

## Graffiti or “getting-up”: From site-specific to Web 2.0

**Maria da Luz Nolasco Cardoso**

Independent researcher, Aveiro, Portugal

nolascoluzm@gmail.com

### Abstract

Leitemotive - Aveiro, a Portuguese coastal city, has these marks of our contemporaneity idealized under an apex of thought and artistic graffiti gestures that cover walls, tunnels, viaducts, ceilings, arches, carriages and clusters dispersed and that carry colors and “signs” difficult to decipher, but, graffiti is also the reflection of the active life of our city. It is important to clarify the connections between public art and the artistic dimensions of graffiti in the current era of globalization. What is the discourse of public art in cyberspace and virtual territory, understood as an act resulting from digital manipulation, especially in Web 2.0. Thus, aiming to interpret urban artistic alterities, graffiti as a marginal art in relation to its forms of artistic production, even more alternating and alternative (Canclini, 2005 Cit. By Andrade, 2010: 50). It is our proposal to cross the action and the explosion of graffiti in the media and social networks. Objectively, we seek to know what has changed in graffiti with the activity generated on the Web and what the results of this kinetic visual and imaginary universe that the Web allows. This online and digital platform has made graffiti come out of its territorial isolation, moving graffiti - as an ephemeral and artistic manifestation - from a site-specific attitude, in style and painting, to a more competitive and revealing attitude towards a new statute, the dematerialization of the image, its preservation and virtual dissemination.

**Keywords:** Graffiti, Lifestyle, Social Activism, Freedom and Peripheral

### 1. Introduction

Graffiti is an expression of self, and the subject-actor who executes it claims the right to be recognized as someone, with a proper name, with a recognized identity and personality. This manifestation materializes by the image and happens “where the periphery gives place to the art”, that is, in the “outer ring” of the city. Citing Pedro Andrade (2010) would reinforce this idea of socio-cultural region in the public / private urban space, as the territory of “leisure or leisure” where marginal public art and / or amateur private art takes place as opposed to the area “of work and professionalization” where the professional and public private arts are legitimized by the local power (Ibid.: 45). Andrade also points out that in times of economic crisis, these peri-urban areas coincide with the unemployment zones, further reaffirming that, “in this area, sub-cultures and arts produced by different social and cultural alterations such as young people or certain

urban marginalities, such as graffiti or other street arts, often emerge in this area” (Ibidem, 46). In graffiti, as in any other artistic project, it is essential to highlight and / or choose the space or physical support of the actions, the scale of the interventions and the discourse of public art in cyberspace, especially in Web 2.0. Social networks emerge from this platform as communicative ways organized by a reticulated system where urban artistic alterities and interculturalities are connected. It is our goal to note the genesis of this artistic movement and its compilers and diffusers on the Web. Still, of the change that the digital tool gave to this marginal and hybrid culture (Gastman & Neelon, 2011), legitimizing it, which is characterized by a strong emotional connection with the territorial areas where graffiti subscribes (words of Alexandre Farto “Vhils” to the DN on February 13, 2017, in Annex A). In the concrete case of the “street art” or the “public art” inscribed in the public / private space

of the polis (Andrade, 2010), where the marginal, illicit art and even the “legitimate” art of Graffiti (Torre, Ferro, 2016), we can collect a set of records that reflect the experiences of those who make graffiti and have the idea or the more or less clear notion of the physical space surrounding the artist - to graffiter. We can also consider this physical and not virtual space, as a territorial extension where the “urban artistic alterities” emerge and confront each other in today’s urban everyday life (Andrade, 2010) and / or consider graffiti in itself defining the immersive space. But, equally neutral, that the graffiter (the performer of the work) uses to distance himself from the rest of the world, provoking, however, the gaze of the passer-by.

Taking another idea from Vhils, the internationally recognized Portuguese graffiter Alexandre Farto, this one defends that the artist must make reflection, and affirms what next we quote:

I believe that the artist must raise questions. Obviously I have answers, but I avoid conducting those answers. Today the urban routines are very close and this brings us very close to the urban side of the world. But at the same time it creates a cleavage between urban and rural areas. And democracies are trying to deal with it, with these two speeds, these two ways of seeing evolution, and it is in that question that the work tries to do, it tries to show how all the identities of the world are affected by that process. It is a discussion that I have been doing for ten years and that today it is being noticed that it creates frictions, and this makes it important the role of art... You are the result of everything that surrounds you” (Vhils, from the reporter Carlos Ferro, under the name of “Vhils, an artist which comes back to its origins” on 13th of February of 2017).

This testimony of a Portuguese graffiter, which is nowadays, by the art of graffiti, a communicative phenomenon of international scale, expresses a social and political critique and demands a careful look at the most segregated and excluded areas of the cities: the suburbs, neighborhood communities, the emigrants from the colonized nations, among others.

