

## Resilience and adaptability through institutionalization in graffiti art: A formal aesthetic shift

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### Abstract

The subject of this paper is the institutionalization of graffiti art. It examines the contextual and formal aesthetic shifts of graffiti within the urban space to graffiti art exhibited in art institutions. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of graffiti art within an institutional framework conducted by formal aesthetic shifts within the art works. Graffiti is always in the verge of the institution and seems challenging to integrate into the institutionalized framework. The significance and contextual change entering the white cube causes several effects such as neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. A formal aesthetic shift based within the art works will be demonstrated by five detailed analyses. Finally, further effects such as reduction and abstraction processes as well as aestheticization and autonomy of the art works will be observed.

**Keywords:** institutionalization, aestheticization, graffiti, graffiti art, white cube, institutions, neutralization, censorship, formal aesthetic shift, resilience, adaptability, urban references, tag, style writing, graffiti code, abstraction

### 1. Introduction and main objectives

The fascination for graffiti can be observed worldwide since its beginning. In the 1980s there were attempts to institutionalize the urban phenomenon. At the same time, institutions always had an ambivalent attitude towards the cryptic, rebellious and peculiar form of art from the very beginning. Nowadays this ambivalence is changing into a trend. Since 2006<sup>1</sup>, institutions have been able to deal with graffiti, street and urban art more intensively and with greater expertise, thus finding their way into museums. The transformation of this unique art form from the urban to the institutional space creates an interesting tension that has aroused a personal and academic interest.

The subject of this paper is the resilience and adaptability through institutionalization of graffiti art. It examines the contextual and formal aesthetic shifts of graffiti within the urban space to graffiti art exhibited in art institutions. Urban space is the natural habitat for traditional graffiti, whereas the sterile and institutional framework or white cube offers a place for contemplation of art and commercial sale. The distinction

between 'street' as the organic context of graffiti and 'institution' as its artificial context illustrates the art historical interest in the research subject. The tension between the 'outside' and 'inside' is intensified by its site specificity. Therefore, the following core thesis regarding the formal aesthetic shift arises: Through institutionalization and commercialization of graffiti art, a formal aesthetic change takes place. Thus a formal aesthetic shift in studio based and institutional works are obvious. Therefore, it should be asked how the aesthetic foundations of graffiti in their traditional environment of urban space differ and manifest in studio-based works created for institutional space? Are there tendencies on a formal aesthetic level that show the shift from the urban to the institutional context?

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of graffiti art within an institutional framework conducted by formal aesthetic shifts within the art works. By pointing out similarities between graffiti art and recognized art historical genres, this thesis of adaptability and resilience in and around institutional frameworks should be supported and finally contribute to the academic legitimacy of this art

genre. Since the change of graffiti from urban to institutional space is at the centre of the attention, the term 'graffiti' is to be used exclusively for lettering sprayed freehand with spray cans (mostly illegally) in the streets and in urban space. For forms of graffiti after entering art institutions and exhibition spaces, will be called 'graffiti art' according to the explanations of Joe Austin and Heike Derwanz (Austin, 2001: 193-195; Derwanz, 2013: 199-203). Regarding the use of the terms 'institutionalization' and 'white cube', it should be clarified that the terms are used in general to refer to the institutional framework.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 - Graffiti code: semiotics, rules and hierarchies

The boundaries between street art, graffiti and graffiti art are not clearly defined. Because this paper analyses only graffiti based art works, a short and preliminary distinction between graffiti and street art regarding the main concerns of this paper should be made. First of all, important contributions that have been devoted in particular to this border area should be pointed out, such as Gabbert, 2007: 15-17; Lewisohn, 2008: 15-23; Reinecke, 2007, 13-17; Waclawek, 2012: 112- 155. Furthermore, a difficulty in the distinction of graffiti and street art, is their coexistence and in some

cases their interaction as exemplified in figure 1. The main differences between graffiti and street art lie in their form, function and intention (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-23). On a formal level, graffiti means freehand lettering sprayed with spray cans or markers in the streets, subways and in the wider urban space. Graffiti is therefore based on words, letters, writing as well as its stylisation and typography. In other words, pieces in the field of graffiti are basically bound to *fonts* (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-23). Street art, on the other hand, serves a much freer and broader description, as Gabbert puts it, street art relies on characters, signs and symbols, whose visual language and imagery is illustrative, flexible, accessible and recognisable (Gabbert, 2007: 16). As a result, all those interventions in urban space that are bound to *figure* belong to street art. On a material level, the differences are just as clear. As the piece in figure 1 shows, graffiti writers only use spray cans or markers. Street artists use a much wider range of materials and techniques, such as, spray paint, stencils, posters, installations and many more.<sup>3</sup> Their formal distinction therefore leads to its different functions and intentions. While in graffiti the codes are difficult to decipher, they usually address a few insiders of the local graffiti scene or specific crews. Street Art, on the other hand, is very accessible and aims to connect with a large audience.



Fig. 1: D\*Face, *Dog Tag*, 2010, stencil and tags on wall, Ecuador.

Artist Faile explains this difference:

“Street art is more about interacting with the audience on the street and the people, the masses. Graffiti isn’t so much about connecting with the masses: It’s about connecting with different crews, it’s an internal language, it’s a secret language. Most graffiti you can’t even read, so it’s really contained within the culture that understands it and does it. Street Art is much more open it’s an open society.” (Lewisohn, 2008: 15).

Nevertheless, graffiti and street art have some common aspects, such as illegality, gaining fame, broad dissemination of their pieces or tags and thus their aim for recognition. Both art forms are integrated into their local context and space. Graffiti and street art pieces are often autonomously produced and financed, do not have a commercial aim and are freely accessible (Lewisohn, 2008: 15; Jaccard, 2012: 29 and Gabbert, 2007: 16).

