A STREET ART HISTORY OF STENCILS

There are several histories of street art; most follow the same popular narratives. Often street art is considered a derivative of US style-writing graffiti of the 1970s and 80s.[1] Street art, like the term itself, is mostly thought of as Anglocentric. When style-writing graffiti tags and pieces were brought to Europe, the region was believed to be a kind of blank slate. Stencil graffiti is understood as a part of that tradition—a European version of US graffiti.[2] The French pochoirist Blek le Rat, the pioneer or "godfather of stencil graffiti," came in contact with style-writing graffiti in New York in the early 1970s, which inspired his own, European version of stencil graffiti.[3] He is considered to have started a stencil movement in Paris in the 1980s (graph 1), the so-called school of Blek le Rat. This movement is regarded as a predecessor of street art, which, at a much larger scale, from 1999 onwards, happened everywhere in the world. Later, the British Banksy became the world's most famous street artist. As a stencil artist, he is deemed a rip-off, follower, or pupil of Blek.[4] In detail and in close-up, but also in general, especially with regard to early sources, this narrative is doubtful or false.

Street stencils, including illegal ones, were first used by groups, and typically for a specific purpose, a political message or a street advert, for instance, not necessarily in an art context. Though there were some exceptions to this "group thesis,"[5] I call the primary groups the three Ps: WWII propaganda and resistance, Paris 1968,[6] and Punk. Street art was influenced by classically trained artists, conceptual art, Pop Art, Paris '68 and punk—in many cases these influences are hardly distinguishable from each other.

1 Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and street art. New York 2016; Seno/McCormick: Trespass. A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art. Cologne 2010, Jeffrey Deitch: Art in the Streets. MOCA catalog. Los Angeles 2011.

2 "street art is a subgenre of graffiti writing and owes much to its predecessor." Quote by Cedar Lewinson in street art. The Graffiti Revolution. Tate catalog, London 2008, p. 15.

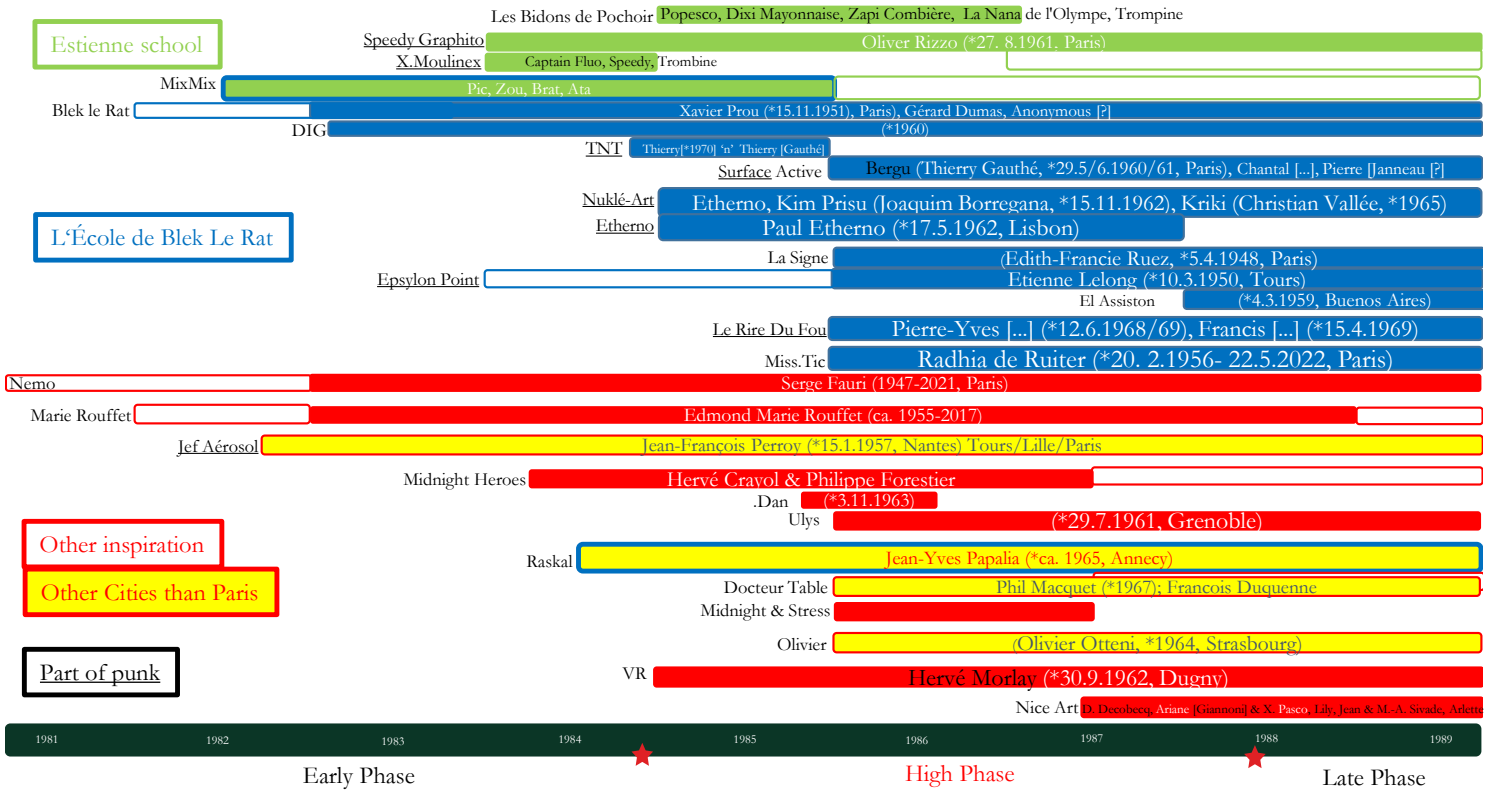
3 See chapter 1.4.1.

