig. 5 Example of crossed-out buff. Image from the author.

5. Faded:

These are created by attempting to remove the graffiti by cleaning it, but not completely succeeding. Chemical products, scrubbing with a cloth or brush, sandpaper, or pressure washers are commonly used. As it is not entirely removed, a kind of glaze is formed, leaving a trace or

imprint of what was painted. This trace, in some cases, also reveals the gestures of the person who attempted the cleaning, unconsciously leaving their mark on the surface. The formal result of this category sometimes resembles the stains in Christopher Wool's screen-printed paintings or Helen Frankenthaler's fields of diluted color.



Fig. 6 Example of faded buff. Image from the author.

Conclusion

As we can see, these stains and cross-outs resulting from buffing are closely connected with elements and techniques found in the tradition of abstract painting, where gestural expression and color fields are the primary means of expression. Furthermore, in this context, the tension between a destructive gesture and a creative act is evident, the creative process use the act of destruction as an instrument. Therefore, the act of removing graffiti unintentionally becomes an act of pictorial creation.

This phenomenon, present in urban environments since the late 1980s, has sparked great interest among various artists and researchers who have addressed the issue. The formal result of the “buffs” holds both pictorial and conceptual value, due to the involuntary manner in which they are created, which has served as inspiration and reference for numerous artists.

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