“Graffiti writing is an activity completely reliant on the tag. Love it or loathe it, we have to accept that the tag is the core of graffiti, and a graffiti writer without a tag wouldn’t be a graffiti writer.” (Lewisohn, 2008: 21) The semiotics, rules and hierarchies of traditional graffiti as well as the fundamental aesthetic “codes” play an important role when analyzing studio based graffiti art works in the institutional space. The decoding of contemporary graffiti art is thus based on the verbal, visual and aesthetic principles and traditions that emerged in the streets of New York in the 1970s and 1980s. As the quotation above says, in the beginning was the tag. The tag is a cryptic, calligraphic and monochrome lettering that is considered the elementary form of all graffiti (Jaccard, 2012: 31; Lewisohn, 2008: 48; Waclawek, 2012: 14). *Tag, throw up, piece, master piece*, are just a few of many expressions for aesthetic codes which were created by the graffiti movement. Moreover, graffiti evoked not only unique and peculiar aesthetic fundamentals, but also its own rules and customs, such as the game for *fame* and foremost *train writing* (Jaccard, 2012: 31; Reinecke, 2007: 23). Gaining *fame* is strongly connected with graffiti hierarchies. In general, a *tag* or *piece* of another writer should not be sprayed over unless it is sprayed on a *hall of fame*<sup>4</sup>. If it does happen outside of a *hall of fame*, it is defined as a *crossing* and in most cases means an attack on a writer and therefore a hostility between

two or more crews (Zolle, 2009: 78-79; Macdonald, 2001: 204-215). Aesthetically and hierarchically speaking graffiti cannot be summed up in a couple of sentences. A profound research on the aesthetics, hierarchies and rules of graffiti can be found in Nancy Macdonald (2001) as well as Craig Castleman (1986).<sup>5</sup>

Graffiti codes are difficult to decode, which is why they usually only address a few insiders of the local graffiti scene or specific crews. “Graffiti doesn’t have any message for the general public. It’s for an elite group of people. If people want to understand it, they have to work hard to enter the language of graffiti. Public art is the opposite.” (Crew Against People, in: Lewisohn, 2011: 160). This short quote from the Prague artist collective *Crew Against People (CAP)* states an important issue in the nature of graffiti. Due to the inaccessibility of symbols and coded language, graffiti has no intention of reaching a large mass, which distinguishes it also from street and public art (Lewisohn, 2008: 15). Some of the main elements of graffiti include illegality, opposition to the system, inherent aesthetics as in *style writing* as well as context and site specificity (Stahl, 2002: 107-108). Based on these fundamental principles of graffiti, it seems almost impossible to think about the exhibition of graffiti art in art institutions.

In brief, traditional graffiti has developed its own terminology, which does not originate from “traditional” fine arts. The unique system of signs and symbols, regulations and hierarchies that graffiti developed, could mostly and only be decoded by insiders of graffiti culture. The peculiarity of its semiotics, regulations, hierarchies and goals makes accessibility, understanding, decoding and acceptance for outsiders very difficult. As demonstrated in this short section dedicated to graffiti in the streets, it becomes clear, that there are challenging and heavy connotations accompanying it. This illustrates the development of a certain tension when entering the institutional space, which will be presented in detail in the next section.

## 2. Institutional shift in graffiti art: From the streets to the white cube

Up to now graffiti was a subcultural practice with a systematic life of its own and a social context that distinguished itself from elite society (Katadzic, 2014: 68, Thornton, 1996: 162). In the 1970s and 1980s, a first attempt was made to decri-

minimize graffiti and integrate it into galleries as art. Graffiti was considered a new trend in the art world from 1980-1983 (Waclawek, 2012: 58). Suter (1994: 148) describes the transition of graffiti into the institutionalized art world as *high-graffiti*. Julia Reinecke describes three attempts to establish graffiti in the art world. The first began in 1972, the second in 1980, the third attempt has lasted since 2000. Within the third attempt the term 'street art' has arisen and established itself as part of urban art (Reinecke, 2007: 26-29). The shift to the institutionalized art context brought up the problem of *street-credibility*. The basic concept of *street-credibility* is considered as authenticity characteristic for graffiti. Exhibiting in galleries was thus considered a *sell-out* in the 1980s (Katadzic, 2014: 69).

The introduction of graffiti into galleries and the commercial art market in the 1980s was therefore not only fundamental and important for the art movement's acceptance and legitimation, but also for the establishment of a target group (Derwanz, 2013: 195-234; Lewisohn, 2008: 138). This is accompanied by the change from graffiti as a subcultural practice of expression to a commercial art form. With the negatively connoted term *sell-out*, graffiti lost credibility within the scene and thus also respect for its hard-won distinction from the commercial system, but managed to catch up with the art market. Gradually, but successively, the transition of the graffiti phenomenon from 'outside' to 'inside' began, which to a certain extent led to the adaption towards the conventions of the institutional system of art (Derwanz, 2013: 208). The institutionalization of graffiti generated a re-evaluation of a former subcultural movement. Through the institutional shift graffiti was not only re-evaluated, but also recognized as an independent art genre (Austin, 2001: 193 and Derwanz, 2013: 199). This shift implied that the transition to the curated gallery space marked the end of traditional graffiti, which led to a terminological distinction. By entering the system of the art institution, graffiti had to be recognized as 'art' and consequently gained the label 'graffiti art' in order to be considered as an independent art genre (Austin, 2001: 193-195; Derwanz, 2013: 199-203). Thus 'graffiti' belonged on the street, but 'graffiti art' was exhibited in institutions (Austin, 2001: 199). Exhibitions in museums, the sale of graffiti art in galleries and its resale in auction houses did not only lead to a repositioning but ultimately to a re-evaluation and legitimation of the art movement (Bengtson, 2014: 116; Danysz, 2016: 223 – 231). Most of these integrational results

are becoming visible today, when commercial companies are using graffiti and street art for marketing strategies or even private or state gentrification processes promise to increase urban development, as for instance the Wynwood Art District (Miami) demonstrates (Abarca, 2015:232).

### 3. Graffiti art in the white cube: Significance and effects

The institutional shift leads foremost to changes in the context, which is a central point of criticism and discussion, especially amongst relevant literature. The loss of context or the inseparable nature of object and context in graffiti must be critically questioned (Duncan, 2015: 129-137; Bengtson, 2015: 220-233). Thus, in graffiti, the quality of a piece only comes out in the context directly connected to it (Duncan, 2015: 130). Its significance and effects will be discussed in this section.

