

The Rough Guide to Van 'Art'

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Introduction and Methodology

This paper considers, and seeks to understand, messages written in the film of dirt on the back of vehicles. The author has, for want of a better term tagged this social phenomenon van 'art'.

The primary resource material for the study of this phenomenon are digital photographs of van 'art' taken by the author during the last six months. Some of the photographs are taken on foot but the largest percentage are captured in the field, by car. Rather than taking journeys serendipitously searching, most van 'art' is caught on necessary trips, to and from university, the shops, friends and relatives, or the park. I always have the camera with me, when I don't I should be bound to see the best specimen yet! Driving along, I sit, camera at the ready in my lap, eyes wide open hunting for the next piece. On sighting a specimen I carefully negotiate my vehicle across lanes, adjusting my speed to match the target and achieve optimum picture taking position. This might involve nudging my way between vehicles whilst courtesy waving and flicking the car indicators signalling both my intention, and appreciation. Whilst achieving a desirable position I might have to spray the windscreen washer to remove any insect debris, leaving sufficient time for the water to dry off. I consider the scene ahead, vehicles slowing, police, the landscape and any interesting objects within it, and the position of the sun and shade. This generally happens within a matter of seconds. When I am ready to snap, avoiding drawing attention to myself I take the camera in my right hand, rest it on the steering wheel, the left hand alongside holding the wheel steady. I look at the road, and the digital camera LCD screen simultaneously whilst zooming in on the 'art'. I edge my car as close as I can safely manage. I have learnt that what I see now, due to the digital camera's delay and the moving of the vehicles, will be past when I take the picture. Holding the camera as still as possible to minimise blur, I forecast the composition and depress the camera button. I try to stay with the van 'art' vehicle, whilst maintaining a course to my original destination for as long as possible, continually snapping to increase the chances of getting a clear shot. The real excitement occurs when I return home; the first thing I do is load my bounty onto the computer and check the quality of what I have captured. Around 90% of the 2000 or so pictures taken over the last six months for this project have little use - blurred, poor contrast, little detail, but returning with just one for addition to the archive fulfils.

The dissertation starts by looking at the messages. To make some sense of the photographs gathered the dissertation develops on the categories defined to describe and distinguish between different types of traditional graffiti. At the end of the message categorisation the dissertation analyses a group of photographs that look like gang van 'art', considering their meaning and function.

Van 'art' as far as can be ascertained has not been written about in an academic context. A handful of web sites have a page with one or two images of van 'art', and the newspapers have reported for example on the work of legitimate van artist Ben Long, that is about it. In seeking to understand the practice and the motivation behind van 'art' the dissertation looks at comparative topics for possible understanding.

In seeking a comparative act the dissertation looks first at the obvious, graffiti, which due to its popularity has been extensively written about. Joerg in 'Paris Graffiti' for example says that that there is the 'perception of a network', where Paris is 'tattooed by night images', the 'song of the network clothing our walls'. (Joerg, 1986: 7-9) Manco in 'Stencil Graffiti' says that the 'walls of the World are used as a free press' and that graffiti is 'spreading like viruses'. (Manco, 2002: 60) Reynolds in 'Magic Symbols' says the 'walls tell us what is happening' and that graffiti is a 'medium for those who are discontented.' (Reynolds, 2000) Van 'art' is a loosely organised text of the people. The dissertation uses graffiti as a starting point to allow the categorisation of the primary resource, the images gathered of examples of van 'art'. The dissertation also asks, is van 'art' really an art?

Van 'art' messages are written in the film of dirt on the back of vehicles. Could looking at the meaning of the medium, the dirt hold any clues to understanding this phenomenon? For answers the dissertation considers distinguished international anthropologist and retired Professor of anthropology at London University, Mary Douglas, and her 1966 book 'Purity and Danger', which is an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo. The dissertation looks specifically at her ideas on dirt in the introductory chapter.

What motivates the van 'artist'? Is van 'art' a *social* phenomenon, a social exchange? The dissertation looks at comparative phenomena and the environmental context to possibly shed some light. To start,

looking in general at culture and civilisation to contextualise the bigger picture, in which van 'art' exists. From culture and civilisation the dissertation goes on to consider subculture, tribe, ritual ceremony, totem and fetish, for example 'The Codes of Advertising' by Jhally about fetishism and the political economy of meaning in the consumer society. Also, another look at texts by Douglas, and Hebdige who has written extensively on popular culture and specifically his 1979 book *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*. The 'The Subcultures Reader' is an extensive collection of specifically selected essays by prominent authors; calling on the work by among others, Professor at MIT Henry Jenkins. Van 'art' messages are largely catch phrases stolen, for example, from popular culture and to shed some light on why this might be, the same Jenkins 1992 book 'Textual Poachers' might prove useful. The book is an ethnographic account of television fans and participatory cultures, drawing on work by French Theorist Michel de Certeau.

If van 'artists' *are* becoming part of a subculture then the vehicle could be the membership card, or at least the card holder. Following on from fan culture, the dissertation looks at the vehicle and 'Car Cultures', the first book to provide an informed sense of cars in terms of culture and specifically material culture. Published in 2001, it is grounded in ethnographic and historical scholarship and edited by Daniel Miller. The dissertation looks specifically at Miller's 'Driven Societies' the introductory overview of the preceding chapters. Daniel Miller has several books published and teaches in anthropology at the University College London. The dissertation also uses the chapter 'Driving While Black' by Professor of Sociology at Yale University, Paul Gilroy, discussing the emergence of Black identity in the US in relation to the automobile; he too has several publications to his name.

Before concluding what relevance the theories considered might have in explaining van 'art', the dissertation speculates as to what the van 'artist' might be like. The research thus far has been voyeuristic surveillance, as an observer, and as such includes what might be considered wild assumptions. The theory is largely untested and based almost exclusively on the evidence of the photographs. This is how the author *thinks*, not necessarily *how* it is. First, to describe the phenomenon.

The Phenomenon

The van is the biggest, flattest, and most travelled vehicle, and therefore most likely to be dirty. In a survey for this dissertation, of vans on the road 37% were visibly dirty (see p.48). The van too is most likely to be written on. From the aforementioned survey, 5% of vans had van 'art' messages clearly written in the film of dirt on the back. The van is the vehicular canvas extraordinaire, the perfect vehicle for communication. Van 'art' is not solely confined to the backs of vans; it can be on the side, the front, anywhere that is sufficiently dirty. Van 'art' can also be seen on cars, 5% of the images gathered for this project are of cars, for example 'I am Nice' (Fig. 03) or indeed any dirty vehicle, as 'Air Bag' (Fig. 01).



Fig 01: Clutton, David. (2004) *Air Bag*. Digital Photograph at 19mph by Author on A53, Stoke-on-Trent. 12:14pm Monday 1st March 2004. *airbag.jpg*

Although the field of study centres largely around the home, and *regularly* travelled routes of the author, messages are all over the country as is evident in 'Air Bag' taken near the authors place of birth, coincidentally on his birthday, and indeed foreign vehicles as in 'Spedition'. (Fig. 02)



Fig. 02: Clutton, David. (2004) *Spedition*. Digital Photograph at 51mph by Author on M25 Anti J11/10. 9:49am Tuesday 9th March 2004. *spedition_close.jpg*

Who is the perpetrator of these messages, the van 'artist'? What gender might the 'artist' be? It is not always men as you would imagine, who are the van 'artists' as 'I am nice' and 'Front Runner' (Clutton, 2004a) make apparent. Graffitists often come and go in the dead of night leaving their messages adorning walls. The messages left are signatures or signed artwork though without the artist stood proudly alongside, the graffiti acts alone, anonymously. Van 'art' is accompanied, begging the question; are van 'art' messages themselves anonymous or is the 'artist' an unknown passer-by? In discussion, the work of van 'artists' has been dismissed as mischievous young kids playing. From the height at which the messages are carved, and the content of the messages, this generalisation is unlikely to explain all occurrences of van 'art'. Hazarding a guess, the driver, if he is aware of the message and has chosen not to scrub it away knows, or may likely be the perpetrator. A warehouse worker waiting in the loading bay, his passenger or co-worker may well be responsible, maybe messaging offers him a way of interacting with the vehicle. The van 'art' could even be a collaborative project. If a driver returned to their vehicle to discover unknown van 'art' they would likely scrub the evidence away. If van 'art' is visible the driver has either not noticed, is not concerned, or more likely has done it himself, or chosen not to scrub away the

message. If he is not the 'artist' he is a willing accomplice and in a sense, driving around the public exhibition space, acting as curator.



Fig. 03: Clutton, David. (2004) *I am nice*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author at Friary Car Park, Guildford. 3:01pm Saturday 7th February 2004. *nice.jpg*

The Messages

Organising the 300 or so usable photographs of van 'art' gathered for this project has been aided by looking at the way graffiti has been categorised, and fitting van 'art' within those parameters. The five graffiti¹ categories are 'Political', 'Expressive', 'Tagging', 'Piecing' and 'Gang'. To allow distinguishing of all van 'art' I have added three further categories, 'Interruptions', 'Scrubbings' and 'Workings'. Van 'art' are often a hybrid of any number of these categories, as is evident in 'Keep Clear' (Fig. 04). Graffiti is discussed and compared with van 'art' shortly after explaining the variety of messages gathered.



Fig. 04: Clutton, David. (2004) *Keep Clear*. Digital Photograph at 2mph by Author on Hare Hill, Rowtown. 2:54pm Wednesday 18th February 2004. *keep_clear.jpg*

NB: A number in square brackets, following a description of a type of van 'art' e.g. 'clean me' [5] indicates the amount of this type photographed. Quantifying the amount of a type was not an exact science due for example to hybrid messages; the figure acts as a guide. Where no number is stated unless otherwise mentioned presume only one example exists. All images gathered for this project can be viewed online, details of images not included and referenced in this document are all listed in the appendix.

