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.

At this point, a short definition of street art might be helpful: Works of street art are illegal, uncommissioned or self-authorized signs in public urban space that are not style-writing graffiti. Illegal, self-authorized street art and its legal sister urban art encompass a variety of techniques—from paper works to posters, stickers, free-hand sprayed and relief-like works and sculptures to performances, videos, etc.

Similar to the constructed duality of art in a l'art pour l'art sense and commissioned art or arts and craft, I distinguish authorized art from self-authorized art on the street. A mixture of both kinds of art on the street are e.g. those by groups or collectives, whose respective motivations often vary the degree of street art in a certain work. Punks, for example, who illegally promote a punk concert with stencils, or radicals who illegally deliver a political message, or ultras who illegally support a football club, or guerrilla marketers who advertise a product—their work could be perceived as street art and it could be street art, depending on the context. Wherever an individual work in public space is not an end in itself—apart from the ones that make their authors better known—it might be advertising or propaganda rather than street art. The dose of street art makes the poison.

In public perception, the stencil is *the* technique of street art par excellence. Street stencils are a compromise between the over-individualized, freehanded-sprayed graffiti tag and the sometimes under-individualized poster or sticker designed on and printed from a computer. Stencils need more analog preparation in the studio than a tag or a graffiti piece, but less than many stickers. The act of application is crucial to spray-painted graffiti, including stencil works, but less definitive for poster or sticker street art. This in-between character makes the stencil the prototypical piece of street art.

Since medieval stencils and Bible editions were usually commissioned, they serve as the legal and technical forerunners of street stencils. The same can be said about stencils used for packaging, street signage, public advertisements, or propaganda from the 19th century onwards.

As I will show in this book, from its beginnings in the mid-19th century, stencil usage increased first in the context of outdoor advertising, sign painting, packaging and military inscription. Stencils then found their way first into both political and revolutionary propaganda—and, simultaneously, into avant-garde (studio) art of the 20th century. My main point of inquiry will be how stencils made it from these origins into street art starting in the 1960s.

Many stencil graffiti artists have a background not only in style writing graffiti or the punk scene, but also in graphic design, meaning they know what they are doing on the street, even though the law largely considers their work to be just "mindless vandalism" or "spontaneous scribbles." On the contrary, stencils both require and give the artist the possibility for preparation; stencils are the opposite of spontaneous and mindless. Many motifs, artistic decisions, choice of fonts, backgrounds, and locations of stencil street art works become more comprehensible and artistically enriching for viewers if they know the background and the history of this technique. The aim of this

project is to trace the historical development of stencils/Schablonen/pochoirs especially in France, United Kingdom, USA, Brazil, Germany and Poland after 1960 to understand the current discussion about art in urban space in general as well as the reception of street art stencils in particular.

While answering this question about the history of stencil graffiti, I will challenge two popular narratives about stencil history: first, that Frenchman Blek le Rat is the starter and godfather of artistic stencil graffiti[9] and Banksy's main influence, and second, that street art is historically primarily a US phenomenon based on US-style writing graffiti. Other, maybe surprising, results of my research are the following points:

1. Much stencil graffiti roots are in political graffiti, propaganda and resistance stencils starting in the 1930s, which is much earlier than commonly understood.[10]
2. Some stencil graffiti roots are not in political graffiti but in concept art, for instance in France, Poland, USA, UK or Russia.
3. In 1966, Ernest Pignon-Ernest was the first traceable stencil graffiti artist. After him, several artists worldwide used stencil graffiti before the typically assumed start of artistic stencil graffiti, that is to say, before Blek le Rat became active in 1981.
4. Banksy was inspired to use stencils by Paris 1968 posters and Bristol graffiti writer 3D [Robert del Naja] (fig. 42), who was himself inspired by Crass punk stencils (fig. 36) that were inspired by Paris 1968 (fig. 12).
5. Set in motion by Alex Vallauri's 1978 pop art-inspired modular stencil graffiti (fig. 31), the first street stencil movement began in Brazil (graph 7)— not Paris (graph 1) or New York (graph 9) — and went largely unnoticed by the (Western) world. A significant goal of this book is also to give credit to Vallauri (fig. 31) as an important stencil graffiti pioneer and innovator alongside John Fekner (fig. 28), Hugo Kaagman (fig. 40), or Blek le Rat (fig. 18).

9 Prou on his website: "Born in 1951, Xavier Prou (better known as Blek le Rat), was one of the first graffiti artists in Paris, and is the founder of the international stencil art movement."https://blekleratoriginal.com/en/blek-le-rat (accessed May 1, 2024); see also Natalie Robehmed: Forget Banksy: Meet Blek le Rat, The Father Of Stencil Graffiti, Forbes 20.10.2014, https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2014/10/20/forget-banksy-meet-blek-le-rat-the-father-of-stencil-graffiti/#7b1063cc440f (accessed May 1, 2024); Liza Power: Graffiti godfather makes mark in Melbourne, The Age, 28.11.2009, https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/graffiti-godfather-makes-mark-in-melbourne-20091128-ge87f5.html (accessed May 1, 2024). In an interview with David Hopkins, Prou, up for [self] contradictions like always, stated John Fekner was the founder of the stencil graffiti. Blek le Rat. Interview with David Hopkins. In: StudioOn [Oliver Walker, Nigel Roberts] (ed.): The street art Stencil Book, London 2010, p. 4.

