



Cezary Hunkiewicz
**EVOLUTIONS. STREET ART AND
ITS RELEVANCE**

Reflecting on the topicality of the phenomenon of street art, we can either put forward arguments indicating its marginalisation or propose coherent reasoning relating to its dominant presence in the field of art. We find both strategies to lie far from and close to the truth at the same time. What can we do, therefore, to approach the current state of things? Determine the criteria, clarify the concepts, and reconstruct the most measurable and significant events that we have observed in the field of interest to us in recent years.

Before we proceed to a proper discussion of the topic, let us make reservations that will define the scope of our interests better. Let us think for a moment about *what street art is and what it is not*. Does it exist in some universal form, or does its influence and place in the field of art depend on the region of the world (for instance)? How has the current of our interest developed and is developing in Poland compared to, for example, France, the USA, or Asian countries? These are trivial questions; however, unless we address them, we will not be able to say much about the phenomenon we are interested in.

‘The difference between graffiti and street art is the same as between jazz and techno’,¹ this is how Cedar Lewisohn, curator of the *Street Art* exhibition at Tate Modern in London, most briefly defined the relation between the two phenomena. To pinpoint the concepts formally: street art is a spontaneous, bottom-up, and independent artistic activity in urban space, aimed at the widest audience possible, using specific media such as the stencil, poster, etc. Street art is not and cannot be identified with graffiti, which is also a spontaneous and bottom-up activity in urban space; however, the intentionality accompanying it is not constituted by the desire for artistic activity; it is, in principle, a hermetic form of communication with other participants in this peculiar game in which *fame* and *respect* become the stake. Its characteristic form of expression is limited mainly to lettering, inclusively distributed and perceived only by the environment of graffiti makers.

The above definitions regulating street art and graffiti were necessary to formulate the first thesis of our considerations, namely that neither street art nor graffiti are elements of the current art market: in view of the adopted definitions, they are excluded as anti-institutional and anti-market phenomena. On the other hand, both could well be elements of the broadly understood domain of art, especially as the subject of considerations in the field of art history (embodiment of democratisation processes or progressive egalitarianism). On the other hand, it should be noted that the most interesting and the most revealing perspective for these phenomena would be the socio-cultural one, for example in the phenomenological perspective, looking for the essence of phenomena in the meaning of actions, motivations, and goals guiding individuals (and groups). The phenomenon perceived in this

1 C. Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*, London, 2009, p. 15.

way becomes the subject of sociological reflection and, as such, it allows such actions as putting forward the thesis of the relationship between, for example, the graffiti movement² emerging in New York, represented by socially, economically, and culturally excluded communities (Rammellzee, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Lee Quinones, or Lady Pink), and the contemporary movement that has coalesced around the slogan *Black Lives Matter*, for instance.

STREET ART IS DEAD

If we return to their roots, neither graffiti nor street art programmatically aspired to be treated as part of the field of art, and the forms of their inclusion are an interpretation and a consequence of the evolution of the phenomenon, especially its deconstruction and professionalisation.³ In other words, street art or graffiti, considered today as an element of the art world, are no longer the same street art or graffiti *per se* that we wanted to know. They are our idea of the phenomenon, which seems to be confirmed by numerous attempts to interpret street art and graffiti in relation to ancient rock inscriptions. These analogies have no grounds, as their sphere simply concerns completely different phenomena (which results, at the very least, from the constitutive role of the contemporarily understood city as a necessary element for the existence of street art or graffiti).

The above remark is not tantamount to the rejection of the assumptions of epistemological realism (which assumes, in simplified terms, that reality is available to our cognition). Rather, it puts forward a far-reaching thesis that street art is gone. This, in turn, raises the question of an

2 At this point, we applied a certain simplification: the discussion about the origins of graffiti which, of course, saw the light of day in Philadelphia, cf.: *Public Wall Writing in Philadelphia*, Philadelphia 2007; R. Gastman, *Wall Writers Graffiti in its Innocence*, Berkeley, 2016.