Interruption [29]

Saturday 7th February 2004 was when the gathering evidence of van 'art' began, for two reasons the decision was made to photograph any incident of interruption in the film of dirt on the back of vehicles encountered. Firstly, fear the frequency of the messages captured might be too scarce to enable the creation of a worthwhile collection. Secondly, for personal reasons the author was following a methodology of gather, incubate, then evaluate. This was the gathering, not evaluating stage and no decision had been made to where to draw the line. For example, should an accidental handprint or a line [2] (Clutton, 2004b) be included? Initially all were photographed. As months passed an extensive, varied archive of true messages were amassed, these are largely the concern of this dissertation. Incidental marks formed in the dirt through activity, creating often-abstract shapes, do however deserve a category.



Fig. 05: Clutton, David. (2004) *Prints4*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author on Old Street, London. 12:13pm Wednesday 7th April 2004. *prints4.jpg*

Interruptions are abstract shapes but some take on recognisable or interesting form, triangles [2], dots [2], circles [3], question mark (Clutton, 2004c) and 'Pipe' (Clutton, 2004d). All van 'art' are in a sense interruptions; for the purpose of categorisation 'interruptions' are a visual diary of accidents and activity, unlikely deliberate. Sometimes activity that caused the interruption appears uncertain 'Expert' (Fig. 08)



Fig. 06: Clutton, David. (2004) *Triangle*. Digital Photograph at 54mph by Author on M25 Clock, J11/10. 4:51pm Monday 9th February 2004. *triangle_close.jpg*



Fig. 07: Clutton, David. (2004) *Circles*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author on Whitechapel Road, London. 1:28pm Wednesday 7th April 2004. *circles_close.jpg*



Fig. 08: Clutton, David. (2004) *Expert*. Digital Photograph at 53mph by Author M25 Clock, J10/11. 4:24pm Monday 10th May 2004. *expert_close.jpg*

Scrubbed [25]

Van 'art' messages are easily scrubbed away. Like interruptions, 'art' in this category are not recognisable as true messages, or at least they are no longer true, or the full message. There are over a dozen examples of completely scrubbed and many more partially scrubbed van 'art'; they deserve a category.

Sometimes the scrubbed area takes on an interesting form, as in 'Mad Dog' (Clutton, 2004y) and 'Shape' (Clutton, 2004e) and 'Shape Again' (Fig. 10), which was photographed twice, a week between the sightings and in nearby locations. The scrubbed area is commonly the entire lower (reachable) area of the rear of the vehicle and can appear to depict a landscape, and interact with its surroundings, as in 'Bridge' (Fig. 11). This was another vehicle that was coincidentally met again; nearly a month later, the scrubbed area looking much the same.



Fig. 09: Clutton, David. (2004) *Scrubbed9*. Digital Photograph at 2mph by Author Station Road, Addlestone. 1:42pm Wednesday 14th May 2004. *scrubbed9.jpg*



Fig. 10: Clutton, David. (2004) *Shape Again*. Digital Photograph at 0mph by Author on Oak Hill Road, Rowtown. 9:23pm Thursday 15th April 2004. *shape_again.jpg*



Fig. 11: Clutton, David. (2004) *Bridge*. Digital Photograph at 68mph by Author on M25 Clock J10/11. 2:24pm Tuesday 18th May 2004. *bridge.jpg*

Workings [20]

'Workings', 'Expressive' and 'Tagging' van 'art' are text-based. Workings differ from the latter two categories in content and function. Workings are not expressive or a signature but appear more to instruct, advise or work-out. Workings perform or fulfil a function other than expression or identification.

- Instruction [11]

Instructions include 'clean me' [5], or variations like 'wash me' [2] or developing on the theme, 'clean me 4 £5.00' (Clutton, 2004f) and 'I see daz don't work! try vanish!' as in 'Chopper' (Clutton, 2004x). Advice often appears alongside 'also available in white' [4] or even 'wight' (Clutton, 2004g) or whatever the base colour of the vehicle. Instructions are often ideas copied, and the text is frequently repeated again and again as if in rehearsal or practising, as in 'Clean Me3' (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: Clutton, David. (2004) *Clean Me3*. Digital Photograph at 11mph by Author A417 nr. Cheltenham. 5:42pm Wednesday 12th May 2004. *cleanme3_close.jpg*

- Advice [4]

Advice messages contain useful information as in 'Out' (Fig. 13) or reminders as in 'Spedition' (Fig. 02) and warnings, as in 'caution' (Clutton, 2004h) and 'Keep Clear' (Fig. 04) and may incorporate imagery as in 'ICF' (Clutton, 2004i)



Fig. 13: Clutton, David. (2004) *Out*. Digital Photograph at 54mph by Author on M25 Anti, J10/11. 11:49am Monday 9th February 2004. *out_close.jpg*

- Numbers [5]

Numbers often feature in van 'art' as if the dirty van is being used as a memo or note pad. See 'Spedition' (Fig. 02) a number which to hazard a guess is a reminder, advice or instruction, and 'Twats' (Fig. 32). The numbers might be weight related or counts of items collected or delivered. Numbers sometimes feature alongside a narrative, as in a Royal Mail van with a '3' (Clutton, 2004j) and the words 'Robin pushing a york', alongside a drawing of a stickman pushing an upright warehouse trolley and the words 'I need help' underneath. Presumably 'york' is rhyming slang - "Duke of York" - fork - fork trolley.



Fig. 14: Clutton, David. (2004) *Numbers*. Digital Photograph at 54mph by Author on M4 East J14/13. 2:05pm Friday 14th May 2004. *numbers_close.jpg*

Political [0]

As yet there are no political examples of van 'art' which in itself might be of significance.

Expressive [38]

'Expressive' van 'art' are the most common, the category functions as a catch-all for largely text-based 'art' that is neither 'Working' nor 'Tagging'. As the largest category it is further subdivided into 'Fan', 'Offensive', 'Humorous' and 'Conversational':

- Fan [19]

Fan 'art' appears to act as a badge of allegiance. Whereas a 'tag' distinguishes the 'artist' as individual, the badge can act to distinguish membership of an organisation. The most common form of membership distinguished on the backs of dirty vehicles, is to a football club. Football fan badges gathered include AUFC/AFC (Arsenal United Football Club) [4] on Roofers and Builders (alongside St. George Cross stickers... symbol of England alone, used primarily in football) vans, NUFC (Newcastle United Football

Club), Celtic and QPR (Queens Park Rangers) [2]. There is also 'Brighton needs a ***** team' (Clutton, 2004k) the asterisked word is scrubbed out. Football fan badges are not all British, as in 'Hup Holland'. (Clutton, 2004l) 'Hup' is Dutch, roughly translating to 'Go'. The picture was captured on the A3 southbound near Guildford at 7.39pm on the day Holland lost 2-1 to hosts of the Euro 2004 tournament, Portugal in the semi-finals, the evening game kicked off at 7.45pm. There is also 'England Portugal' (Clutton, 2004m) with large scrubbed areas. Portugal knocked England out of the same Euro2004 tournament in the quarterfinals on penalties, after a controversial extra-time England goal was disallowed.



Fig. 15: Clutton, David. (2004) *Parcel Force*. Digital Photograph at 6mph by Author on Old Woking Road, West Byfleet. 1:10pm Friday 5th March 2004. *parcelforce.jpg*

Other common forms of fan 'art' relate to radio programmes that are likely being listened to in the vehicle. DJ Chris Philips broadcasts his 'Bam Bam' Breakfast Show on London's Kiss 100FM between 06:00-9:00. He instigated a trend with his novelty 'zero marketing budget' radio campaign. He encouraged listeners to promote his show, by advertising on the backs of dirty vehicles [3]. Looking at his audience demographic (Oliver, 2004) they are under 25 and urban. The connotations of the phrase 'slap my top' [6] on first impression would suggest a sexual motive. Further research indicates an allegiance to another

early morning show, (03:00-06:00) on Radio 2 hosted by bald-headed Alex Lester, his catch phrase is 'slap my top' (Fig. 16). Similarly 'Magic' (Fig. 19) could indicate the 'artists' preference of Magic FM. The quantity of what would appear to be messages written in the early morning, might suggest that time is of relevance. As with graffiti, the artist might gain the confidence to express free from prying eyes, under the cover of darkness.



Fig. 16: Clutton, David. (2004) *Slap*. Digital Photograph at 64mph by Author on M25 Anti, J11/10. 10:18am Monday 29th March 2004. *slap_close.jpg*

Catch phrases are not limited to the media likely to be currently listened to by the 'artist', they are also stolen from television, as the popular 'suits u' (Fig. 19) said by two bungling suit salesmen on BBC2's 'The Fast Show' shows, and even adverts 'I see daz don't work! try vanish!' (Clutton, 2004x).



Fig. 17: Clutton, David. (2004) *Bam*. Digital Photograph at 6mph by Author on B2430, Layby. 11:52am Monday 22nd March 2004. *bam_close.jpg*



Fig. 18: Clutton, David. (2004) *Magic*. Digital Photograph at 57mph by Author M25 Clock J10/11. 2:26pm Tuesday 18th May 2004. *magic_close.jpg*

