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Urban Art as Countervisuality?*

As cultural techniques within the urban environment, Graffiti and Street Art are investigated by many disciplines. Mostly art historical studies have explored the contradictory relationship between Street Art and the art market. My research is inspired by the approaches of Visual Culture Studies and their critique of the central perspective; furthermore by Mirzoeffs concept of 'neovisuality' describing actual fields of power constituting themselves in a permanent crisis that demands and legitimizes control and surveillance. The analysis applies these issues as methods for finding new ways of seeing and discussing Graffiti and Street Art in form and content, also questioning their potential as a countervisuality.

Keywords: street art, central perspective, drones

Introduction

The motivation to ask, if Urban Art is a form of 'countervisuality' derives from the critique that started with the beginning of scientific research on the topic. Many positions seem to enhance the contradictory aspects like the involvement of Urban Art in processes of gentrification, sell-out to the art market or advertising business.[1] The critique of these phenomena is of course very important, but it also reduces the potential of a worldwide movement of artists and activists on the streets. So I would like to highlight again the more subversive aspects of Urban Art, and add criteria for a better understanding of the movement's success and for the artistic choices being made.[2] Before I proceed with my formal analysis, I would like to clarify the two main terms 'Urban Art' and 'countervisuality'.

In my understanding, Urban Art implies Graffiti, Street Art and all visual expressions on the streets or related within the art system of galleries and museums. I am aware of the Anglophone notion of Urban Art as being the less valuable indoor Street Art.[3] But in the non-Anglo-American languages Urban Art is used as an umbrella term for many forms that rely on the notion of contemporary urbanity. The idiom allows nevertheless stylistic differentiations between Graffiti, Writing, Street Art, Urban Knitting, Guerilla Gardening and so forth.

The term 'countervisuality' was coined by Nicholas Mirzoeff in his book *The right to look. A counterhistory of visuality* from 2011.[4] He traces back the term 'visuality' to the 19th century and the representation of history that implies not only images, but also texts and, moreover, the authority to produce meaning and to install a dominant discourse.[5] As 'countervisuality' he acknowledges any form or image that is at the same time linked and opposed to this normative truth, as a subculture strategy "the attempt to reconfigure visuality as a whole."[6] Following Mirzoeff, we are now living in the era of Neovisuality that "(…) is a doctrine for the preservation of authority by means of permanent surveillance of all realms of life, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of necropolitics."[7] Several characteristic of today's Urban Art react to these forms of visuality. The formal analysis of selected works will show how Urban Art undermines traditional ways of seeing, and how it works as a subversive strategy opposed to the neoliberal urban development and the policies of surveillance and control.

Visuality and the central perspective

One of the main criteria to discuss visuality is linked to the central perspective as a visual construction of a power relation in Western tradition. Besides Panofsky's seminal study, the discussion was revived in the Sixties and Seventies with the Marxist critique about the architecture of medieval castles, Renaissance villas and Baroque gardens, showing how these structures allowed a dominant view from above for the ruler, serving as instruments of control.[8] Mirzoeff applies these figurations on the colonial plantations of slavery. Again this system allowed the dominant view for an overseer in order to surveil the slaves as subordinated subjects.[9] In images, it is traditionally the central perspective that puts the beholder in the dominant position. A famous example for this tradition, developed in the Renaissance, is illustrated in Albrecht Dürer's *Treatise on Measurement* published in the second edition 1538 (1st edition 1525).[10] The text is an advice for artists on how to construct, among other things, a central perspective and a perfect illusionistic space in which objects and bodies can be positioned. The example chosen here shows the construction for a nude in Venetian manner with the female body lying within an architecture and before a landscape (Fig. 1). The underlying power relation spans here between the white, male

artist and the female body positioned behind the frame of the visual apparatus. The result would be a picture that can suggest spatiality and puts the beholder in the same dominant position as the artist-creator.[11]

Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, *Treatise for measurement*, 3rd book: Of the bodies, 2nd edtion 1538 (Bonnet 2001, 58)