3 An interesting context is to follow the dynamics of the first exhibitions of artists related to graffiti. Starting from 1973 and the United Graffiti Artists exhibition at the Razor Gallery, through the *Wallstreet* exhibition, where J. M. Basquiat made his debut (as SAMO), 'New York / New Wave' at the PS1 (today, MOMA PS1) 1981 and the groundbreaking 'Post-Graffiti' in 1983. (See: C. Pape, *Graffiti in Galleries*, [in:] R. Gastman, *Beyond the Streets: Vandalism as Contemporary Art*, New York, 2019, pp. 138–163). Even as early as then, in New York, an opposition was emerging between experienced, commercial galleries and novice exhibition initiatives with a more socially oriented profile. The former would announce graffiti as a new breakthrough trend that was supposed to succeed pop-art in capturing art, while the latter approached the phenomenon with more perspective, seeing in it the potential for an experiment free from the promise of artistic breakthrough (cf. A. Waclawek, *Graffiti and Street Art*, London, 2011, pp. 60–61).

ontological nature: if something is gone, why are we still talking about it? What is this *thing* that exists instead of street art?

Before we solve this problem, let us summarise the foregoing education. We began with a question about the current status of the phenomenon of street art. Within the problem, we indicated the existence of two extreme attitudes, which can be called:

- a. affirmative attitude, proclaiming that street art is a dominant phenomenon in the contemporary field of art. In the case of this attitude, we most often find references to the mediality of street art icons, the phenomenon's impact on popular culture, or its global nature;⁴
- b. negative attitude, marginalising the influence of street art within the contemporary field of art. At this point, the argumentation may include opinions referring to the lack of institutional legitimacy, the sporadicity of museum exhibitions, or the peculiar naivety of the phenomenon, which is closer to a hobby than to a professional activity.^{5 6}
- c. Both attitudes are misleading, not only because of their extremeness but also due to the implicit unification of street art and graffiti in the public discourse. The blurring of such a key distinction gives us an apparent conviction of describing the phenomenon, without paying attention to its inaccessibility (graffiti)⁷ or the progressive breakup with the street art tradition in favour of identification with the urban art (alternatively urban contempora-

4 An excellent example of this approach is the exhibition *Beyond Graffiti Writing*, as well as the preceding *Art In The Streets* show, which took place in 2011 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (curated by MoCA director, well-known populariser and collector of abstract expressionism and pop art, Jeffrey Deitch). *Beyond Graffiti Writing* (curated by R. Gastman) had its last edition at the Saatchi Gallery in London (see R. Gastman, *Beyond the Streets*, London, 2023).

5 See also, e.g.: C. Lewisohn, *Street Art...*, p. 131.

6 The evolution and discursive transformation of some works in urban space, which turned, over time, from *delinquency* into institutionally legitimised works of *art* – observed by J. Kimvall – seems to be significant in this context, see J. Kimvall, *The G-Word: Virtuosity and Violation, Negotiating and Transforming Graffiti*, Arsta 2014, p. 156.

7 The aforementioned definitions (and the distinction between street art and graffiti) have demonstrated that neither of the two phenomena can be part of the field of art when we treat them in an objective way. The paradox arises when we want to make a meta-objective view of the indicated phenomena, because they become elusive. While the elusiveness of graffiti results from the nature of extremely [chyba brak słowa, również w oryg. – tłum.] social practice, the elusiveness of street art can be caused by the fadeaway of the phenomenon.

ry) trend. Nowadays, the concept of urban art is precisely the most complete and capacious one, giving identity to creators commonly referred to as street artists.

The widespread lack of identification with street art is significant here. The concept got blurred, in a peculiar way, by a significant group of artists and curators alike.⁸ They gradually abandoned the term, considering it no longer an adequate description of the creative processes involved. Thus, it is currently becoming increasingly difficult to find the use of the name of street art in the artists' self-definition. The sources of this situation can be found in three processes: a) festivalisation, b) infantilisation, and c) institutionalisation.

