

# VIGILANTE VIGILANTE: THE BATTLE FOR EXPRESSION

A film by Max Good



USA - 2011 - 86 Minutes - Documentary - Unrated

[www.vigilantefilm.com](http://www.vigilantefilm.com)

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**VIGILANTE VIGILANTE:  
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**Selected Press**

“engaging...entertaining...nary a dull moment...”

“Max Good’s film touches on larger issues around free expression and blight while focusing on three individuals who’ve taken their opposition toward taggers to extremes that could be argued as unhealthy, unaesthetic, and/or unlawful. Engaging docu, in which the filmmakers themselves sometimes play a part...”

--[Variety, August 8, 2011](#)

“Max Good's film quickly sketches – you could say "tags" – the history of graffiti in America, rousing in favor of even the scribbliest scrawl as a mark of self-expression in a repressive society ... Good is good at catching out these hitherto anonymous men in New Orleans, L.A., and Berkeley, and although he evidently hates what they do, their DIY spirit mellows even him, and by the end of this worthy film he allows them a grudging respect.”

--[SF Weekly, August 10, 2011](#)

“Eschewing any pretense of objectivity and adopting a civic-journalism approach, Bay Area director Max Good and producer Nathan Wollman exhaustively explore the issues at stake in the current graffiti and street art scene by focusing on some unexpected, once-hidden antagonists: the so-called buffers...Good and Wollman ratchet their tale up a notch when they follow Sharp with colorful paint of their own, brilliantly driving home an appeal for freedom of expression and a reclamation of public space.”

--[SF Bay Guardian, August 9, 2011](#)

“Talk about a mind-blowing twist to the graffiti question. Self-described crime-fighters cover up blight by slapping gray paint on the scrawlings, at times damaging property. Is this heroic volunteerism or suppression of freedom of expression? It all depends on your perspective.”

--[SF Chronicle, August 11, 2011](#)

“A turf war is playing out in the Bay Area. Graffiti artists and the people who paint over graffiti are fighting over visual justice. Jean Elle takes a look at a new documentary that may change the way you see paint.”

--[NBC Bay Area News, April 7, 2011 \(video\)](#)

“As a vigilante Berkeley citizen battles taggers and vandals, city officials are threatening to fine newsrack owners for graffiti. Two documentarians capture it all on film.”

--Robert Gammon, [“The Great Graffiti War,” East Bay Express](#), March 25, 2009

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**Synopses and Description**

**35 words, 192 characters:**

A new breed of crime-fighter now stalks the urban landscape. Two filmmakers go undercover to expose anti-graffiti vigilantes who stop at nothing to rid their neighborhoods and cities of street art, stickers, tags, and posters.

**95 words, 525 characters:**

A new breed of crime-fighter now stalks the urban landscape: the anti-graffiti vigilante. These dedicated blight warriors stop at nothing to rid their neighborhoods and cities of street art, stickers, tags, and posters. Yet several of these vigilantes have become the very menace they set out to eliminate. In their relentless attempt to stamp out graffiti, they've turned to illegally and destructively painting other people's property. VIGILANTE VIGILANTE is the story of two filmmakers who set out to expose these mysterious characters and discover a battle of expression that stretches from the streets to academia.

**765 words:**

Out on the quiet city streets, in the pre-dawn hours, a battle is being waged. For decades, graffiti writers, street artists, and bill-posters have contended with police and city clean up crews. Now they have a new enemy: the obsessive and self-motivated lone vigilante. Matching or exceeding the persistence of the graffiti writer, older (generally) white men have appeared in several cities, vigorously painting out or "abating" tags, stickers, and any unsanctioned communication. True to form, these anti-graffiti vigilantes are themselves vandals, as they typically paint over graffiti without the property owner's permission, often doing more physical damage than what they are covering up. Some have been known to use violence as well.

The story begins with the "Silver Buff"--a mysterious character known only by his marks—he has prolifically (and illegally) painted over graffiti in Berkeley, CA for over 10 years. Silver is his color of choice. From the start, the filmmakers reveal themselves not to be "objective" observers but instead involved operators seeking to unmask and stop the Silver Buff, who they see as hypocritical and destructive. With no experience in surveillance, the filmmakers' initial efforts are fruitless and often humorous. During the stakeout phase, they experience periods of exasperation, paranoia, and despair, but persevere to achieve their first milestone—catching the Silver Buff in the act, with a well-placed surveillance camera.

