
Some Defining Aspects in Graffiti, Street Art and Urban Art

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Abstract

Graffiti has developed in an interesting way: from a craft technique in the Renaissance to a defining difference made in the 19th century between official and unofficial inscriptions. Even then, graffiti was depicted as an art of rebellion. In counter perspective to this tradition of being just politically rebellious, New York writers instead had difficulty defining their practice between art, vandalism and rebellion.

Street art is a speaking term: Defining a phenomenon by its place is just one element of this definition. The connotations of the word “street“ and the physical street as a visual subject as well as a site for art should be looked at as defining factors, too. How does street art refer to the fact that street perspective or mobility produces a way for people to look at things? What similarities exist if objects and their reception are compared to advertising or so-called “percentage art“? And where and under which conditions is street art free or applied art?

Urban art opens another defining possibility. Here aspects of urbanism can enable a closer look into these phenomena, but also how factors of urbanity have changed during the last decades.

Keywords: Graffiti, street art, urban art, definitions

I think that many of the terms in use and their definitions mainly follow approaches that are not accorded to art history terminology and which are typical in their time. It is sometimes amusing to consider the claims that definitions make. Typically, in a more business-related approach, a gallery assistant in Munich explained to the author that urban art is the superior term for all forms of art in public, including street art, of which graffiti is part.

Some shortcut definitions try to put it in historical sequence: graffiti later became street art and even later urban art. The graffiti writer Mare 139 wrote in 2007, referring to the 1980s in New York: “What we call street art today is nothing else than what writers made in those times.” (Mare 139, 2007: 110) The question rises if this can be regarded as a normal historical development or more like a marketing-minded relaunch of a product, which – from time to time – has not only lost a bit of its attractiveness but was taken out of the game because terms like urban art matched better with business activities.

1. Graffiti

In 1970, a dictionary entry stated: “Rarely used in the 19th century, when it was first used outside the Italian language, the term ‘graffiti,’ which seemed to be in use for all kinds of scratching, inscriptions, carvings and scribblings on whatsoever surface, takes a new meaning: for the archaeologists and paleontologists, it becomes a general term serving to distinguish popular inscriptions from official inscriptions in antique monuments (...). Today, it is common sense to call graffiti all unofficial drawings and inscriptions to be found on surfaces, architectural ones and others, in which the primary function differs from those [surfaces, J.S.], which are normally in use for drawing and writing.” (Curry et al. 1970: 850).

It is remarkable that the authors use the singular *graffito* and mention French users of *graffite*, plural graffiti.



Fig. 1 - "Wir sprühen nicht vor Freude ...," (we don't spray out of fun) Köln, Magnusstraße, photo taken August 1983].

The date when they published this definition is close to Theodore Roszak's (1969) exposition of ideas about counter culture. However, the focus on the unofficial element in graffiti had older roots. In his comments on Pompeian excavations and his discovery of graffiti in the mid-nineteenth century, Raffaele Garrucci (1872-81) introduced and used the term *graffite* for every unauthorized attribution to public walls, widening the formerly technical differentiation between *sgraffiare* (scratching) and *pentimenti* for legal and thus social aspects.

But referring to graffiti as art is another question than to ask for technical, legal or fashion definitions.

One might ask: How do scratching and related techniques refer to art? Can art be counter culture? At least, scratching made a difference in German legislation discussed in the mid-eighties. It mattered whether you just altered the surface or "harm the substance." Nowadays, the definition of the "substance" is very large. The alteration of this notion has enforced stricter laws. An addition in the 1979 judgment against Harald Naegeli put a related perspective into words (cited by Thoss, 1983: 215-225).

"Harald Naegeli has, over years and with incomparable hardness, consequence and ruthlessness, managed to make the residents of Zürich insecure and to unsettle their faith in the invulnerability of property based on our legal order."



Fig. 2 - Footprint and ghost writing in Edinburgh, photo taken 2012].