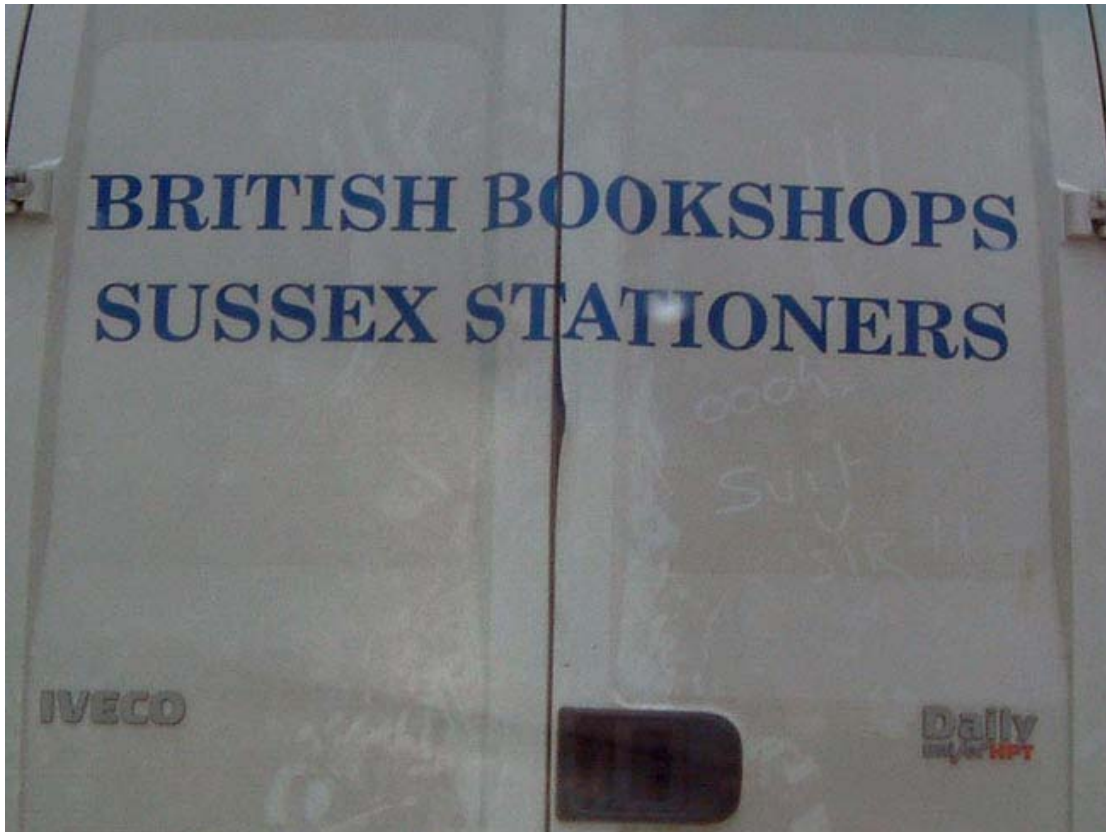


Fig. 19: Clutton, David. (2004) *Suit U*. Digital Photograph at 0mph by Author on A24 nr. Ashtead. 2:59pm Tuesday 13th July 2004. *suitsu_small.jpg*

- Offensive [5]

Offensive expressions include terms such as 'Wankers' [2], cunt, twat and arse. Sometimes offensive expression can utilise the company name on the vehicle. Using a tactic of scrubbing away dirt covering certain letters, or parts of certain letters the 'artist' reveals an alternative word as in 'UNISTRUT' made to read 'SLUT' (Fig. 21)



Fig. 20: Clutton, David. (2004) *Doughnut*. Digital Photograph at 2mph by Author on Hare Hill, Rowtown. 5:59pm Wednesday 14th April 2004. *doughnut.jpg*



Fig. 21: Clutton, David. (2004) *Cunt*. Digital Photograph at 70mph by Author on M4 East J8/9. 2:26pm Friday 14th May 2004. *cunt.jpg*

- Humorous [8]

Humorous expression shows an element of wit for example the rebranding of a lorry with 'R Type' (Clutton, 2004o) on the back alongside '**** on board' the first word is scrubbed out. 'Artists' often use word play to avoid blatant offence for example 'r.send' (Fig. 23) on the back of a Parcel Force van.

Expressions in this category like fan 'art' are often copied phrases, but do not indicate specific membership to an organisation. Phrases include 'I wish my wife was as dirty as this' or 'honk if you bonk' (Clutton, 2004p) the origin of which are uncertain, though likely copied from bumper stickers. Phrases can sometimes be quite lengthy and faintly poetic as in 'I like tits...large tits, blue tits, great tits' etc. which appears alongside more comments and scrubbed areas. The passenger is visible in this image, is he the van 'artist'? (Clutton, 2004q)



Fig. 22: Clutton, David. (2004) *Dirty Truck*. Digital Photograph at 7mph by Author on St. Peters Way Roundabout, Surrey. 3:04pm Tuesday 10th February 2004. *dirtytruck.jpg*



Fig. 23: Clutton, David. (2004) *R.send*. Digital Photograph at 0mph by Author on Lay-by, B2430. 11:04am Tuesday 17th February 2004. *rsend.jpg*

- Conversational [9]

This category includes what appear to be conversations; this is textual chatting. The 'artist' is either conversing with himself, with an 'artist' or 'artists' he is working alongside, or with the viewer as in the Northern greeting 'How Doo'. (Fig. 25) Conversation can also be in the form of a personal expression that unlike tagging appears not to be a nickname or signature, see 'Doughnut' (Fig. 20) and 'We Love' (Clutton, 2004n) with an arrow pointing toward the driver.



Fig. 24: Clutton, David. (2004) *Dead*. Digital Photograph at 2mph by Author on St. Peters Way, Addlestone. 2:43pm Wednesday 18th February 2004. *dead_close.jpg*



Fig. 25: Clutton, David. (2004) *How Doo*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author on South Ealing Road, Ealing. 2:08pm Thursday 26th February 2004. *howdoo.jpg*

Tagging [14]

Tagging, or tags are simply a nametag; a Christian, sometimes a full name, as in 'Billy Walker' (Clutton, 2004r) or a nickname, like 'spunky' (Clutton, 2004s). Tags say 'I woz 'ere' or in the case of van 'art' more likely 'I am 'ere'

Some tags are written in an elaborate artistic style [12]. With graffiti elaborate tags would likely be included in the piecing category. For two reasons, van 'art' largely comprised of text has been kept out of the piecing category. Firstly to avoid discrimination against any text that may or may not be sufficiently artistic, to warrant inclusion in the piecing category. Secondly, to avoid having to describe and define where the line should be drawn as to what is sufficiently artistic, to warrant inclusion in the piecing category. This would entail the question of defining art, which is briefly attempted later.



Fig. 26: Clutton, David. (2004) *Sammi*. Digital Photograph at 0mph by Author on Car park, Heriot Road, Chertsey. 1:07pm Wednesday 18th February 2004. *sammi.jpg*



Fig. 27: Clutton, David. (2004) *Ox*. Digital Photograph at 4mph by Author on Guildford Street, Chertsey. 2:10pm Wednesday 18th February 2004. *ox_close.jpg*



Fig. 28: Clutton, David. (2004) *ST*. Digital Photograph at 21mph by Author on St. Peters Way, Addlestone. 3:42pm Monday 5th March 2004. *st_close.jpg*



Fig. 29: Clutton, David. (2004) *Rear-view*. Digital Photograph at 0mph by Author London Street, Chertsey. 1:58pm Friday 9th July 2004. *rearview_small.jpg*

Piecing ('art') [23]

The 'Piecing', short for masterpiece, category includes those van 'art' that could be considered art in a traditional sense, that is, those markings that are largely drawn or sketched, illustrative symbolic representation, rather than explicitly utilising the alphabet, written text, ergo typography.

- Icon

Although some are, this category does not necessarily indicate that pieces are any more creative than textual messages; often they are simple recreations of icons such as the smiley (Fig. 30) symbol of love and happiness, or the 'cool' or drug culture. A taboo swastika, (Clutton, 2004u) an ancient symbol of well-being representing human, animal, hellish and celestial beings stolen by the Nazis in WWII and coming to represent fear and horror, later being adopted by skinheads and neo-nazi national front. A Star of David [2] symbol of God's rule and religious freedom ... the six triangles denoting the four points of the compass plus above and below, the joining of the spiritual and material realms, of heaven and earth.

- Image

Again, although some are, the piecing category does not necessarily indicate that the 'art' is any more elaborate or difficult to produce than text-based messages. For example a picture of a penis, the symbol of male fertility, power and maybe control, a house or home symbol of protection, stability and material possessions. Stars or they may be suns [4] symbolising life and energy. A star can symbolise divinity, unity, destiny, success and superiority or indeed can be used to signify an omission or footnote as with an asterisk. Or a circle above a horizontal line appearing to be a sun over the horizon (Clutton, 2004t). Often poached pieces show 'meaningful mutations' (Hebdige, 1979: 131) of icons for example the development of the smiley into a cartoon. Most of the detailed drawings are of people though there is one of cats, taken on a dual carriageway in the countryside nr. Cirencester. (Fig. 33)

- Play

Pieces often show an artist at play, as can be seen in 'Hills' (Fig. 36) and 'Hill'. (Clutton, 2004v).

Sometimes the play is quite literal as in 'Recovery' (Fig. 37) showing the evidence of a game of tic-tac-toe (noughts and crosses). Evidence of other forms of play can often be seen, for example the impression left in the dirt on the van after being hit by a football. Sometimes the imagery as a result of this play is mysterious as in 'Boxes', (Fig. 38) or what might at first appear to be rough markings, can be intentional decoration and disguise as in 'Warpaint' (Fig. 39)

- Art

Ben Long is the original and still practising van artist, notice the removal of the inverted commas around the word artist. His work 'Birds' (Fig. 35) was photographed by the author pictured alongside an abstract shape created through repeated activity. This was taken at his outside 'studio' in Covent Garden Fruit Market, London. Ben believes his van art is an art for everybody, not bad art made good because of its commercial or cultural value. Van art is not created for the purpose of commodity.