Festivalisation is probably the best definition of the functioning of the street art phenomenon in the second decade of the 21st century. In Poland alone, a dozen or so festival initiatives have appeared, attributing to street art a servile role towards the local government bodies' ad-hoc promotional needs. The paradox of the functioning of street art, which, when put into the framework of official cultural events, was supposed to 'brighten the walls and colour the city', caused the art of rebellion to become the art of the authorities and the seedbed of gentrification processes. In addition, its media were narrowed down to (mainly) murals which guaranteed the visibility and spectacular effect for spending public or private (sponsorship) funds.⁹ This description is a sort of mental shortcut intended to illustrate the (then) non-obvious contexts of colonising street art; those processes were possible due to the effect of novelty (the creators finally had a chance to produce large-sized paintings) and the lack of curatorial thought: the first initiatives were born out of the desire to showcase murals in the city, without due preparation, planning, grasping of urban contexts.¹⁰ Thus, it can be seen that the progressive festivalisation (a visible fruit of which is, to this day, the so-called *muralosis*) resulted from the lack of a safety element or mediator, functioning at the intersection of artistic activities – the organisers' interest, the city, and the local communities. There will still be time to assess the festivalisation process (which was not only a Polish phenomenon); however, it is possible to point out some of its positive aspects even today. It benefitted the involved individuals, the artists who could professionalise their activities

8 Cf., e.g., M. Filippi, *Street Art Is Dead. Again and Again. Brief State of the (Urban) Art*, 'Street Art & Urban Creativity Journal' 5, 2019, b. 2, p. 84–90.

9 Cf. M. Duchowski, J. Drozda, B. Kopczyński, et al., *Mury. Diagnoza dynamiki środowiska twórców malarstwa monumentalnego – raport badawczy*, Warszawa, 2016, pp. 104–105.

10 The panorama of the phenomenon was grasped by, e.g., W. Wilczyk, *Słownik polsko-polski*, Kraków, 2019.

and develop critical apparatus entitling them to operate both in urban space and in studio work.

Infantilisation seems to characterise the ways of conducting cultural policy towards street art which has often led to inevitable associations with naïve, banal art. This was exemplified by event promotion materials where spray and graffiti-styled typography (most often with the so-called *drips*) became prevalent attributes. In other words, the goals or intentions associated with street art were limited to the form and act, i.e., to the colouring of façades, without connecting contexts, which turned its artworks into output that did not call for any reflection. Street art slowly became a medium without a message, gaining the recipients' applause thanks to its spectacular form (murals) which, over time, began to serve yet another function: advertising. This combination of the content gap with visual attractiveness and the potential for impact led to the propagation of the idea of patriotic or national murals, which gradually began to prevail in large-sized painting in Poland, becoming a common practice widely subsidised by power-related ministries (Ministry of National Defence), institutions (Institute of National Remembrance), or local governments.¹¹ The most important feature of infantilisation of the phenomenon is the recognition that the role of art-related initiatives is to fill the content gap with promoted values, bypassing the design phase. In the revision of activities related to patriotic murals, it can be concluded that the content is the most important value of the work and the very fact of its communication in the urban space eliminates the deficit of artistic quality (random composition, selection of typography, and often the level of technical execution). As a result of the progressive infantilisation, an era of sanctioned caricature set in, the fullest image of which could be found in ceremonial unveilings of murals in the presence of representatives of power with ribbon-cutting rituals borrowed from official events and festivals. That is to say, symbolic behaviours closer to sports or political events than to culture.

The last indicated process was institutionalisation, understood here in great simplification as a form of objectification of individual practices, which – ordered – become accessible from the outside and structured, thus ready to be viewed.¹² An indicator of progressive institutionalisation was the peculiar desire to create places for the presentation of so-called street art: galleries and museums. While the creation of galleries focused on presenting or stimulating the phenomenon was an emanation of the environment's needs, one could observe in public discourse an electrify-

11 See M. Duchowski, et al., *Mury. Diagnoza ...* p. 45.

12 Cf., e.g., P.L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *Spółeczne tworzenie rzeczywistości*, transl. E. Goździak, Warszawa, 2010.

ing race to create a place that could be called *the first* street art museum. The result was the establishment of as many as five first street art museums:¹³ the Street Art Museum in St. Petersburg (2014), the Urban Nation Museum for Urban Contemporary Art in Berlin (2017), the Museum of Urban and Contemporary Art in Munich (2017), STRAAT in Amsterdam (2020), and the Amuseum in Munich (2022). The aforementioned initiatives were private activities or places created by non-governmental organisations, and the basic differences observed between them were the ways of understanding street art (implying exhibition strategies). In Amsterdam and St. Petersburg, the museum was contextualised by its location in a post-industrial space, intended to correspond to the street-specific nature of this art. The German museums were oriented towards the creation of a more classic (abstracted) museum presenting paintings, graphics, and artefacts; in addition, they undertook the preparation of themed exhibitions and the building of art collections.

