INTRODUCTION

"The history of the stencil as a graphic technique is long and surprising. Long, because it has started in the Palaeolithic caves. Surprising, because contrary to the other traditional graphic techniques it is not vanishing in the artistic heritage park but is still flourishing in the new environment—on the city's walls.

Stencil is the oldest graphic technique (famous handprints from El Castillo cave are 25.000 years old). The stencil technique is simple and cheap. It was used anywhere where patterns, inscriptions or symbols were supposed to be precisely carried onto any base. The amount of such imprints is unlimited because each stencil can be a template for the next one. Copies can be made with almost any paint and in any format. It's No surprise that many signboards, inscriptions and signs were made in this technique."[1]

Instant Public Art. This title alludes to the two primary spaces where stencil graffiti appear: the urban public sphere and the internet—a notable inclusion being social media platform Instagram, first released in 2010. Like instant tea, instant public art has two signature characteristics: prefabrication and fast execution. Here, "instant" refers to the two main qualities of stencils, which are pre-cutting—the advance preparation of a stencil tool in a studio—and the speed of application in a public space. "The stencil plate itself has encoded expert form, enabled good composition, and made these qualities available especially to those unskilled in"[2] creating images or lettering. A detailed definition of "stencil" follows in section two of the introduction.

"Instant public art" is, furthermore, a phrase used by Robert Del Naja,[3] not in his role as front man of famous triphop collective Massive Attack, but in his role as a DIY street stencil graffiti pioneer who was himself inspired by Crass' punk stencils (fig. 36), which were in turn inspired by the stencils of Paris 1968 tradition. I chose a Del Naja quote rather than a Blek le Rat quote as it was Del Naja, not Blek le Rat, who inspired Banksy, the most well known stencil artist after 2000—as I will show in this survey.

However, the work of Blek le Rat, who referenced propaganda stencils in his stencil graffiti history and often referred to himself as the "godfather of stencil graffiti"—another claim I will later disprove—also serves as a subject of interest for this book. Another inspiration for this book's title was "Instant This Instant That" (1978),

1 Tomasz Sikorski: Szablon Kwitnie Na Ulicach [Stencil Flowers on the Street]. In: Format No. 52 (1-2/2007), p. 88–91, english translation by Tomasz Sikorski, http://2bartpl.blogspot.com/2012/05/tomasz-sikorski-szablon-kwitnie-na.html (accessed May 1, 2024).

2 Kindel 2012, p. 3.

3 Robert Del Naja in conversation with Sean Bidder, in: Robert del Naja: 3D & the Art of Massive Attack. London 2015. Unpaged [booklet page 1].

an early environmental conceptual graffiti stencil graffiti by John Fekner,[4] and a short text by 1980s street art photographer Thomas Christ entitled "Graffiti as Instant Art." Works that match this characterization "fit sensibly into our fast-moving zeitgeist of instant satisfaction. Whoever cannot find anything positive in today's everyday life about instant soup or instant drink or even the instant camera must admit, at least in the case of certain selected examples of instant art, that we have become richer in a form of communication. In order to classify a work as 'instant art,' three prerequisites could be mentioned: First, there is the immediacy of production, instant production; it requires a temporary work at the place of final presentation. Graffiti images are usually created under time pressure, either there is the danger of being arrested by some law enforcement officer or the artist is under pressure from the curious public. Instant art is typically not created in the studio, but in public as a 'public piece,' so to speak, and thus allows for […] instant reception. […] In order to distinguish graffiti art from the bored scribblings of casual painters, a further criterion could be added, that of immediate recognition by the public, instant recognition. This last element is missing in all those instant works that only appeal to the viewer when an additional explanation is given, such as for ReadyMades. Instant art is always immediately understood, whether as performance, jazz improvisation or, indeed, graffiti art."[5] Although Christ wrote about draftsmen like Haring and painters like Hambleton, his thoughts fit very well to stencil graffiti which he also—en passant—documented in New York City, for instance Alex Vallauri (fig. 34). In contrast to those freehand instant public works, stencils do require preparation in the studio. "The creation of this [stencil, note by the author] graffiti is an amalgamation of actions on two levels: the graffiti is already made in the author's home, in complete legality, where he manufactures and tries out the stencil. Then the action takes place at the illegal level when the graffitist applies his work in the street. And this whole, from the preparation to the act itself gives stencil graffiti results. It is a possibility to see the end result in advance, to change it or possibly refuse it altogether. This is virtually impossible with the other types of graffiti without leaving permanent scars on the work. This control that the author has over the end result, with almost all phases of the work process tightly controlled, can be a motivation to make stencil graffiti. […] The motives that can induce an author to use stencils for their