Mostly authors from visual culture studies have put forward the critique on central perspective as a 'scopic regime' and have shown how it found its effects in contemporary media like television, photography, video camera, computer, satellites and most recently in the techniques of the drones.[12] Used as instruments of control and surveillance, these technologies seem to generate objective evidence and serve to construct and maintain a hegemonic discourse of power and legitimacy, in Mirzoeffs words 'visuality', also because they are accompanied by a discourse on how we are supposed to understand the images they produce.[13] The instruments are used globally for counterinsurgency and the so-called 'war on terror', but it should not be forgotten that these techniques are transposed on our everyday life within the city. Thus, the argument of Mirzoeff is that the system of surveillance of the colonial plantation was first brought to what he calls the "metropole", that is the modern city as an agglomeration of powerful networks and institutions figuring as the nation-state, and then spread out globally in a post-panoptic visuality, where the divine eye of the drone or the satellite sees everything without being seen themselves.[14]

Kool Killer and the Drones

The appearance of American Graffiti in the modern city can be described as a true subversive visual practice that spread around the world and is still going on until today.[15] The graffiti piece consists in a written name (pseudonym), put on the wall in a variety of styles, sometimes readable and sometimes not. At last with the 3D-style the letters began to show a visual depth, but only within the written name or an additive character. The writing itself is not set in the rectangular frame of central perspective and therefore disturbs our habitual way of seeing. Moreover, the strongly coded significance of graffiti is not open to a generic meaning and does irritate the public, as Jean Baudrillard has already argued in his essay *Kool Killer*.[16] While graffiti developed further in a variety of styles and found its way even into the art market, it is perceived at the same time as vandalism and therefore severely prosecuted. In fact it does not only show the 'arty side' of technical skills, but is often acted out as aggression towards society, as the graffiti slang itself shows by using terms like 'bombing the city'. In his article, *The wars on graffiti and the new military urbanism*, Kurt Iveson has shown how the 'war on graffiti' has "contributed to the diffusion of military technologies and operational techniques into the realm of urban policy and policing" and how the 'war on terror' has both gained advantage of and reinforced these strategies.[17] This militarization of the urban includes razor wires, mobile surveillance cameras sending alert and real time images to smartphones of security agents, acoustic sensors able to detect the frequencies emitted by spray cans, GPS locators, smell sensors, intelligence and counterintelligence operations.[18] Since last year the German police and Railway Company are testing the use of drones to prosecute graffiti-sprayers.[19] Following Mirzoeff's argument of neovisuality – "the preservation of authority by means of permanent surveillance" – then the use of drones and the technologies listed by Iveson indicate that graffiti can still be seen as a subversive strategy within the urban space. To reverse this practice the New York based KATSU – who calls himself vandal, artist and hacker – experiments with the technical possibilities of the drone for painting.[20] So instead of using the drone to control sprayers, KATSU thinks about using this technical device for

graffiti in areas which are out of reach and difficult to access. To sum up, graffiti is perceived as a chaotic threat for the security of the city – and that means for society in general – like a guerilla tactic that has to be controlled.

Street Art and the lack of perspective

If we turn to Street Art, which has its roots in the Seventies and Eighties, but was widely spread after the turn of the millennium, we see that most of the images do not show a perspective either. The form that has become emblematic for Street Art is the cutout figure drawn, painted or pasted up directly onto the city walls, which functions as its visual background. Though it is often treated three-dimensionally in itself, so that we can visually grasp the form of a body, it is not set in a frame with a perspective view. The beholder's eye is attracted by the cutout forms and he or she has to arrange it actively within the environment, because we are used to order things within space. The most interesting pieces are therefore those, who show carefully chosen positions and an interaction with the architecture of the city.[21] These settings allow a playfulness with our perception: the girl with the fly agaric by Dolk for example was positioned right onto the wall of an old and abandoned brewery in Berlin, in order to turn the courtyard of the building into a bewitched forest (Fig. 2). Those pieces interact with the urban environment, but their spatiality has to be produced by the beholder.

