

Half a Life Painting Walls: The Trajectory of Graffiti Artist Miguel "Kane One" Aguilar



Rooftop, 2012.

When I start a graffiti installation the first step is usually dropping off my kids at school. By the time the morning of painting comes I have already been mentally preparing the days before. I look through recent sketches. I read lists of color palettes that I've jotted down. I mind map ideas that I want to connect. I think about an intention or a goal I want to accomplish.

I've developed a mental stamina to conceptualize an idea and keep revising it while I complete other, everyday tasks. It becomes this roaring rumble of momentum under a tight deadline. By the time I arrive at the wall, it's go time. I'm focused. I scroll through different genres of music on my phone until I find one that plays off of the dynamics between my current emotions, the weather, and the physicality of immediate landscape; I am already thinking about my fourth and fifth permutations as I begin to paint my first layer.

This is how I paint graffiti at 37 years old.

I did my first graffiti mural in 1991, 2 years after I began tagging. It took me about 2 weeks to fumble through the process. I was 15 years old and worked on it every day after school. I didn't get any money for it and I paid for all the spray paint materials. The mural was approximately 50'x12'. I felt it was a fair trade to have the opportunity to paint a wall because I valued access to the practice, so I was glad to fund the project myself. Once I was done, it gave me credibility within the graffiti community to be able to paint other walls. I was able

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to get more "permission walls" on my own by using photos of my first piece as a reference, and I started to get asked by other writers to paint on walls that they had permission for. Whenever a graffiti artist obtained permission from a property owner, the artist inherently become the curator for who else would paint there and how often installations rotated on that wall.

I became pretty obsessed with developing a fluency in both process and aesthetics. I wanted to make more informed decisions on the fly and have my pieces identified as my style. The following two summers I painted two pieces per week on average and spent 10-14 hours on each wall. This work-rigor really crystallized these parameters as my standard practice. I continued like this until my wife and I had our first child in 1998. I tried to continue painting as I normally had but it presented brand new challenges with my familial responsibilities. I

think I must have tried quitting graffiti at least half a dozen times over the years. We had two children by the time I received my BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in May 2000.

It took me the next 10 years to develop a harmony of priorities that didn't neglect my wife and children or whatever noncreative jobs I tried to withstand. I had to come to terms with how much of a hold my graffiti practice had on me since I was a teen. I had to let go of completing an installation within a 48-hour time frame. I started painting in 2- to 3-hour sessions over 1- to 2-week periods. And I didn't die.

Enter the iPhone.

I started taking progress-photos after each session so I could review them back at home. This reflective activity allowed me to revise the decisions I had made. I was able to put

Professor and graffiti artist "Kane One" tells us how his education, family, and iPhone have affected his ever-evolving career as a street artist.



Go Bears! (London), 2012.



Life is good, 2012.

the art down, walk away for a while, do laundry, and then look back at what I had done. At first, I did it to keep up a mental momentum in anticipation for returning as soon as possible, but it slowly became an aesthetic benefit because I could spend more time flushing out different options. It was as if the progress-photos, along with Adobe Creative Suite and a light box, all functioned together as a *thumbnailing* practice, and the wall was my studio. My mode of production became more circular and less sequential.

In 2009, I was accepted into the Master's of Art in Teaching program at School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). I wanted to learn how to teach graffiti in Chicago Public Schools. The program enabled me to look at graffiti within a larger context of art education. I was able to identify educational frameworks for how I paint and how I had learned to paint. It was affirming, and it gave me the theoretical foundation from which to design my curriculum. I learned how to create exemplars for graffiti activities that were accessible to

a wide variety of age groups. The responsibility to make it as "easy" as possible to children further expanded the permissions I could give myself in my own practice. It has helped me identify, loosen, and dissolve oppressive blockages that I had learned from my teenage peers and mentors. I graduated in 2011 and began working for several nonprofit organizations as a teaching artist and as a program coordinator.

Now, as an educator, I continue to learn from my students about how they see graffiti and street art from a holistic perspective. They read a wide range of cultural production as part of the same practice and this perspective has informed me to take a much more inclusive approach in my own practice as well as my curriculum design. I've grown to integrate social media into my process by using Instagram as an educational platform for my Graffiti Institute (www.instagram.com/graffitiinstitute) organization. I've also used Twitter (@Kane_1) to crowd source collaborative graffiti installations with other practitioners.

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Pink deconstruction, 2012.



Team dynamite!, 2012.

I've also begun enlisting my four children into my practice. Each has their own sketchbook and we draw together. My two older children, Kayla and Kane, help me paint some of my outdoor installations and Kane sets up my DSLR camera with time lapse remote for me on location in order to document my process. It's a great way to spend time—talking about art—with my kids. I think by doing this, I can give them insight into my processes as a working framework for how to navigate other parts of our/their daily lives. In that, there is a space that I've arrived at together with my wife (a Chicago Public School teacher) where parent and educator are truly reciprocal.

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