Fig. 3 - Red Indian tent in New York's financial district, photo taken October 1986].

Besides these questions, graffiti has been a hip term. As an example, George Lucas' highly successful film *American Graffiti* (1973) used it, but in no way referred to the cultural impact the first gallery show writers of the *United Graffiti Artists* had in 1973.

As late as 1986, a bookshop catalog, which was structured according to art eras, was entitled *Graffiti*, as the most current art movement (Delivery catalog, 1986). It might be asked if mentioning a word in a context like this is a sign of something that has already ended. However, compared to the everlasting public phenomenon, graffiti never has been just an art era. This is one of the main differences with wordings deriving from the art scene.¹

It is worth considering how and why its forms have spread worldwide, how the promotional process took place. Nevertheless, the question remains: how much of it was a youthful art movement, how much of it a media phenomenon and how much a class-related item?

Looking at the wording of "subway art" and "spraycan art," the definition is obvious, but a show by Sidney Janis Gallery in 1983 modified it to "post Graffiti Artists" (Janis 1983). Can a growing segregation be felt here? For art marketing, it is definitively better to leave the illegality behind and maintain the wildness.

The gallerist was very disappointed with his "wild" guests:

"These boys are not very reliable. (...) You're doing business with people who are merely irresponsible. There are few who are very sincere about it, but there are others. For example, when I took them to Madrid we made a big exhibition, maybe 75 paintings, they gave me two big galleries and (...) they got into trouble on the social side. Between their paintings, they were bad boys and I had a lot of trouble with them. So it was a chance for a reliable gallery like ours to really sponsor that kind of art because the whole thing might develop into something or the whole thing might collapse..." (Stahl 1990: 138).

Gallerist Tony Shafrazi has had similar questions. While acclaiming graffiti artists like Futura 2000 as "heirs to the continuing tradition of rebellion, play and adventure which is art" in 1982 (Shafrazi 1983), he was more reluctant to deal the case in 1986:

"It is interesting as a young phenomenon, but unless they learn about the rest of the culture (...), you can't go very far with that because it's totally naive, uneducated and gradually very limited. Up onto a certain amount of time it has a certain interest of dynamic energy because it comes from the street, is very raw, very rebellious and that's all it is. But after the first year, the second year, the third year you expect some correlations with given things of the world" (Stahl 1990: 144).

In a letter to the author, artist Phase II made his controversial point of view clear: his aim was full acceptance, at least as a remarkable cultural impact, if not as art:

"Words like graffito and graffiti only minimalize, direct and control an art of tremendous magnitude, endless direction and unpredictable aspects. (...) Titles have admittedly been used to satisfy an unreceptive >public< unprepared to deal with the beauty of this art and its existence" (Phase 1989).

1 - Similar question is asked by Raphael Schacter, (with the doubtful attempt to replace the term with "intermural art"):

<http://hyperallergic.com/310616/street-art-is-a-period-period-or-the-emergence-of-intermural-art/>. Thanks for the hint, Ulrich Blanché!

2. Street Art

It is worth giving a second look to a central essay in the growth of an esthetic view of graffiti. In 1933, Hungarian-French photographer and essayist Brassai wrote his famous *Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine*, an essay accompanied by photos that he had taken of graffiti in Paris. He wrote: "The art of the streets with bad reputation becomes a valuable criterion. Its law is formal, turning over all the canons which have been established with big efforts by the aesthetic theories" (Brassai 1933).

It is remarkable that the term "street art" is almost in use here, decades before Robert Sommer published *Street Art* (Sommer 1975). Used even earlier (Schmidt-Brümmer 1974), this term meant wall paintings. The objects shown there were mainly commissioned or tolerated murals trying to express dreams for and by ethnic minorities. It seems the term has undergone a basic change since then.

In order to get closer to defining sources, some questions might be helpful. If the street is regarded as a functional space, how does street art deal with this functional aspect? First, I think street art should have to do with streets: as form, site, functional space and cultural phenomenon.