### **Graffiters’ action on the ground and in the cloud**

The graffiter works and expresses her drawing in specific places where the contact is full but not immediate, where the manifesto drawings are invisible but still have the visibility necessary and sufficient for them to be perceived on the outskirts of the city. Images, drawings, tags (personalized labels), stencils (decal-inscribed or negative images with a template or a cut-out open-type figure-background), stickers, graffiti, or post diffused on the web each acquire, by itself, a status or a specific category, that of manifestations of “urban art”, of urban artistic alterations. Or, they acquire the qualification of peripheral art, marginal art, being easily embedded in the idea of open space and illicit territorial space, site-specific, or street art, already legitimized by society in general and by the media as of “street art” (Birgit Krols, 2000)<sup>1</sup>.

Graffiti can happen in places where people do not live, inside and outside isolated and abandoned buildings, on walls that restrict traffic routes - road and rail - where the speed of the media and its passers-by seems to keep pace with the gesturality of its designers. Graffiti travels on train carriages (Gastman & Neelon, 2011), and goes further in space and faster in the gesture printed by its creator. We quote JUNE CTA, “To me, graffiti is experiencing the entire process of breaking in the systems and leaving evidence of my existence on the trains” (JUNE CTA quoted in Gastman & Neelon, 2011: 402-3). The graffiti travels across land, little and much land, much more territory than the author who is at its origin. And, in this dizzying journey, the graffiter flies higher without leaving her own space.

### **2. Graffiti on social networks**

If it is important to establish the link between graffiti and activism in social networks, it will also be significant to understand the extent of activism that graffiti messages trigger in the Web, in the Cloud, and perceptible through the inter | face | world1 (Loureiro, 2014: 4).

In this order of thought I would add the case of a street artist, Mathieu Tremblin, who defines himself as a translator of tags. This means that this graffiter translates and makes readable

1. The 3D Street Art, edited by Birgit Krols, TECTUM Publishers, 2000, makes an exhaustive record of the art of graffiti from 23 creators from all over the world and authors of 3D Wall Murals, 3D Street Paintings and Graffiti 3D.

the tags - signatures and trademarks - that graffitiers write on city walls. This author created the “Clouds” project in 2010 and works as the inter | face | world mediating the images-code (Loureiro, 2014: 1) and decoding in parallel between the street tag and the virtual tag used on the Internet, relating them as if they were the key to the mystery that makes them recognizable and that makes recognizable the orientation of the creative artist, the graffitier subject, in the world.

Mathieu Tremblin is the image-map translator, picking up on anagram type signatures with noise, with visual images of words to be deciphered, with smudges and chromatic spots, and cleans it making it readable. Tremblin separates what is on the side and is contiguous with the visual image: it removes the signature traces of the signature - from the tag - sterilizing the word, graffiti, making it decipherable, close and immersive.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Social networks and graffiti in 1994 - temporal and conceptual evolution

As far as social networking is concerned, we have Susan Farrell as a reference point in the introduction of graffiti on the Web and its dissemination in social networks since the 1990s. Susan Farrell studied English in the State of Georgia and in 1992, following professional and academic needs, to provide properly formatted weekly written assignments, decided to learn to process texts on computer. She learned how to use the Web and HTML language. This knowledge took her to other stops and to a new perception of urban aesthetics. The reality of the graffiti, realized in Atlanta where Farrell began to photograph graffiti in 1986, and later in Prague in 1994, led to the decision to create a webpage for the preservation and appreciation of this ephemeral and transforming art of cities.

We underline the idea of the fracture between conventional

2. “Removing the personal traits of the signature allows everyone to decode it and contact it,” said Mathieu Tremblin in an interview with Atlantic City Lab. “On the one hand, I pay tribute to local graffiti, on the other hand I normalize it”. To translate the names on the same scale, which does not stop anyone from continuing to fill in the blanks and adding the signature between the typography. (...)“I paint using the stencil. Incidentally, my project is drawing attention to some walls to which few were aware because they were full of ‘tags’” (In Line) [http:// www.mathieutremblin.com/](http://www.mathieutremblin.com/)

art, endowed with a status of “uniqueness” and “treasure value” of “reproducible” art, with the value that Farrell imprints on the “temporarily Visible”, “cumulatively transformable”, palimpsest of other images, ephemeral and resistant. In the words of Farrell:

One of the things that makes artwork precious is that there’s only one of it. We don’t think a lot about this concept now, but at the cusp of the digital era it was a very big deal... If we make a copy of this work available digitally what will that mean about the value of the original?... The graffiti artists had a different set of problems than fine artists. They had personal-safety issues... They had an art-preservation problem, and they had the problem that art historians would not take them seriously because their artwork was too ephemeral... I thought, I can solve that problem (Farrell, in Wells, 2014).

