

INTRODUCTION

From the 23rd of May until the 25th of August 2008 Tate Modern London organized an exhibition on 'Street Art'. The show attracted a large number of visitors. In the catalogue the organizer of the show, Cedar Lewisohn, describes 'Street Art' as a many-headed monster, manifesting itself in tagging and bombing trains and walls, sticker bombing, stencil art, graffiti sculptures, installations, graphic design, breakdancing, fashion, films, videos, books and internet. And this either results in entirely free forms of expression or in art that has social relevance and is politically committed.

In an edition of 'Eigen Huis & Interieur' (Home & Interior 2008), a glossy Dutch interior design magazine, the famous Italian architect Matteo Thun states: "Graffiti used to be seen as vandalism, today however, it's a serious and innovative form of art."

The origin of all these art manifestations lies in New York, in the late sixties. A sense of oppression urged young adolescents and minorities to look for new possibilities and opportunities. Spraying or 'tagging' your name developed into different styles of graffiti. In the late seventies and early eighties graffiti writers became artists, sprayed their ideas onto canvas and found their way into galleries and museums.

Graffiti artists are outsiders in the academic art world, which is embedded in the European tradition of fine arts. They don't carry the weight of the artistic past on their shoulders but draw their inspiration from street life, television, commercials, internet, comics and social interaction. They live like nomads, travelling around the world in order to create mural pieces and participate in projects. These artists operate completely independent and don't ask for subsidies. They succeeded in penetrating the existing art establishment according to their own rules. In public places you are continually confronted with their works, it is, however, very difficult to find out who they are and where they live. A good example of someone living such a 'secret life' is the English graffiti artist Banksy.

Frans Haks, the well-known former artistic director of the Groninger Museum, who died in December 2006, told an interesting story about the transportation of art works and its consequences at a symposium on graffiti at Sotheby's Amsterdam in 2003. Haks described the evolution of 'the carrier' in the art of painting. The frescos in the Middle Ages could not be transported from one location to another. The development of painting on wooden panels, and later on canvas, facilitated transportation, so more people could take note of paintings. Furthermore, the invention of etching and lithography enabled artists to increase their production, enlarge circulation, raise public awareness, sell their works faster and thus gain more revenue.

With the establishment of the Factory in the late sixties Warhol intended to reach a mass audience. And this is exactly what his 'silk screens' did. By tagging and bombing the interiors and exteriors of trains, graffiti artists succeeded in bringing large groups into contact with their art. These trains transported their names from one place to another, 'uptown, downtown and all-over'. The different carriages functioned as independent words. Every time a train was coupled or decoupled phrases and new contexts were created. 'Getting your name up there', was the common goal. They sought a direct confrontation with the public and competing 'gangs' by showing their art and the development of their own styles, for instance the bubble letter and so-called wild style. Finally, graffiti expanded and branched out into different media, like buttons, stickers, stencils, t-shirts and internet art.

Artists and their works are always a reflection of the current world, society and politics. Graffiti was brought to the Netherlands in the early eighties by a gallery owner from Amsterdam, Yaki Cornblit. It hit instant success. The Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam was one of the few museums that organized a big exhibition in 1983, which attracted over 40,000 visitors. Every distinguished collector bought work from the featured artists. More exhibitions soon followed in the Netherlands as well as abroad.

In 1982 I became a genuine and passionate supporter of these young artists from New York. Until then I didn't know anything about this new artmovement. Confronted with these works of art it was love at first sight. I was on fire. I immediately recognized the purity and originality of their intentions.

I started buying like a madman. I waited for galleries until they would open their doors and I waited for the artists to arrive at the airport with their enormous canvasses rolled up on a tube. These works were spectacularly big and powerful, the power they radiated was dazzling and unbearable. You could feel the sincerity, the integrity, which finds its origin in the utmost depth of one's being.

Various reasons can be put forward as to why these artists fell from grace. From the very first beginning graffiti was seen as a menace to society and public health. Spray paint contained CO₂. The artists belonged to minority groups in the American society, who only caused pollution and anarchy and could hardly be regarded as serious artists. Finally, the economic crises in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, seemed to be responsible for delivering the final blow to a thriving art movement.

