

University of Pécs Doctoral School of Arts

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Post vandalism

The path of graffiti aesthetics to contemporary culture

Theses

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The focus of my doctoral thesis is a new term in art: post vandalism.¹ This label no longer indicates the need for old-fashioned genre demarcations, but rather an optional aesthetic attitude² to the hypercultural excess of the present conditions, which is at the disposal of a wide range of contemporary aesthetic actors. What they have in common is that they draw on the once mysterious, now typified character of the graffiti artist and the former capital of the graffiti movement. We know graffiti artists as contemporary art stars, graffiti influencers, urban graffiti artists, and a host of contemporary cultural expressions that have in the meantime been infused with some of the essence of the graffiti culture of the movement. Post cinema, post internet art, post truth realism, the definitions of recent and contemporary art and visual culture styles seem to be constantly "after something". It is no different with street art, which still balances on the edge of vandalism.³ Post vandalism can be summed up as graffiti, street art, and other creative fields associated with urban tactical art, in many senses. One is that there is an increasing tendency in the present hypercultural context for destructive techniques, aesthetics and concepts of street art to be subject to a wider canonical institutional and market influx.

Another reading is that in the incorporation of the late "spray-painting boorishness", another stage has been reached, whereby the graffiti that evaporated on social platforms has been assembled into an endless sensual stream of graffiti aesthetics. The imitation of vandalism in question may even refer to the tamed medium of street art, which has carved a bourgeois experience out of the once subversive street movement. Think of the fire-wall painting that has become a must-have tourist attraction in large cities, or the fact that graffiti and street art are also part of the fashionable civic recreational leisure palette, with numerous workshops and experiential painting courses on

¹ Post vandalism as a definition first appeared on social media with Stefano Badsley's instagram account Post Vandalism. Launched in 2019, the site features contemporary artworks related to graffiti aesthetics, which is where the term comes into the field of art theory. In 2023, Larissa Kikol will publish a thematic issue on the subject for KUNSTFORUM International, which will give the exhibition Post Vandalism, curated by Stephen Burke, at the Omni Gallery in London in 2022, as a possible programme creator. By contrast, the theoretical term "Post Graffiti" had already appeared in 1983 in connection with an exhibition of the same name at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. See Norman Mailer [1986] *Budapest Graffiti*, p. 104. While Post Graffiti referred to the original spray technique on canvas, Post Vandalism is more a collective term for theoretical, contemporary approaches to graffiti aesthetics mixed with street art, environment, and concept art.

² "Reckwitz sees hyperculture as a form typical of late modernity: 'In hyperculture, products leave their own context of origin and often circulate globally or across social milieus, where they can be perceived as singularities in their otherness to other products, and can be appropriated or appropriated in new contexts.' Hyperculture is a single vast global and virtual Alexandrian library in which all the existing elements and motifs of all human cultures and civilisations that have ever existed are potentially housed, to create new cultural patchwork contexts, alienated from their origins and freely mixed with other motifs." See András Keskeny's [2023] essay on *Reflections on the Problem of Postart*, Cf. Byung-Chun Han [2022] *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalisation*, p. 23 and Andreas Reckwitz [2017] *Society of Singularities*, p. 143.

³ Art history has traditionally linked the criminalising origins of the cultural aspects of vandalism to Henri Grégoire Abbé and the destruction of images in the great French bourgeois revolution. See Adrew Merrills [2009] *The Origins of 'Vandalism'*, p. 157.

these themes. My thesis focuses on the cultural conditions of possibility of these three vectors and some significant moments in their historical unfolding. How graffiti aesthetics appear at the top of the art world today. What graffiti looks like on the social web. How graffiti in the classical sense has been reduced to a civic experience.

In order to explain these, we turn to a number of texts on cultural criticism, anthropology and art theory related to the subject of graffiti. Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's [1984] *Subway Art*, or Johan Vandewalle's [1996] *The World of Graffiti Writing: A Socio-Anthropological Approach*, anthropological studies of graffiti have been able to view the graffiti movement in its unfolding and exotic form. By the early 2000s, graffiti as a globalised field of movement had undergone many changes, and by then various sociological, anthropological, or cultural-urban studies had accumulated around the widening graffiti movement. After the writings of Gregory J. Snyder [2009] *Graffiti Lives, Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* and Alison Young [2010] *Street Art, Sweet Art: Reclaiming the 'Public' in Public Place*, graffiti and street art research has become an aesthetic and social theoretical discourse in its own right. In many cases, research perspectives have sought to capture the phenomenon of graffiti as an anomaly of some kind of social tension, as exemplified by deviance studies or criminological approaches to the subject, but also class-based and ethnic, research perspectives.