Farrell created the first web page dedicated to these artists, “Art Crimes” in 1994, which became a space open to the immersion of conversations, interviews, looks about graffiti production all over the world, a script Visit to sites with graffiti, digital visual manifesto device of graffiti, tags, stencil, the swift gesture of urban art artists. It is reported that in the last twenty years Susan Farrell has received death threats and made friends with some of the biggest graffitiers by consulting various organizations about the significance of the internet for this community of artists. One of the consequences was a greater knowledge of the areas of graffiti, its commercialization and ascent in relation to its surveillance and public recognition (Farrell, in Wells, 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

Farrell created a repository of images of graffiti, preserving the production of works that would otherwise be obliterated. This ephemeral character of graffiti is part of its nature and its preservation implies an attitude of reproduction. However, graffitiers act with great openness regarding the reproduction of their works; it is common for graffitiers to photograph their tags, their graffiti and, immediately, make digital copies as if they were cards from a deck to collect

3. Interview with Susan Farrell by Lisa Wells in November 2014 in “Interviews, The Toast,” a digital journal with an associate blog “The Toast Journal”, Georgia.

(Farrell, in Wells, 2014). To quote further Farrell once again, “The only way to make works of art survive is the possibility of their mass reproducibility, and consequently their wide distribution by many people in the hope that they will keep them. This act of large-scale preservation will only destroy the artistic production of its destruction, for environmental or technological reasons or crises.”

#### 4. The places where the Graffitiers act

Graffitiers operate in places where anonymous communities reside, which are satellite districts of the city and which fill vacancies of an unplanned urbanity. Most of these neighborhoods have residents who move to the urban center to work there in generic and transversal areas, where they watch precariously and operationally. They are general service providers and, in general, providers of a chain of basic services: they assist in cleaning streets, buildings, civil construction, or provide private and / or public services as workers without their own qualification in health institutions, education, security, and so on. The majority of the population on the peripheries carry with them the idea of a ghetto, a community that is closed in on itself and segregated by the majority of its contemporary civil society.

The graffiti reflect the place, the human and cultural capital of the places where they are represented, but not only that; they take a new look at art and use a specific aesthetic that fits the walls of the street, breaking with the idea of gallery and of conventional exhibition and representation spaces.

**The Artistic Plans:** the scale of the street serves graffiti as the art gallery serves paintings in frames.

#### 5. BI or the Meaning of Graffiti

Legal term: “Vandalism act”,

The author’s term: the act of making “an illegal piece”

#### 1970-1980 Evolution of the term “Graffiti”

Graffiti appears expressively and materially in the USA and acts as the “Getting-Up” of the individual, that is, the graffiter acts in the direction of “raise your / your name”. “Getting-up” is also giving visibility and a sense of presence: - Look at me / I’m here!

**1974 - The idea of Revolution** combined with that of manifestation through art.

In Portugal in 1974 and with the dawn of the Military

Revolution on the 25th of April a new artistic, spontaneous, ideological and sensorial attitude emerges, to which the concept of mural art is mirrored in political murals designed with painted posters. Placed on walls and walls of the city, added with paintings directly made and painted on the masonry of the walls and mixed with posters glued, placed and superimposed, among many other pictorial materials added to them. There are archives of images from this period in Portugal that came to us through the hands of artists such as Anna Hatherly<sup>4</sup> (painter, writer and art teacher) who had the exact perception of an irreducible conceptual phenomenon that was in danger of being lost by its natural ephemeral character and fragility of materials.

It is important to note that in the last works of the series Neograffiti (2001), Ana Hatherly uses the technique of spray on paper, appropriating a language specific to urban solidarity subcultures, which is usually practiced in a nocturnal environment (see João Lima Pinharanda In Ana Hatherly: *The Intelligent Hand*, Lisbon, 2003).

#### 1988 - The manifestation of graffiti

The mural art gives way to graffiti, and this corresponds to the great change of intellectual and artistic attitude, and graffiti not only has a political and social message, but also can go beyond this manifesto a little “fora-de-campo” (Loureiro, 2014).

The great examples of graffiti images arrived through skateboard magazines, which featured “skate parks” decorated with urban art, street art, evidently coming from USA.