Fig. 4 - Keith Haring, Crack is wack (II), commissioned version of the mural, NYC, FDR Drive, photo taken in October 1986.

If street is regarded as a site, being site-specific can be basic for street art. Remember, the discussion about so-called drop-sculptures, which might have been placed anywhere.



Fig. 5 - Lee Quinones: Allan Boys, NYC, Allen St, photo taken October 1986.

If people regard the street as an image, street art should refer to this role as part of the scenery - or at least as action space.



Fig. 6 - Using Street as canvas; Halle, Rathenauplatz, photo taken 2008.

If street is considered as a meaningful creation, this raises questions about the meaning of public art.

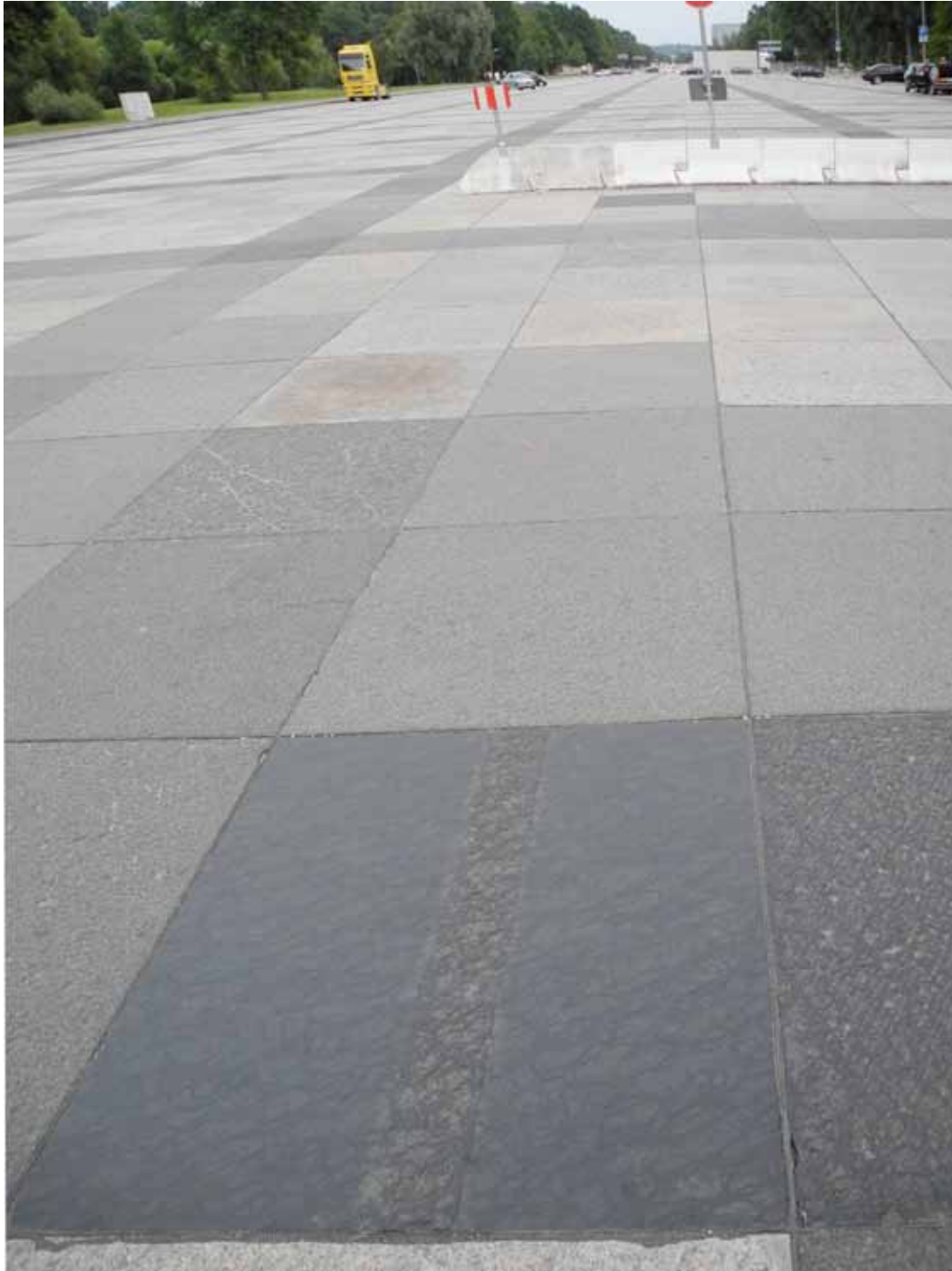


Fig. 7 - Karl Prantl, intervention at "Große Straße", Nuremberg.

The *Große Straße* in Nuremberg was designed to be a solemn background for the marches of the National Socialist movement in Germany during the 1930s. Austrian sculptor Karl Prantl intervened in 1991, following a conception made by Israel artist Dani Karavan for a sort of aesthetic conversion of this Nazi ambient. If it follows these suggestions for definitions, street art can be an ambitious undertaking.

3. Urban Art

As for street art, here is an attempt to find some basic aspects of the term “urban art.” If for urbanity, form, function, design and meaning of public space, and its forms matter, it has to be asked: How does urban art handle this?

Urban forms have long been in focus; urban surroundings determine human lives in so many ways. How streets, places, architecture, and habits form a sense of urbanity is the object of many considerations and even teaching narratives. Does urban art take these formal components serious? Are they possibly defining components?

Many urban forms – whether planned or just developed by human behavior – are the result of common sense. Jean Baudrillard interpreted graffiti as a “revolution of signs,” because they disturbed the consensus of society, both by not respecting property and by refusing to give clear signs or topics of a public discussion. However, I doubt whether graffiti writers or other urban artists wanted to leave all common conventions in a sort of an “uproar of signs” (Baudrillard 