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DAVID BEAULIEU
Loc : Kien-Khouang
Date : 21-11-58
Sex : ♀
Iris : brun foncé
Bec : brun
Pattes : chair

DAVID BEAULIEU
Loc : Kien-Khouang
Date : 21-11-58
Sex : ♀
Iris : brun foncé
Bec : brun
Pattes : chair

DAVID BEAULIEU
Loc : Kien-Khouang
Date : 12-9-58
Sex : ♀
Iris : brun foncé
Bec : brun
Pattes : chair

DAVID BEAULIEU
Loc : Kien-Khouang
Date : 15-1-59
Sex : ♀
Iris : brun foncé
Bec : brun
Pattes : chair

THE
TAGGING
ISSUE

DAVID BEAULIEU

ROB WALKER

Tag / Anti-Tag

On Uncovering the Beauty In Buffing

The question of who is allowed to tag what, and how, and why, becomes a much more ambiguous discussion of space, ownership, and aesthetics.

One of the most memorable figures in the classic 1983 graffiti-culture documentary *Style Wars* called himself "CAP." He was remarkably prolific, painting a stylized version of that tag all over New York. But he differed from the other graffiti artists featured in the film. In fact, he informed the filmmakers: "I am not a graffiti artist. I am a graffiti bomber."

In practical terms, what this meant was that the most significant place you'd see a CAP tag was on top of someone else's graffiti work—ruining it. He seemed to take particular satisfaction in tagging detailed and elaborate murals, as promptly after their laborious completion as possible. This was less an artistic gesture than an alpha-male one: just short of territorial pissing.

The artists whose work he defaced sounded alternately outraged and demoralized, but nobody denied that he was a near-unstoppable force. And CAP seemed to relish his demonized status. "Anybody tries to screw around with me and my friends, I go up over everything they got," he said at one point, adding later: "People like that, they deserve getting everything they got crossed out. Forever."



Top
Cover Up, Charenton-le-pont
© Matthieu Martin and Gallery ALB

Bottom
Cover Up, Berlin
© Matthieu Martin and Gallery ALB

Most of the graffiti writers in the film, and graffiti itself, are treated sympathetically, or reverentially, in *Style Wars*—an account of creative but marginalized souls finding a way to add their individual voices to a brutalized landscape. CAP comes across as a villainous figure, but a fascinating one. However inadvertently, his project complicated the traditional art versus vandalism dialogue around tagging and street art. Normally, street artists and their fans and champions mock the city officials or property owners who consider the practice to be unsanctioned defacement. But when their own (artistic) property gets painted over, the reaction sounds suspiciously similar to the rhetoric they regularly dismiss.

And in the process, the question of who is allowed to tag what, and how, and why, becomes a much more ambiguous discussion of space, ownership, and aesthetics. What, after all, is a "tag"? This becomes even more interesting when you start to pay attention to buffing.

