THE ARTISTIC TURN IN GRAFFITI PRACTICE:
SZWEDZKI VS MONA TUSZ

Abstract: Graffiti and street art are related in many aspects. However, in spite of their common origins, and similar techniques and strategies, modern graffiti is usually presented as a genre lacking an artistic factor. The aim of this essay is to show that the separation between graffiti and street art is less warranted than it would appear.

Keywords: graffiti, street art, murals, aesthetics, performativity, pragmatism

1. Introduction

“Graffiti is passe and obsolete”
PHASE 2

Graffiti is passe and obsolete. This is nothing new, since it was proclaimed by one of the most influential New York aerosol artists, PHASE 2, already in 1984. His famous “bubble letters” style drawing that states this fact has survived till now and is displayed at one of the American galleries of contemporary art. At the first glance, as PHASE 2 was believed to be one of the most important and progressive artists on the early New York's graffiti scene, the message mentioned above appears to be highly provocative. However, it is

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1 “Bubble letters”, or “softies” is a graffiti style originating in the 1970s in Bronx, New York. PHASE 2 is credited as one of its creators. The “Graffiti is passe and obsolete” drawing depicts the mentioned phrase in an aggressive bubble letters style.
also possible that like many other artistic dreamers, PHASE 2 has accurately recognized the problems that would affect his discipline in the future. Indeed, those problems seem to be clearly represented in the paradox that is a clue to the mentioned work, and what is more, to be an indelible part of the strategy of the genre of graffiti. The tension represented by the “Graffiti is passe and obsolete” drawing comes from a strong discord between the pessimistic message that denies the innovative, radical form of the picture. For some reason, in PHASE 2’s mind, graffiti as an art form seemed to be “dead” already at the moment of its creation.

Summing up some popular modern definitions, graffiti could be perceived as a kind of performative urban discipline that only exceptionally, depending on the level of craftsmanship represented by the individual practitioners, can be considered as an art form. “Tags”, “characters”, and “throw ups” are well known, cataloged forms of graffiti, and are usually not interpreted in artistic terms, but rather as manifestations of individual expression, an aggressive appropriation of the public space, a territorial war conducted by informal city groups etc. This opens the field for expert psychological and sociological interpretations of the graffiti movement. As a result, in spite of being a kind of creative activity conducted on the streets, graffiti is not considered to be a proper street art. From this point of view, there is not much difference between the first graffiti writings, discovered in the ancient Pompeian ruins, and those placed on the walls of modern cities. For many researchers they are only information on the social status or mental state of the citizens from a particular century. Perhaps in the initial period of its existence and development there was something “fresh” and truly artful about graffiti, but now the movement seems to be a hostage to stereotypes and its particular manifestations are examined by professional curators and art historians only if they fall under their traditional systems of classification and fit their own understanding of modern art. However, it is worth mentioning that this process of the exclusion of graffiti from the domain of art is also motivated by the logic of the graffiti practice itself.

Graffiti, hip-hop and breakdance movements originated and developed in symbiosis and are considered to be the foundation of the so-called “street culture”. It is important to remember that those practices were established in constant opposition to the cultural mainstream, thus b-foying, bombing, and rhyming primarily meant remaining in a deep cultural underground. This process obviously found its expression in the subsequent development of a specific

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2 Graffiti writer = graffiti artist.
3 B-foying = breakdancing, bombing = graffiti writing.
logic of rejection and stigmatization, as the more “the system” was rejected, the more the underground movements were criticized and marginalized by the representatives of the official cultural trends.