Fig. 2: DOLK, Berlin 2008, exhibition *Urban Affairs* in the former brewery building Friedrichshöhe (IH)

Thus, the reception of Urban Art needs a participatory involvement because of its situation within the urban environment that is experienced mostly through the movement of the body. We need to move around the city to discover Street Art as the artists are moving around looking for suitable places.[22] One such artist who has referred directly to this performative aspect of Street Art is Swoon.[23] Her playing children are only to be seen entirely while moving onwards down the street (Fig. 3). At the same time, the architecture functions visually as a playground. So I would argue that one of the most striking features of Street Art is the active participation of the passerby. His/Her physically engagement in the visual reception turns him/her into an active subject, even when this moment may last only a few seconds.

Fig. 3: Swoon, Berlin 2007 (IH)

This form of perception differs significantly from the main visual systems in the city, which are mostly traffic signs and advertising. In the first case, the signs order the traffic and are often redesigned by urban artists. In the second case, advertising campaigns are maybe the most dominant images within cities. More than traffic signs, they can be regarded as a form of 'visuality'. They make use of traditionally composed pictures with a central perspective, in which bodies and consumer goods establish a normative discourse of the real and common, on how we should look, and what we should buy and so forth. Since the Seventies, these images are the target of political movements like Culture Jamming and Ad-Busting, which are significant parts of today's Urban Art.[24]

Street Art and video surveillance
The next system of order that especially Street Art deals with extensively, is the video control of urban environments (Fig. 4). It is not surprising that this issue is so widely spread among Street Artists, because through their activity of spot searching they gain a deep and detailed knowledge about of the urban fabric.[25] They really pay attention to the realm of everyday life and actually see where and how many cameras are installed, which the average passer by does not notice. With these pieces we find an explicit reaction to what Mirzoeff has described as 'neovisuality', namely the continuous surveillance of our everyday life, without knowing, who actually sees these images, how they are used or to what end they are really made for. Here Urban Art refers directly and often ironically to the mechanism of urban surveillance. By doing so, Urban Art overtly addresses the politics of the 'scopic regime', of controlling the city.

Fig. 4: Aachen 2011 (Maik Glatki)

Street Art looks back

Another example of a subversive visual strategy can be seen in the photo installations of JR, which very often show people looking back at the viewer, questioning again ‚visuality' as a normative system. One of his first campaigns took place between 2004 and 2006 and is called *28 Millimeters, Portrait of a Generation*.[26] The artist took portraits of young people of the Cité des Bosquets and La Forestière in Clichy-sous-Bois, where the 2005 riots started in the French suburbs. Afterwards these portraits appeared in the city center of Paris. The images did not only show the segregated and underprivileged, but individuals that defiantly look back. The black-and-white photographed heads almost fill the complete space of huge posters. Though the format shows the usual rectangular frame, the heads do not leave any space beneath or behind so that they look very similar to cut out figures. Moreover the portrayed faces are grimacing and show a perspective distortion, maybe caused by using a fisheye lens. These formal choices lead to alternative photographic portraits with an additional sense of humor. JR's work realizes with a tacit understanding the right to look that "claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity."[27]

As many other artists, JR expanded his work across the borders of his city and now works globally. Nevertheless, he adheres to his style and the question of who has the power to see or not, as in the case of the Israeli separation barrier.[28] In this work, he dealt again with how the power of the gaze may have far reaching and severe consequences in the ways in which we perceive each other. In his campaign *Women are Heroes,* carried out in different slums worldwide, JR attempts an even larger scale by placing huge images on houses and rooftops.[29] Here again those most haunted by poverty and violence are constituted as individuals via the image that is a close-up adhering to the architecture in a typical Street Art manner. But in contrast to the smaller dimensions within the city, here the eyes of the women are looking back at the

panoptical eye as these pictures are big enough to be seen from high above, from helicopter, satellites and drones. Inspired by this campaign, a group of artists and the Reprieve/Foundation for Fundamental Rights installed a huge portrait of a young girl in Kyber Pukhtoonkhwa region of Pakistan, who according to FFR, lost both her parents and two siblings in a drone attack.[30] Again the image is big enough to be seen from high above and it is intended to raise awareness of the civilian victims in drone military operations. It was released in the internet under *notabugsplat*, referring to the military slang of drone operators, who see human bodies merely as little spots moving on their screens, and describe them as "bugs being crushed". In this case, the huge portrait image is addressed directly to the military complex.