10 Josh McPhee: Stencil Pirates. A Global Study of the Street stencil. New York 2004, p. 11–16.

Street art, and thus stencils, are not a marginal phenomenon—they interest a broad audience that trends young: Banksy's "Wall and Piece" from 2005 was a best-selling art book in several editions, languages and reprints, and was sold even in clothing and lifestyle shops.

In contrast to other well-known street art representatives such as Shepard Fairey, Os Gemeos, JR, Blu, and Invader, Banksy plays a dominant role in public perception as well. Although this artist has such a widespread effect, little is known about the origins of the technique he uses, a gap this research project is intended to close.

Banksy became world-famous around 2006. With him, the English term "stencil" became dominant in discourse; it is used in a variation in Spanish and is a loanword also in German, Dutch and Italian, which is why I used "stencil" in the title of this project. "Stencil" is both the stencil tool and its result on the wall. Before use of the word "stencil" became prevalent in the 1980s, it was the French word "pochoir" that was most widely used to refer to stencil graffiti internationally.

After a brief historical outline of street stencil history, especially before, during, and after industrialization until 1950, this book has a temporal focus on the period from 1966 to 2000. In 1966, Ernest Pignon-Ernest (*1942) started stenciling outdoors in France, and in 2000 Banksy mainly switched to street stencils. Prior to that, only a few street artists, such as Gerard Zlotykamien (*1940), are known at all.[11] So, a history of street stencils is also a history of street art. Before that, only graffiti made by anonymous people was documented in an artistic way, for instance by photographer Brassaï (1899–1984), but only exceptional cases, such as Joseph Kyselak (1798–1831), can be regarded as street art predecessors with a name and biography attached.[12]

Not only in terms of content and form, but also in terms of personnel, a line can be drawn from the fascist propaganda and anti-fascist resistance stencils that were used starting in the middle of the 19th century by military, private, and advertising groups, then during the events of May 1968 in France, and then, starting in the mid-1970s, by South American guerrillas and (political) punks. At the same time, stencils were already being employed in a (legal) avant-garde art context in cubism, but also illegally in outdoor late pop art contexts, i.e., in a proto-street-art context with Alex Vallauri (1949–87) and Robert del Naja (*1965) and in conceptual art with Jerzy Treliński (*1940), John Fekner (*1950), Birger Jesch (*1953), and the SZ group even before and during 1980.

Apart from Vallauri, echoes of this line can be seen today in the world's most famous stencil artist. Banksy collaborated/exhibited with some of the line's key protagonists, such as British hip-hop and style-writing graffiti pioneer 3D/Robert del Naja, punk artists Gee Vaucher (*1945) from the UK, French pochoirist Blek le Rat (*1951)

11 Christoph Maisenbacher: Graffiti Kalender '89. Moers 1988, p. 11.
12 Johannes Stahl: street art. Berlin 2009, p. 30, 225.

and Hugo Kaagman (*1955) from Amsterdam—all of whom worked with stencils before Banksy—among others.

Of course, it is not always possible to prove a photographed graffiti was really painted with a stencil, but the same can be said for photos of lost oil paintings. Spray-painted stencil graffiti often have overspray and a characteristic mix of spray-blur, and sharp lines that would be very unlikely, that is to say, hard and time consuming, to achieve without a stencil tool. If the coherent form of a graffiti image is interrupted by stencil "bridges,"[13] this also indicates the use of a stencil.[14] Sometimes spray stencils on cut-outs, i.e. pasted paper works of street art or stencil graffiti mimicry to save time or gain even more studio control over the outcome, can look very similar to stencil graffiti, but often the background has a slightly different color, different overall visual appearance or even protruding ends as evidence that a stencil was not sprayed directly on a wall.

2 Terms and Definitions

2.1 The Four Main Stencil Terms—Etymology and Differences

This survey deals with (predominantly artistic) stencils in public space from 1966 until 2000. My main examples are street stencils in France, Poland, Germany (East and West), the United States of America and Great Britain. I also talk about Italy, Spain, Norway, Brazil, Russia and the Netherlands. I base this chapter on results from Google Translate and several dictionaries. The different terms used for the concept of stencil by the majority in other countries each point to a different understanding of the same phenomenon.

As several countries also use two of the main terms, "stencil" and "pochoir," as loanwords, and as several of the terms—especially in Scandinavian and Eastern European countries—are etymologically related to the German "Schablone," it might suffice to analyze the most widely used ones, i.e., "stencil," "pochoir," and "Schablone." "Estampa," a fourth term used primarily in Spanish-speaking contexts, has also been included, as it is etymologically and semantically distinct from the main three.

13 See next chapter.

14 Rolf E. Straub: Tafel- und Tüchleinmalerei. In: Hermann Kühn, Heinz Roosen-Runge, Rolf E. Straub, Manfred Koller: Reclams Handbuch der künstlerischen Techniken. Vol. 1. [Farbmittel Buchmalerei Tafel- und Leinwandmalerei] Stuttgart 1998, p. 228.