The American pragmatist aesthetician Richard Shusterman gives an interesting definition of hip-hop culture that could be also, per analogia, applied to the graffiti movement. In his reflections on rap published in “Critical Inquiry”, Shusterman stresses the connection between the so-called philosophy of rap and philosophical pragmatism in the field of aesthetics. In this respect, rap culture can be considered as a source of a certain type of embodied experience and also as a kind of multidimensional community. In another essay, entitled “Rap aesthetics: violence and the art of keeping it real”, Shusterman gives a precise description of those concepts: “Pragmatism and rap understand art not as ethereal product of supernatural imagination, but as embodied activity emerging from natural needs and desires, from organic needs and satisfactions, and also from the social functions that naturally emerge from and reciprocally influence the biological”. In this respect, practicing rap or hip-hop (Shusterman uses those terms interchangeably) could be understood in terms of maintaining and improving self-control in quest to achieve a better life. It is extremely interesting that for Shusterman, rap or hip-hop is a way of self-improvement, and the means of such self-improvement can be obtained by practicing hip-hop itself.

In this approach, hip-hop culture constitutes a complete micro universe of rituals, practices, meanings, and symbols. This micro system can be understood as a kind of cultural bubble, a cultural vehicle, that properly driven can be a source of self-improvement and establishes harmonic relations with the external world through its codified interfaces. In this approach, hip-hop appears as a highly inclusive phenomenon, closed to innovation and experiments. In his essay, Shusterman recalls the verses of “Hip-Hop as a Way of Life”, a famous track by Guru, one of the most prominent representatives of “knowledge rap”: “Hip-hop has a history, an origin and regulations that a lot of kids overlook nowadays...” Following those hip-hop rules is essential in practicing hip-hop

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7 Shusterman understands rap as a philosophy of life, thus he consequently uses the term “knowledge rap” with respect to those rap producers who present a philosophical perspective concerning self-development and relations with others. Cf. R. Shusterman, “Art in action, art in fraction...” p. 149.
as a way of life. The certain codex made hip-hop culture strong and built its identity, but at the same time, it has locked it in a cage of stereotypical themes, rituals and poses.

Going back to the world of graffiti, it can be also understood in a similar way, and as in the case of hip-hop, its strong points can be regarded as weak ones, depending on the adopted perspective. In some respects, practicing graffiti seems to be similar to painting the enso theme in Zen calligraphy. Enso means a circle, and depicting it is a kind of meditation practice. Each enso is different, as it reflects the individual style, technique, and physical condition of the painter. However, each enso is always nothing more than a simple circle. Though individual in style, its graphic form remains the same. The same is true of graffiti: copying a character or simply tagging is individual, as each attempt takes place in different time and circumstances, and the potential of each writer is also different. However, the tag or character will remain in some way always the same. The sense of its depiction, as in the case of enso, consists in the process of depiction itself. “Stop kidding yourselves, there is no rebellion in graffiti, there is no message in it. It’s just about copying Your nick. That's cool! Graffiti is a kind of an urban, extreme sport. There is adrenaline in it, it’s a craze when your nick runs through a city on a tramcar!” – those words of MEAT, one of the famous Polish graffiti writers, seem to be a great confirmation of such understanding.8

However, does graffiti really remain in the frames outlined above? Judging from the walls, something strange is going on, as we can easily find interesting cases of graffiti going beyond simple tagging and bombing, but at the same time not showing connections with the official street art scene. This sphere of transition between the two genres, graffiti and street art, seems to be extremely fruitful and interesting.

2. Graffiti / street art

How do we define the difference between graffiti and street art? On a basic, popular level, a specific tendency can be observed: if a particular work appeals as interesting to the audience and arouses the emotions of the masses, it is usually quickly promoted to the status of street art. Popular Silesian graffiti characters, Franek Mysza and Szwedzki, have drawn a lot of attention and are widely regarded as an example of local street art. However, some years ago they were perceived as an act of graffiti vandalism rather than something artful and important for the identity of the region.