However the graffiti culture, which is still dynamically evolving today, seems to be not fully understood from the outside. The self-reflective internal renewal of modern graffiti as we know it today is still undisputed, yet its hypercultural dispersal has taken some internal toll. In our analysis, we will ask where the subversiveness of graffiti originated and where it has now evaporated, in the Adorno sense, and how graffiti has been neutralised.⁴ The present communication differs from much previous research on the subject in that it attempts to make insider observations about graffiti and the substantive contexts in which it is changing. This cannot be otherwise, because my own practical creative practice is still a defining experience of encountering graffiti as an adolescent. Since then, I have been moved by this subject in theory and practice for nearly twenty years in a full-fledged dedication. This will hopefully add to the authenticity of my writing, rather than a sense of bias. The analysis uses a contemporary, comparative method, yet also seeks to critique idealistic

⁴ "Adorno himself declares that the works, because of their asserted autonomy in opposition to the historical existence of the moment, are exposed to the risk of being assimilated into reality, of losing their life, their social-critical relevance, their self-legitimizing character, of being neutralized, as Adorno genius sees it. The ambiguity of this notion is, of course, obvious: on the one hand, it implies the loss of critical power, and on the other, if I understand it correctly, it implies the possibility that works of art, in this retreat into themselves and in this neutralization, retain a potential for meaning and impact which can be reactivated with varying intensity from age to age, but almost no one can predict when a work will emerge from this apparent neutralization." Béla Bacsó [2022] *Aesthetics along and after Adorno*, In *Interpretation and Aesthetics*, pp. 115-116.

views of history to some extent.⁵ The graffiti as a historical artifact covertly permeates the historical periods. Within this framework, I will outline three well-defined historical units: the historical ad hoc graffiti,⁶ classical movement graffiti⁷ and the post-vandalism era.

My hypothesis is that defining these and understanding their interrelationships in a deeper contextual way not only offers a unique understanding of the historicity of graffiti, but also allows a specific perspective for understanding contemporary cultural processes. I would like to reflect precisely on the cultural, or rather hyper-cultural, turn in which the consumption and production of contemporary culture seems to have overcome the possibilities of critical distance, and how, in this reduced form of mere effect, it has brought about a general revolutionary spell,⁸ although the diverse tradition of graffiti offers many interesting themes. The wall, the name and public value judgements have proved to be the most comprehensive themes in the research, and they provide a tangible link between the historical units identified so far.

In the second chapter of the thesis, entitled *The Historical Palette of Graffiti*, we will sketch the horizon of historical ad hoc graffiti and then delimit the turns and specific periods of classical movement graffiti and post-vandalism. In parallel, we will introduce and concretise the three main aspects of the study, which will help us to adventure along these three historical planes. In the following chapters, we will take stock of the aspects of investigation offered so far. In the chapter on the image on the wall, we will look at the changing meanings of the site of mediation, from the

⁵ Concepts of the end of history, typically rooted in the term "Posthistoire", characterised the theoretical thinking of the 1980s and 1990s, Hans Belting [2007] *The End of Art History*. A revised version of the first edition after ten years, or Arthur C. Danto's [1997] *After The End of Art* and the reflections of many other art critics, announced the demise of eschatological views of history. In contrast to these, a number of narratological speculations have drawn attention to the inevitability of narrative identity, which on the one hand is interpreted as a background for the continuity of cultural history. Cf. Paul Ricoeur [1991] *Time and narrative*. In my analysis, I interpret the historicity of the graffiti not as a coherent, goal-oriented, programmatic agent, but as a symptomatic formation in which different turns can nevertheless be detected, and along these, distinct periods. I hypothesize that this is because graffiti is, until post-vandalism, a symptom rather than a shaper of its own historicity.

⁶ In parallel with the introduction to the study *Ancient graffiti in context* by Jennifer Baird, Claire Taylor [2012].

⁷ I define classical movement graffiti as graffiti that appears in an organised way, typically from the late 1960s onwards, by groups starting in the United States. See the documentary *Style Wars* [1983], or Jack Stewart's [2009] book *New York City Mass Transit Art of the 1970s*. In addition, for a detailed guide to the internal rules of graffiti culture, see Sándor Imre's [2023] doctoral thesis on the expanses of modern graffiti Plural layers in the public space.