By entering institutional space, the subversive values of graffiti art directly collide with the values of the established and elite art system (Duncan, 2015: 130; Derwanz, 2013: 207). This shift of graffiti and street art to a completely different and changed context means a loss of its original function in the public sphere. In its natural habitat graffiti is accessible to everyone, in the institutional framework it leads to the exclusion of different social views and thus the access remains only for the privileged class. Additionally, the context shift means not only a site-specific shift, but also a change in its before mentioned target group (Duncan, 2015: 129,135). Before graffiti was accessing only a hand full of people that were able to decode the inscriptions, whereas nowadays art collectors and connoisseurs reflect on the market value of a studio based graffiti artwork. The challenge to connect graffiti and the institution especially can be pinnacle on its ideological divergence. Graffiti which arose completely separate from the traditional and institutional art system, therefore developed its own urban ways of communication, its own qualitative standards of style and aesthetics (Duncan, 2015: 136; Lachmann, 1988: 242-243). Therefore, the implementation of graffiti into the institutional space seems very challenging and delicate.

Furthermore, exhibiting graffiti art in an institutional framework means the loss of its organic meaning or even censorship. That is why Lewisohn describes art institutions in relation to graffiti and street art as "sanctioning bodies" (Lewisohn, 2008: 134). Art institutions function as sanctioning bodies, because the original rebellious and dynamic

aura of urban art is lost through the contextual shift, institutionalization and academization (Duncan, 2015: 132; Lewisohn, 2008: 134 und Suter, 1994: 149). In urban space, graffiti or street art is essentially linked to their social and political context, which mostly reinforces their effect. When graffiti art is exhibited in a white cube, this contextual and socio-political meaning gets lost (Lewisohn, 2008: 135). Bengtson's many important remarks regarding the exhibition *Art in the Streets*, which took place in The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2012, illustrate this problematic - between genuine 'anti-commercial' and exhibited or commercial art works, very well. Finally, the effects of the genuine 'anti-commercial' expression of an art piece might be perceived as 'authentic' but there is always a possibility of it being only staged or re-enacted for an exhibition, which Bengtson refers to as "double bluff" (Bengtson, 2014: 124-127).

Although the change from the streets to the institutions entailed substantial and considerable challenges, these should not only be viewed negatively. Through the increased attention and exhibition of graffiti and street art in art institutions, the art movement is finally gaining long awaited legitimacy, acceptance and appreciation of the general public as well as the established art institutions. Nevertheless, this upswing and acceptance obliterates this negative stigmatized graffiti, new target groups increase the number of visitors in museums and therefore exhibiting urban art offers a new marketing strategy to gain new audience in art institutions (Bengtson, 2015: 221-223; Danysz, 2016: 223-231).

Furthermore, the main effects caused by the institutional shift shall be discussed. Firstly, there are the effects of neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. The art works exhibited in art institutions lack political and ethical connotations, which is why they mostly appear clinical, clumsy and misguided. Studio-based works appear as replications or representations of urban aesthetics, which do not necessarily emphasize the quality of a *writer*. Also, the quality of a piece only comes out in the context associated with it (Duncan, 2015: 130-133; Lewisohn, 2008: 127). According to Lewisohn, the institutional framework leads to the neutralization of urban art pieces because they have been legally painted. In illegal graffiti there is a "tangible conceptual aura," whereas in the institution this is not existent (Lewisohn, 2008: 127). Museums are considered as state institutions, therefore they are the mouthpieces of the state and imply a hierarchical

system of values that represents wealth and cultural heritage, which makes graffiti challenging to exhibit due to its ideological divergence towards traditional art (Lewisohn, 2008: 127).

This leads inevitably to the second effect of neutralization, which is censorship. When graffiti and street art collaborate within institutions, there are challenges for curators as well as artists, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings regarding motifs and intentions. Sometimes misunderstandings or different perspectives between artist, curator and institution lead to censorship. Bengtson illustrates the censorship of Blu's mural at the exhibition *Art in the Streets* (2012) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. On December 9, 2010 the mural was removed before its completion and even before the opening of the exhibition. The piece was classified as very provocative and highly political, the content of which was not supported nor granted from the side of the museum and not even agreed between curator and artist (Bengtson, 2014: 117-120).

Thirdly, there is a change of context when graffiti art works are exhibited in the white cube. The neutral white 'cell' means a loss of the political and social potential of an artwork and thus leads to a big challenge for artists to enable their art pieces to have an impact. In order to make art works in the white cube impact aesthetically and contextually the artists make use of urban references. Indeed, Bengtson has observed the following: "urban artworks often incorporate thematic and aesthetic references - as well as references in a material level - to the street." (Bengtson, 2014: 75-76). He assumes that artists use typical motifs, materials and aesthetic codes in order to reactivate the context of the streets in the white cube. These 'tropes' include references to rebellion, critical references to authorities and many others, which were extended by Patrick Nguyen.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the new exhibition context has considerable influence on the artists, their imagery and the creation of new works. In order to gain impact in the changed context of the institution, street artists make use of the discussed 'tropes' that refer to context tied to the streets, illegality and urban space. In this respect, art works from the graffiti art seem 'only' representations of urban space. References to street codes of a former subculture reactivate the viewer's memory of that passed rebellion against the establishment. This contributes to a tension in the white cube, which the audience often per-

ceives as fascinating and compelling.

Formal aesthetic shift and references in studio based works of graffiti art are analyzed in detail in section 4.

#### 4. Formal aesthetic analysis

The choice of the artists was based on the connection to traditional graffiti as well as its reference in their creative practice as well. Their roots in graffiti should be recognizable in their concepts, production aesthetics and content. However, the artists should differ in their career and fame. Therefore art pieces of the artists John 'Crash' Matos, John 'JonOne' Perello, MOSES & TAPS™, Tilt and Thierry Furger were selected. It is obvious that formal aesthetic examination of five series of artworks does not lead to a full representational result, nevertheless certain tendencies become evident through this initial analysis.

Through a traditional formal aesthetic analysis the influence of institutionalization of graffiti art will be demonstrated in its aesthetic essence. This means, by the deconstruction of the formal aesthetic and conceptual characteristics of an art work the shift from traditional graffiti to institutionalized

graffiti art can be determined. To legitimate graffiti art as an autonomous art movement within the art institutions at the end of each artist's analysis aesthetic connections to existing fine art will be found. Eventually the analyzed art works are going to be classified in existing fine art genres. Regarding the final interpretation, exegesis and meaning of the artworks presented the remarkable explanations and derivations in Cedar Lewisohn's book *Abstract Graffiti* (2011) were of great significance.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.1 - *The Color Swatches* (John 'Crash' Matos)

John 'Crash' Matos is a veteran of the graffiti movement, who sprayed on trains in the 1980s and was among the first writers to transfer his graffiti pieces onto canvas. Color explosions as well as the omnipresent icon of the eye are predominant features in Crash's series entitled *The Color Swatches*. The multicolored swatches imitate amplified sprayed tags or 'throw ups' on walls. The opaque yet transparent coloring and the layouts of the different patches enact a playful assimilation of tags and paint splats.