On the formal level, a wide variety of graffiti interpretations are being proposed. However, professional aestheticians researching the phenomenon usually point to the set of core aspects of graffiti that distinguishes it from similar forms of street activities that could be named as proper street art. Recapitulating this standpoint, we could say that graffiti is mainly connected with the process of “bombing” the urban space. The term “bombing” is on point here as the word reveals the specific attitude presented by the prototypical graffiti writers. The bombing involves subjecting the urban space, i.e. in most cases the public, common space, to dynamic, often illegal, well-organized actions of applying graphic forms typical for graffiti, such as the tags, characters, or throw ups mentioned above. As already pointed out, many writers regard their practice as a kind of extreme sport, a kind of terrain game taking place in an urban context, which stresses the performative aspect of the phenomenon. In addition, it has to be said that in many cases the aesthetic aspects of the painting process are truly not important to graffiti authors, which is often accompanied by a lack of any artistic motivation. This however, usually occurs in the case of the writers coming from the milieu of football hooligans or simply city vandals. Many of those aspects of graffiti have been analyzed by the Polish aesthetician Agnieszka Gralińska-Toborek, and her essay entitled „All my city in graffiti” is a great guide to understanding the core graffiti writers’ actions and motivations.\(^9\)

In the approach recapitulated above, there is a significant difference in the understanding of graffiti and street art practice. To see it, think about an illegal football fans’ throw up on a huge, expensive, commissioned city mural, painted by a famous street artist. Such a situation occurred in Łódź, Poland, where the hooligans from the football club ŁKS superimposed their own tag on the mural painted by TONE. This provoked a heated discussion on whether the mural was damaged, and whether it should be repainted. Is intervention in the already finished art work possible and necessary? The most interesting opinion was presented by Michał Bieżyński, the art director of the Urban Forms Foundation, which leads and coordinates the city murals project in Łódź. He called the football fans’ intervention a “seal of approval” from the “graffiti professors” at the ŁKS. The whole discussion shows on the one hand, that the worlds of graffiti and street art are divided by a huge gap, and on the other, that each one affects the other. To complicate things further, it must be stressed that even the milieu of graffiti writers acting illegally includes some interesting cases of self-confident urban artists, understanding all aspects of the process they are part of, and demonstrating a high level of artistry.

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The close relation between graffiti and street art seems to be more evident from the level of performativity as both the graffiti writer and street artist are performers. According to the definition proposed by Richard Schechner, performativity is not only an element of an artistic practice, but also part of our daily life.\textsuperscript{10} Thus, on this level the difference between the two modes of using a spray can is not so important. What is more, if we follow other theoreticians of performance, such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, it appears that graffiti can also meet a more complicated criterion of performativity. The German aesthetician builds the category of performativity around the phenomenon of staging, which according to her, can be described as a process that „circumscribes a strategy of creation, which performatively engenders presence in a certain temporal sequence and spatial constellation”.\textsuperscript{11} These conditions however, can be fulfilled both in graffiti and street art practice.

Panos Leventis, an aesthetician specializing in Greek graffiti and street art, has written an interesting text covering the street art scene in Athens just before and during the economic crisis. His essay entitled “Walls of crisis: street art and urban fabric in central Athens 2000-2012” shows how thin or even invisible can be the line dividing core graffiti and street art. Leventis emphasizes the fact that “Athenian street art, which emerged from the world of graffiti and urban underground, has in fact a longstanding connection with the world of migrants and <others> ”.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, in the case of graffiti / street art movement in Athens, both the multicultural context and the unfavorable attitude of the criticized authorities pushed them back into the cultural underground and helped them to identify with the social problems. It is interesting that the authorities of the city of Athens were keenly interested in flirting with street artists in the period of the city’s prosperity just before the Olympics, and even commissioned some interesting projects from them on that occasion. However, after the commencement of the crisis the front has changed and the critical artists turned out to be a problem for the city authorities. This led to a situation in which the actions of the street artists acquired a guerilla character, just like graffiti writing. Creating a critical mural began to be perceived in a similar way as bombing a public space. The Greek and Polish artist Dimitris Taxis, who was born in Szczecin and is an active street artist in Athens today, appears as an extremely interesting figure here. Taxis is fond of murals, however not those big, fancy,
commercial works of art, associated with the promotional strategy of big cities, but small, human-sized ones, often hidden, and destroyed by municipal services. Taxis’ typical work is the famous mural with a boy chained around his neck to the heavy weight of Greek debt. Not everyone knows that Taxis, parallelly to his mural painting is still an active member of the graffiti crew “GPO”, which specializes in the bombing of trains and city buildings. Taxis is thus a living proof that graffiti and street art have more in common than it first appears.