4 John Fekner, INSTANT THIS INSTANT THAT, 1978, cardboard stencil tool, 25.4 cm × 71 cm, illustrated by Fekner on Instagram, 26.04.2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_a5SMQFpAz/ (accessed May 1, 2024); 21.02.2020; https://www.instagram.com/p/B8192toFuP_/ (accessed May 1, 2024); in 1978, Fekner stenciled it for instance at Park Avenue Viaduct Grand Central Terminal, NYC, illustrated by Fekner, 12.03.2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BRjfYtNFcnk/ (accessed May 1, 2024); also in John Peaslee, Victoria Hamburg: INSTANT THIS INSTANT THAT. In: Wet [magazine], Sep/Oct 1979, unpaged, illustrated by Fekner 23.04.2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_VccEHFaWJ/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

5 Thomas Christ. Urban Graffiti. Basel 1987. Unpaged. Translation by the author.

graffiti are very diverse. This may be because of the properties of stencils themselves; the speed and neatness with which one can, without much effort, apply the same graffiti in different places. But also because of the technique, where the limitations and possibilities of stencils bring about an artistic interaction in which the graffitist can fully develop and perfect his talents. The medium becomes a challenge."[6]

1 Question/Problem/Goal

The question "Who invented stencils for street art?" is ultimately the question of the history of stencils in street art. If we follow Adorno, the "who invented it?" question is part of the discourse around the concept of genuineness. "To equate genuineness [Echtheit] with truth is not tenable. […] In […] [genuineness, note by the author] hides the idea of the supremacy of the origin over what is derived. This is however already connected with social legitimism. All ruling elites claim to be the eldest of all, autochthonous."[7] Is older always better and more genuine? Authenticity is not a condition in itself, rather only in relation to something else is something real. So we have two questions: Who used stencils in a street art context for the first time and who has made it what it is today? The development of a medium (such as that of the stencil) can best be grasped in its characteristic peculiarities, considering both questions.

The "Who invented it?" question requires clarification. Stencils have been used on walls in medieval churches and in early modern editions of biblical texts on paper. In the 20th century, avant-garde painters used stencils—George Braque (1882–1963) was most likely first with his cubist collages, followed a little later by Fernand Léger (1881–1955), and around 1960 by Jasper Johns (*1930) and Robert Indiana (1928–2018)—but none of them worked illegally on the streets; they worked under completely different conditions and for different goals.[8]

Street art's most recognizable figure, England's Banksy (*ca. 1974), works mostly with spray stencil motifs. Little is known, however, about the history of Banksy's technique. As a street art researcher, I sometimes receive photos of random stencil graffiti accompanied by the note that these street works might be by Banksy. Not every stencil work on the street is from Banksy, just as not every oil painting is by Rembrandt. Nevertheless, this indicates that the public perceives a close connection between a technique and an artist—as a result, one can almost speak of Banksy's signature stencil style. Today, stencil graffiti is often equated with Banksy and street art.

6 Bosmans 1992, p. 61–62. Translation by the author.
7 Theodor W. Adorno: Goldprobe. Kapitel 99. In: Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben. Frankfurt [1951] 1970, p. 174–176, translation: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/ch02.htm (accessed May 1, 2024).
8 Kindel 2012, p. 3.