Regarding the three-divided composition of the art work *Silver Color Swatch* (Fig. 2), two characteristics which derive



Fig. 2: John 'Crash' Matos, *Silver Color Swatch*, 2017, spray paint on canvas, 122 x 76 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.

from traditional graffiti writing become apparent: the letters and the omnipresent eye. Taking a closer look at the individual letters in the art work, they appear similar to the typography of Marvel comic books. A comparison with a comic excerpt from Marvel Comics (Fig. 3) illustrates this similarity very well. As demonstrated in the comparison there are typographic references to comic traditions in Crash's pieces. Even Crash's pseudonym underlines this connection between him and the tradition of the comics, which writes out words of certain sounds. Further, it can be assumed that the predominant symbol of the eye is a reduction of the *characters* playing a role in 1980s graffiti. Looking back at older paintings of Crash, such as *Arcadia Revisited* (Fig. 4) from 1988, it becomes clear that *characters* constituted a larger part of the compositions, whereas today they have been reduced to the symbol of the eye. Last but not least there are the color swatches. The opaque yet transparent coloring, as well as the design of the various splashes, represents a playful and aesthetic approach to the street codes and their transience back in the 1980s. The powerful colored clouds or splashes imitate tags or throw ups on public walls in an abstracted manner. The characteristic of Crash's oeuvre, to mix and compose individual excerpts can be observed throughout his entire later body of work. Magda Danysz describes this peculiarity in Crash's imagery as "patchwork," which represents the reflection of the American pop art and advertising industry during the 1960s and 1970s (Danysz, 2016: S. 63).

Summarizing, it can be assumed that letters as well as *characters* only appear in a reduced version. Accompanied by the legacy of old school graffiti Crash developed compositions, while traversing several abstraction processes. Lettering, writing and *tagging* became color swatches. Writing nowadays constitutes only a small part of his art works. Full feminine faces from his earlier paintings in the 1980s and 1990s were shortened to one essential icon - the eye. In particular, the reference to the comic tradition in Crash's stylization of letters and swatches or bubbles becomes obvious. Even his mostly commissioned *murals* as the one designed in Zurich (Fig. 5) in 2017 demonstrate already known symbols such as: the eye-icon, letters and imitated paint splashes. The formal structure of the mural shows compositional similarities in comparison with the series of works (Fig. 2).

Regarding categorization of the series *The Color Swatches*, the stylization of his letters and icons conveys a nostalgia

not only for old school graffiti, but also for the advertising industry of the 1960s. The imitation of elements such as comics, advertising and pop art give his works a certain 'retro look'. Following Lewisohn's remarks, the thick outlines, graphic elements, symbols or icons found in Crash's art works as well as the reference to comic tradition could be classified as *retro pop* (Lewisohn, 2011: S. 77).

#### 4.2 - 24/7 (John 'JonOne' Perello)

John 'JonOne' Perello was born in the United States. There he achieved a worldwide breakthrough when he moved to Paris and, due to his expressionistic abstract style, he is often said to be Jackson Pollock of graffiti art. The painting *24/7* (Fig. 6) looks like a complex pattern of lines, which appears abstract and expressionistic. On a closer look at least two layers are recognizable. The lower layer contains a cryptic pattern applied in different colors, the upper layer demonstrates white and wild squiggles enriched by spontaneous multicolored spots. However, the cryptic pattern can be decoded as writing. A characteristic of Jon One's oeuvre is that he writes his *tag* "JONONE," sometimes in variations as in "JONONE ROCK," repetitively. Eventually this regular repetition of his *tag* develops into an abstract pattern. Additional symbols from traditional graffiti, more precisely from wild style, such as star or arrow symbols, can be deciphered (Waclawek, 2012: 46). The writing is no longer carrying a verbal message nor it has a functional use. Writing shifts to a cryptic-abstract pattern and is thus "only" a means of aesthetic expression. Nevertheless, the image convinces through its visual character, gesture of the writing and the power of expression.

Looking back at JonOne's oeuvre, it seems as if an interest and tendency towards abstraction has already been developed since the beginning of his artistic career. On canvases and in institutional spaces he mainly works with the repetition of his *tag*, as a *mural* at the Pera Museum in Istanbul shows (Fig. 7). The wall of the museum itself thus replaces the canvas and presents this infinity of tags that dissolve in its obsessive repetition and results as a structured, abstract and colorful web.

As a tendency to abstraction and a detachment of writing from its original function has been demonstrated, the similarities to abstract expressionism and action painting should now be examined through a brief comparison with Jackson Pollock's *Alchemy* (Fig. 8).

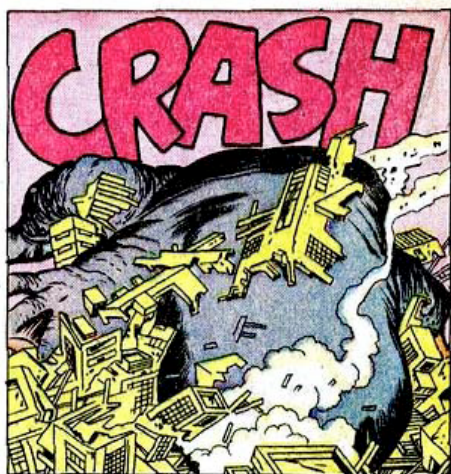


Fig. 3: Jack Kirby, *CRASH. Giganto Falling into waterfront buildings*, 1961, Excerpt of Marvel Comic „Fantastic Four“.



Fig. 4: John ‚Crash‘ Matos, *Arcadia Revisited*, 1988, spray paint on canvas, 245 x 173 cm, Collection Veranneman-Stiftung, Kruishoutern.



Fig. 5: John ‚Crash‘ Matos, ohne Titel, *mural*, 2017, Zürich.