Initiatives that emerged in Poland did not resist the temptation to create a museum, either. This idea was promoted in 2021 by the Urban Forms Foundation, which was behind the creation of most murals in Łódź. At the press conference, however, no advanced programme or broader thematic concept was announced on this occasion, apart from the mention that the museum in Poland was meant to be modelled after Berlin's Urban Nation and to host temporary exhibitions, present performance art, and host workshops and lectures.¹⁴

The three processes outlined above seemed to intertwine and occur simultaneously. They were quite subtle, which is why they constituted a discreet background for the movement and the environment operating around street art for a long time. Reconstruction of the logic of actions allows us to interpret the process of killing street art as a gradual colonisation of the phenomenon and appropriation of its useful properties.¹⁵ That was how the bottom-up nature of street art made it possible to identify it with youth, its spontaneity with freedom, and its independence

13 A separate case was the creation of the *Museum of Graffiti* in Miami, opened in 2019.

14 See: *Łódzkie murale częścią muzealnej ekspozycji? W Łodzi ma powstać muzeum street artu*, tulodz.pl, 17 July 2021 <<https://tulodz.pl/wiadomosci-lodz/lodzkie-murale-czescia-muzealnej-ekspozycji-w-lodzi-ma-powstac-muzeum-street-artu/9thfj2TAHO1peL8A2cf>>, [accessed 21.12.2022].

15 This generalising opinion cannot prevent us from noticing interesting and downright contestatory events, also conducted in the form of festivals (Katowice Street Art Festival under the curatorial supervision of Michał Kubieniec) and biennials: Out of Sth in Wrocław, Traffic Design in Gdynia. Significantly, however, both initiatives have gradually moved away from taking up the topic of street art.

with inaccessibility or uncontrollability. The mechanisms for supporting street art initiatives were to show its stakeholders as attractive and authentic. It does not matter whether it concerned local governments or commercial brands that, thanks to street art, positioned themselves as credible, creative, progressive, or open.

In the subsequent step, street art was identified with murals, and the massive nature of the creation of the latter limited their quality and reduced their functionality to the (more or less successful) decoration of urban space. That, in turn, resulted in the creation of a content gap, filled with symbolism preferred by the authorities. In this way, street art lost its original momentum but, at the same time, thanks to the universality and values attributed to it, became a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in the discourse on contemporary culture and art. That, in turn, gave rise to the need to institutionalise it in the form of initiatives using the name 'museum'.

The slow exclusion of the concept of street art as inadequate for describing the current state of things created an ideal space to introduce and sanction the concept of urban art (urban contemporary),¹⁶ which has become a widely used conceptual umbrella, including artists and a number of initiatives, once identified with street art, but now free from the genre burden. The most popular questions that arise within the framework of urban art are no longer whether street art can be shown in a gallery or how it can be collected. It has been recognised that artists who have developed a specific and unique style in the context of activities in urban space can successfully refine it in studios and function efficiently in the art world as long as they are capable of creating works that are irreducible to the context of the place (city) where they are created. Urban art is now a basis for a meeting of creators grown out of graffiti and street art. The former group followed the path of abstraction (Futura, Pantone, Jan Kalab,¹⁷ and others), brought performative elements (e.g., Nug, Taps & Moses, and others), introduced a symbiosis of the original typography with expressiveness in the form of the so-called *calligraffiti* (Retna, Jonone, El Seed, and others). On the other hand, artists originating from street art have successfully found their place in painting, and the experience of creating murals includes them in the urban contemporary current

16 'Urban art is most often gallery art made in the street art style,' U. Blanché, *Street Art and related terms – discussion and working definition*, 'Street Art And Urban Creativity', 1, 2015, vol. 1, p. 38.