Graffiti and street art, in the context of the Greek crisis, also have an additional common denominator, as both of them reveal strong social and political attitudes. Vaggelis Horsoglou, another Athenian artist, signing his works as “Woozy”, admits that “Graffiti itself is a political message. If there is no political message, this form of art misses some of its essence, which is not only creating a fancy, eye-catching image, but mostly pointing out modern social problems and envisioning a possible change”. Perhaps it is a Greek specialty and in different milieus those common grounds can vary, however those common contexts definitely appear and are a proof of the lively symbiosis of graffiti and street art practice.

3. Szwedzki vs Mona Tusza

As has been already noted, Polish artists are not anonymous on the global graffiti and street art scene today and we are also witnessing some extremely interesting processes within those genres in Poland itself. It is now in good taste to research and comment on the great names of international renown, such as the Polish M-City, the Chilean Inti or ROA from Belgium painting large-scale, commercial murals as part of street art projects and festivals in Łódź or Katowice. However, sometimes it is more fruitful to bring the discussion down to the local level, where even if the artistic standards are not set as high as in the above cases, we still have a unique opportunity to follow the spontaneous actions of the artists. Such a situation occurred in Siemianowice Śląskie, a small industrial city near Katowice, which witnessed an original graffiti beef between two local artists, Szwedzki and Mona Tusza, in 2013.

The history of graffiti beefs is long, however only one of them has reached the status of a legendary turning point in the development of graffiti and street art as a whole.

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14 Beef – battle on walls between graffiti artists. A full documentation on Szwedzki vs Mona Tusza battle can be found on a one of local city portals: http://siemianowiceslaskie.naszemiasto.pl/artykul/zdjecia/wojna-na-murale-w-siemianowicach-slaskich,2057864,galop,7245614,t.id.tm,zid.html date of acces: 28.08.2015.
It is the famous King Robbo vs Banksy beef from 2009-2011 that took place in London, under the canal bridge in Camden. Its history is well-covered by researchers and was even the subject of the TV documentary "Graffiti Wars" from 2011, so it does not need to be presented here in details. It is important however to recapitulate its crucial points, as King Robbo vs Banksy battle appears as a kind of proto-beef, which finds its reflection on a smaller scale in what happened in 2013 in Siemianowice Śląskie in the Hugo district.

The site

It is significant that the famous Robbo vs Banksy beef took place on a hidden wall in an underground canal in Camden, a place that cannot be easily accessed. The starting point for the battle was a historical piece of graffiti placed there by King Robbo in 1985. Robbo had chosen this site deliberately as it was directly under the London Transport Police headquarters, however it was only accessible by water, so the audience of his artwork could be considered as minimal. In 2009, the year when the beef started, King Robbo was not an anonymous artist, and the same was of course true of the world-acclaimed Banksy. However, the artistic battle between these two giants had to take place underground, with drastically limited audience contribution. King Robbo's 1985 throw up was then partially destroyed and covered up by smaller tags of anonymous origin. Banksy contributed a small mural presenting a city worker painting over the old graffiti left by Robbo, which provoked the retired artist's reaction.

