

THE CITY: A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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GRAFFITI – A WAY OF COMMUNICATION IN THE CITY

In our daily city life we quite often come across graffiti. Sometimes we do not pay attention to that, perhaps marking buildings and some public places irritates us, but sometimes a single drawing particularly draws our attention because of its colouring or message. Then we wonder: “Who has drawn it and for what purpose?”. We realize that we have never seen any of the graffiti writers at work. We have an ambivalent feeling concerning that form of city creators’ activity and usually we would not agree to have our house elevation or fence painted in that way, we are not as much restrictive about other places. Generally, we likely treat the problem of graffiti as marring both the urban space and the place that is painted on. Many firms specialize in selling some paints that make getting rid of graffiti easier or simply prevent it from being painted on. There were also ideas to force the sale of paints in spray only in licensed places or to ban their selling to individuals at all.

As Kamila Kamińska writes (Kamińska, Iwanowski, 2010, p. 129) in her article: “The cities all over the world are covered with net of marks, starting with shops and advertising boards, and finishing on light signals or road signs (...) the graffiti is quite often borrowed from the sign aesthetics as well as from the slangs of advertising campaigns. Many city marks have affected the lettering or composition of graffiti”.

The phenomenon of graffiti appeared in the 1960s, some people claim it was even before the music of the ‘60s began. Everything started with simple writings, especially names, done in order to mark one’s presence (just like our ancestors used to draw in the caves). But the true spark for the movement was an interview published in New York Times, in which Demetrius, a teenager of Greek origin, boasted that there was no place in New York Subway where one could not see the marks of his presence.

The graffiti era starts along with introduction of paints in spray on the market, what had its beginning in the 1970s. The place where the phenomenon started was New York, and concretely its poorest districts like Bronx or Harlem, where multicultural influences connected to the countries of origin played important role. Each of ethnic minorities living in those places created graffiti. It is also worth mentioning that at that time the building elevations were not painted as the places for that kind of drawings were provided. First graffiti had an artistic character rather than mindless devastation or tagging (Ferrell, 1993). However, as it usually happens when that

field of artistic expression develops, the graffiti makers started to paint public buildings as well as private ones. Subway is also full of graffiti: the drawings are seen both inside and outside trains or platforms.

At the beginning of graffiti development no self-respecting maker accepted such sort of expression that would be against the law. In that respect, an evolution of graffiti makers may be compared to that of sports fans. In the past, a fan with his presence only supported his favourite team, but nowadays many actions of the fans have criminal features, not supporting ones.

One must distinguish the graffiti from ordinary daubs. Making a real graffiti usually takes a couple of hours, but a simple "space mark" just a moment. The phenomenon called "tagging" has also been described (sometimes used as damaging for the graffiti art). The main purpose of the "tagger" is to mark/tag as many places in the neighbourhood as possible. He can do so thanks to markers or different stencils on which he sprays the paint. One "tagger" with nick Picasso painted in the eighteen kilometres radius of his house, marking in that way 'his area' (Steward, 1989).

Painting within the urban space has a multipronged dimension. Let us try to put it in some frames, no matter how we perceive it: as the act of destroying the city space or a spatial development; a form of communication. There are various sorts of graffiti – I suggest the following classification:

- political graffiti (supporting or negating a certain political group or a single politician, for example, the writing on the wall: PIS=pisiory /cocks/, that is a typical political graffiti);
- the graffiti as the protest against something or someone (e.g. against smoking, insensitivity or racism);
- the graffiti as the piece of art with aesthetic dimension;
- the gang's or subculture's graffiti (e.g. in the USA, where each of the gangs that occupy certain territory mark it as well as the racial or nationalistic subcultures);
- music, sports or hooligan graffiti (usually full of vulgarisms or slogans praising their own teams);
- marking the territory (daubs, initials, nicks; the tags in the purest form).