Fig. 6: John ‚JonOne‘ Perello, *24/7*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 98 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



A braid of lines constitutes the multi-layered nature of the two works. The effect of both works is expressive, energetic, wild and dynamic. Yet, some differences, apart from the choice of colors, can be clearly identified. The painting *Alchemy* demonstrates, that the colors have been swung in the air first while the canvas was laid on the ground. This working practice cannot be demonstrated in JonOne's *24/7*. The systematic brush strokes or the direction of the writing layers in *24/7* show that most of it has been painted directly on the canvas. This means that JonOne writes his *tags* on the canvas and does not swing the paint in the air. This probably marks the greatest difference between JonOne's approach and that of action painting. It also becomes apparent that the structure of the painting *24/7* is clearly influenced by the writing direction, whereas in *Alchemy* the lines and color spots seem more uncontrolled and unintentional. Following that, it can be suggested that JonOne uses an alternate form of action painting. The canvas may be hanged on the wall first and then it is finished by laying it on the floor.<sup>8</sup> Summing up, the writing forms a structural basis for JonOne's art works and are visually closely related to abstract expressionism. While lettering has lost its original function, every single line of the letter gains autonomy. In contrast to the traditional abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, JonOne came to apply this technique from a completely different context. Contextually speaking, there is nothing in common, also because JonOne is an autodidact and had no fine art education. Through the obsessively repetitive writing of his *tag*, his roots in graffiti are still evident.

According to Hinz (2011) single lines are fundamental to letters and writing. Writing made it possible to fix language by means of an abstract system of signs. Writing gives a visual result similar to drawing, except writing is non-representational. However, the typeface, especially the single letter, has an aesthetics that can be thus described as linear (Hinz, 2011: 9). Following his aesthetic approach, it seems quite interesting when decoding JonOne's art work. The higher the number of repetitive *tags* on JonOne's canvases, the more abstract the paintings appear. The system of signs in writing therefore mutates into an abstract and repetitive web of infinite lines. Thus, the visual character of the writing undergoes a process of abstraction to the point where font is no longer recognizable. Lewisohn also observes this process: "Another prominent technique employed in the works in this section is the use of repetitive tagging to create an abstract

image." (Lewisohn, 2011: 105). Due to formal aesthetic similarities to abstract expressionism, and following Lewisohn, the work *24/7* of JonOne could be classified as *abstract expressionism*.

#### 4.3 - *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™ IX* (MOSES & TAPS™)

MOSES & TAPS™ are the avant-garde misfits of the graffiti scene. Meanwhile their fame has crossed the borders of Germany up to an international level. With their creative concepts they try to break the unwritten rules and hierarchies of graffiti. MOSES & TAPS™ certainly redefined graffiti for themselves and developed their own values of aesthetics. The piece of series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™ IX* (Fig. 9) appears as polygons of different lengths. First of all, an abstract geometric interwoven figure painted with different colors, structures and techniques appears. All outlines of the figure are black and thick. Black shadows indicate a certain three-dimensionality of the figure portrayed. The title of the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* derives from the abstract, look-alike letters, which are merely a representation of graffiti writing. An aesthetic proximity to graffiti is suggested, because the intricate figure reflects fragments of the style writing.

In the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* abstract and graffiti look-alike writing as well as flashy colors are part of the visual language. The look-alike letters evoke aesthetic proximity to graffiti, although there are only abstract and interwoven shapes. As known from traditional graffiti writing, portraying a name or a clear message is an imperative. Unfortunately, in case of *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* there is neither sense in the formal elements nor a possible content to decode. Nevertheless, the viewer is forced to find a logical meaning and usually finds it through his or her very own imagination. The title *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* therefore reveals the concept behind the artworks in form of an abstract, non-readable and senseless piece, that reflects the clichés of traditional graffiti writing and deceives the beholder at the same time. The concept of freedom, which is very important to MOSES & TAPS™, is translated not only in the "meaningless" content but also to the shape of the canvases itself. In *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* an unsubstantial deception creates the compulsion to over interpretation. The aesthetics of style writing are only used as a conceptual tool. The conceptual controversy regarding traditional graffiti is pinnacle in their artwork. Finally, the representation of graffiti aesthetics without any content moves to the center of attention.

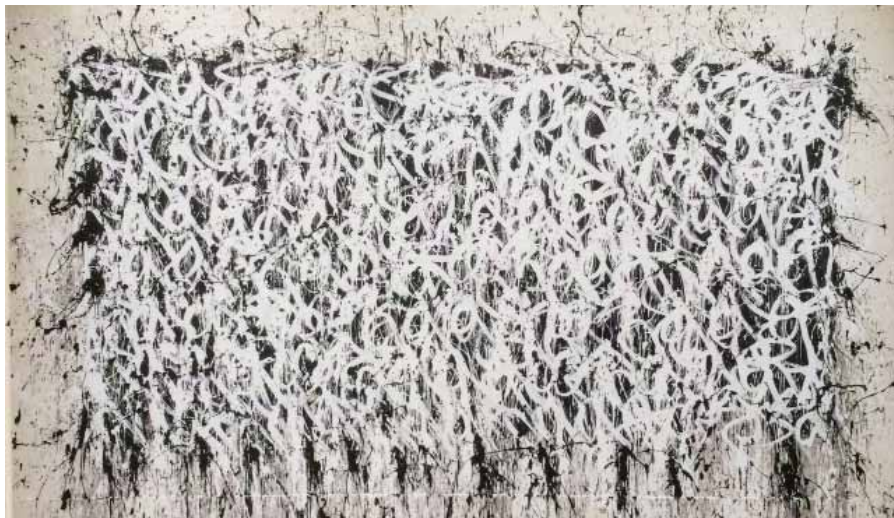


Fig. 7: John 'JonOne' Perello, *Untitled*, 2014, spraypaint, marker and acrylic on a wall, Pera Museum, Istanbul.



Fig. 8: Jackson Pollock, *Alchemy*, 1976, oil, aluminum, alkyd enamel paint with sand, pebbles, bers, and wood on commercially printed fabric ,114.6 x 221.3 cm, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.



Fig. 9: MOSES & TAPS™, *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™ IX*, 2017, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 152 x 170 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



Fig. 10: MOSES & TAPS™, *piece*, date unknown, (Source: image archive Galerie Droste).