1975) or if they just wanted to “watch the name pass by” (Mailor/Kurlansky/Naar 1973) and be part of the economics of attention using their own codes. In any case, they succeeded in many ways: They generated media hype and were acclaimed by the contemporary art scene as well as having commercial success. Seen from this point of view, the narrative of style wars appears also to be a mode of social consensus. The media hype about their pieces took them in anyway, be it by the success in an acclaiming art scene or on a commercial level. Seen from this point of view, the narrative of style wars reveals a new layer of the conflicts about consensus.



Fig. 8 - Style, Berlin Wall, photo taken October 1986.

If urban space is a construct formulating a public design: How does urban art interfere with this dimension? A similar question might be posed when it comes to spots where the architectural design of a town like Hannover has suffered from too car-friendly policies after World War II that overemphasized the street in the urban fabric.



Fig. 9 - Andreas von Weizsäcker: hang over; 1991. mixed media, concrete, Hannover, Raschplatzhochstraße.



Fig. 10 - Inner city interaction, mural in Brussels-Anderlecht, photo taken March 2008.



Fig. 11 - Space Invader, Paris, photo taken March 2008.



Fig. 12 - "You are here," position in town, Paris, photo taken March 2008.

Can images of rats fixed to the walls by artists as different as Judy Rupp, Blek le rat or Banksy really interact with the city? Or are they just isolated images with their own narrative disclosed from architecture and citybuilding?

The mosaics from Space Invader, for example, rework the imagery from the 1970s video game; insofar as their iconography originates from outside of the urban narrative, transposing it to the contemporary city. Placed at spots where usually road signs are posted, the mosaics disturb orientation and modify the urban space.

Seht Sigellaub's famous art definition "art is to change what you expect from it," might constitute definition-criterion for all of these phenomena, whatever you call them. And it might depend on your own position, whether you feel this change or not.

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