

---

## Ulrich Blanché

### 1) Urban Art, Graffiti, Street Art, and Public Art

In April 2016, Ilaria Hoppe and I received 73 international proposals from our call for papers: from researchers from 27 countries and diverse academic backgrounds. Our subject matter in this book, as does the conference, makes use of four main terms: urban art, street art, public art, and graffiti. Graffiti was not our main focus but many of the authors in this volume deal with street art and graffiti. Urban art has become an art-market term, as Johannes Stahl states in the first essay of this volume. But, as Ilaria Hoppe will expand on in the second part of our introduction, urban art as a term can exceed self-authorized, often indoor street art and graffiti.

It seems that each author has a different understanding of street art, graffiti, urban art, and public art. There are tendencies, however, to differentiate between the terms. Street art is often more picture-based and tries to reach a general audience. Like graffiti, it is usually illegal or self-authorized. Graffiti could range from historical graffiti (in Pompeii, latrinalia, scratchings in medieval churches, etc.) to contemporary graffiti (style writing) or just about any illegal activity in urban public space involving first and foremost the writing of words or letters. Urban Art is the legal and/or indoor variant of street art and graffiti. Urban art and street art are also related to performance activities and urban development, graffiti is not. Public art usually comes into being with public money, community involvement, and it is usually sanctioned.

Still most researchers understand street art and graffiti, but also urban art, as outdoor art practices (former) street artists or graffiti writers do. Street art, graffiti and urban art, however, can also be terms outlining a certain visual style (like Baroque can be a style) and are understood more and more this way. Practitioners who never worked illegally or self-authorized on the streets might create urban art, namely art “in the style of” and media known from graffiti and street art: without location, without illegality, but for instance with stencils, with spray cans, on urban furniture, car wrecks, pieces of walls, removed doors, trash cans, etc.

Furthermore, urban art, graffiti, and street art can be a period (like Baroque can be a period) that might be over, or not, as various researchers pointed out in 2016, for instance Alison Young at the Street Art & Philosophy conference in New York, Christian Omodeo at the Urban Creativity conference in Lisbon and Raphael Schacter on [hyperallergic.com](http://hyperallergic.com).

In terms of artists, style, and period, street art or style-writing graffiti does not differ from other art terms, such as Baroque or impressionism. Public art or graffiti (and to a certain extent also street art) could be “timeless” as well, an alternative art history as these phenomena existed in variations in all times and places.

### 2) Street art researchers and their background

Most researchers who applied for our urban art conference had a background in art history, art and design or/and were artists/curators or specialized, for instance, in street photography or performance studies. The second biggest group came from architecture and design, urban planning, metropolitan studies or (urban) geography. Sociologists or social anthropologists formed the third group; some had studied art and cultural sciences, cultural studies or cultural anthropology. Other researchers had a background in media studies, psychology, philosophy, political sciences or Asian studies.

The reason why so many art historians (17) applied might be that we, as art historians ourselves, organized this conference in an art historical context. I suppose other academic urban art/street art conferences might attract more sociologists or anthropologists or more philosophers, such as the Street Art and Philosophy conference in New York in 2015. Other street art researchers (not in our sample) have academic backgrounds for instance in criminology, law or in modern languages.

### 3) Tendencies in our Urban Art Proposals

It was interesting to read through the different understandings of these four key terms, urban art, street art, public art, and graffiti. Quite a few researchers use these terms (or some of them) interchangeably as if they had the exact same meaning. Many researchers commonly use “graffiti and street art” as a pair, but seem to know acknowledge differences, similarities and intersections (personal, stylistic, historical, and intentional). Most understandings have in common that all these practices happened outdoors or are inspired by outdoor practices.