If a piece of the artists on a train (Fig. 10) is compared to the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup>, great similarities can be observed. Also, in this case different interwoven and colored forms can be seen. The shapes appear close to the ones in the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup>. It is questionable whether it is only differently arranged forms and colors or the word "Taps" can be read from the piece. This comparison between urban and institutional space shows that the concept of imitation of graffiti aesthetics is remarkably similar or even identical in the artistic practice of *MOSES & TAPS*<sup>TM</sup>. A comparison between institutional and graffiti pieces by *MOSES & TAPS*<sup>TM</sup> reveal that their concepts and formal aesthetics are quite similar. This does not mean that they do not adapt their works to the context of the white cube.<sup>9</sup>

It seems almost effortless and extremely aesthetic how *MOSES & TAPS*<sup>TM</sup> question the rigid codes of the former subculture. As a matter of fact, graffiti aesthetics are the main part of their artistic practice and concept. Indeed, the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup> is very conceptual and highly critical, as it questions the graffiti system and its perception in the social system. The analysis of the series reveals multiple similarities to conceptual art. Firstly, the artists pursue a precise goal even before the formal realization of the art works. They plan how the art work should be perceived in advance. Secondly, the formal aesthetics and its creation are themselves the subject matter of the art work. The deliberate reference to the typical aesthetics of graffiti itself becomes the main theme and content of the work. A kind of re-enactment or parody of the principles of traditional graffiti writing takes place. Therefore, and following the argumentation in Lewisohn (2011: 155) the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup> of *MOSES & TAPS*<sup>TM</sup> could be classified as *conceptual art*.

#### 4.4 - *Just Clouds* (Thierry Furger)

Since 2007 Thierry Furger has been researching the transience and aesthetics of illegal *tags* and *pieces*. During his research on the ephemeral phenomenon, the series *Buffed Paintings* developed. As an artist and observer of society, Furger explores the aesthetic forms of graffiti culture. The series *Just Clouds* (Fig. 11) is an abstracted evolution of the original series *Buffed Paintings*. In *Just Clouds* there are white backgrounds, and on top of that cloud-like round shapes are placed. To some extent, wipe marks and drips running over are recognizable. As shown in the comparative illustration (Fig. 12) of the *Buffed Paintings* series, an alumi-

nium plate with a partially cleaned piece can be recognized. As the title of the series suggests, Furger's main artistic concern is the *buff*.<sup>10</sup>

During Furger's long-term observations of the aesthetics of graffiti the cleaning traces inspired Furger's own formal aesthetic characteristics. Furger's artistic practice is explained as following. First, he sprays *tags*, *throw up* and *pieces* on metal or aluminium boards. Afterwards, they are cleaned or painted over by the artist using the same graffiti-killers as the official train staff. As he himself is creating his own *buff*, he is able to control and steer the effects of transience. Depending on the surface material and color applied, different compositions of color clouds, wipe marks, drips and swings appear as a result of spontaneous chemical reactions. Therefore, he creates pieces that are contrasting and challenging the usual high gloss look of art pieces exhibited in the white cube. Furger deliberately dispenses the representation of lettering, calligraphy, style or its decorative aesthetics but portrays an abstract representation of the aesthetics of speed and transience.

The explained working procedure was used also for the *Just Clouds* series. In addition, he does not even tag the plates anymore, instead he only applies splashes of colour, that he buffs and wipes to cloud-like figures. In other words, abstraction and reduction means changing the writing to a dash of color. Perhaps the change in the title is an indication of the abstracted reduction in Furger's concept. Finally, the concept of the series *Just Clouds* originates in the speed of graffiti buff and consequently in transience. It demonstrates abstract and reduced representation and imitation of ephemerality in graffiti. The series *Just Clouds* and *Buffed Paintings* show that Furger's artistic concept pays homage to urban aesthetics. Indeed, the proximity to the urban space is recognizable comparing Furgers series to a random buff encountered in a train station near Lisbon (Fig. 13). In addition to the elaborate arguments above, a reduction and great abstraction can be observed in the series *Just Clouds*.

To conclude with a possible categorization of Furger's creative practice, Lewisohn's explanations are once again helpful: "Likewise, the artists in this section take their inspiration from a primitive, 'uncultured' style of creativity." (Lewisohn 2011: 165). The gesture of the streets and the primitive aesthetics of the urban space and transience are clearly visible. The



Fig. 11: Thierry Furger, *Just Clouds 1-3*, 2017, ink and acetone on aluminium, 130 x 92.3 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



Fig. 12: Thierry Furger, *Going Over*, 2010, spray paint ink and acetone on aluminium, 128 x 268.5 cm, (Source: image archive Thierry Furger).



Fig. 13: Photo archive of the author, *buff* at the trainstation in Carcavelos, Lisbon, 2017.

inspiration for his artistic practice is also based on his own observations, reflections and experiences within the urban space. Furger's series *Just Clouds* could thus be classified as *raw* or *gestural abstract expressionism* (Lewisohn, 2011: 105 and 165).<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.5 - BA 13/17 (Tilt)

Tilt is a French artist who belongs to the second graffiti generation of France. With numerous interventions and installations in urban space, he has already caught a lot of attention. He is currently working on a new concept that is focusing on the destructive and raw aesthetics of graffiti. The piece *BA 13/17* (Fig. 14) appears as abstract representations of lines, drips, shapes and colors applied on a plaster board. On a closer look, fragments of writing can be detected. The different structures and textures indicate that markers, spray paint and other varnishes were applied on plaster board. It is also noticeable that scratches have been made even before the application of color. A phallic symbol with the inscription "ZOB"<sup>12</sup> is carved into the plaster board surface of *BA 13/17*. Some of the lines are edgy and twisted, which show similarities to *tags*. Others are curved and dynamic thus they appear as fragments of a *throw up*. However, there are no clear letters, words or verbal messages. Due to the materiality of the pieces they eventually appear like replicas of wall fragments.

While interpreting the plaster board series of Tilt the carvings and primitive elements are reminiscent of Paris' carvings in Brassai's photographs. Traces of human existence are scratched into the surface. In order to portray the rough and "unaesthetic" gesture of urbanity Tilt uses wild and illegible tags and deliberate drips as a formal aesthetic tool. The complexity of the fragments of *throw ups* and *tags* show the transience of urban space. By this practice the artist re-enacts and refers to the complexity and ephemerality of graffiti in urban space on a plaster surface. This reference to the transience of the streets and urban space becomes obvious, when a random street corner with illegal *tags* and *throw ups* is compared (Fig. 15).