Fig. 30: Clutton, David. (2004) *Two smiley*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author at Friary Car Park, Guildford. 3:04pm Saturday 7th February 2004. *2smile.jpg*



Fig. 31: Clutton, David. (2004) *Animator*. Digital Photograph at 0mph by Author Pine Wood Grove, Woodham. 2:25pm Thursday 15th April 2004. *animator_close.jpg*



Fig. 32: Clutton, David. (2004) *Twats*. Digital Photograph at 70mph by Author on M25 Clock J10/9. 5:07pm Monday 19th July 2004. *twats.jpg*



Fig. 33: Clutton, David. (2004) *Cats*. Digital Photograph at 70mph by Author on A419 nr. Cirencester. 5:19pm Wednesday 12th May 2004. *cats.jpg*



Fig. 34: Clutton, David. (2004) *142*. Digital Photograph at 7mph by Author on A500 nr. Stoke-on-Trent. 1:13pm Tuesday 1st June 2004. *142.jpg*



Fig. 35: Clutton, David. (2004) *Abstract*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author at Covent Garden Fruit Market, London. 3:15pm Thursday 18th March 2004. *abstract_close.jpg*



Fig. 36: Clutton, David. (2004) *Hills*. Digital Photograph at 54mph by Author M5 South J8/9. 12:33pm Friday 14th May 2004. *hills_close.jpg*



Fig. 37: Clutton, David. (2004) *Recovery*. Digital Photograph at 14mph by Author St. Peters Way, Addlestone. 2:07pm Thursday 15th April 2004. *recovery_close.jpg*



Fig. 38: Clutton, David. (2004) *Boxes*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author at Covent Garden Fruit Market, London. 3:58pm Thursday 18th February 2004. *boxes.jpg*



Fig. 39: Clutton, David. (2004) *Warpaint*. Digital Photograph at 68mph by Author M25 Anti J10/9. 11:12am Thursday 24th June 2004. *warpaint.jpg*

Gang [7]

A more detailed analysis has been conducted of several pictures collected at the same time, in the same location, a car park in central London on Belvedere Road that could provide evidence of gang van 'art'. The badges 'England' with offensive expressions 'Suckers', 'Bandits', 'Arse' and 'Fuck U All' are scrawled on all sides of several transits. Also 'We Love *****' where the final word has been scrubbed out; it looks like 'boys' but the word seems longer than that. Similar symbols of what look to be crossed polo sticks or hammers appear on the vehicles.

The number-plate on one of the vehicles, a plain white transit, denotes Lincoln (FX) (North) as the registration area, another plain white transit Newcastle-upon-Tyne (BB) (Far North), another has a Stockton (NX) registration plate on a Sheffield (Mid North) Window Company. This vehicle has a map drawn into the dirt, maybe suggesting an element of group planning. Another van, that of CSI Security, a Bedford (North) Company who kindly granted permission for the image to be included, said, 'CSI Security are currently working on a highly sensitive project in that area of London and due to confidentiality issues I can give you no further details'.

What was happening locally on the Thursday 18th March when these pictures were taken? They could have been going anywhere as the car park is very near to Waterloo Station. The drivers might have been attending an Equestrian event, though this would more likely be represented by a horseshoe than polo sticks. Polo sticks are usually pictured with the club end to the ground, and not aloft as in this case.

Presumably, the class of people who are interested in polo, would not drive around in dirty vehicles with messages drawn all over their exterior. The symbols are more likely to represent West Ham United 'The Hammers' supporters. The map could well be directions from the vans location, to the West Ham ground just 7 miles away. The pictures were taken shortly after noon, on Thursday 18th March. West Ham played Crewe Alexander at home on the evening of the 17th and were due to play London team Millwall away, on Saturday 20th March. The transit vans have sleeping bags visible inside.

Looking again at the messages 'bandits' and 'arse' both crossed through could be intended to read 'arse

bandits' and 'we love ****' could *well* be 'boys'. Crewe Alexandra are a Northern team, the vans look to be from the North. If the van owners are working locally long term as CSI Security claim, they may well be in contact with Southerners and attending the football match as fans of the Northern team, Crewe Alexandra. Working class Northerners often refer to Southerners as 'Southern poofs'. The messages might well be banter written by local, Southern, West Ham lads, to get a bit of revenge. The messages cover the Northerners vehicles with suggestions that the Northerners are in fact the 'poofs' and making it clear who has left the message on the Northerners territory, by leaving their calling card, the West Ham badge. This apparently group activity might go some way to proving that van 'art' exists as a subculture. Almost two months later the same polo sticks, or hammers symbol 'Numbers' (Fig. 40) were photographed on the M4 Eastbound J14/13, alongside lots of four digit numbers.



Fig. 40: Clutton, David (2004). *Map*. Digital Photograph on foot by Author on Belvedere Road, London SE1. 12:15pm Thursday 18th March 2004. *map.jpg*

To add another dimension to the group, gang, subculture theory, a couple of times the author had the privilege of meeting two or more vehicles on the motorway with messages forming a temporary gallery. This is not necessarily gang related but it does highlight the effectiveness of messages as a means of

identification. Recently as good fortune would have it, two vehicles 'Pair' (Clutton, 2004w) from the same company, one behind the other were captured. Both were decorated with messages, the leading vehicle said 'I wish my wife was as dirty as this' the other had been slightly scrubbed, but appears to have been used as a note or memo pad. Finally 'S Bomb Squad' (Clutton, 2004z) suggests a group, this image has 'Sir Cone + Big Nose on tour + meaty + mushy' written above, and like 'Chopper on Tour 2004' (Clutton, 2004x) makes the viewer aware that the gang are away from their own territory, their familiar home turf.

General Traits

The exercise of categorising the images gathered has made a number of general traits apparent. The messages are clearly more than just an expressive account of the 'artists' assumed psychology, often appearing to function as a form of social exchange. The 'artists' through display of their membership badges are clearly fans - of popular culture, football, and radio etc, they believe in something, are part of a community. The practice is nation-wide, even international, and the messages are coded, and/or poached catch-phrases. Fan 'art' clearly indicates a need to express membership when emotions are high. The 'artist' has the confidence to express high emotion; angry, happy or excited. They are mainly male, mainly labourers, and working or lower middle class. During the last few weeks attempts have been made on the very precarious task of photographing the driver, to gain some verification of these theories. Employing tactics such as holding the camera to my left as I pass, or pulling in front of the van 'art' carrier and snapping in my rear-view or side mirrors, but as yet I have nothing clear. For now, a cursory nod to the left as I pass to gain a mental image of the driver has to suffice. The drivers of vehicles with messages have largely, although not exclusively, been young males, and those of completely scrubbed vehicles older. Interestingly, vehicles that have been partially scrubbed are also driven by younger males, indicating that they do have boundaries of what is decent and acceptable.

Theory of the Elements

The Act: Street Art

Joerg in 'Paris Graffiti' says that graffiti are as old as memory. (Joerg, 1986: 6) Reynolds in 'Magic Symbols' asks 'is age the only difference' between cave painting and graffiti, (Reynolds, 2000) and Manco in 'Stencil Graffiti' says the original cave painting 22,000 years ago was often done by blowing dirt, a powder, toward a hand placed against a wall. (Manco, 2002: 7) Is ancient cave painting the origin of the behaviour of the graffitist? Through the centuries man has made his mark, in caves, lovers declaring undying love on the old oak tree, children elaborately decorating schoolbooks and desks, tattoos. We make our surroundings, and our surroundings make us. Through the medium of visual communication we create and recreate our identity. What is interesting about van 'art' is similar to the interest paid to an undecorated hand in comparison to a tattooed hand, and the hand with a note scribbled on the back with a biro. Notably its difference, what its temporary presence says about the bearers' identity.

Alonso introducing a paper on graffiti in 1998, to a Graduate Conference, gave a potted history. Though his focus is clearly on US based material, similar activities were occurring in the UK and Europe, and especially in Paris. (Huber, 1986) The word graffiti originates from Italian 'scratch', and Greek 'to write'.

1967 New York introduce \$25 or 10 day fine for graffitists. Graffiti illegitimately recognised.

1971 New York Times acknowledge graffiti as a valid art form. , Graffiti is gaining legitimacy.

1972 Invasion of the street with a 'wild' form of communication, a fresco of coded messages.

1982 Energy absorbed into the mainstream, with profiting of galleries, and museums. Graffiti becomes legitimate; it is recognised as art. The graffitist, like the hacker, is being used by corporations.

(Alonso, 1998)

Van 'art' is comparable with, yet distinctly different to graffiti. The van 'artist', like the graffitist, uses the surface available as a free press. The messages are networked with other messages and through the system of roads the message of the people spread like a virus. Graffiti adds a covering, van 'art' removes one. Graffiti has permanent location and medium, the spray cans, the stencil. Van 'art' is truly hand made;

the 'artist' employs no tool other than the finger, the messages are transient and easily scrubbed away. Graffiti as a style has been legitimised but the practice of decorating buildings is still very much illegitimate. To continue, the dissertation refers to the illegitimate practice of decorating buildings as street graffiti. Street graffiti is created by the undisciplined... outlaws and vandals, rebels who want to be artists but have a 'disorderly attitude to the rules of the game' (Vergine, 1996). As we have seen in the categorisation the van 'artist' too tends to express emotions in an undisciplined manner, in particular with 'fan' and 'offensive' messages. Less violation and trespass occurs with van 'art', the perpetrator is not breaking any explicit rules or formal laws, it is less premeditated, but, there is an element of civil disobedience. Van 'art', like street graffiti is not formally produced, not formally printed; not the carefully considered or politically correct messages delivered through proper established channels of communication by the dominant culture, the government, the police, the council, a corporation, and the media. Van 'art' and street graffiti are as equally illegitimate, threatening and penetrative. Does van 'art', like graffiti, deserve to be considered an art, and does the van 'artist' want to be an artist? Their work would suggest not.

Van 'art' like street graffiti is not created to a brief, not produced for financial gain², nor for a wealthy collector, should the work catch his eye. The large percentage of van 'art' can not be described as art in a traditional sense. Van 'art' is not created by someone professing to be an artist³ with the ability to conceive of the original, the unique, the interesting, the diverse or the wonderful. Other than the work of Ben Long and a few rare pieces photographed say '142' (Fig. 34), 'Cats' (Fig.33), 'Warpaint' (Fig. 39) and maybe 'Airbag' (Fig. 01) for its originality, humorous and advisory duality, sheer scale and the unique canvas, van 'art' messages are largely not art at all. This explains the ever-present safety net of the inverted commas. Van 'art' pieces that can be described as art are arguably *the* ultimate in contemporary 'art', individual pieces are around for a day, their fragile medium guaranteeing an equally short future. Here today, gone tomorrow. But the act, the performance, still remains. Masterpieces of van 'art' are in the minority, the vast majority perform another function, have another purpose.