The film broadens to encompass questions of why people are motivated to do graffiti and how it relates to the wider culture, as well as why some may appreciate it while others hate it. The film introduces several interview subjects, including psychiatrists who discuss the vigilante character in American culture, as well as psychological insights into graffiti writers. Urban theorist and graffiti expert Stefano Bloch explains the cultural importance of graffiti as well as the widespread misunderstanding of the

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phenomenon. Graffiti writers, most disguised in masks, give their perspectives on the culture and its opponents. James Q. Wilson, prestigious co-author of the “Broken Windows Theory” makes the argument for a vigilante response against graffiti and other “quality of life” crimes. The filmmakers are not convinced and point towards the theory's small scope and lopsided priorities.

The Silver Buff turns out to be Jim Sharp, an obsessive 63-year-old retired man who lives in an upscale neighborhood in the Berkeley hills. Sharp admits to nearly 20 years of “anti-blight” activities, including tearing down posters and picking up garbage from city gutters and sidewalks, on top of the silver spray painting. The battle against Sharp, which is sometimes serious and sometimes absurd, is woven throughout the film.

Los Angeles’ “Graffiti Guerilla,” Joe Connolly, 53, is a hyperactive non-stop talker with a conflicted psyche. He is torn between an unstoppable desire to help and a deep sense of anger and pain. Connolly has fought against graffiti in his LA neighborhood for 17 years but he respects the artistic side and considers graffiti writers his friends. A vigilante to the core, Connolly is fearless, driven, and a bit crazy. He is a willing participant in the film, as he will talk to anyone who will listen.

Portland’s “Silver Circle,” Ron Engman, 68, was active for a decade, spray painting thousands of silver circles over and next to graffiti—his own signature and a warning to graffiti writers. Engman was eventually arrested and charged with vandalism. Engman’s story is covered second hand and through archival material because he was never located.

Fred Radtke, the “Gray Ghost,” is a former marine in New Orleans who is dedicated to personally eliminating graffiti. In 2008, Radtke was arrested by a National Guardsmen for painting out a colorful graffiti mural that had been sanctioned by the property owner. He has been known to shoot at or attack those who challenge him. In a city known for colorful expression, Radtke is often seen as the bad-guy. World-renowned street artist Banksy came to New Orleans and battled with Radtke, creating stencils of him in action and mocking his efforts to eliminate expression and creativity on the streets. Radtke is covered through both archival and original footage.

Ultimately, “Vigilante Vigilante” is about tolerance and creating a conversation with one's opponents. It's the story of a battle between two perspectives and two generations. It is a youthful film that challenges conventional wisdom about who the villains are in the fight over graffiti. The story and methods may be brash, but the arguments are rooted reason and debate. The film is a unique appeal to reconsider some of our assumptions and recognize the importance of free public expression and the communicative use of public space.

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**About The Filmmakers**

**Max Good: PRODUCER / DIRECTOR / CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Max Good recently worked as assistant producer and distribution manager on the Academy Award®-nominated documentary feature, "The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers" (2009). Previously, Good co-produced "B.I.K.E." (2006), a documentary feature on the underground culture of mutant bicycle gangs that screened at NYC's MoMA, the Slamdance, Silverdocs and Ann Arbor Film Festivals, and aired on Canal Plus (France) and HBO Poland. He has also directed several short films, including "Gangster Administration" (2005) and "Smooth" (2009), as well as "Ungonquinleños" (2006), in collaboration with producer Nathan Wollman.

Having been involved with graffiti and street art culture for over 15 years on both coasts, Good was drawn into exploring the phenomenon through its most dedicated enemies. He has also spent a large amount of his time involved in political activism over the last 5 years and sees film as an avenue to promote awareness and tolerance, as well as to entertain. Good holds a B.A. in Communications and the Arts from the University of Pennsylvania.