Fig. 5: JR, *Woman are Heroes*, Kibera, Kenia, 2009 (jr-art.net)

In sum, the campaigns by JR and his staff clearly constitute subjectivity and the claim to look and to be seen as a metaphor for autonomy and human rights. But as in the Dürer picture mentioned in the beginning, we do see these images from the same perspective as the 'scopic regime'. It seems that the underlying power relation did not change in the last five centuries. Therefore, are these images of women and children only reinforcing their status of 'victims' in the neovisual order? Are only the weak to be seen, because to have control over the scopic regime means to possess real – unseen – power? As these questions remain at stake, from a formal point view we can describe these images as a contemporary way of portraiture. The faces are shown as fragments and are not situated in a frame of spatial illusion. At least these images are not imitating the scopic regime.

Urban Art as popular culture

In the end I am not sure, wether Mirzoeff would acknowledge Urban art as a form of 'Countervisuality' and of course not every single position of Urban Art claims to be political. But if we think of it as swarm intelligence with its distinct features and topics that I have shown here, it clearly challenges the authority of visuality.[31] In the last chapter of his book, Mirzoeff refers to Antonio Gramsci's writings and his concept of a resilient popular culture:

„Gramsci argued that one of the reasons that the subaltern classes could not be fully absorbed into the dominant hegemony, and thus retained the potential for revolution, was their folklore. Folklore maintained an "unstable and fluctuating" element in the nation-state that provided the potential for a spontaneous upraising, the "great 'undoing.'"[32]

So if we no longer struggle anymore to show that Urban Art is a form of contemporary fine art, but treat it as a less restricted form of popular culture, the modern way of an urban folklore, then we can assign a subversive potential to it. The "unstable and fluctuating" sides of Urban Art belong to the reasons, why it has proven to be such a powerful and interesting movement.

Notes and References

[1] Julia Reinecke, *Street-Art. A subculture between art and commerce* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007); different entries in Katrin Klitzke and Christian Schmidt, eds. *Street Art: Legends to the street* (Berlin: Archiv der Jugendkulturen, 2009); Claudia Willms, *Sprayer in the White Cube. Streetart between everyday culture and commercial art* (Marburg: Tectum, 2010); Ulrich Blanché, *Consumer Art. Culture and commerce by Banksy and Damien Hirst* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012); Heike Derwanz, *Street Art-Careers. New Ways into the art and design market* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013); Peter Bengtsen, *The Street Art World* (Lund: Peter Bengtsen and Almendros de Granada Press, 2014), esp. 65-128, with further refernces (all my translation).

[2] For similar approaches see e.g. Ulrich Blanché, *Something to s(pr)ay: The Street Artivist Banksy. An arthistorical analysis* (Marburg: Tectum, 2010; my translation) and Rafael Schacter, *Ornament and Order. Graffiti, Street Art and the Parergon* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

[3] Compare Bengtsen, *The Street Art World*, 67-69 and Schacter, *Ornament and Order*, xix, introducing the term 'Independent Public Art' for "all forms of autonomously produced aesthetic production in the public sphere."

[4] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The right to look. A counterhistory of visuality* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2011).

[5] See also his summary on the "Keyword Visuality" in Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2009), 89-93.

[6] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look,* 24.

[7] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look,* 34.

[8] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as symbolic form*, transl. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991 [German edition 1927]); Reinhard Bentmann and Michael Müller, *The villa as architecture of governance. An arthistorical and sociohistorical analysis* (Frankfurt on the Main: Suhrkamp, 1970); Stanislaus von Moos, *Tower and Bastion. Contributions for a political iconography of Italian Renaissance architecture* (Zurich: Atlantis-Verlag, 1974; all my translation).

[9] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 48-76.

[10] Albrecht Dürer, *Woodcuts and Wood Blocks*, ed. Walter L. Strauss (New York: Abaris Books, 1979/1980), 579-80; Joanne G. Bernstein, "The Female Model and the Renaissance Nude: Dürer, Giorgione, and Raphael," *Artibus et Historiae* 13 (1992): 49-63, here 60.