Brassai (2002) though he is referring specifically to carvings, considers graffiti the 'playful marks' of a

'primitive voice'. Van 'art' is a real, genuine, not skilled, nor perfected, nor laboured, rather a spontaneous form of play, and this is where van 'art' has a certain magic, a cult value⁴. This pertains specifically to the phrases that are placed, used and reused, in 'workings' and 'fan' expression, as in a ritual ceremony. The messages may not be ever visible, the work will pass or be scrubbed away, but continues to survive, if not in the photograph, then in mind, spirit and in recreation. The act performed by the van 'artist' is play, practise, rehearsal, working, expression, conversation, identification and protest, largely, they are not producing a piece of art. What is produced are functional 'workings', 'expressions' largely copied, identifying 'tagging' signatures and even protesting 'scrubbings'. Van 'art' in its various guises is more of a performance, a social phenomenon, a social exchange and a form of expression, than art.

The dirty word

Is the medium, as McLuhan claimed *indeed* the message? What message as the medium does dirt communicate? As well as obvious connotations... earth, mud, excrement and dust, dirt has other more symbolic meanings. Embarrassment as in the dirty joke or dishing the dirt, vile... talking dirty, dirty word, obscenity... being dirty, dirty books. Malicious... eat dirt, corruption... paying dirt, dirty dealing, deception, dishonesty and the unethical... playing dirty and the dirty player. Discoveries... digging the dirt, detraction, defamation, deprecation and libel... dirty laundry. Mary Douglas announces in the introduction to 'Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo', 'reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order and disorder' adding, cleanliness is 'respect for convention.' (Douglas, 1984: 6) Douglas explains that fear was a 'false trail' for anthropologists attempting to understand religions, little trace of it could be found. Ideas on hygiene, purity and dirt 'by contrast turns out to be an excellent route'. This is not to suggest that van 'art' is a religion, if anything it is an anti-religion, just to consider the message of the medium. Douglas said 'dirt is essentially disorder' (Douglas, 1984: 2) adding to shun any sense of bias 'I am personally rather tolerant of disorder'.

Freud suggested that ultimately thirst, hunger and pleasure motivate us. Lohisse in 'Anonymous Communication' suggests sustenance i.e. thirst and hunger, fear, the fear of death and pleasure is what motivates. (Lohisse, 1973: 63) Douglas's ideas of dirt work on two levels; to influence ones behaviour,

'ideal order in society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressor' (fear). Dangers affect unbelievers such as loss of claims to status, respect (pleasure) and thus potential economic loss (thirst and hunger). Dirt is a 'lapse from righteousness' and a 'political disloyalty'. (Douglas, 1984: 3) The dirty are expressing their view of social order. Secondly, dirt works on a symbolic level installing a 'symmetry or hierarchy'. 'Dirt offends against order' it is a threat and 'eliminating it is a positive effort to organise the environment... making it conform to an idea.' (Douglas, 1984: 2) 'Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressors have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.' Douglas uses oppositions to illustrate this creation of a semblance of order, with and without, about and below, being and non-being, form and formlessness and life and death. 'That which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it' (Douglas, 1984: 4)

'Culture is richly organised around ideas of contagion and purification.' (Douglas, 1984: 5) The dirty vehicle might suggest owners and drivers are too busy to clean the vehicle, or that they have better things to do with their time, than become slaves to their possessions and tools. The van artist Ben Long says vehicles can take 2-3 months to get dirty enough to write a message. The experience of long motorway journeys in wet conditions shows the time required to dirty a vehicle can be much shorter, but being dirty takes longer than being clean. Being clean happens for but a brief moment, what follows is a process of becoming dirty. 'Rituals of purity and impurity create unity.' (Douglas, 1984: 2) No highly regarded corporation, for example a Marks & Spencer's or Sainsbury's vehicle with a message in dirt has been seen, they are polished. Certain companies feature frequently; the white vans of Securicor and Securitas, and British Telecom, The Royal Mail, the decline of whom has long been documented in the press and blamed on the popularity of email, and Parcel Force, are especially dirty. This may indicate poor order and organisation or investment in the cleaning of their vehicles. The personal experience of the author⁵ is these companies regularly enlist temporary staff, filling vacancies with those lacking loyalty or pride. 'That which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it' (Douglas, 1984: 4)

Douglas (1997) continues to use ideas related to dirt in later writings, for example 'In Defence of Shopping' she talks of pesticides, front door steps, toiletries, and detergents and polishes being signs,

badges of allegiance. Today we are bombarded with cleanliness and cleaning products, we watch television programmes informing us how clean our house is, and of lives of grime. The dirty van like Douglas's front door step is a sign of disorder. Dirt is the element that acts to glue cultures that have relevance to van 'art', like graffiti, youth, fan and car cultures, dirt both motivates the van 'artist' to perform and as a medium the message is a sign of disorder that helps establish a 'badge of allegiance'.

Dirt is a weakness that the van 'artist' uses to his advantage, it becomes his strength. Van 'art' *might* be perpetuated, and the van 'artist' *might* be urged to express as a result of the threat civilisations' bodies of power and other social formations, the family, education in their 'teeth-gritting harmony' (Althusser, 1971, quoted in Hebdige, 1979b: 133) have on the individuals self-esteem. Power bodies might function as their evil, their devil responsible for their fear and stresses... the messages might declare 'I am not accepting this bargain.' The messages might propitiate, appease and dispose of their demons, the 'artist' might be chanting 'my wife is my...my team is my...my humour is my...I am my...god'. This could be a reading of messages and marks apparent in expressive, tagging, gang and scrubbing van 'art'. The van 'artist' in playing civilisation⁶ and culture⁷ against one another; he uses cultures strengths, the dirt, to highlight civilisations weaknesses, his vehicle, the messages mark his victory.

The Environment: Dirty Cultures

Norman Mailer in 'The Faith of Graffiti' May 1974 Esquire famously described Graffiti as 'your presence on their presence, hanging your alias on their scene.' The State, the 'master of ceremonies', the 'serious' people, deal with the threat posed by subcultures by dismissing them 'as nonsense...condemned as degenerate or reduced to good clean fun.' (Hebdige, 1979b: 132) Van 'art' is often mocked by the dominant culture. Media headlines include 'Off the back of a lorry', 'Grit Art', 'Art-iculated Lorry' and 'White Van Manet' but the widespread public awareness and frequent examples of the social phenomenon seems motivation enough to warrant 'serious' consideration.

As a form of communication van 'art' has much in common with other currently popular social phenomena, that require active participation and inside knowledge to allow the understanding of the

codes in use. These include legitimate forms of communication such as text messaging through the mobile phone (our new rosary beads (Osborne, 2002: 72)), Internet chat rooms and the public forum, and especially illegitimate forms like street graffiti and its descendants, stencilling and stickering. Modern street graffiti is interwoven and has evolved alongside rap, dance, and lately skateboarding subcultures, and ultimately from the consumer society, as opposed to traditional pre-industrial and industrial cultural society. Van 'artists' feed off and find the freedom of thought to encourage their first mark through the influence, acceptance and learned behaviour from these dirtier cultures; drug taking, music lyrics (i.e. Eminem, Rebel MC) and traditionally 'dirtier' such as pornographic cultures. The behaviour of these cultures is having to become more accepted. The declassification of cannabis, and plans to allow currently restricted hardcore pornography to be shown after the watershed; once illegitimate activities, are being legitimised by the state, culture is being allowed to get dirty. The van 'artist' uses this acceptance of dirt to his advantage, to alter or reinforce his identity.

Civil Disobedience

Van 'art' is obviously not, as the lack of political messages would confirm, a counterculture, a middle class articulate opposition to the dominant parent culture, but might van 'art' be a subculture? Subcultures are typically male working class youth who become delinquents as a reaction to respect and status problems, that is, status and respect in the eye of, and applied by those of the parent culture.

Membership of a subculture requires the possession of the group's key, ergo the argot. The key allows understanding of the language, the slang or jargon peculiar to the group as is evident with tramps, gypsies, homosexuals, and lately 'texters'. A subculture is a division within the dominant parent culture that 'must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different.' (Clarke et al, 1975: 100) A subculture's shape and structure is defined by its characteristics, these might include age, sex, class status, occupation, ethnicity and religion, residence and territory, and even material artefacts. Subcultures can similarly be defined by the way members walk, talk, look, act and interact.

Van art' symbols, for example the hammers, (Fig. 14) act to identify the carrier as a fan and possibly a member of a gang, though not as a member of a specific subculture. Coded messages used like 'slap my

top' (Fig. 16) and 'bam bam' (Fig. 17) act to identify the 'artist' as listener, viewer, audience and fan, in this case of a particular radio station, and hence part of fan culture. Piecing and tagging have no characteristic membership identifiers other than that the perpetrator likely enjoys art, and the graffiti culture. Expressive van 'art' is simply that, a personal expression though arguably could suggest the undisciplined nature of youth, and hence youth culture. Some expressive messages 'R type' (Clutton, 2004o) might suggest an interest in cars, and hence car cultures. Workings don't function in any way to suggest a subcultural allegiance other than a copycat or working class culture, not really subculture. The vehicle, the dirt and the van 'art' as identifiers are not sufficient in themselves to 'exhibit a distinct enough shape' to allow a subcultural classification. What of other identifiers? The van 'artists' are of no discernible age group, they are *mainly* young but *mainly* is a weak proposition. Their class status, of working class, but then so are millions of others, no distinct religious ethnicity, no specific territory other than the road but again so are millions of us. The van 'artist' does communicate in a peculiar way. Writing messages on the back of dirty vehicles, as a form of interaction, is a particularly novel characteristic but still not, along with the vehicle and the dirt, distinct enough.