⁸ „A kapitalista kultúra mai formáját már nem a korábban felforgató potenciált hordozó tartalom inkorporációja, hanem a prekorporáció határozza meg: az eleve a rendszer képére formált vágyak, igények és remények termelése. Vegyük csak a »kulturális intézményrendszer« »alternatív« és »függetlennek« nevezett színtereit, amelyek úgy ismétlik a lázadás és tagadás egykori gesztusait, mintha minden alkalommal először élhetnének át azokat. Az »alternatív« és a »független« itt nem valami fősodron kívülit jelöl; ezek is stílusok, sőt a domináns stílusok a fősodron belül. Senki sem testesítette meg ezt (és küzdött vele) jobban, mint Kurt Cobain és a Nirvana. Erőtlen és céltalan dühével Cobain annak a generációnak a megfáradt hangja lett, amelyik a történelem után született; akiknek minden mozdulatát már az előtt kiszámították, megvették és eladták, mielőtt egyáltalán megtették volna. Cobain pontosan tudta, hogy ő is csak egy eleme a spektakulumnak, hogy semmi sem néz ki olyan jól az MTV-n, mint lázadni az MTV ellen; tudta, hogy minden mozdulata előre megírt klisé, és hogy még ennek felismerése is az.” Mark Fisher [2020] *The Capitalist Realism*, 26. o.

perspectives of historical incidental graffiti, classical graffiti and post vandalism, by exploring the depths of thought of the wall motif. In the chapter on graffiti and the enigma of the name, we will focus on the recurring format of the common historical and programmatic graffiti, the name on the wall, which will lead us to quite swampy linguistic philosophical problematics. Graffiti and value judgments approaches our topic from the side of the often conflicting value judgments about graffiti. In more detail, we look at the environmental-cultural traditions and expectations that underlie the perceptions of the destructive traditions of graffiti. After this, in the section entitled The post vandalism era, the contemporary proliferation of graffiti aesthetics, we will look at the main scourges of graffiti that have evaporated in contemporary culture, with a particular focus on professional contemporary art, social media, and the recreational civic spheres. In conclusion, I will explore the depths and turns in the history of graffiti, and seek a possible critical positioning of an idealistic historical consciousness and heightened contemporary visual sensuality within the larger context of contemporary culture. The following thesis-like statements either appear explicitly in the argumentation of my thesis or follow indirectly, as if from the internal logic of the context of the chapters.

1. In its generality, graffiti has been present in almost all historical periods. Jennifer Baird and Claire Taylor summarised them as "ancien graffiti".⁹ They were painted and scrawled on walls by our earliest ancestors. The stones of the buildings of the great ancient civilisations were scrawled in a similar way to the bricks of any large city today. The dark corners of history: the walls of prisons, brothels, slums, are also the guardians of this seemingly forced general graphomania.¹⁰ Throughout history, travellers, soldiers, slaves, and later workers, citizens and revolutionaries have typically scribbled on the walls, in most cases leaving their own mark on the public eye. One could say that we are dealing with a collection of monuments to faceless private individuals of historical times. From the very beginning, walls as multi-functional symbolic boundaries have been the privileged surfaces of human self-reflection. Its potential for both the outside and the inside, and the surface and the depth, has stirred the human imagination in many forms, and in turn, visual forms of rearranging and recording shared beliefs. The historical study of the wall and its visual

⁹ Brassai (Gyula Halász) had already dealt with the collector's approach to occasional graffiti in Paris around the 1920s. The earliest sources for an administrative approach to historical incidental graffiti date back to 1731 in England, where a collection published under the pseudonym Hurlothrumbo lists the graffiti of contemporary toilet rooms. See Maximilian Novak [2021] *The Glass-Window and Bog-House Miscellany* by Hurlo-Thrumbo.

¹⁰ Gabriella Gáspár's [2022] *Study on the annexation of graffiti* mentions concrete historical examples for most of them. Just to mention one: the Brunswick Monogrammist Brothel scene (c. 1540).

appropriation provides an insight into its idealistic history, but what is important for us now is that it has always been a repository of non-idealistic, often compulsive, expressions of the kind that have been the subject of a great deal of attention since the beginning of history. The wall, as a symbolic and functional element of central importance, has been able to determine the process of self-reflexive cognition from the very beginning. In our case, all of this represents an entry point into the historical flow of ad hoc murals. The history of the visual appropriation of the wall's depths is here bifurcated, offering us both the history of the great turns that took place on the stage of mural painting and the formation of the historical ad hoc message walls that lay at its base.

2. Graffiti in the modern sense started in the late 1960s in the major cities of the United States and in almost a decade has grown into a worldwide movement that we will refer to as "classic movement graffiti" or "pioneer graffiti". One of the great turning points of classical movement graffiti was its recognition of the potential for a higher level of publicity offered by the 'moving wall', as pioneer graffiti artists preferred to paint on railway trains. Let's take a look at the earliest slogan of the classic graffiti movement: 'To be all city'.¹¹ A recurring theme in Michel Foucault's influential work is the examination of subjectivity and power in the modern age. Critiques of modern space in these contexts have played a major role in his thinking. "Our present age may be more an age of space. We live in an age of simultaneity, juxtaposition, near and far, right and left, dispersion. It is a moment, "I believe, in which the world sees itself not so much as life unfolding through time, but as a web of connecting dots and crossing threads".¹² In the chapter '*Divergent Spaces*' in the selection volume *Language for the Infinite*, Foucault interprets the construction of space in the modern sense as a set of 'structural sites' through the historical paradigm shift of 'location' and 'extension'. The idea and gesture of "to be all city" can be equated with what Foucault calls in the same passage "heterotopies", which he defines as a structural space that is related to all other structural spaces: "in such a way that it suspends, neutralizes or reverses the relations it marks, reflects or reflects back".¹³

¹¹ Tony Silver [1983] *Style Wars* documentary, 5:40

¹² Foucault, Michel [1999] *On divergent spaces*, In *Language for the Infinite. Studies, Lectures, Conversations*, p. 147.

