

**University of Pécs - PTE Faculty of Music and Visual Arts**

**Doctoral School of Music and Visual Arts**

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**Dimensions of Modern Graffiti**

Plural layers in the space of publicity

Summary of DLA thesis

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One of the most significant stations within my diverse artistic practice is a project called *Black Cube Gallery* near the city of Pécs, that is hard to look at as a usual artwork since it technically concerns a block of barracks where I was placing murals for three years then left them on their own. The gesture of occupying this place as well as my own relationship with the notion of having my artwork accessible by anyone is hard to fit into the general operating principles of contemporary art institutions and art trade. On the other hand it would be a lot easier to connect it with a mostly automatic, other times quite directed type of pop cultural product that I label as *modern graffiti* in my thesis.

Placing drawings and texts in public spaces has always been an ancient method of self expression that was even formed into a movement during the 70s by the media and street life along the East Coast of the US. Childish egocentrism turning into an addictive habit of creation, teenage rage against conventions and conscious actions taken for related career prospects are all characteristics of this half a century long trend. I attempt to capture these in analogy with a general coming-of-age story.

When observing modern graffiti as a tool that is connecting cultural spaces, we often bump into disciplines such as developmental psychology, sociology, criminal and copyright law, politics, urbanism or media studies. However, in this present study I reflect on it from my personal point of view that is heavily influenced by visual culture and fine arts. My own visual path is also affected by all of the above mentioned disciplines and their borderlines, but most significantly the East Central European cultural era I spent my teenage years in. In my work I observe graffiti as a transcultural product, as there are only a few style varieties that I was able to define by their geographical location. The coherent language of graffiti is mainly dissolved by personal styles as well as the material it appears on. We could arrange the development of styles in a linear fashion as well, based on their historical traits, since graffiti did outgrow itself from a mere pastime for kids to arrive into a global artistic phenomenon state, however, I rather choose to look at it in a parallel manner, where mentioned examples cluster under different kinds of habits and aims, directing our focus to spatial thinking that can provide us a panorama on the intellectual environment of our times.

According to Foucault the end of the 20th century is the ‘epoch of space’. This space is a kind of a process that is reinvented by social interactions and actions. It is a constantly changing social construction that has language as its tool.

This way, the visual language and plural arrangement of street art can be integrated into the postmodern spatiality. By the expansion of the role of visual communication it became quite striking that the path and composition of modern graffiti confirm the spatial pattern of the

zeitgeist, which I aim to grasp through precedents of various artistic attitudes. Trends of equal rank are not style history periods exceeding each other, but rather crossroads that come from the same direction. We arrive at spatiality when looking at areas in a city that are covered by graffiti - as if we were gazing at a map from above - and the outcome is similar if we consider these signs left behind as continuously changing creators and actors of postmodern spaces. On the other hand, the aspects I take into consideration in my research do not lack the visual approach either. I attempt to dig deep until the most original impressions when I emphasize the unified, scenery making potential of tags and throw-ups along with their territory-related visual context and connected content. Travelling artists and unknown creators using real spaces leave their signatures on various concentrated surfaces, the coherent view of which provides the hallmarks of the genre. Being close to each other, having a forever changing accidental composition and surfaces and materials being unlimited make contemporary urban folklore of public spaces an aesthetic quality, beyond its already existing place in the network of visual communication.

In my thesis I often draw parallels with the compositional principles of collage art, as well as with their forms of appearance and editorial procedures found in graffiti art. Beyond recurring image references, toneless compositions, cover-ups and the overall DIY mentality, coherence can be demonstrated along both the common voice exceeding the personal and different associations connected to subcultures.

Far from official education, infantile attitude and images containing pop cultural context are quite common features of street art. It is a rich and colorful phenomenon of the contemporary space, it arrives into art discourse through individuals and mutations, however, we still happen to be under the impression that the overall picture is of uneven quality and is rather divisive. This is the reason why I categorize my examples based on their position in the cultural environment and the motivation and behaviour fuelling their actions.

Since the first tag of 'Cornbread' numerous creators emerged, for whom the motivation has not been lying amongst aesthetic considerations, but rather in conveying a message. Legible lettering, dense placement and the bold attitude it takes to reach unapproachable places, all recall the original habit of the movement. Like in all artistic trends, here you can also find intentions that exist solely for their infamous selves, and I could also enlist here some militarist-like organizations that occupy metro and street networks by well organized actions and place their gang's name on the most visible surfaces. Those who express their discontent through graffiti may also utilize similarly aggressive instruments when assigning political or social discomfort to their actions. Vandalism and impairment are often the criticism of capitalism, an

act of self-defense, since using a style of principally resistant nature in commercial advertisements, fashion or even representations of power can easily discredit the movement.

Pushing legal boundaries is still a significant trait of today's street art. Illegality is a part of the process; it starts with searching for the location, continues with developing the tactics and procuring the materials, then often an unidentifiable combination of letters is used to avoid identity disclosure. To interpret such combinations one needs to be an insider having an alternative way of living. This does not exclude such graffiti that are made to order within a legitimate setting either from the radius of the definition, moreover, becoming more popular is making the scene drift towards canonization. This also has an effect of legal sanctions to an extent where the number of copyright claims became quite outstanding. However, reduced retaliation is obviously not expectable against vandalism, there is still a noticeable shift towards considering the value of the impaired asset first, rather than the malicious act. The case of the 5Points, that I mention in this present thesis, can be counted as a major milestone in the history of legal disputes on arbitrary acts and material and intellectual property.

The vast majority of the most important contemporary artists have a connection with graffiti in a way or another. Banksy, Basquiat and Shepard Fairey managed to find a way to become a renowned artist after creating street art and placing graffiti outside, but there are other examples for anonymous artists that are working by high standards in the scene. Post graffiti is where underground merges with canonized works, where digital space reinterprets the role of real space, this way the value of personal presence falters and creates a proportional transition between separate discourses. Graffiti existing in abandoned places can be introduced to social media where they can preserve or even multiply their fame while they also play a distinctive role in real space, and create scenery.

In my work I attempt to research - through countless highlighted precedents and literature - those potential motives and indicators that created graffiti as a communicational tool and brought it to its current form. Its complex cultural role is undeniable in which I also had the privilege to discover my own creative intention as well as my relationship with publicity. I believe I succeeded in supporting my original assumption on the incontestably intercultural nature of this form of art, since I managed to find references both within and outside of the barriers of fine art.

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