Four years ago in Siemianowice Śląskie, local street artist Mona Tusz, well known from her mural designs and many official, commercial works, decided to execute the mural “Lelki from Hugo” on an abandoned wall near a tunnel in the Hugo district, a place with long-standing bad reputation, avoided by pedestrians. The idea of “Lelki”, part of a larger project called SilesiaTopia, was to put a colorful mural on a dilapidated wall tagged by football hooligans, and check their reaction to the intervention. At the starting point of the project, Mona Tusz was almost sure that her work would be completely covered by the tags of the Ruch Chorzów hooligans and she intended to document the process of devastation to add an additional dimension to her work. That in fact happened in almost no time, but additionally something else happened too. Just before Halloween in 2013, the famous local graffiti writer, Szwedzki, took over the wall and repainted it with individual „character”, depicting a loose-style guy with curly hair. This was the starting point for the beef, as Mona Tusz

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15 Graffiti Wars, directed by J. Preston, 2011.
obviously had to react to the act of painting over her work. It is interesting that
the work by Szwedzki was painted with a special type of spray, glowing in the
dark, so that the figure saying “Afraid to be afraid” could make an impression
on the potential spectators. The only problem was, that as in the Robbo vs
Banksy case, the number of the potential viewers was limited to those who
dared to see it personally or the ones who followed it in social media and
Internet portals. It is significant that both beefs were observed and commented
upon mainly in social media, which, according to Marshall McLuhan’s “the
medium is the message” dogma was a highly determining factor for the viewers’
opinions. In fact, what happened in both cases did not have much to do with
the actual message coming from two physical walls affected by the four artists.

The artists

In both cases, the controversy began to arise on the ground of the graffiti versus
street art antagonism, as it could potentially appear that the persons involved
were truly representing only one of those two milieus. There was of course
a huge difference in the evaluation of each artist’s steps during the battle, which
was determined by the origin and background of the respective web pages,
social media profiles, public groups etc. moderating the discussion. Overall,
it may be said that many legally acting artists took the role of the rigorous
judges of the graffiti hooligans and on the other side, the writers tended
to perceive Banksy and Mona Tusz as enemies of genuine, underground graffiti.
Yet reality has been far more complicated. King Robbo was by no means a pure,
core graffiti artist, with all its consequences. And as for Banksy, wasn’t he also
a graffiti writer? He started with graffiti and still occasionally uses this
technique in his projects.

In the case of Szwedzki vs Mona Tusz beef, the story is even more com-
plicated. Szwedzki started his career in both graffiti and street art. He became
famous thanks to his “character”, painted on the walls of the cities in the Silesia
region, and bombing trains with other local graffiti writers, such as KET124.
However, at the same time he was making stickers, which qualifies him as a street
artist. What is more, his “character” has evolved and he has recently started
to comment on the surrounding reality and also to interact with other graffiti
“characters” and street art works. It can be observed that in time, Szwedzki’s
works are becoming more and more contextual and begin to correspond with
the motto placed on his official fanpage profile: “observe and comment”.¹⁷
Szwedzki is not by any means a typical graffiti writer, as he openly flirts with

the mainstream, gives interviews to newspapers, and also owns an internet shop selling gadgets with his character (!). It can be also observed that personally, Szwedzki tends not to distinguish between graffiti and street art, as he interchangeably calls himself as a street artist or a writer. Formally however, Szwedzki still follows the graffiti ethos, as his “character” is not used by him commercially to advertise products, and remains truly independent as it is not a subject of campaigns and commercial activity.

In contrast, Mona Tusz is a full-scale professional street artist.\(^{18}\) She paints on interior and exterior walls, as part of commercial or public projects in Europe. She is known for her murals made for the Industriada festival and public institutions, such as the museum Park Tradycji in Siemianowice Śląskie. During the beef, Mona Tusz was criticized for not understanding the rules of graffiti and her lack of any graffiti background, which made her different from Banksy, whose achievements as a writer were known and appreciated. However, her concept for „Lelki from Hugo” proves something different. As a street artist, Mona Tusz is well known for a special type of dwarf-like characters she puts on her murals, that resemble in some respects the “characters” known from graffiti practice. In this case of course, we are not witnessing a process of copying, but rather creating whole families of related types that populate the oneiric landscapes painted by the Silesian artist. There is also a difference in the scale and technique of applying them on walls, in relation to genuine graffiti style represented by Szwedzki. Somehow, the idea of confronting some of her typical characters, called “Lelki”, with the harsh reality of the walls occupied by football hooligans, shows that Mona Tusz is highly aware of graffiti logic. It can be also a sign that modern, professional and specialized street art still needs graffiti-like experience to make it alive: the experience that can be found only in such spontaneous and open actions as „Lelki”.