¹³ p. 150.

The pioneering graffiti could be defined as a counterpart to the fluidity of contemporary networked society, which gained new relationships and filled its social spaces with formlessness.¹⁴ Classical movement graffiti found techniques to address the spatial and existential challenges of how I can 'see myself where I cannot really be', and the inversion of this can be the origin of the internal tension that shapes the movement, as Foucault writes of the heterotropy of the mirror: 'I consider myself absent from the place where I am'. In the pioneering graffiti period, the graffiti was used by individuals and narrowly conceived groups to find their place in the formlessness of production relations and social realities that had taken a spectacular turn, albeit belatedly and compulsively, in the desire to transform the surfaces of common spaces into mirrors of the "I" or the "we". In this way, the contemporary muralist community attempted to make itself reflective by "creating new shared senses".¹⁵ The young people of the time wanted to define themselves on the surfaces that still symbolically held together the society and its spaces that were being networked.

3. If we are looking for an epochal limit of post-vandalism, we are confronted with some of the early actions of a well-known scribbler, Banksy, of which the painting of the wall of the Gaza Strip is of particular importance. This was not only a risky graffiti action, but also a conscious media hack. The Gaza conflict was a recurrent theme in the news in the mid-2000s. The wall, like the Berlin Wall, was and remains a symbol of a global social, political and religious discourse. The ingenuity and timing of Banksy's paintings of the zone soon led to them being covered in the news. The increased attention soon broadened the general interest in graffiti and gave a real activist flavour to the archetype of the graffiti artist, who had hitherto been mostly in obscurity. Whereas the classical movement scribbler sought, in a kind of romantic spell, ghostly positions outside the system, the scribbler of the post-vandalism aftermath began to emerge speculatively, with its own mysteriousness, as the 'conscience' of social discourse. All of these roles simultaneously gave a contour to classical movement graffiti and set graffiti on the road to hypercultural dispersal. They wanted to define themselves on cohesive surfaces.¹⁶

¹⁴ By analogy, Zsolt Miklósvölgyi and Z. Márió [2017] *The steam engine as a metaphor factory* with pathological ideas of the contemporary cultural paradigm. Although the authors' writing questions the formlessness of contemporary online realities, all these processes have already been prepared by the network society globalized by the neoliberal turn. Comper: Manuel Castells [2005] *The Emergence of the Network Society - The Information Age*, Volume I, p. 532.

¹⁵ Although Bagi was not explicitly talking about graffiti, but about the liberating potential of culture in general, "the most important task of cultural emancipation is the liberation of sensuality. And the emancipation of sensuality means the production of new senses". Zsolt Bagi [2017] *The Theory of Aesthetic Power - Cultural Liberation in a New Baroque Age*, p. 149.

¹⁶ Emily Glynn-Farrell [2020] *Art in Flux-Banksy, the West Bank Barrier, and Art as Activism* 15. o.

4. I will outline the term post vandalism in the neutralizing history of classical movement graffiti as a culturally layered, multi-directional process where different approaches, perpetuating the traditions of graffiti, primarily in the form of the intersection of hyperculture, have found their feet in institutional culture, online space, and, in a specific way, in contemporary civic reality. I point to the self-dissolving and simultaneously globalising expansion of classical movement graffiti and the activist and media turn of the graffiti wall as the catalyst for all these changes. From this turn, I highlight street art, a genre of graffiti that, by the first decades of the twenties, had moved classical movement graffiti out of the confines of its own intimacy and, in an unprecedented change of scale, repositioned public walls, secret names and, indeed, the significance of value judgements more generally.

On the subject of the aftermath of vandalism, I will touch on the high cultural emergence of graffiti, which has reformed the hitherto obscure archetype of the scribbler, capitalized by strategies of activism and conscious media representation. I then contrast the intimacy of classical movement graffiti with the formations of online representations that have come to the fore in the aftermath of vandalism, highlighting the changing patterns of online content production and consumption over the last decade, and the endless sensory streams optimised for bubbles of taste and opinion. In the context of all this, I will primarily relate the characters of mediation reduced to mere effect, its tendencies to reduce critical distance and the possibility of self-reflection to contemporary cultural-critical assumptions of theories of design capitalism

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