People responsible for keeping order in their areas e.g. the building administrators, may sometimes wonder, what was the purpose of graffiti makers (or just ordinary space markers – definition of "mine"), since a group of residents neither understand nor accept that kind of activities. It may result in an attempt to stop the devastation of a particular place, for example by installing CCTV system (circuit television) or by separating certain places for graffiti. Quite often, a mindless elevation painting seems to be the simplest and cheapest way for some people to leave their mark, their "sign", to mark the territory. It may be done by pupils, local blockers, teens, but not graffiti makers in my understanding. There is no message for the others in such painting, and it is only about giving satisfaction to "taggers" who want to mark their territory and feel the sense of power. In some rare situations it may

provide adrenalin (fear of being caught and arrested), perhaps it fulfils the painters politically and frees their emotions concerning their opinions and attitudes. For example, less than twenty years ago in Hamilton, New Zealand, the research into graffiti showed that 22 per cent of its inhabitants had already seen graffiti and treated that phenomenon as a kind of offence (Ninnes, 1997).

In my paper I would like to present several kinds of graffiti, from different places in Europe, but not only. For the purposes of my study I took some pictures of graffiti in Wrocław myself, but I also got many of them from close friends and relatives, taken by them in Sydney, London, and Germany.

Before presenting graffiti and murals of a high educational and artistic value (in my opinion) I shall refer to those perceived as a crime, an act of destruction making ordinary citizens a strong enemies of the whole graffiti phenomenon. I propose such a classification:

1. Typical writing on the wall, which to the typical city dweller has no meaning ("tag")

2. Burning-like-letters writing, has no meaning for an ordinary man, no message

3. Writing typical for a supporter of the local football team

Written carelessly, this kind of work has one purpose: to inform that someone in the area is a fan of that football team. It has no deeper meaning since there is no other team in extra class, there is not even a person who would like to paint it over. Probably other team's symbol will never appear in the place

4. Crying letters, looks like another drawing with no meaning

I must admit the above drawings (writings) are not too original and probably not very important to the local society. A person having a university degree in academy of fine arts (PWSSP), with whom I consulted the drawings, has the same opinion. It is just a "damage" on the wall that should be painted over as soon as possible. There is no message for others. The cost of renovation is usually high, for example: according to the report of a local government in Gdynia, the renovation of the fragment of several buildings cost about 50 thousand zlotys (Wydatki 2007, 2008). Those are not the costs for the entire town, but for some streets. The money could be spent on different aims, more important for the town. All over the world the costs of removing graffiti are enormous and counted in hundred million dollars. In the market there are many specialized companies removing graffiti, like FJ Complex from Wrocław (FJ-Complex, home site). The cost of removing graffiti from one square meter of unprotected wall in Wrocław is from 60 to 90 zlotys (Ogłoszenie firmy: F.H.U. WILKI Jacek Wilk, 2011).

In the western countries people have been thinking how to fight against that plague. Several ways have been found so far (Knight, 2005):

- ban on painting (sanctions for breaking);
- deterring from painting, repercussions and punishment (e.g. social and repair work), but also a proper education;
- finding space where the graffiti makers could express themselves;
- promoting graffiti in some spaces which are prepared for that purpose.

In New York massive devastation of the Subway and the city itself stopped at the end of the 20th century, what is related to the term of office by Rudolph Giuliani as the mayor (1994-2001), and his practice called: no tolerance (Rudy Giuliani campaign, home site). It was proved that some delinquents breaking law were also members of the gangs or culprits. Each offence was punished, even a small one, and every offender had to know the punishment was unavoidable. Giuliani was often taken, also in Poland, as a good example how to keep order in the city (a controversial figure to others).

Completely different to analysed above element of Wrocław landscape is the building in the city centre painted in graffiti style. It arouses a great interest not only in tourists but also in inhabitants of Wrocław. Many families pose for the photos in the background of the building. In my opinion that picture is very artistic and it is not only another gate or subway painted in senseless style. It is also controversial for "real painters" because for them it is too "sugary". Such is an elevation of the building in Wrocław, opposite the botanical garden in Sienkiewicza Street (ill. 1). It might be funny for advanced graffiti writers, as it was painted from government funds.

Searching for the historical roots of mural paintings in Poland we may refer to the elevation made in different tone which comes from the period of socialist realism. It is located in Olbin, the district of Wrocław (ill. 2) – wall of the building in Rychtalska Street, Wrocław.