When this series is exhibited in the institutional framework the pieces appear confusing and contradictory, which often stimulates reflection in the viewer. Urban semiotics are actively perceived, but cannot be decoded verbally or contextually. On the one hand, the *BA* series critically questions and

pinnacles the challenge of the institutionalization of graffiti, on the other hand, by hanging a re-enacted wall fragment in an exhibition space, a sacralisation of graffiti occurs. Tilt's strategy of imitating urban aesthetics is not only noticeable in the series *BA 13/17*, but also in other works by the artist exposed in the institutional space. In *Minibus* (Fig. 16) exhibited at the Pera Museum, an entire bus body was bombed with *tags*, *throw ups* and *pieces* and subsequently hanged to a museum wall. His compositions thus represent the transient and ephemeral gesture of the streets. Finally, integrating Tilt's series into an art historical context, the approaches of art brut appear suitable. As observed in the pieces *BA 13/15* and *BA 13/17*, Jean Dubuffet's creative practice was already permeated by the gesture of urban space. The interest that connects Tilt with Dubuffet is the pure expression of the human being, regardless of its origin (Lewisohn, 2011: 165).

Art is inspired by primitive, non-cultural or unaffiliated tradition, as is the case by graffiti. Graffiti which is socially seen as "lay" or amateur art but nevertheless is exhibited in institutions thus shows similarities to art brut or 'raw' art. Just as in art brut, graffiti artists are mostly self-taught. Reduced, abstract and decontextualized shapes from the urban field are portrayed as inner and creative reflection of the urban space. The series is about an aesthetic concept that has strong tendencies of an expressionist and raw gesture. Tilt's works seem closely related to art brut and abstract expressionism. The ephemeral layers, such as complexity and transience, as well as visual references and codes evoke memories of the urban space. Through the reproduction of the pure expression of graffiti, Tilt's works appear naive and primitive. Due to the interpretations developed in this section Tilt's series *BA* could thus be classified within the category of *raw* or *gestural abstract expressionism* (Lewisohn, 2011: 101, 165).

#### 5. A formal aesthetic shift towards the institution or resilience of graffiti art?

The results of the art work analyses, interpretations and tendencies between institutionalized art genres are summarized in figure 17. In general, several changes have been observed on a formal aesthetic level, which were demonstrated individually for each artist. The elaborated tendencies summarized to central processes. In this regard Bengtsen's explanations of "tropes," which can be found especially in street art, are also applicable on graffiti art. Aesthetic, material, thematic or



Fig. 14: Tilt, *BA 13 17*, 2016, mixed media on plaster board, 100 x 70cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



Fig. 15: Photo archive of the author, mere layers of tags and throw ups, Lisbon, 2016.



Fig. 16: Tilt, *Minibus*, 2014, Installation, Pera Museum, Istanbul.

content-related references are made in artworks to maintain the connection to urbanity when exhibited in an institutional framework (Bengtson, 2014: 75-82). Applied on the analysed works, this means: In the painting *Silver Color Swatches* the silver surface becomes a substitute for the train surface. JonOne works with *tags* as an aesthetic reference and visual code to portray the expression of the street on his canvases. In the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* by MOSES&TAPS™ the aesthetic reference of traditional style writing is central. The series *Just Clouds* from Furger portrays the aesthetic reference to graffiti buffs. Additionally, the aluminium panels constitute a strong material reference. Tilt's works are also filled with aesthetic references to urban space. These include primitive scratches and *tags* as contextual reference, the plaster base as well as the use of spray cans and markers as a material reference.

Regarding the institutionalization discussed in section 3, further formal aesthetic changes can be observed. Reduction, abstraction and aestheticization as well as neutralization processes can further be observed. As a result of the institutional and contextual shift studio-based graffiti art works gain autonomy. The mechanisms of resilience and formal aesthetic tendencies towards the institution in graffiti art will be explained in the following two sections.

### 5.1 - Tendencies of reduction and abstraction

Letters belong to an abstract system of signs. Through the linear structure of a letter, therefore the basic element of abstraction is inherent to it (Hinze, 2011: 9.). This leads to the assumption that abstraction processes in graffiti art are quite obvious and were demonstrated analysing the artworks. This means, uncontextualized fragments of different graffiti typographies result in new abstract and multi-layered representations. Former *tags*, *throw ups* and even *buffs* are abstracted and reduced to aesthetic splashes, swatches or pale clouds of different shades. Furthermore, repetitive writing of *tags* and letters, results in abstract patterns and patterns of lines with a captivating expression. Additionally, a reduction of graffiti aesthetics to an abstract representation of "meaningless" figures and structures, which do not contain any verbal or content-related message, was observed.

The semiotics of urban space has thus lost context and significance in the institution, which gives them a neutralized appearance. Verbal codes and decorative stylistic devices

from the graffiti tradition are no longer used because of their systematic, hierarchical and content-related function, but to create new creative concepts evoking complex interpretations that can only be decoded while contemplating in the institutional framework. Thus a detachment of the writing is demonstrated in the analysed works. Finally, former *tags*, *throw ups* and *pieces* are reduced to abstract geometric forms, expressive patterns or textures which reflect and represent the aesthetics of the urban space.

### 5.2 - Aestheticization and autonomy in graffiti art works

The process of aestheticization is observed within the chosen working materials and the form of presentation of the analysed art works. The former walls of an abandoned house became canvases or custom made aluminium panels. The surfaces or backgrounds of the artworks often imitate textures of urban space, such as walls or trains. The former spray can is substituted by brushes. Also, spray paint is supplemented by the use of acrylic or even oil paint. The form of presentation of the exhibited objects changes accordingly to its context and soon adapts to the traditional framework of art institutions. Through the process of aestheticization and institutionalization a certain distance from the object to the viewer is built up. Furthermore, the contextual shift and dissociation between art and audience demonstrates, while exhibited art pieces are not allowed to be touched, whereas graffiti in the streets is unprotected from external influences (Lewisohn, 2008: 127).

The topos of the white cube in the institutional framework additionally reinforces the effects of neutralization and aestheticization illustrated in section 3. On the one hand the works lose their site specific, political and ethical connotations (Duncan, 2015: 132; Lewisohn, 2008: 127, 134 and Suter, 1994: 149); on the other hand, the artists are freed from the rules and hierarchies of the street and can fully concentrate on the creative process and the independent new message of their art. The art pieces themselves are no longer personal acts of vandalism, but now appear as autonomous art works. Graffiti was born in the streets. Its essence lies in contextuality and ephemerality. In the streets graffiti is connected to vandalism, graffiti and system critique is obvious in urban space. In institutional space, however, graffiti art is exhibited for contemplation, criticism and to be sold.