Subcultures represent 'noise' an 'interference in the orderly sequence... a temporary blockage in the system of interpretation' (Hebdige, 1979a: 130) a glitch in the matrix. Van 'art' certainly fulfils this characteristic, in the sense of visual noise; illegitimate messages interfere with the appearance of the view and complicate interpretation. Subcultures figuratively and symbolically express tension between power and the second-class, master and slave. Van 'art' on first inspection does not show much evidence of power tension. Subcultural expression embodies members' 'dissatisfaction with class experience' (Osborne, 2002: 241) exclusion, alienation, opposition, resistance and refusal to accept values and structures. Maybe another characteristic that connects van 'artists' is the white van man stereotype, maybe through their messaging they are distancing themselves from, or reinforcing the uniformly applied WVM stereotype. Subcultures 'manifest culture...as symbols of communication, forms of expression and representation...judged ...as 'appropriations', 'thefts', subversive transformations, as *movement*.' (Hebdige, 1979b: 129) We have seen 'appropriated' phrases, 'thefts' and transformations in van 'art'; though not explicit or physical in manifestation, could van 'art' be described as a subculture? Or even a

virtual subculture? A virtual subculture apparent through characteristics of largely white working class male, dirt, white van, alongside methods of communicating opposition, resistance or resignation to the class experience caused by public application of the WVM stereotype? Recently, Richard Osborne discusses subcultures as being partly brought about by new found economic independence and new forms of communication. Subcultures 'took what was available and reconstructed it into patterns that reflected their dissatisfaction and rejection of dominant cultural meanings.' (Osborne, 2002: 241) Van 'artists' take what is available, the van, the dirt, and (re)construct meaning through new forms of communication.

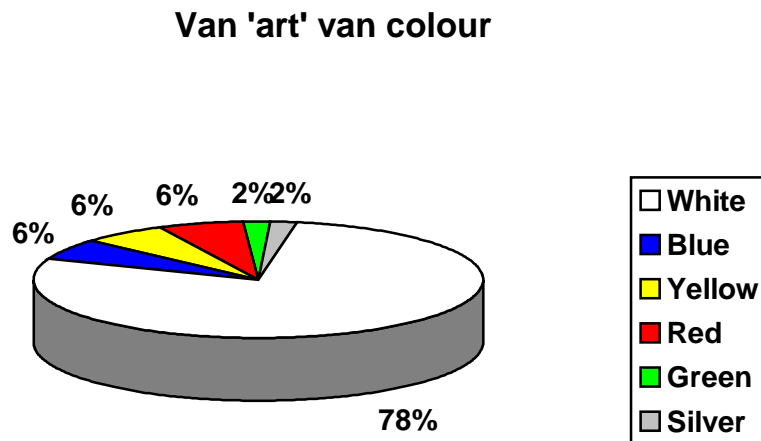
Before going on to consider the white van man stereotype, two further ideas might add weight to the van 'art' as subculture theory, that of the totem, and of ritual ceremony. Cultures are organised around totems. A problem occurs considering the driver's van as a totem because a traditional totem is often an animal, for example a horse; it is very rarely an artificial object. Recent discourse suggests, looking at the stages of evolution of cultural meaning of objects, in more contemporary society, a strong correlation between lifestyle and totemism. Jhally for example declares 'goods take place of natural species... objects are badges of group membership.' (Jhally, 1990: 202) The van could be described as the van 'artists' totem. Tribe members are related through their totem to other members. Totems protect and guide each other; the connection is mutually beneficial. As a totem the van undoubtedly benefits the driver as a tool for carrying, as transportation, though the connection is not totally beneficial. The dirty white van does little to enhance image, status or respect. Branding⁸ the vehicle with messages in the dirt helps reduce the damaging effect on the driver's public image.

Ritual ceremony is the decoration of environment, weapons and bodies. The van 'artist' may wait months for his totem, his van to be sufficiently decorated with dirt to allow him to place his marker. Just as cleaning is a ritual ceremony so is dirtying. One's identity is created through the objects consumed, dominated and controlled by it. We begin to serve the object... master and slave. When this relationship becomes an obsession it can become a fetish, the result a mild form of fetishism. With van 'art' the opposite is happening, the slave, the driver, has rebuffed his master, the vehicle. He will no longer be servant to the master. The van is not worthy of such attention. The vehicle will serve him and he declares

this through ritual ceremony, the non-act of allowing the vehicle to achieve a state of dirtiness then celebrating this control by his mark in the dirt. The mark gives a small glimpse of the vehicle below the dirt, the message more effectively portrays the van 'artists' image and status, and the importance of his time, and the unimportance of the vehicle, than if it were clean.

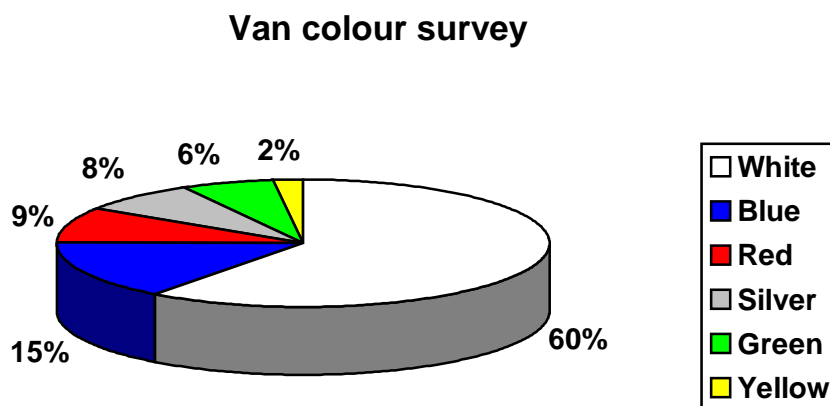
The Vehicle

Fig. 41:



Surveying the images gathered of van 'art' looking specifically at the colour, 78% of the vans are white (Fig. 41). The white van is without doubt the most popular colour on the road. This figure could suggest that the white van is the best canvas for effective display of van 'art' or that the dirt shows up more readily. More interestingly it could indicate a link with white van man.

Fig. 42:



Conducting a similar survey at a random time and location of van colours on the road showed 60% (Fig.

42) of the vans to be white; indicating that white is indeed the most popular colour. Additionally the survey noted that 37% (not pictured) of all vans were visibly dirty, 23% of the dirty vans had marks, and 56% of these marks were van 'art' messages. 5% of the total vans surveyed had van 'art'. Furthermore 80% of the van 'art' were on white vans, the remainder being silver. This figure is reassuringly close to the 78% (Fig. 41) of white vans with van 'art' that are the primary resource of this dissertation.

Retired Professor Jan Harold Brunvand has written numerous books on urban legend. In 'Two Good to Be True' he says the defining qualities of modern folklore [like textual poaching] are repetition and variation, tales gets recycled and revised. (Brunvand, 2001: 20-1) Is the van 'artist' white van man a modern urban legend, the dirty van his medium for telling his tale? The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) were commissioned by Renault to conduct a study of WVM, this is a summary of the findings. White van man was a term coined in 1997 by Sarah Kennedy of Radio 2. WVM is a 'folk devil' worse than a football hooligan. As a mobile thug he is an aggressive white male, a tattooed 'mad bastard', a lager lout, and a moron to be avoided and hence friendless. The study showed this to be a false and unjust stereotype.

WVM is mostly 30-40, with an average age of 37. Females are only 4%. Two thirds of WVM are married, 75% stay around their home area, 26% are self-employed (the dissertation figures were 29% (Fig. 44)) with 22% (dissertation figure 21% (Fig. 44)) working for large companies. The vast majority of WVM listens to local radio stations (33%) which sits nicely with the large proportion of local radio catch phrases photographed. WVM reads the tabloids and he plays football again suiting the amount of football fan badges photographed. WVM has a routine working week, his is a solitary profession... maybe he does do the van 'art' himself. WVM watches everything on television... so he is a real fan of popular culture. WVM eats a 'heart attack on a plate' so maybe he could be overweight. WVM is no 'designer' addict... but maybe he would like to be if he were single and could still afford those luxuries. Maybe the van 'artist' is one of the few WVM who is a designer addict, a poser and through his messaging he is satisfying his posing urges. 57% of WVM have pets. Here is the interesting bit, WVM is not, and however much the surveyors wanted him to be, tribal. The only thing that unites WVM is that they drive vans. WVM considers his van either a tool, he loathes it, has some affection or loves it so nothing too

revealing there. WVM is assertive not aggressive (10%) and doesn't care much for the American 'over-regulating' 'how's my driving?' sticker on the rear of their vehicles. WVM feels that others behave antisocially towards him because of the van and the stereotype. He has *strong* opinions about his media image, a third of those questioned rejected the WVM stereotype completely. They felt it was a generalisation based on one bad experience, presumably that of notorious London villain and M25 road rage killer Kenneth Noye. The media, largely uninformed again seize on a 'grain of truth' and amplify it causing 'moral panic'. WVM as a stereotype is only a tiny fraction of those that drive white vans. (Renault, 1997) Presumably if WVM does feel as strongly as suggested about being wrongly accused then the messages on the back of his van maybe often do function to alter public perception of him, to put the record straight, for example by highlighting his humorous side.