Now let us skip to Germany, to Freiburg. There urban space is also marked by graffiti, but mainly in underground passages. An example is shown on the picture number 3 (ill. 3). Classic underground passage covered with paint, made to look like a colourful fabric. It is not chaotic. It seems to be thought through in an artistic way by a group of people. There are some cartoon characters and some fairy tales ones. There are also strange creatures from legends, bizarre signs, and words – some of them designed just like Celtic ones (which is fashionable, i.e. in tattoos). An average passer-by should not feel embarrassed while going by such images. They rather see colourful painting than grey cement. Elderly people do not show any negative reaction when looking at those graffiti. Young people, on the other hand, might even feel proud of unknown artists' performances.

In Freiburg, there are also other examples of graffiti. Those represent individuals.

Graffiti signed with artists' pseudonyms, which shows sort of individuality.

This graffiti is different from that presented earlier. This one conveys a kind of artistic soul of the author, and is probably aimed at provoking certain reaction. Graffiti was partly destroyed by "a marker", who added a rough drawing of man's sexual organ, plus he/she painted the gun over. In the background we can see mobile phones which may symbolize the way of communication that we prefer nowadays. Instead of talking to someone face to face, we would rather call or text someone. I think I can also see here the portrait of the painter himself – an ordinary boy wearing a hood that is supposed to protect him from the police or monitoring. In Germany it is often

a case that the whole underground passage is covered in graffiti, a kind of a street gallery available for anybody passing by.

We can see that all the colours used on the wall of the underground passage combine very well with the colours of buildings outside, so it is somehow matched all together. The green plants going down on the walls do not destroy the whole picture, but create a certain symbiosis.

How does graffiti look like in Australia, Sydney? Photograph number 4 (ill. 4) is an example of the piece of wall specially built for graffiti. The paintings are colourful, and remind of German ones. Those do not carry any messages, but only to fill the space.

Another case is graffiti painted over the buildings in the suburbs.

Very often they do not have any ethnic associations, and are made in a sparsely inhabited area. The Australian authorities pay attention to order and care for buildings in cities, that is why graffiti artists' expression is directed towards suburbs and commuter belt. No artistic spirit is visible here. It is more like painting for its own sake. Australia, a young country, has not discovered great painters yet – painters that everybody would hear of. Such countries like Germany, The Netherlands, United States have well known painters. Perhaps that is the reason why in those countries graffiti has an artistic range and develops so quickly.

In the context of our exploration we need to mention one extraordinary graffiti artist known all over the world as Banksy. He has his own web site created by one of his fans (Banksy graffiti reaper, home site). He is known around the world, however his real name has never been revealed to the public. Nobody has ever taken a picture of him. He has his own spokesperson. Characteristic feature of Banksy's works is the fact that they always carry a message. He probably discovered his style while he had to hide under one of a subway cars for quite a long time during the time of graffiti painters discrimination. At that time Banksy's attention was drawn to a serial number of a car, what inspired him to work.

Banksy became famous for social actions. The last one had a widespread impact. On the day of Paris Hilton's record premiere, he replaced the original CDs' covers with his own, which presented a caricature of Paris Hilton. All those were supposed to provoke people to realize how dull lives such celebrities lead. As a BBC News journalist claimed, Banksy exchanged about 500 CDs (Banksy graffiti reaper, home site).

Banksy is also famous for other actions of "smuggling" his own works, usually to the museums. British "The Guardian" was writing at length how he managed to smuggle an exhibit into one of London museums – a stylish dead rat above which there was a sprayed sign: "Our time will come". One of the most dangerous of his actions was painting graffiti on a Palestine wall (March, 2006).

Nowadays, 3D graffiti has become very popular, as well as graffiti painted not on walls or subway cars, but on the ground. Below we can see two examples of 3D graffiti. (ex. Tracy Lee Stum, home site <http://www.tracyleestum.com/>)

This graffiti makes an optical illusion; we lose the sense of space. Undoubtedly, 3D graffiti draw our attention more than simple useless painting for its own sake. An

observer of graffiti paintings has become more demanding. Graffiti is now supposed to be appealing and carry a message. Recently, this kind of graffiti has won recognition as a preventive measure in several countries. For instance, graffiti painters paint a 3D child lying on the road so that a driver who does not stop his car in the right place thinks that he has just knocked down a real child. Such an action is supposed to make drivers drive more carefully and more slowly. We can say that controversial art has found its way and serves safety.