17 In the context of *urban art* positioning, it is worth recalling that paintings by Czech artists from this current: Jan Kalab, Michał Skapa, or Pasta Oner were auctioned and sold in 2021 at Sotheby's at the auction titled *20th Century Art: A Different Perspective*, i.e., the same one where works by Wojciech Fangor, Jan Ziemiński, Ryszard Winiarski and others were offered.

The ability to make money and combine artistic and exhibition activities with a powerful sales machine finds an expression in Kaws' exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, gathering contemporary urban art dilemmas like a lens. Those dilemmas are related to achieving unprecedented success related to the conquest of the market, presence in major collections, entering the international, institutional circulation of art and the lack of substantive reflection and criticism based on the discussed current. The exhibition What Party²³ was an eagerly awaited event intended to build a bridge between art, design, and mass culture.

(Conor Harrington, Przemysław Blejzyk, aka Sainer). It should be noted that their exhibitions are presentations free from any street context and operate in the field of contemporary art (an example is Sainer's solo exhibition *KOLOOR* at the National Museum in Gdańsk in 2023).

The recognition of the trend by collectors and auction records that could be observed during the pandemic played an auxiliary role in the approval of urban art. It was precisely then that the works by the most recognisable artist, namely Banksy, achieved spectacular growth and unattainable prices on the art market.¹⁸ Importantly, art auctions increasingly began to be titled with the simultaneous use of the names *urban art & contemporary*, thanks to which some auctions featured works by the most important representatives of urban art (Banksy, Invader, Kaws, Shepard Fairey) along with Hirst, Koons, or Warhol. It was a peculiar form of legitimising the artists and the whole current as full participants of the art mainstream.

BANKSY IN THE EMPIK FRANCHISE.

KAWS AT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Over time, the phenomenon of urban art became so attractive and reproduced from the bottom up that facing its progressive commercialisation was only a matter of time. And it is not a simple statement that artists began to function as sought-after designers, lending their style in order to combine a brand with expected values, such as (the aforementioned) creativity, youth, freedom, etc. Such practices, supported by the artists' organic reach in social media, are standard fare in the world of today's culture. After the liberation from the street art ethos and with the constitution of urban art, commercialisation became an opportunity and sometimes a destination the artists had dreamt of for a long time.¹⁹ Leaving this thread aside, let us discuss two significant events in the field of urban art that can most fully present its current condition.

The first event is Banksy's legal dispute over the rights to his own work. The problem can be phrased in the question: how is it that the British artist's works are available in the Empik bookshop franchise for a dozen or so zlotys? This fact is a consequence of the colonisation of street

18 The signed edition of the screen print *The Girl With Balloon* reached the price of £160,800 on 11.12.2019 at Forum Auctions, to raise to £469,800 at Sotheby's on 18.09.2020. Comparing the results of one auction house (Bohmans), it can be observed that prices for the unsigned edition of *The Girl with Balloon* increased from £87,652 (18.12.2019) to £321,600 (15.12.2020).

19 Especially for the first generation of artists originating from the USA, for whom financial success is an important indicator of success in the field of art. Individual strategies for balancing art and its usefulness in the marketing fields have become a separate question.

art, as we mentioned above. The company Full Color Black / Brandalised, taking advantage of the general availability of Banksy's works on the streets, combined with the creator's anonymity, decided to register all the iconic works as its trademark.²⁰ It thus gained the potential to grant licenses for the reproduction of the designs and made the author himself lose the (theoretical) prospect of income. The legal dispute was fueled by the fact that, in 2007, Banksy had declared that *'copyright is for losers'*, which became one of the arguments for the company wishing to register its trademarks. This situation makes us see more and more clearly how the strategies proper to street art can no longer be maintained and how the phenomenon itself had to undergo the necessary metamorphosis, not only to become a fully-fledged participant in the art world but also to gain the specific protection of its intellectual property.²¹ So far, the result of the dispute is unfavourable to the creator, as he cannot be indicated as the sole owner of the rights due to his anonymity, and his willingness to claim the trademarks was considered to be conducted in bad faith since he does not intend to use the license in his (commercial) activity.²²

