

# No one will be watching us // a soundscape of bathroom graffiti

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*Please take a pen and leave your words and drawings on the stalls, walls, and mirrors. Please also leave any comments you would like to share in the notebook outside this installation.*

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Bathroom graffiti, or “latrinalia,”<sup>1</sup> as Allan Dundes has named them, have been around for quite a while. Evidence of bathroom scrawling from ancient Greek and Roman societies still exists today, in the form of insults, magic, love declarations, political messages, and prostitution advertisements. In recent times, graffiti has entered the world of art, through Basquiat, museum displays, hip-hop album covers, clothing, and the like. A public school in New York lined the walls of selected classrooms with blackboards and invited famous graffitiists to execute their work in chalk, encouraging students to scrawl their own logos next to those of their idols. But what about new art that uses graffiti as an impetus? In this installation, I’ve tried to treat bathroom graffiti as seeds for a new work, one of re-contextualization rather than pure documentation or replication.

Bathroom graffiti are constantly erased, painted over, and even prohibited by protective coating. They’re a fleeting mode of personal expression, and each written utterance risks extinction at any moment. Over a roughly two-month period last fall, and with the generous help of Christine Clancy, I found this graffiti in different bathrooms all over Brown’s campus, with the one exception of the AS220 men’s room. My piece seeks to capture this scrawling and reshape it through the personal interpretations of the 13 actors. As Paul McCartney sings, “Why don’t we do it in the road?/No one will be watching us.”<sup>2</sup> What one writes, or draws, when completely alone and anonymous is much different than what one would present to an acknowledged audience, and thus the content is not only more original, in a sense, but much harder to define or explicate. Because we don’t know who wrote it and have little context or frame of reference, we can interpret graffiti in many different ways, each reading no more valid than the next. The white, sterile setting I’ve created is meant to contrast with the more typical yellowish, dingy restroom so the vocalized graffiti interpretations can better stand out. The bathroom is like a whiteboard: initially clean and bare, it becomes covered with words and drawings, only to be erased and the process restarted.

The urge to mark our surroundings grips us all, even those in the police force: a Rhode Island 911 dispatcher was convicted of pouring red paint on numerous cars in February of 2006. Graffiti, even in a stall, is in fact vandalism, and the desire to break the law without repercussions can be tempting. But it’s more than just this. Gangs often “tag” a wall to mark their territory, just like a

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<sup>1</sup> Dundes, Allen. "Here I Sit--A Study of American Latrinalia." *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, 34 (1966): 91-105.

<sup>2</sup> “Why Don’t We Do It in the Road?” From *The White Album*, 1968.

dog urinates on a mailbox post in his neighborhood. Perhaps, for us in our developed world, a bathroom inscription takes the place of more 'traditional' territorial marking, which we nowadays flush down the toilet, never to be seen again. It may even replace a childhood impulse to smear feces; instead, we smear dirty words, not dirty substance.<sup>3</sup> Another motive for bathroom graffiti is a strong desire to express a personal predicament, feeling, or crass insult. In fact, as Gonos, Mulkern, and Pushinsky have found, "the relative frequencies of different thematic contents of graffiti will vary inversely with relevant dominant social values of the social milieu in which the graffiti are found."<sup>4</sup> That is to say, for instance, the more socially unacceptable it is to make homophobic slurs, the more they will appear in private places such as bathroom stalls. Some people need an outlet for their various unaccepted opinions, and latrinalia is a prime venue.

Women often go to the bathroom together, and many are known to socialize, gossip, or console each other in the bathroom, while men generally venture in on their own and don't stay too long. While both sexes produce latrinalia as well as excrement, the content of their respective scribbling is drastically different on the whole. Listen to the wide range of lewd, sexual comments from the men's rooms and the many love-oriented quotations from the women's, or the frequent, terse phrases from the men versus the lengthy, philosophical quotations from the women. This difference doesn't signify any intellectual gap between the sexes, but it does indicate, among other things, the different ways the two approach a trip to the bathroom: many women see the bathroom as a space for legitimate social interaction, whereas most men only view it as a place to relieve oneself. And maybe, despite an extra layer of privacy within a lavatory or stall, women still feel vulnerable when exposed due to social pressures and the more prevalent threat of sexual assault, and thus treat their scrawling more seriously.

Graffiti can have both positive and negative effects, even simultaneously, and they have a history at our university: in 1991, desperate female Brown students inscribed the names of males they accused of sexual harassment on bathroom stalls all over campus. As a result of this and a staged protest, they brought about a new sexual harassment policy at Brown and made national news. Graffiti for social change is exciting, and surely a great thing; but on the other hand, the lives of some students, accused of wrongdoing but not proven guilty, were severely compromised<sup>5</sup>.

I believe my installation constitutes a unique art form, one that can be infinitely reproduced in different areas around the world, each instance with its own individual character and social relevance. I'd be thrilled if other communities would use this same process to portray their own societies. While my goals include an exposure of social trends and gender differences in our community and a transformation of the visual into the auditory, another is a discovery of what we'll write when actively considering the process of bathroom writing, in the midst of the installation, and more exposed than when sheltered by a stall. Perhaps these findings will help us better understand our motivations when we are all alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, Ernest. "Anal-erotic character traits." Papers on Psychoanalysis. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. 432. [From Dundes (1966)]

<sup>4</sup> Gonos, George; Virginia Mulkern; Nicholas Poushinsky. "Anonymous Expression: A Structural View of Graffiti." The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 89, No. 351. (Jan-Mar, 1976), pp. 40-48.

<sup>5</sup> For a complete story, see Raman, Sheela. "Rape List, serving the Brown community since 1991." Brown Daily Herald. May 31, 2004.

For online photo-documentaries of latrinalia, visit:

<http://www.graffitiproject.com/>  
<http://www.thewritingsonthestall.com>  
<http://graffitipaparazzi.blogspot.com>  
<http://www.toiletlines.net>

For media coverage of this installation, visit:

<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=1728528&page=1> (ABC News)  
<http://asap.ap.org/stories/424185.s> (Associated Press)  
<http://www.browndailyherald.com> (Brown Daily Herald)

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\*photo from [www.toiletlines.net](http://www.toiletlines.net)

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*Alex Kotch graduated from Brown as a music theory and composition major. He plays clarinet and saxophone and stays active with Brown New Music, at <<http://students.brown.edu/bnm>> Please visit <[www.alexkotch.com](http://www.alexkotch.com)> to hear samples of his music. He can be reached at [alex@alexkotch.com](mailto:alex@alexkotch.com).*