[11] For the discussion of the interrelations between gender, space and gaze see esp. for this example Svetlana Alpers, "Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art," in *Feminism and art history: Questioning the litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 180-199, here 184-185; Irene Nierhaus, *Arch6. Space,*

gender, architecture (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1999), 48-54; Anne-Marie Bonnet, *The 'Nude' by Dürer* (Köln: König, 2001), 58 with earlier references (my translation).

[12] In summery first by Hal Foster, ed. *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

[13] Mirzoeff, *Visual Culture*, 1-30.

[14] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 19. For an overview on the vast discussions about the politics of surveillance I used the introduction to "Regimes of visibility. Control, safety and privateness in 21st century", ed. Leon Hempel et al. Special edition of *Leviathan. Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*, 25 (2010/2011), 7-24 (my translation).

[15] For the latest approaches towards an analysis and history of Graffiti see the special issue of *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 14:1-2 (2010); Ralf Beuthan and Pierre Smolarski eds., *What is Graffiti?* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2011; my translation); Blanché, *Something to s(pr)ay*, 17-29; Roger Gastman, *The history of American graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2011); Anna Wacławek, *Graffiti and Street Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 10-28; Schacter, *Ornament and Order*, 2014.

[16] Jean Baudrillard, "Kool Killer, or The Insurrection of Signs," in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993 [French edition 1975]), 76-86.

[17] Kurt Iveson, "The wars on graffiti and the new military urbanism," in *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 14:1-2 (2010): 115-134.

[18] Iveson, "The wars on graffiti," 118-122.

[19] Klaus Jansen, **"**Deutsche Bahn plans to use drones to catch graffiti artists", *DW*, March 3, 2013. Accessed October 23, 2014. http://dw.de/p/18ife.

[20]Oliver Wainright, "Spraycopter: the drone that does graffiti", *theguardian*, April 21, 2014. Accessed October 23, 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2014/apr/21/drone-does-graffiti-street-art.

[21] See also Wacławek, *Graffiti and Street Art*, 139-146; Peter Bengtsen, "Site Specifity and Street Art," in *Theorizing visual studies. Writing through the discipline*, ed. James Elkins et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 250-253.

[22] For the aspect of walking in the city as a practice that constitutes the perception of the urban fabric and urban art see Robert Behrendt and Katrin Klitzke, "Mind walks," in Klitzke and Schmidt, *Legenden*, 146-161 (my translation) and Jeff Ferrel and Robert D. Weide, "Spot theory," in *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 14:1-2 (2010): 48-62.

[23] For the performativity of Street Art and Swoon particularly see also Wacławek, *Graffiti and Street Art*, 96-102.

[24] A critical insight to these forms gives Hagen Schölzel*, Guerillacommunication. A genealogy of a political form of conflict* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013; my translation); see also Blanché, *Something to s(pr)ay*, 39-41.

[25] Ferrel and Weide, "Spot theory."

[26] JR, Marco Berrebi and Ladj Li, *JR 28 mm* (Paris: editions Alternatives, 2011); http://www.jr-art.net/projects/portrait-of-a-generation. Accessed October 28, 2014.

[27] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

[28] For the documentation of this campaign see Marco and JR, *Face 2 Face* (Paris: editions Alternatives, 2007); Wacławek, *Graffiti and Street Art,* 139-141.

[29] For the documentation see JR and Marc Berrebi, *Women are Heroes. A Global Project by JR* (New York: Abrams, 2012) and the film *Women are Heroes. Un film de JR* (France: Studio 37 and 27.11 production, 2011); Wacławek, *Graffiti and Street Art,* 139-141.

[30] http://notabugsplat.com/. Accessed October 29, 2014.

[31] For the comparison of Writers to 'swarm' after the Hardt and Negri concept of 'Multitude' see also Iveson, "The wars on graffiti," 130; compare also Wacławek's chapter on "Urban visual culture," *Graffiti and Street Art,* 157-195 and Schacter, *Ornament and Order*.

[32] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 275.

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