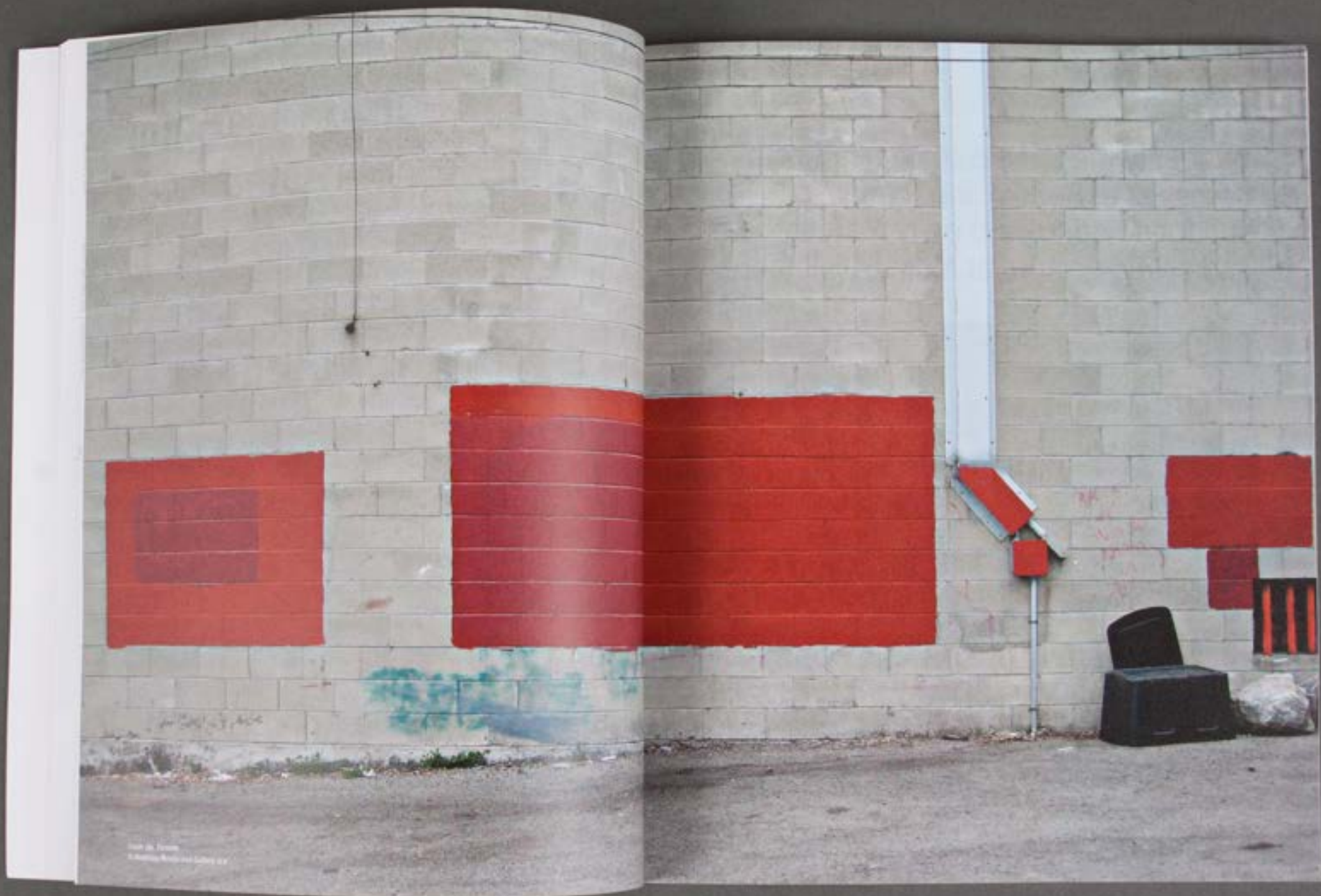
"Buffing" refers to obliterating tags or street art with a paint roller. It's a crude and straightforward process, executed without precision by city workers, property owners, or freelance (vigilante, you could say) graffiti-abatement crusaders. The buffer's motive is not aesthetic creation, but blunt destruction. The implicit belief is that anything looks better than graffiti, including an ill-defined rhombus of industrial-grade paint.

Buffing is a perennial hot topic among street-art enthusiasts, and you might be able to guess exactly how they feel about it. I'm a fan of street art myself, and am friendly with several people who made their name through the form. But I seldom broach the topic of buffing with street artists or their advocates, because the truth is, I secretly enjoy it. If you can set aside (for now) the ideological dimensions of buffing, I think there is a curious, accidental aesthetic merit that results from the practice of obliterating

tags. In short, I think buffing can be oddly beautiful.

Matthieu Martin, a French artist currently based in Berlin, thinks so, too. He began documenting examples of graffiti buffing in 2010 (and in late 2015 collected some of this work in a book called *Cover Up*). There is nothing obviously compelling about the roughly rectangular blotches of color Martin has photographed; if viewed on the street, they wouldn't be notable (and obviously the makers of these paint patches were hardly seeking artistic recognition). But look again, focus on the results rather than just the intent, and the examples Martin presents have a cool magic to them.

The typical buffer's palette tends toward grays and beiges and off-whites. Sometimes the shapes reflect at least an interest in geometric specificity: a dark gray rectangle stacked on a rich white one, forming bold stripes on a bland wall. Sharp, white squares set against dingy concrete. An uneven block of peach, its specific dimensions likely defined by the shape of the tags it covers, perches over a more precise layer of blueish slate that presumably buffed out an even earlier batch of graffiti.



Book 26, 2016
© Massimo Pizzoli and Gallery 292

Sometimes Martin spots instances with brighter colors: a bold red-and-magenta arrangement, a crimson blob that pops out from fading bricks. Elsewhere these compositions seem to play against their environment—big, brown rectangles jammed against retail signage, offset by a blue Dumpster (itself anti-tagged with a swath of paint in a shade that's mismatched just enough to assert itself).

Collected, the images start to change the way you see: suddenly the streets seem filled with homages to Rothko and Ryman, a subdued nod toward early Marden here, and a wild gesture at Motherwell there. But Matthieu is deliberate in his choices, and you won't mistake these buffs for intentional abstractions. He keeps a careful distance that underscores their context (and is always absent of human beings). These are marks made on the city, in public, and with particular intent that's impossible to miss. And yet, his images suggest, we can make of them something they were never intended to be, simply by the way we choose to see them.

To pass the time during a lengthy commute, Martin tracked the comings and goings of graffiti tags along the route. "One day," he wrote, "the city decided to remove every single graffiti, by covering them all with grey paint. My routine was broken up, and the route was terribly mute. There was nothing to 'read.' It was like death."

"I decided to capture this violence," he continued. "So the next day I took my camera, and during the trip I took pictures." At the time, he thought he was

documenting a singular moment. But on a trip to North America a few months later, he realized buffing was everywhere: Toronto, Montreal, New York. There were reds and blues and greens. As he continued to take pictures, his framing became increasingly thoughtful and precise, bringing out the subtly noteworthy aspects of particular buffs.