Last year Renault commissioned another report. The new report, five years on, begins with conclusions from the earlier survey. WVM had a varied lifestyle and demographic characteristics and there were many more 'diamond blokes' than 'dodgy' WVM. The report seriously recommended painting vans a different colour and since then van colours have changed. Silver Van Man (SVM) is the new WVM; sales of silver have risen by 500% to distance themselves from WVM. Silver is seen as cool literally and metaphorically, it is modestly prestigious (vs. say gold), it says executive, modern and ambitious, SVM is seeking to get ahead. This fits neatly with the dissertations' theory that WVM is trying to alter public perception through messaging. WVM is the flip side of the coin to the silver BMW driver, the have's and the have not's. The survey interviewed 200 van drivers. 'Silver looks classier - you expect to polish it rather than ding it.' SVM don't want to be seen as cowboys and want to stand out from the crowd. The report also suggests that WVM is becoming more like a car driver. This new report surveys vehicle dealers who said the van driver wants small bonuses, refinements like ride quality, comfort, the luxury of mod-cons, and appreciate that their vehicle portrays an image and acts as a means of self expression. For SVM his vehicle has dual roles of business and leisure, the van is increasingly his sole means of transport. This fits with the dissertations assumption that not all of the vehicles are company owned and are indeed multipurpose privately owned vehicles, indeed dealers refer to these vehicles as car-derived vans. The new report claims that van man as a distinct species has eroded with the increase in popularity of the

people carrier, the four-wheel drive and the colour change. The WVM stereotype is difficult to maintain. The report also discusses how fleet drivers lack motivation to ensure the appearance of their vehicle presents a positive image due for example to only 30% having a choice of colour. Big companies are saving WVM from extinction. (Renault, 2003)

The Car and its Culture

One would be correct in thinking van 'art' is largely on vehicles other than cars, 95% of the images gathered for this project are of vehicles other than cars. Cars suggest private ownership and hence investment, owners are more likely to have chosen, and protect their investment and therefore keep it clean. So what relevance might car cultures have on van 'art'? As we have seen from SIRC's study of WVM 30% of van drivers are self-employed, surveying the van 'art' images returned 33% (Fig. 43) with 50% of vans owned by small to medium companies (Fig. 44). The van is seen much more as having a dual purpose, for business and leisure, the car-derived van. Van drivers' vans are often their only or main vehicle and as such act as their car. Van drivers are becoming more aware of the identity their vehicle bestows upon them. Car culture may well be relevant to van 'art'

Fig. 43:

Van 'art' vehicle ownership

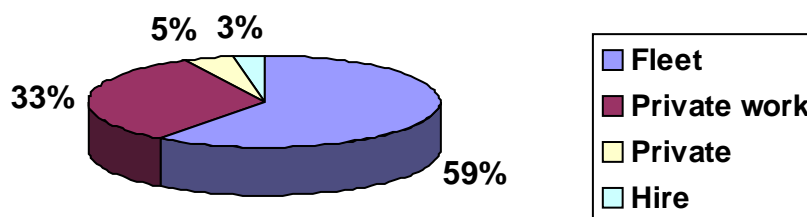
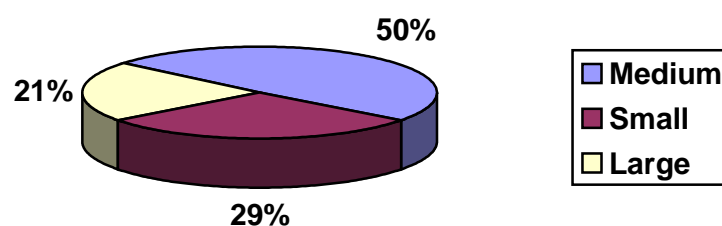


Fig. 44:

Company Size



This looks specifically at vehicle as identity interpreting the relevance to van 'art' the ideas of Miller, and Gilroy in 'Car Cultures' alongside Collet and Marsh in 'Driving Passions: The Psychology of the Car'.

Paul Gilroy's chapter 'Driving While Black' in 'Car Cultures' says the accepted link between commodity and identity 'represents victory for car culture.' (Gilroy, 2001: 87) He starts considering Raymond Williams on traffic flow and regulation clearly presenting social order. Civilisation and its roads, signs and rules is expanding to meet the needs of capitalism and just as Teddy Boys expressed their difference in the shopping mall so do vehicles on roads. Civilisation keeps us safe, it also presents obstacles that effect our progress. Our appearance and behaviour within this obstacle course makes our visibility, or in this case van man, more prominent. In this environment the vehicle is far more than a 'mere product' or an 'innocent technology'. The vehicle 'acquires a special force... becomes a social and political actor that shapes... worlds through which it moves even as it damages both them and us'. (Gilroy, 2001: 86) We are a 'car-based civilisation.' The car is a form of 'belonging promoted by the government' and 'in selling this triumph for capitalism, the totems sublime power... demands fresh consideration in terms of the way resistance and resignation is understood and evaluated.' (Gilroy, 2001: 84) The cultural integration of class, religion and ethnicity on the road, like nowhere else, demands we seek 'new ways of becoming present to one another.' (Gilroy, 2001: 85) The van 'artist' has found a new way of dealing with obstacles, expressing difference; his messages inform us he is not stereotypical WVM, he is more than his van alone would suggest. The vehicle is a global phenomenon and although access is far from universal, the vehicle is the most mainstream of dreams, and one of the few dreams that is likely to come true. Gilroy talks about individuals 'will to triumph in the game of consumerism' but cars as a status symbol are 'less easily counterfeited' than other desirable goods. 'Anxious individuals' want to buy in rather than drop out, these objects offer the 'means to seem wealthier, prouder and thus more respectable', (Gilroy, 2001: 86) and as we have seen in the case of WVM, vehicles also have adverse effects. Van 'art' as a logo is a way of faking identity, of altering public perception through addition of illegitimate marking. The critical assessment of cars and car culture equals notions of 'progress, development, growth' and as such is a provocative emblem of wealth, status and prosperity. Cars are symbols of power and prestige, manifestations of wealth. Our attitudes towards our vehicles can 'disorient and mystify' and test our ability

to perceive. The vehicle is an 'index of hegemony' ...an index of where you stand in societies league table, a 'public cipher of celebrity' (Gilroy, 2001: 86-94) The van 'artist' through messaging is altering his position in the league table, achieving celebrity, his 15 minutes of fame.

The vehicle can 'transport us intellectually between otherwise separate academic destinations' (Miller, 2001: 27) Daniel Miller introduces *Car Cultures* with a key idea, that the car dominates our landscape. Miller explains how the vehicle, originally the rich mans toy, in its domination is both a tool of destruction and a form of seduction. (Miller, 2001) The vehicles' domination is both physical and metaphorical, building and destroying our environment and its inhabitants whilst simultaneously ensuring it remains man's best friend. Developing on this we can see that the car shapes our cities and countryside, what we view, our lives and our identity. As dominator the vehicle is integral to the identity both of the people within them and the identity of physical locations and organisations from the vehicles within and used by them. Just as one would make assumptions about the inner sanctum of the home, from as Douglas says the front step, it too is normal for expectations to be formed on the basis of one's car. The large articulated lorry, for example, demands respect through sheer size, whilst the van is degraded by its function as a tool of working class labourers, cowboys, the WVM legend and still further if dirty.

Collet & Marsh (Collet & Marsh, 1986) talk of how women evaluate men's prospects on their car and how the car informs on status, guiding the strangers we are constantly meeting in their behaviour towards us and in the apportioning of respect. They talk of the car as an article of fashion, as expressive costume allowing drivers to distinguish themselves from others. They discuss accessories that allow owners to personalise, upgrade and customise their vehicles. Personalised plates for example costing thousands of pounds feed their owners' vanity and desire, and draw attention to themselves, showing a badge or insignia of rank. Personalised plates once sold exclusively by dealers have become big enough business to warrant the involvement, regulation and profiting of the DVLA in distribution. Drivers on the roads are largely incommunicado 'isolated in mobile cocoons' (Collet & Marsh, 1986: 82) these badges enhance visibility, prominence and individuality. They also talk of accessories like white walled tyres that show that the owner has the 'wherewithal to keep his possessions clean.' (Collet & Marsh, 1986: 34) The van

'artist' has the wherewithal and conviction to maintain his vehicles' accessory, the dirt. Van 'art' is the poor mans creative way of customisation, of personalising his vehicle, on a budget.

The Artist: Fan and Poacher

The word fan comes from fanatic, a fan is someone with an obsession, for example the Star Trek fan, known as a trekkie, has an obsession with the series, impersonating and wearing the costume and the collection of the memorabilia. Fandom is recognised as a subculture. Michel de Certeau said in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Certeau, 1984) that the masses were 'caught and collected in the nets of the media', 90% watched TV and 80% read newspapers. He opposed an idea of a 'nation grazing' on media, saying the audience stole, poached from the what they saw, and made it their own. (Certeau, 1984: 165-6) Henry Jenkins book *'Textual Poachers'* is an account of television fans and participatory cultures. Jenkins drawing on work by Certeau talks of an audience 'transforming borrowed materials from mass culture into new texts.' 'Fans are poachers who get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations for the construction of an alternative cultural community.' (Jenkins, 1992:223) A few years later he wrote of 'nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write' (Jenkins, 1997:508) and how fans 'operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness', they are 'peasants not proprietors.' (Jenkins, 1997:509) The vast majority of van 'art' messages are a form of textual poaching, catch phrases are stolen; from the radio 'slap my top', television 'suits u' and unknown origins, legend 'I wish my wife was....' Lohisse in *'Anonymous Communication'* says words are like magic, they evoke objects and ideas into the present with the viewer becoming the author. (Lohisse, 1973: 47) The *Subcultures Reader* says goods and commodities are 'invested with meaning, association and social connotations by the dominant [parent] culture.' (Clarke et al, 1975: 109) Brydon in *Consuming Fashion* says 'narratives invent significant objects' (Brydon, 1998: 3) The van 'artist' is a great reproducer, of icons and catch phrases and as such is a master of disguising his identity with that which he has stolen. The marking of the object with appropriated phrases invests the object, the van, with that meaning. This is apparent with almost all van 'art' 'clean me' (Fig. 12), 'suits u' (Fig. 19), 'bam bam' (Fig. 17), 'NUFC', 'R Type' (Clutton, 2004o) etc. The 'artist' takes on the role of fetishman; he is sorcerer, wizard, and 'maker of charms...magically active'. (Jhally, 1990: 53-4) The messages on the backs of vans allow the van 'artist' if

not only to make explicit his fantasy then to escape the reality of public perception to live in a fantasy.

The 'artist' might be mildly if not excessively and irrationally devoted to the relationship between how *others* perceive them, and how they *want* to be perceived. They gain pleasure through altering that perception, not simply visually but intellectually. The 'artists' have a desire to alter perception, to show, present, to prove, to advertise that they are more than their vehicle would suggest, that they have an attitude, they are not passive, will not be manipulated. For them the dirt on the back of their van has the magical power to alter how they are perceived, to alter how their image is communicated, whether that be through like resistance or resignation, difference or similarity. Through similarity in the sense of fan 'art' and their expression of allegiance through catch phrases and football team abbreviations and logos. And through difference with humorous expression distancing them from the public's aggressive WVM stereotype. Offensive expressions proclaim similarity, act to reinforce the aggressive stereotype. Where the dirty area over and around the vehicle's legitimate corporate sign has been scrubbed clean, it may signify the individuals pride in and allegiance to the company. Or it could be a simple protest against the van 'art' that it removed, through scrubbing the driver is distancing himself from van 'artists'. The scrubblings might even be a reminder of the 'artists' doodling, erased and hidden once finished.