Quite a few, including the author of these lines, differentiate between legal and illegal activities (or as I call it: self-authorized). As concepts of style, all of these terms could be used in a legal and institutional context as well. Each could be an umbrella term or a synonym for at least two others. Often graffiti is assumed to be non-legal and public art legal. City planning, (non-)institutional actions, performance art in public spaces and ephemeral urban interventions are often considered to be urban art as well, no matter if illegal/self-authorized or institutional. Some researchers consider carnivals, museum-scapes, art biennales or other art events in the city, psychogeography and urban walking, protest camps or urban archaeology forms of urban art.

The name of Über-street-artist Banksy appeared in more than 10 percent of all submissions, Shepard Fairey in 4 percent. More than 10 percent of all proposals were monographic. Artists, wanted to talk about their own work. Nearly 10 percent were interested in speaking about street art in their home country or city.

### 4) The papers in the conference sections

In the 16 papers and two introductions in this volume, there are nearly as many understandings of urban art, street art, public art or graffiti, although not everyone defined what they meant by these terms. However, from the context their understanding of these terms is often obvious.

#### a) Section 1: Public or Urban Art? On Terminology

In our CFP, the topics Urban or Public Art? About Urban Art Research (Terminology, history of the core concepts) attracted the second greatest number of all applicants. It formed the basis of our first conference section Public or Urban art? On Terminology.

Johannes Stahl is the first art historian who wrote academic books on graffiti and street art in Germany, in the 1980s. In his essay, Stahl describes the historical development from graffiti to street art to urban art and points to the inconsistencies in the usage and motivations to use these different terms since the 19th century. Pedro Soares Neves from Lisbon, a graffiti pioneer in Portugal -- spark plug of the Urban Creativity network - who turned to research and publishing about street art and urban creativity, discussed the differences between urban and public art. Finnish street art researcher and street art in “Asia” expert, Minna Valjakka, opted to use the term “urban creativity” and the value of non-art instead of discussing street art, urban art, and public art in an art context.

#### b) Section 2: Digital Media & the Urban (Art)

The largest number of proposals dealt with New Media (Internet and social media in the production and reception of urbanity). It formed the basis for our second section entitled Digital Media & the Urban (Art).

Landscape architect and urban designer Meltem Sentürk Asildeveci pursued how specific identities of meeting places are changing in accordance with social media impact (especially Twitter) and how mobile communication is redefining urban design theories. Katja Glaser shared one chapter of her German Ph.D. thesis “Street Art & Neue Medien” (2017) in which she investigated the mutual interactions of street art and new media technologies. In her paper, Glaser discussed QR codes and digital archiving practices in street art.

Italian street art researcher Marco Mondino<sup>1</sup> described street art as an interdisciplinary object, a language of urban visual culture that is important to study through an integration of theories and tools about media studies and a semiotics perspective. Art historian Annette Urban analyzed some examples of (institutional) media art from the 1990s and from today. She concluded that similar issues occurred regardless of recent digital mobile media and that the dialectics of de- and reterritorialization are a valuable analytical tool for urban media art in general.

#### c) Section 3: Affect & Performance

The topics Performativity (Action and reception by moving in the urban space) and Emotions and the City formed our third section Affect & Performance. In Agnieszka Gralińska-Toborek's "Art of Serenity. Aesthetic Function of Humor in Street Art," the author states that even very activist street art usually uses laughter as a weapon. With the help of humor, things we are afraid to see in the public realm are uncovered. Susan Hanson's essay "Street Art as Process and Performance: The Subversive 'Streetness' of Video-Documentation" differs from the original paper she gave with Danny Flynn at the conference "The Active Role of the Viewer in Urban Art: From Reception to Material Engagement." Hanson's chapter emphasizes the role of street artists' videos as performance and as a more authentic way to transfer the street into an indoor art space. Elisabeth Friedman and Alia Rayyan gave a paper on "Re/Viewing Jerusalem: Political Art Interventions in Occupied East Jerusalem." The authors discuss the political potential of participatory urban art interventions in the contemporary context of occupied East Jerusalem.

