



WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

By **Jeremy Shere** Photography by **Ben Weller**



Graffiti by Malcolm Smith, IU associate professor of fine arts. (opposite page) Artist Joe LaMantia, who conceived the graffiti project, with one of the "public" graffiti boards.



5 LOCAL GRAFFITI ARTISTS PAINT THEIR ANSWERS

Many people see graffiti as little more than unruly scribbling defacing public property. But this year's ArtsWeek (Feb. 20–Mar. 1) in Bloomington will feature graffiti as a dynamic way of engaging politics through art. Called "Writing on the Wall," several large, graffiti-covered panels on display at IU's School of Fine Arts (SoFA) gallery will challenge viewers' preconceived notions of the meaning of democracy.

"Democracy, its uses and abuses, has been on my mind a lot lately," says Joe LaMantia, a local artist and art educator who first conceived of the graffiti project as part of IU's Moveable Feast of the Arts—a program designed to share the university's cultural riches with people across the state. "Graffiti just seemed like the perfect medium because it's inherently democratic—anyone can use it as a way to express pretty much anything they want."

Working with Sherry Knighton-Schwandt, director of Communications and Special Projects in the IU Office of the Vice Provost for Research, and SoFA director Betsy Stirratt, LaMantia came up with an ingenious idea: set up large, blank panels at various locations around Bloomington and IU and invite people to engage two questions: what is democracy, and what does democracy look like?

"We had no idea how it would turn out, if people would respond or not," LaMantia says. "Little or no participation from the public might have shown that people just don't care, but that's not what happened."

Instead, the public response was overwhelming. From October 2007 through the first weeks of December, panels placed outside City Hall, at the Herman B Wells Library,

(right) Graffiti by local artist Mike Burchfield. (below) The work of David Ebbinghouse.



in the Kelley School of Business, and in the atrium of the School of Education building were quickly covered over with drawings, questions, slogans, and political manifestos. Comments written in several languages, including English, Russian, Korean, Chinese, Hindu, and Arabic ranged from cryptic commentaries—“Democracy is something no one has yet experienced”—to calls for action: “We live in a democracy but we are not equal... each of us must fight for what we are told we already have.”

LaMantia was amazed by the range and depth of the public response. “People really thought about the questions and tried to come up with something that was different or provocative,” he says. “Democracy isn’t black and white, it’s more complex. And I look at the wall as living up to that complexity. It became a working definition of democracy, one that provokes you to read and think. Thinking is an especially important ingredient in this project because too often people don’t take the time to stop and ask, ‘What is democracy?’ Instead of just saying it’s the Bill of Rights, it’s not until you exercise your freedoms that you really know what freedom is.”



Graffiti has a long history as a means of self-expression for the poor and disenfranchised, dating back to ancient times. In the United States, graffiti rose in inner city ghettos when kids armed with spray paint cans began to “tag” public spaces with coded signatures. Alongside rap and break dancing, during the 1970s and ’80s graffiti evolved into an elaborate art form characterized by intricate, highly stylized lettering. With the breakthrough of hip-hop culture in the United States in the mid-1990s, graffiti began to cross over into the American mainstream as a trendy style in clothing and advertising.

Part of the purpose of “Writing on the Wall” is to celebrate graffiti as art and as legitimate and powerful means of political expression. To complement the public walls, five local artists were commissioned to create their own graffiti-inspired panels on the theme of democracy. For artist Mike Burchfield (aka Mike Wizowski), graffiti fits the theme perfectly.

“It’s a brilliant idea because if you look at history, you can consider almost any art as graffiti,” says Burchfield, whose panel depicts a stylized American flag. “Even in Roman times

you had people writing on walls to protest the government, so politics and graffiti have gone hand in hand for eons.”

For Malcolm Smith, IU associate professor of ceramic arts and one of the artists commissioned to create a panel, graffiti represents art in one of its purest forms. “It’s important in the sense that it taps into the core creative energy that most people have,” he says. “There’s no outside reward for it other than self-fulfillment. Yet it’s an incredibly dynamic form that’s always



Julian Hensarling’s panel references New York City and Brazilian graffiti.

pushing forward. If you do graffiti, you’re excited by the challenge of throwing something up on a wall and being challenged by another artist trying to outdo you. In its own way, graffiti is as competitive as the commercial art scene.”

Hannah Shuler was inspired by the graffiti of ancient Greece.

LaMantia sees the commissioned works as the perfect complement to the public panels. “The purpose of ArtsWeek is to bridge the gap between artists at IU and artists living in the community and to get everyone involved and thinking about democracy, and I think ‘Writing on the Wall’ really accomplishes that,” he says. “On the public board, people have responded to other people, like an ongoing conversation. Someone writes something and someone else may disagree, or add something or put a question mark. You really have a dialogue happening.”

Over the course of the next year, LaMantia plans on taking the installation to other IU campuses across the state, adding new panels at every stop. “We want to keep the conversation going,” he says, “because there’s always more to say.”

The Artists

Hannah Shuler

local art educator and artist

Hannah Shuler first came across graffiti in her early 20s in Berkeley, California. “Graffiti is on the fringes, and I’d always thought of myself as someone outside the mainstream, questioning accepted ideas about art.”

For her piece, Shuler was inspired by the ways in which democracy,



David Ebbinghouse

local artist

For David Ebbinghouse, art is a spiritual calling. “Art has its roots in ancient shamanism, and as an artist I see myself as a sort of shaman,” he says. “To me, art is like medicine for the soul.”

Ebbinghouse’s panel is a mix of loosely related images and cultural references. “It’s like a chain of associations that lets people interact and add associations in their minds,” says Ebbinghouse, who in his younger days was an active graffiti artist around Bloomington. “Like street graffiti, it’s on ongoing conversation.”



like graffiti, is elusive. “How do you do a picture of democracy? The first thing that came to mind was having a conversation about history and democracy, about its Greek origins,” she says. “But democracy is more than that, it’s subtle and mysterious. I hope my painting inspires people to make up their own minds.”

Malcolm Smith
IU associate professor of fine arts

For Malcolm Smith, graffiti is “a voice, a voice of free speech that involves appropriating public space to let yourself be seen.”

In his project, Smith stresses the concept that democracy is still an experiment. “So it’s flawed to some degree...experiments can lead to

Mike Burchfield
local artist

Since he first discovered graffiti in a Bloomington train yard, Mike Burchfield has been hooked.



Julian Hensarling
MFA graduate student

As a teenager growing up in the conservative environment of Salt Lake City, Utah, Julian Hensarling found an outlet in graffiti. “The attraction was the freedom to say anything, anywhere.”

Hensarling’s panel references New York City-style graffiti from the 1980s and pichação graffiti from Brazil, where youth get their messages across using mud and tar. In tribute, in his work Hensarling uses a mixture of spray paint, mud, glue, tar, and acrylic materials. “It conveys the idea that even though poor kids in Brazil can get their voice out, it’s a futile attempt and will get washed over.”



disaster,” says Smith, who specializes in and teaches ceramics at the School of Fine Arts. “I’m trying to create an environment of experimentation by using symbols to represent that idea.”



Inspired by graffiti’s free, ever-changing aesthetic, Burchfield’s work is constantly evolving. “I usually start with some image and then keep what I like and add another layer over everything else,” he says.

For “Writing on the Wall,” Burchfield was struck by the American flag as the quintessential symbol of modern American democracy. His version of the flag uses the word “fear” spray painted over and over to make the red and white stripes. “I don’t feel that all of Democracy is fear-driven,” he says, “but especially today, too much of what we call democracy boils down to fear.” ✨