Douglas summarising 'Cheats at Work' by Gerald Mars says 'the social environment, being dominated by large-scale hierarchical organisations, exemplifies distant authority'. Mars finds four types indicated by cultural theory, the individualist, the isolate, the hierarchist and the egalitarian. (Douglas, 1997: 23-4) Of these types the van 'artist' is the individualist, furthermore the wealthy male in his sparkling BMW is also an individualist. The rich male is driven and owned by his possessions, the van driver drives and owns his dirty vehicle. The rich have alternative methods of proclaiming their status, for example their personalised number-plate. The accused and the accuser are two sides of the same coin, the have's and the have not's, those who have made it and those who want to. The clean individualist surfs on the crest of a wave; society has done right by him. He lives life in the fast lane, drives a flash car. The other side of the coin the dirty individualist is struggling in the gutter but he is a fighter, he is surviving.

Conclusion: The great unwashed

Van 'art' is accompanied by the driver of its vehicle, it is not anonymous. The 'art' is largely not art; it is an illegitimate act. Pieces, through their symbolic and representational form, using iconography, imagery, and markings are the closest to what might be traditionally accepted as art. Other messages in their various guises perform a number of functions. Interruptions and scrubblings are not true van 'art'; interruptions act as a diary recording activity, whereas scrubblings indicate an individual's resistance or resignation. Through hiding or protesting against messages they are showing either resignation to their identity, or resistance to the defamation of a company, showing an allegiance or loyalty. Workings serve to advise, instruct, work out and record. Tagging acts to identify the individual, whereas gang acts as a territorial identifier, and indicator of group membership. Expressive van 'art' allows the individual to express, for example through conversation with self, or other, or to express his support, as a fan, of a particular genre, or team. Van man has strong feelings about the public persona his vehicle bestows upon him, ergo his identity. Expressive van 'art' can strengthen or distance the identity of the individual from a stereotype; in this case that of the contemporary 'folk devil' white van man. Expressive van 'art' can indicate difference or similarity. Similarity can be expressed through the use of offensive messages, whereas difference can be suggested through humour. No evidence of political van 'art' has been gathered, this in itself is interesting and indicative of the 'artists' class and interests.

Philosopher and founder of conservatism Edmund Burke (1729-97) was the first to use the term 'The Great Unwashed', referring to the mass of ordinary people, the common herd. Van 'artists' whether rogue tradesmen, cowboys or 'diamond geezers' are all the same, they are all human. They all have differences, some appear proud, others offensive, some intelligent, others barely literate. Some are creative, others blatantly thieves, some are humorous, some are young, some old. Other than the human connection, the van 'artist' is connected by their urge to express, and in doing so to continue the great tradition of communication, and community. Van 'art' as an act, is a primitive form of communication, expression, and exchange of information; the result of play during periods of idleness and rest. The van 'artist' satisfies his primal urge to gain pleasure, through physically making his mark. The van 'artist' plays at the

intersection of dirty cultures, sex, drugs, rap, graffiti, and other new forms of communication such as chat rooms, and mobile phones. These cultures have moved much more out into the open, and become more visible as a result of the lowering of standards, the changing of the goalposts, of what is deemed acceptable behaviour, by civilisation. Culture is getting dirty.

Van 'art' could be described as a virtual subculture, of paramount importance the peculiar method of communication, along with traditionally accepted membership criteria; being largely young working class male. The vehicle is his totem, the build up of dirt, as ritual ceremony, acts as a badge of allegiance, making explicit the reversal of the master slave role. Dirt's only message, might be the opportunity it offers the van 'artist', though dirt undoubtedly motivates, is a statement, an indicator of pride, loyalty and order and also of a problem, the sign of an issue, a matter. The vehicle of the dirty individualist, the van 'artists' vehicle, is functional, as opposed to the clean individualist who worships. Dirt is the budget accessory that allows the 'artist' to perform the function of accessories like personalised number-plates.

Van 'art' is here today, gone tomorrow but the act remains, little can be done to stop it. Dirt is matter, without which nothing would exist. Walter Benjamin in 'Myth and Metropolis' says 'play is spontaneous and creative, a counterpoint to tedium and exploitation inherent in instrumental labour... it unmask the desolate'. (Gilloch, 1988: 84) Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Without doubt, the van 'artist' is a great reproducer, of catch phrases, icons and his 'designer' identity. In the tradition of the van 'artist', allow the textual poaching of a catch phrase currently being used by comedian Keith Barrett, on his BBC2 'chat' show - 'its just a bit of fun'. Van 'art' is 'just a bit of fun'. As Hebdige said (p. 41), good clean fun.

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- **Appendix**

1. Alonso suggested five categories in which the various forms of graffiti could fall:

- Political: The most easily understood
- Expressive: The most common, similar to political it is easy to read consists of a personal commentary of ideas and sentiments (often taboo), it is an outward manifestation of personality that can be further subdivided based on theme for example sexual, racial, religious or humorous
- Tagging: The most widespread and consists of a stylised signature
- Piecing: A more artistic, decorative form of tagging demanding skill and technique
- Gang: Similar to tagging and expressive styles however serves to mark gang territory, there is a clear gang mentality (Alonso, 1998)

2. A company called 1576 and market themselves as an above the line advertising company paid a white van man to let them draw an on the back of his vehicle for client White Dentalcare

<http://www.1576.co.uk/track-record-8.html>)

3. The law in 'Brancusi v United States' attempted to tackle the issue 'what is art?' The case centred on whether an item 'The Bird' being imported should be taxed as raw metal, or duty-free as sculpture.

'Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) was one of the founding figures of modern sculpture and one of the most original artists of the twentieth century. 75 years ago Brancusi had to fight for his name and reputation in a trial which became the cause célèbre of its day. The state asks whether a mechanic could make a similar piece of work. Epstein: 'A mechanic cannot make beautiful work...He can polish it up but he cannot conceive of the object that is the whole point. He cannot conceive those particular lines, which give it its individual beauty. That is the difference between a mechanic and an artist. He cannot conceive as an artist... [if he could conceive as an artist] he would *become* an artist.'

(Mortimer, 2003: 18:48)

4. Benjamin suggests 'works of art are received and valued on different planes. Two polar types stand out: with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work.' Adding 'Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult. One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view.' What happens with 'the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products. It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple.' Adding 'in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value... only later did it come to be recognised as a work of art.' Benjamin, Walter. (1999).

5. During the years 1999-2003 the author worked during summer breaks for various agencies where he regularly drove, sorted and packed for companies like the Royal Mail, the Council

6. Civilisation is a 'nation so distinguished more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people.' (On the Constitution of Church & State, V quoted in Williams, 1976: 59) Civilisation is the whole, the varnished (dirty) people and polished (clean) people; civilisation is there to polish manners that need polishing. 'Civilisation' derives from 'civilise', to make criminal into civil matter. 'Matter' means either a problem or concern or in its scholastic form, something that has physical or abstract mass. Dirt is matter. The process of cleaning, and being clean is the process of being civilised, of making criminal into civil matter. In this sense dirt and messages in dirt is civil disobedience. Civilisation contrasts with savagery, barbarism and the primitive. Civilisation proposed order, refinement, organisation, etiquette, 'good' manners and behaviour within which the mass, the multitude can be mutually strong. Civilisation optimistically promised progress and the achievement of an ordered way of life. Civilisation has become the source of our wants, our mechanisms... and our monotony. With 20th Century community breakdown, mental stress, cultural and emotional deprivation the optimism offered by civilisation began to be questioned, notably Freud's 'Civilisation and its Discontents' discussing forced labour, and the frustration and repression of the common, ordinary mans 'natural' activities.

7. The frequently quoted Raymond Williams (Osborne, Hebdige etc.), in 1976 described 'culture' as one of the 2-3 most complicated words in the English Language. The word originates from cultivate, and later during the 18th Century social and intellectual movements to mean couture, cult and colony, a romantic alternative word to the 'new' civilisation of the mechanical and industrial. Culture is how we live, it is personal independence, our thoughts, our superstitions and our actions. Civilisation is the structure within which culture exists, it is the machine, culture its' function. Civilisation is the foundation of what we are expected to do, culture is what we do, what actually happens. Civilisation is what we achieve, culture is how we achieve. Civilisation is the carpet, culture the footprints. Civilisation is the game, the house, and the suit. Culture is how we play, the home and the necktie. Civilisation tells, culture explains. Civilisation is pure and clean; culture is lived and dirty. Culture poses a potential threat to the harmonious development of civilisation.

8. Collet & Marsh talk of how the car replaced the horse, and in Arab countries the camel. The vehicle was originally promoted in terms of how it would reduce the pollution caused by the horse. The power of the vehicle is to this day measured by how many horses power it represents, brake horsepower BHP. They also discuss how the garage replaced the stable and how we give our cars pet names. The car is a common object, a totem. Collet & Marsh also talk of how manufacturers exploit the cars' power in creation of social identity. For example the four-wheel drive vehicle is created for those who want and have the financial capital to look like 'Hollywood Cowboys' (Collet & Marsh, 1986: 6-94) roaming the outback, when indeed the vehicle is likely never to leave the tarmac. The van driver is more like a real cowboy, hardworking rather than the glamorous sharp shooting 'Hollywood Cowboy' stereotype. Cowboys branded their horses and cattle and wore decorative clothing as depicted in Hollywood Western films. Times have changed, we are no longer watching Westerns but 'Fast and Furious', 'Death Race' and 'Crash'. The cowboy and the van 'artist' are defined by their mode of transport, along with changing attitudes. The van 'artist' writing his message is branding his vehicle, declaring ownership... it is mine not WVM's. The van is the modern day horse, white van man is the well-travelled urban cowboy, the professional nomad on the road. His totem is his mode of

transport, what connects him with the tribe.

Image References

A slideshow of all van 'art' images, and this document in pdf with active links, can be viewed at

<http://www.mediageezer.com>

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