#### d) Section 4: Territories

Peter Bengtsen visually and contextually analyzed some site-specific street artworks by Spanish artist Isaac Cordal that address how humans relate to nature in an urban environment and how site-specific street art might have an impact on our perception of nature. Jovanka Popova discusses participation in democratic regimes and where art practices in urban public space can exceed traditional, institutional boundaries.

Although we did not mention graffiti in the CFP, a few proposals dealt exclusively with graffiti. In these proposals, graffiti meant ego-style writing graffiti in the US-American style since Philadelphia and New York in the late 1960s. Our applicants were not referring to historical graffiti in Pompeii, not bathroom graffiti (latrinalia), or graffiti as more or less spontaneous often political messages on the street, which are a part of street art and graffiti research, too. Henrik Widmark's contribution about graffiti by football supporters in our conference (volume) can be seen in this context. These supporters do not have to have a style-writing background. They usually do not have to have an art background either; they are more than spontaneous messages, often quite organized and interested in spreading their message widely. Like street artists, they speak to a general public or like graffiti writers to a certain peer group: other supporters.

#### e) Section 5: Urban Imaginary & The City

Architecture and City Planning (Medialization of architecture and alternative forms of urban design/city planning) is the last section Urban Imaginary & The City. Johanna Elizabeth Sluiter opened this panel with her paper "'The Man In The Street' Shadrach Woods & the Practice of Everyday Architecture and Urbanism." Postwar urban planner Woods used urban structures like stems, webs and bazaars in his texts and his architecture and was geared to care more about pedestrians and streets, less about cars and roads. Pamela C. Scorzin's chapter "Urban Art as a Laboratory - New Approaches to Architecture and City Planning" deals with new approaches by the urban art collective Office for Subversive Architecture (osa). Renée Tribble's essay "From Urban Interventions to Urban Practice? An Alternative Way of Neighbourhood Development" discusses urban interventions as new form of urban development, reflected in the recent win of the Turner Prize in 2015 by radical young architects group Assemble.

**f) Section 6: Networking Panel**

An international conference is also a great opportunity to meet researchers and practitioners from different street art, graffiti or urban art backgrounds. From Here to Fame Publishing from Berlin continuously stage, curate and collaborate with international Urban Art and Hip Hop projects around the world since 2008. Their founders Akim Walta and Don Karl spoke about their work. Street Art & Urban Creativity is a network of international street art and graffiti researchers founded in Lisbon in 2014. Members Ilaria Hoppe and Ulrich Blanché gave a short introduction about the network, its aims and possibilities.

In her essay Yasha Young, director and curator of Urban Nation, informs about the development and the goals of the forthcoming Urban Nation Museum for Urban Contemporary Art in Berlin. Jens Besser, a Dresden based (urban) artist and curator introduced his work and also contributed a short essay about the idea of a travelling Urban Art Library to document the development of contemporary muralism.

**5) PS: About our cover photo**

On February 14, 2009 I took a photo of one of the so-called “human beans” by British street artist Dave the Chimp (\*1973) in Berlin. This ongoing series of stick figures with an orange bean-shaped body was started at the latest in 2008. When I saw the motif I liked the contrast of the characteristic human-bean-orange with the bluish green wall. Obviously, a house owner had sloppily painted over the upper part of the bean. It was impossible to say what the original bean had done. Then someone added astonished, slightly angry eyes to the bean where once its face was.

When Ilaria Hoppe and I were looking for a key visual to use on our poster for the urban art conference in Berlin in 2016 I remembered the photo. It was site-specific and showed a dialogue, multiple authors on the street, over time, as well as street art’s ephemerality.

When I gave our flyer with the motif to urban art curator and former graffiti writer Stefan Winterle, who had worked with Dave the Chip before, he said he was quite sure Dave the Chimp added the eyes himself. In 2017, we contacted Dave the Chimp per mail and he kindly gave us permission to use the motif for the book. I asked him if he had added the eyes as Stefan Winterle said. Dave’s response: “The bean wasn’t painted over. I painted it to look like it had been painted over!” So it was an illusionistic dialog referring to the many dialogues that happen on the street all the time.