Martin, as it happens, had been a graffiti writer himself, and was "looking for a way to make a bridge" between that part of his past and a present and future more grounded in contemporary art practice. In the process, he started to see something else beyond the more obvious interpretation of buffing as censorship.

"Being erased is part of the graffiti process," he told me. "Before being erased by authorities, you can be erased by another writer. So I was more interested in how this desire for control takes shape—how far the result is from the original desire of cleanness." He came to address these "cover ups" as a worldwide phenomenon, with its own visual grammars. And he saw that it was worth paying attention to this as a kind of extension of the traditional tagging dialogue with a built environment—to focus not just on the writers, as he put it, but "the eraser too!"

It's a useful perspective. The erasers' de facto styles vary with their identities, geographies, particular motives. But you can see visual through-lines in *Cover Up* that unite their movement. There is a collective identity expressed here: It is yearned-for authority, and in buffing, it has a tag.

There is nothing obviously compelling about the roughly rectangular blotches of color Martin has photographed; if viewed on the street, they wouldn't be notable.



Cover: St. Petersburg
© Matthew Martin and Gallery A11

A much-cited 1971 *New York Times* article about a young man who identified as TAXI 183 basically introduced the idea of the modern graffiti tagger to the general public. A few years later, Norman Mailer's famous (if, in retrospect, somewhat woozy) essay "The Faith of Graffiti," summarized the essence of throwing a tag onto the property of, for instance, New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority: "Your presence is on their presence," he wrote, "your alias hangs over their scene."

This captures a crucial element of the tagging instinct that drives street art to this day. Even the most gifted street artists—their work long since embraced by the art and gallery worlds—almost invariably begin with no higher motive than expressing identity. Bombing comes down to declaring that "I was here," as a successful street artist once put it to me. I'd go one step more primal. To tag is to say: "I exist." The art comes later (except when it doesn't). And for those who commit to the form, "getting up" in prominent yet unlikely venues lingers on as part of that art.

And CAP's attitude lives on: getting up often means going over someone else's work, or tag, or identity. Established artists like Banksy or Shepard Fairey become particularly inviting targets—in the Internet era their presence on any given scene is multiplied exponentially, making it that much more irresistible. After Banksy allegedly went over a mural by an early London street artist called King Robbo, a Banksy piece was defaced by work signed "Team Robbo." For a time, one or more persons operating as "The

Splasher" simply flung paint over work by Fairey, Swoon, Neckface, and other street art stars. This led to a gob of media meta-commentary about vandalism, authenticity, and selling out, that briefly dripped over familiar street art discourse.

By and large, however, buffers have not been part of that discourse. A semi-exception is the 2011 documentary *Vigilante, Vigilante*, which identifies and tracks individual buffers in several cities who operate without any official sanction. Each has simply taken it upon himself (they are all men) to paint over as many tags as he can, usually with variations on the rough-splotch style that Martin has documented. "It's a shame he doesn't have more talent," one graffiti fan in the film sneers about a prolific buffer, "because he definitely gets up more than anybody else." (That's the idea. To borrow one last line from CAP: "The object is more. Not the biggest and the beautiful-est, but more.")

The film gathers some compelling material, but in its strenuous efforts to restate decades-old defenses of tagging, becomes dully didactic and unsubtle. In particular, it is at pains to argue that these buffers act just like taggers (true, for sure)—but never acknowledges that its own critique of buffing is ironically similar to authoritarian critiques of tagging. At one point, we hear one of the filmmakers, evidently addressing a city council meeting, denounce a particular buffer as "a menace to the community fabric." Evidently this tagging advocate resents the buff's presence on his presence, the buffer's alias hanging over his scene.

Street art can be thrilling, and when it is the reasons go beyond mere boldness and daring. Part of it is the fact that it can route around the art world, and willfully engage with public spaces in flat-out defiance of the rule of law. But another part of it is that, as a result, tags are fundamentally vulnerable. If you expect your expression to be protected, seek the shelter of a museum, or a trendy retail client. If you choose instead to impose your presence where it was not invited, you can hardly complain when some other presence intervenes on precisely the same terms.

To my eyes, Matthieu Martin's project recognizes this, but in a way that transcends any predictable debate. *Cover Up* makes plain that just because buffers may not have "talent" according to the aesthetic rules of the street art establishment does not mean we cannot choose to see their anti-tag tagging on our own terms. To me, in fact, what Martin has done is a triumph of seeing. Reading the city means reading the marks upon it, decoding the stories they tell or simply imply. Buffs have a beauty, however sad or malicious, and they are part of the never-ending contest that is the essence of tagging. That's what the cover-up reveals.

Rob Walker is a columnist for *The New York Times* Sunday Business section and a frequent contributor to *Design Observer*. His most recent book, co-edited with Joshua Glenn, is *Significant Objects: 100 Extraordinary Stories*.