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20 D. Cassady, *Banksy May Lose Trademark After Court Rules Greeting Card Company Can Sell His Work*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielcassady/2020/09/17/banksy-may-lose-trademark-after-court-rules-greeting-card-company-can-sell-his-work/> [accessed 04.07.2023]; J. Lawson-Tancred, *A Court Has Ruled That Banksy Can Keep His Trademarks – and Anonymity – in His Battle With a U.K. Greeting Card Company*, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/banksy-trademark-decision-overturned-2211959> [accessed 04.07.2023]; A. Shaw, *Not laughing now: Banksy loses second trademark case over famous monkey image*, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/20/not-laughing-now-banksy-loses-second-trademark-case-over-famous-monkey-image>, [accessed 04.07.2023].

21 Recent years have seen a great deal of legal disputes between brands and artists creating on the streets, including the use of a fragment of Revok's street works by H&M, the use of the Futura mark by North Face or, lastly, the legal dispute over the removal of graffiti by developers at 5 Pointz in New York.

22 Therefore, in 2019, a Gross Domestic Product shop was established, where it was possible to purchase the artist's original signed limited works by a draw. The place and shop were created to prove in a legal dispute that the artist actively used both his works and his brand. However, this did not bring the expected effect and Banksy's work and his pseudonym can be licensed by the company that had appropriated his work.

and the lack of substantive reflection and criticism based on the discussed current. The exhibition *What Party*²³ was an eagerly awaited event intended to build a bridge between art, design, and mass culture. Instead, it provoked a very interesting discussion which, admittedly, bypassed the mainstream, but may become a seedbed for the development of critical reflection on urban art. Hrag Vartanian shared a particularly shrewd remark through the pages of the portal Hyperallergic²⁴, where he excoriated Kaws' mid-career exhibition for linking the art of excluded people with the real estate market, merchandising, and gentrification. Moreover, he pointed to the strategic apoliticality of Kaws's works, perfectly tailored to the richest who do not want their collection to contain works criticising their behaviour, but only decorations emphasising their wealth.

Vartanian found the display pathetic, 'akin to Instagram filters or Photoshop tricks' supposed to support further sales, and he brutally compared Kaws' work to the class of Swatch watches, offered in various sizes, colours, and price points. Finally, he described the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum as contempt for contemporary art. Kaws' mid-career retrospective exhibition exposes his lack of artistic development (Vartanian proves this by comparing works *Kimpsons* from 2004 and *Better Knowing* from 2013), while he calls the iconic figure created by the artist (*Chum*) an avatar of greed that shows absolutely no emotional complexity.

The outlined problem may only be the beginning of the systematisation of the phenomenon of urban art in its current form. It is especially due to the peculiar borderline situation of the current which begins to gradually introduce criteria for the selection and distinction of works of high artistic value from those which merely simulate these values. In a broader context, however, it is not just about calling for criticism in the field of urban art, but about gaining a kind of self-awareness both among the artists and a wide range of art recipients. Street art gradually disappears in its original form, while the urban art built on it proposes a culturally rooted and formally mature reflection, enriching the panorama of contemporary art.

23 See: E. Tsai, D. Birnbaum (ed.), *KAWS. What Party*, New York 2021.

24 H. Vartanian, *Kaws Is Terrible, But Thankfully Forgettable*, Hyperallergic, September 2, 2021 <<https://hyperallergic.com/674324/kaws-is-terrible-but-thankfully-forgettable/>>, [accessed 01.01.2023].

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Abstrakt:

The article is an attempt to diagnose the current status of street art and graffiti. It strives to describe the processes of evolution of the phenomenon and the moment of the emergence of urban art which, as the currently most popular name of the trend, paved its way to the world of contemporary art. The article introduces several original definitions for the discussed phenomena and attempts to name and structure the factors occurring at the intersection of art, politics and cultural policy. In addition, it points out two symptomatic phenomena which are an important context for the development of street art: its commercialisation and management of legal disputes over the use of works that function in urban space.

Keywords:

graffiti, street art, urban art

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