#### 6. The character of the works

Seemingly hidden from the eyes of society in general, graffiti invade walls that require the watchful eye of one who watches the urban space. The distracted do not realize the energy of gesture implicit in the drawings; it is necessary to stop, to break the traces and the inscribed words to decipher the sense of representation, the narrative and the pulsar of the

---

4 We highlight the take-offs of Ana Hatherly (exhibition in the Coimbra Plastic Arts Circle) that with a more intentional use of typography or illustration have opened up new possibilities for the exploration and experimentation of languages; Ana Hatherly showed a certain Portuguese vanguard context in the post-25 April 1974 murals (6 Documentaries about the 25th of April in RTP2, April 22-27 April 21, 2014, by Élia Rodrigues); See also “*Exhibition of Ana Hatherly (1929-2015): Obrigatório não Ver, CAPC, 2015.*”

forms. They are hidden in the walls of abandoned buildings. The graffiti of hidden spaces persist in walls that are not visible but more appealing to the fleeting nature of graffiti on anonymity, outside the public eye, evasive but interpersonal of the author's daily life - "Getting-up" act; Of the individual being made present and identified.

When graffiti becomes institutionalized, it once again passes into the status of mural art, a pictorial expression with a permanent character. But there are also graffitis created for walls that come from public or private order; the graffiti made to take art to the public space and to the places where the populations do not have access to the art, in the poorer districts and in ghettos.

### 7. Graffiti on social networks - FACEBOOK

The act of graffiti is in essence a "hidden" act outside the public eye, but can be the target of a public, national and international audience via sharing photographs online on social media. As graffiti writer SAM explains, "I make a TAG and soon after I do a POST and put it on Facebook: it is the democratization of the marginality of the work." In this quotation we find that the letter design is also important, the tag, the acronym that identifies between equals but which may be hidden from ordinary citizens: "to draw letters and create a pseudonym" is much more than having another identity – it is one with artistic freedom. To SAM, this represents an identity, which is "mine more than others have of me" (SAM, in Blackout, 2017).

### 8. The future

In 2015, the web page "Art Crimes", active since 1994, decided to divide its database or image bank into two parts: one for archiving and the other for the future-facing copy. The objective was to preserve the 20-year archive of images developed on the website, proving that it was one of the only active websites and functioning as the true historical repository of graffiti. The archived copy is thus preserved online and offline by Susan Farrell and the Fabricatorz team, in addition to the archives that are in partnership and somewhat worldwide (Internet Archive (USA), Sunsite Poland, graffitiarchiv.org (Berlin). The same purpose in view: to create a graffiti and art gallery in the USA, in Europe and in the cities of the world to remain available and accessible, especially for students and historians, for appreciation and diffusion of graffiti.

### 9. The Future – Today

Graffiti writer André Saraiva asserted that:

Graffiti has to do with adaptation and we sneak to places where we are not supposed to be. But as for museums, graffiti takes place in the city illegally and at night. Anything else is not graffiti. Talking about graffiti, it may refer to graffiti, but I'm not doing a graffiti exhibit. Graffiti is an action, not even a result, so I go out and find a space, graffiti is almost over. Graffiti is a performance without a public and 80% of it is action, the result is only a tiny part. And anyway the idea is to disappear. (Joana Amaral Cardoso, in Público - Ípsilon, Graffiti is a performance without public, interview with André Saraiva, July 4, 2014).

Maybe yes, maybe no. We do not know how we are going to work.

### References

- Andrade, P. (2010) Arte Pública versus Arte Privada? Alteridades Artísticas Urbanas e Web 2.0. In *Caleidoscópio* (Ed.) *Arte Pública e Cidadania: novas leituras da cidade criativa*. Casal de Cambra. Bembem, A., Plácido, A. &, Leopoldina V. (2013) Inteligência coletiva: um olhar sobre a produção de Pierre Lévy. *Perspectivas em Ciência da Informação*, 18 (4): 139-151.
- Ferro, L. & Torre, H. (2016) O Porto sentido pelo graffiti: as representações sociais de peças de graffiti pelos habitantes da cidade do Porto. *Revista de Ciências Sociais, Fortaleza*, 47 (1): 123-147.
- Lévy, P. A. (2003) *Inteligência coletiva: por uma antropologia do ciberespaço*. 4 Ed. São Paulo: Loyola.
- Loureiro, Luís M. (2014) Ecrã|screen|inter|face. Da imagem-mapa à imagem-libido. From the image-map to the image-libido, *ArtCiência*, 17: 1 - 9.
- Neelon, C., & Gastman, R. (2011) *The History of American Graffiti*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Primo, A. (2005) O aspecto relacional das interações na Web 2.0. In *Revista da Associação Nacional dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação*. Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. Available at: [www.compos.org.br/e-composKrols](http://www.compos.org.br/e-composKrols).
- Wells, L. (2014) Bombing the Net: A Conversation with Susan Farrell, Creator of Art Crimes. *The Toast*. November 20. Available at: <http://the-toast.net/2014/11/20/conversation-susan-farrell-art-crimes/>



SAM Duarte's Tag, Blackout, 2017, Vera Cruz, Aveiro.