The final

The famous King Robbo vs Banksy battle ended unexpectedly with Robbo’s accident that was followed by a coma and finally the artist’s death in July 2014. After the accident, Banksy once more entered the canal under Camden and painted a minimalistic mural in tribute to his opponent, that was intended to finish the duel. It was a black-and-white depiction of the original mural made by King Robbo with a small addition of a flame as a symbol of support for Robbo.

It is significant that Szwedzki vs Mona Tusz beef, which like its London prototype appeared at some level as an unsolvable conflict, also ended

rapidly and resulted in a collective mural of both artists, depicting „Lelki” and „Szwedzki” characters, cheering each other on the famous wall in the Hugo district. This, but also the logic of the earlier decisions taken by the artists during the battle, make it different from common graffiti painting-over actions. It seems that they were following the same order of battle as their British colleagues, and more importantly, they were intentionally playing with the stereotypes of street art and graffiti.

Both battles described above evidence the fact that no matter how we call it, modern graffiti or street art are in need of that source of creative energy that can be obtained only in spontaneous, unpredictable actions. The energy of the underground graffiti from the past. It is a sign of the times that the researchers and artists are so widely discussing performativity, as it is so important for the authenticity that is so much missing in modern street art. The best words to sum up the situation come from MIESTO, graffiti writer and street artist from Warsaw: “Why are we against the Street Art festival? All that is now happening in Warsaw, a series of events in cooperation with the city authorities – this in some sense is a negation of graffiti and street art idea in general. It's an odd situation when old throw-ups are being removed to make place for some new “colorful murals”. Such paintings are only decoration and don't have anything in common with art in a proper sense. They lack authenticity, because their creation is not spontaneous, but is preceded by long arrangements. We are entering here the commercial, business-like kind of relations and at the same time we depart from what is really important in art. [...] It should all be about the dialogue between the city and the people. Graffiti wants to be the dialogue.”

1. „Hugo Wall”, Mona Tus & Szwedzki, current state, September 2015

2. „Hugo Wall”, Mona Tus & Szwedzki, current state, September 2015
3. „Szwedzki” character, FABUD district, Siemianowice Śląskie

4. Szwedzki & Marcin Malicki, Eco mural, FABUD district, Siemianowice Śląskie
5. Szwedzki & Marcin Malicki, Eco mural, FABUD district, Siemianowice Śląskie

6. Mona Tusz, mural with elements of mosaic, Park Tradycji, Siemianowice Śląskie
7. Mona Tusz, mural with elements of mosaic, Park Tradycji, Siemianowice Śląskie

8. Mona Tusz, mural with elements of mosaic, Park Tradycji, Siemianowice Śląskie
9. Mona Tusz, mural with elements of mosaic, Park Tradycji, Siemianowice Śląskie

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


ARTYSTYCZNY ZWROT W GRAFFITI:
SZWEDZKI VS MONA TUSZ
(streszczenie)

Ruch street artu wyewoluował w dużej mierze z graffiti. Jednakże, w przeciwieństwie do street artu, współczesne graffiti dość powszechnie uznawane jest za dyscyplinę o znikomym potencjale artystycznym. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie związków pomiędzy tymi dyscyplinami ze szczególnym naciskiem położonym na zaprezentowanie artystycznych wymiarów graffiti.

Słowa kluczowe: graffiti, street art, murale, estetyka, performatywność, pragmatyzm