In Poland of the beginning of the '80s and '90s together with the changes of political system there appeared basic tools for graffiti artists. As a result there appeared also first graffiti paintings on train cars which were similar to the New York subway ones. Many graffiti artists got inspired by U.S. works. Besides graffiti or even vandalism (not every graffiti is made by an artist), people imported also 'black music' and characteristic clothes (gangsta look), as well as a certain way of behaviour with a strong sense of self-confidence. All that is noticeable in hip-hop and gangsta rap lyrics.

For over few years we have been observing rapid growth of interest in street art (it is often called so) of official institutions of art. Banksy, mentioned above, at first rather mysterious, now has become a pop-culture idol. His works are worth a lot on auctions. There was even a film made by Banksy: "Exit Through the Gift Shop". It tells a story of many artists of street art ("Wyjście przez sklep z pamiątkami", 2010).

Art, imaginatively speaking, is also in the street, to be accurate – on the pavement.

At times curators of graffiti exhibitions decide to arrange it not in the museums, but in warehouse buildings or open urban space. A huge event in Poland was an exhibition "Artyści Zewnętrzni OUT OF STH" in BWA Awangarda in Wrocław in 2008 (Out of sth, home site).

Graffiti art is developing rapidly and is available for everyone, unlike common paintings, i.e. oil paintings. Graffiti do not require any particular carriers. Oil paintings require a special canvas, paints, and preservatives. In fact, everyone with a little sense of art is able to paint graffiti. There is, however, one condition – certain space and complying with the law. Therefore, a question appears – can wall or a building be used by an artist?

As I have mentioned before, communication in the form of art is presented in cities in different ways. It can cause reflexion, artistic or emotional experience (exposed piece of wall). On the other hand it can also be a usual thing with no message – simply a colourful filling of space. It is not important which city or country it is – graffiti is everywhere. Finally, the time has come for this field of art, and some of graffiti artists are now very famous. People react to these works of art differently.

Once I was going by buses and trams around Wrocław, and observed how passengers reacted to a great graffiti sentence right opposite of one of the bus stops. The sentence was "Remember about fidelity". The young and elderly people pointed to the sign, smiled, took pictures with their mobiles. What other artist would be so popular?

That phrase did not belong to the artist anymore or to the potential buyer who would have it in his/her home. That phrase was part of the city and carried a message for other people.

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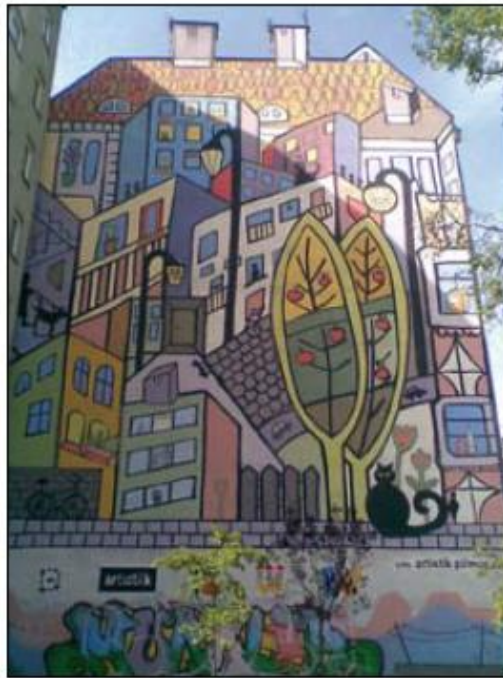
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Ill. 1. Mural at Sienkiewicza street in Wrocław painted during Muralia festival (supported by local government funds)



Ill. 2. Mosaic mural from surrealism times. Rychtalska street in Wrocław



Ill. 3. Graffiti from Freiburg, Germany



Ill. 4. Graffiti from Sydney, Australia



Ill. 5. Graffiti from Monachium, Germany