The book 'Coming from the Subway' (1992), which I produced in collaboration with the Groninger Museum and others, appeared in three editions: a French, a German and a Dutch version. However, an English publication, which was the most important edition, was never released. The New York publisher Abrams was not interested at the time.

At the beginning of the book fair in Cologne (1991) interest was very high. Initial subscriptions went up to 100,000 copies. However, the economic crisis that followed shortly afterwards, ultimately resulted in the sale of 15,000 copies. Only just enough to break-even.

After the successes in the first half of the 1980s, decline followed

rapidly. In the public opinion graffiti looked very similar everywhere in the world. Art critics could or did not want to see the differences between these artists. Negative newspaper and magazine articles full of destructive criticism circulated everywhere. The former artistic director of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum and successor to Wim Beeren, Wim Crowel, argued as follows; 'Graffiti is nothing but a dog pissing in the snow.'

Nowadays street artists still regard the old school graffiti artists as their godfathers. They injected new life into the concept of graffiti by making their own rules outside the current art establishment. Everywhere in the world many young artists are very active with graffiti. It is probably the only reason why the art world has regained interest and that graffiti has risen from its ashes.

Only Basquiat and Keith Haring got off scot-free. While reading the biography 'Basquiat - A quick killing in Art', by Phoebe Hoban, we notice there is a thin line between success and failure. Paige Powell, advertising director for 'Interview' magazine, was a good friend of Basquiat, who brought him in contact with Andy Warhol. At first Warhol used to avoid him because he was afraid of him, but eventually he accepted him. Powell also introduced another artist, A-One, a friend of Basquiat, to Warhol and 'The Factory'. The plan backfired completely. Andy freaked out. He said; 'Paige, don't you ever bring those guys into the office, because they'll just spray-paint all over my paintings. Powell; 'That's how paranoid he was about it'.¹

In the 1980s gallery owner Holly Solomon from New York put into words what many were thinking at the time; 'White men don't like black art'. Fortunately thirty years later things have changed considerably. Newly emerging galleries and museums, such as Helenbeck (Paris, Nice and New York), Speerstra (Geneva), Magda Danysz (Paris), Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain and Grand Palais in Paris and other cities pay attention to graffiti. Many important new art

books about graffiti are being published. Margo Thompson, assistant professor art history, is writing a book about 'American Graffiti', which is due to appear this year. Spring 2009 publisher Abrams will release Jack Stewart's book 'American Kings'. Unfortunately, several artists have died in the meantime. For instance, both Basquiat and A-One died from the effects of drug abuse, Keith Haring and Dondi White died from AIDS and Noc 167 became schizophrenic.

But now the tide is turning. The exhibition in Tate Modern has certainly contributed to the acknowledgement of graffiti- or street art. The art world and the general public were able to distance themselves from the past and have gradually become more and more familiar with the pictures of graffiti artists. Above all, this cultural phenomenon has become a stepping-stone for young people who want to succeed in art. Graffiti is hot, unrestricted, not hindered by academic constraints and cloaked in mystique. Graffiti is a gateway, a vehicle for young people to discover the seemingly endless frontiers of art.

This book tells the story of one of the pioneers of the old school New York Graffiti, called Blade (Steven Ogburn 1957). Blade has become a celebrated artist within the world of graffiti, which earned him the title 'King of Kings'. His work, and the work of other graffiti artists

are finally getting the international recognition they deserve. The art market is starting to stir and good prices have been paid for paintings by Blade, A-One, Crash, Futura, Quik, Rammellzee and Dondi White.

My irresistible enthusiasm for this art movement, even after twenty seven years, is the main reason for publishing this book about Blade.

Moreover, I'm convinced that the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America will be a boost to all black American artists, collectors and museums will most certainly open their hearts and doors for these artists.

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(Translated by Brendan Pijnenburg)

¹ Hoban, Phoebe, Basquiat - A quick killing in Art, p.199-200, Quartet Books, 1998