The core elements of graffiti and graffiti art could not be more different. In institutional space, the art work represents

## Evaluation of the analysis and categorization

	material/technique	formal aesthetic analysis	stylistic elementsc	ategorizationa	ffiliation
<b>Color Swatches</b> <b>John ,Crash' Matos</b>	freehand spray technique, spraypaint on canvas	graphic composition, thick outlines, single stylized letters, symbol of the eye, bubble-like shapes, colored areas, juxtaposition	pop art, comic tradition, icons, logo, advertising, commercialization 1960 years, retro look,	retro pop	graffiti art
<b>24/7</b> <b>John JonOne Perello</b>	acrylic on canvas, brush, marker	thick and fine brushstrokes, cryptic patterns, unreadable font, <i>tag</i> , drips, wildstyle, signature, multi-layered, dynamic style, star / arrow symbols, improvised spots of color, repetition of the tag or name, structure, mesh, net, process of dissolving the font, abstraction	abstract expressionism, action painting, improvisation, abstraction, expression of the personal inner world	abstract expressionism	graffiti art
<b>IOG</b> <b>MOSES&amp;TAPS™</b>	spray paint and acrylic on canvas	thick outlines, single simply stylized look a like-letter structures, image, representation, staging, message-less, aesthetics, reduction, stylewriting, stylweriting, mannerism	graffiti as subject conceptual art, representational art, mannerism, new staging, parody	conceptual art	graffiti art
<b>JC</b> <b>Thierry Furger</b>	ink and acetone on aluminium	<i>buff</i> , <i>drips</i> , cloud-like shapes, graffiti aesthetic, wipe marks, opaque, pastel, discreet, intuitive, random, unintentional, process of dissolving from the script, process of dissolving from the verbal message	transitoriness in graffiti, abstraction, aw art, gestureal art, minimal art, representational art, conceptual art, abstract expressionism	raw abstract expressionism	graffiti art
<b>BA</b> <b>Tilt</b>	mixed media	fetishism, <i>scratchiti</i> , multi-layeredness, scribblings, <i>tags</i> , bubble style, drips, throw up, anti-aesthetics, outsider, primitivity, art brut, gesture of street/urbanity, conceptual, contextless, naive, mise-en-scène, process of dissolving verbal message	primitivism, outsider art, art brut, raw art, gesture, representational art, conceptual art, folk art, abstract expressionism	raw abstract expressionism	graffiti art

Fig. 17: Evaluation and summary of the formal aesthetic analysis.



itself without interacting with its environment anymore. Therefore, works of graffiti art are autonomous and no longer context-dependent. The entry of graffiti into the institutional framework is not only visible on a formal aesthetic level, but also on a functional level, which offers the works freedom and autonomy in their interpretations.

## 6. Conclusion

“Graffiti art is neither ‘simply graffiti’ nor ‘simply art’, but a new kind of visual cultural production that exceeds both categories” (Austin, 2010: 33). The quote by Austin reflects the complex transition of graffiti art. The creative expressions of this art form have developed themselves since the 1980s, so that they are no longer regarded as simple ‘graffiti’ in urban space, at the same time they are still not fully accepted in the institutional framework. Graffiti is always on the verge of the institution and seems difficult to integrate into the institutionalized framework.

The institutionalization and exhibition of graffiti art in the white cube has brought profound changes. The significance and contextual change has caused several effects such as neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. A formal aesthetic shift based on the art works was demonstrated by several detailed analyses. Further effects such as reduction and abstraction processes as well as aestheticization and autonomy of the art works were observed.

But if the demonstrated tendencies in the formal aesthetic are highly associable to fine arts, what makes graffiti art unique? How do studio-based art works, which merely are representations of urban space, differ from traditional art when even similar genres are used? What makes graffiti art stand out when it no longer has a site-specific connotation? Finally, does this art form even belong in the institutions or should it be practiced where it originates - the streets?

These critical questions lead to a potential of advanced research. Therefore and concluding, an investigation of suitable exhibition formats and contextual frameworks for graffiti art would be insightful and would lead to a greater understanding on how to represent and honour such a unique art form.

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## Notes

1. According to Bengtson (2014: 112) Banksy's solo exhibition *Barely Legal*, 2006 held in Los Angeles marks a milestone regarding the integration of graffiti, street and urban art in the established art world. Also Derwanz (2013, S. 288) reports a similar turning points in her summary of central exhibitions and festivals of graffiti, street and urban art.
2. Unless otherwise noted they are used according to Bengtson's descriptions (Bengtson, 2015: 220).
3. On the different techniques and types of street art, see Gabbert, 2007: 25-45 and Reinecke, 2007: 41-98.
4. *Hall of Fame* describes walls for legal graffiti spraying given by the city or state.
5. Macdonald, 2001: 151-163 and Castleman, 1986: 18-51.
6. Further illustrating examples of the so-called "tropes" can be found in: Bengtson, 2014: 75-82. Central motifs from Nguyen's observations are: Instruments of war and terrorism, references to graffiti and street art, iconography, company logos and marketing motifs, references to old masters as well as references to cartoon and pop culture. The email from Nguyen to Bengtson, with the detailed observations can be found in Bengtson, 2014: 76
7. In his book *Abstract Graffiti* (2011) Lewisohn tries to find aesthetic connections between graffiti and existing fine art genres. His explanations were very helpful to classify the analysed works in this paper.
8. This assumption is based on a video excerpt, in: Fabien Castanier Gallery 2014, URL (1:34 and 2:40 min).
9. Studio-based art works by MOSES & TAPS™ usually fit on a wall of a flat regarding their size and material.
10. From 1977 to 1989, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York took very strict measures against graffiti and train writing. The buff has eliminated 20 years of train writing culture, in a very short time (Gastman/Rowland/Sattler, 2006: 60).
11. Based on the two art genres, *raw art* and *abstract expressionism* discussed in Lewisohn, this own composition emerged (Lewisohn, 2011: 105, 165).
12. The word ZOB means 'penis' in informal French language.