**Nathan Wollman: PRODUCER**

San Francisco Bay Area native Nathan Wollman, is a producer of visual media projects, focusing primarily on character driven films. He has produced numerous short film projects, while specializing in creative consulting and investigative research in the documentary genre. Nathan has served as producer for the feature documentary, "Vigilante Vigilante," 2011, worked on set for cable television with Comedy Central's Battle Bots Series, 2004, provided production coordination for FIAT motor company advertisements in Monterey CA, 2006 and has worked with director Max Good on several short films appearing at San Francisco's 3 Minute Film Festival, 2007-2010. Nathan is an active member of San Francisco film society and is a proud alumni of San Francisco state university design and industry department. He holds appointed membership in the Epsilon Pai Tau honor society for visual design and applies those same standards to his film work.

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**Main Cast Members**



**Stefano Bloch** – Stefano is a former graffiti writer and current Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota. He combines an academic approach with first hand knowledge of the culture to make valuable insights into what makes graffiti important.



**Joe Connolly** – Joe has starred in two other widely distributed films in the graffiti genre, “Bomb It” (2007), and “Infamy” (2005). An extremely intense non-stop talker who runs marathons in his spare time, Joe has been involved with graffiti abatement since 1993 and has also developed an appreciation for the artistic side. Joe may consider himself part of the graffiti culture, but most graffiti writers remain skeptical.



**Shepard Fairey** – The Los Angeles based Fairey is one of the most well known street artists working today, most famously known for his role in creating the President Obama “Hope” poster and the “OBEY” and “Andre the Giant” campaigns.



**Fred Radtke** – Deemed a “local hero” in *People* magazine, Radtke has been an active opponent of graffiti in New Orleans for over a decade. He is internationally known for being one of America’s toughest anti-graffiti vigilantes and was involved in an infamous battle with street artist Banksy.



**Steve Rotman** – A San Francisco photographer, Rotman became intrigued with graffiti in 2005 and recently released the first major book on the local graffiti culture, “Bay Area Graffiti,” with co-author Chris Brennan. His second book of photographs is “San Francisco Street Art.” Rotman is an articulate supporter of the graffiti culture.



**Jordan Seiler** – Seiler, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, is a NYC-based activist and street artist. His works pushes the limits of legality to question the politics of public space and advertising.



**Jim Sharp** – Sharp is Bay Area preservationist turned rogue vigilante. He has been covered extensively in the local press for his unrelenting persistence and devotion to destroying the markings of graffiti taggers. His damage to public and private property has become the target of much debate.



**James Q. Wilson, Ph.D.** – Co-Author of the influential “Broken Windows Theory,” Wilson is an accomplished professor, political scientist, and expert on crime and public administration. Wilson has taught at Harvard University, Pepperdine University, and UCLA, among other institutions.

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**Credits**

**Produced by**

Max Good & Nathan Wollman

**Directed by**

Max Good

**Executive Producers**

Fredric King

John Madigan

**Associate Producers**

Robin Griswold

Scott Pourroy

**Director of Photography**

Max Good

**Edited by**

Julien de Benedictis

**Animation by**

Owen Cook

**Narration**

Michelle Brown

**Written by**

Max Good

Julien de Benedictis

**Additional Editing**

John Lore

Chris Struckman

Rick LeCompte

Max Good

**Additional Photography**

Nathan Wollman

Julien de Benedictis

Crista Rock

Dan Kwong

Kate Dollenmayer

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Owen Cook

**Additional Photography**

Scott Fitzloff  
Isaac Jones  
Capac Roberts  
Patrick Biesemans

**Graphics**

Rose/Pacific

**Motion Graphics**

Julien de Benedictis  
Scott Fitzloff  
Chris Struckman

**Colorist**

Lucas Hartog

**Supervising Sound Editor & Re-Recording Mixer**

Miik Dinko  
Outpost Studios, SF

**Music Supervisor**

Katherine Stanford

**Music**

23 Skidoo  
Matt Abeysekera  
Rob Ahlers  
Allison E. Lee  
Paul de Benedictis  
Karl Force  
Mike Hoffman  
Jake Hutt  
Dave Nelson  
Japanther  
Julien de Benedictis  
Justin McDonald  
Metronomes  
The Panic Attacks  
Alistair Paxton  
Trevor White  
WOOM