4 Scott Reyburn: Banksy Is a Control Freak. But He Can't Control His Legacy. New York Times, 5.2.2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/arts/design/banksy-legacy.html (accessed May 1, 2024). (accessed May 1, 2024).

5 Enest Pignon-Ernest and most Conceptual artists, but also King Pin and Christoph Kohlhöfer, see chapters 1.3., 2.1., 3.1., 3.3.

6 "Ils utilisèrent au début le pochoir et la lithographie puis, en plus du linoléum et de l'offset, employèrent beaucoup la sérigraphie, provoquant un renouveau de ce mode d'expression[…]." Charles Perussaux (ed.): Les affiches de mai 68 ou L'imagination graphique. Preface: Alain Gourdon. Exhibition catalogue Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 17 February – 31 March 1982, p. 15.

Publiziert in: Blanché, Ulrich: Instant Public Art, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2025. https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1433



Graph 1: 1980s Pochoirists in France.

Penny Rimbaud of punk band Crass, for instance, went to art school and through "1968."[7] In the following chapters, differences and similarities in technique, purpose and interrelations between propaganda and resistance, Paris '68, Pop Art, conceptual art, punk and pochoirist stencils will be analyzed.

There is a fourth "P"—besides Propaganda/resistance, Paris '68 and punk—the 1980s pochoirists who emerged in France. They were later received in Germany[8] and Poland as well. Many 1980s pochoir protagonists acknowledged Paris 1968 as a visual and technical predecessor.[9] According to a statement by Blek le Rat himself, the French 1980s pochoirist and street art pioneer was influenced to use street stencils by, among other things, fascist WWII propaganda and Paris 1968.[10] Blek was one of the first pochoirists in Paris (and the rest of France). The pochoir movement (graph 1) was a stencil art movement in the mid to late 1980s.[11] About a hundred people or more made illegal wall stencils at that time.[12]

Other pochoirists and 1980s Paris street artists, though not Blek, acknowledged the importance of punk stencils as predecessors.[13] In this way, the third P, punk, and the fourth one, the pochoirists, were interconnected. Also, the "group thesis" does not work consequently here, neither for punk nor for the pochoirists. Although stencils appeared in a punk context, not all punk stencils were made by groups. Individuals like Hugo Kaagman (*1955) in Amsterdam, Robert del Naja (*1965) in Bristol, David Wojnarovicz (1954–1992) in New York or, for instance Thierry Gauthé (*1960) in Paris, can be identified as artists who started to stencil more or less in a punk context. Many punk stencils, however, were not painted in an art context, or by individuals, but as underground adverts for punk bands or their events, concerts, or political actions. In the case of the pochoir movement it is vice versa. Not all pochoirists are traceable with biographies and an art agenda. Most examples in some of the key sources about 1980s pochoirists, illustrated books like Joerg Huber's *Serigraffitis* (1986) and Eric de Ara Gamazo's *Graffiti'Art* (1992), were made predominantly by anonymous pochoirists.[14]

7 See chapter 5.1.
8 See chapter 2.2, 3.2.
9 For instance Marie Rouffet in Vite Fail Bien Fait 1986, p. 26, 27; Eric de Ara Gamazo: Graffiti'art. Paris 1992, p. 7.
10 See chapter 1.3.2.
11 Maisenbacher in Pochoir 2000, p. 12.
12 Prou in Blek le Rat. Original Stencil Pioneer (29.52 Min., dir.: King Adz) 2006, TC: 14.33-15.09 Min.
13 See chapter 1.4.3.
14 In the 74 stencil photos in Huber's book I can identify artists in about 20 photos, due to other sources. Gamazo even lists the photos he could attribute to an artist in the foreword, that are in the minority. Gamazo 1992, p. 6.

In the opinion of Xavier Prou, Blek "transferred the stencil technique from a political message to an art message."[15] Though not all street stencils in the traditions of 1968 and punk were just political or advertising, nor was it impossible for stencils to be both, the tendency was there. It is debatable whether Blek was the first to make this transfer, which happened, at least on the street, at some point after WWII. Several artists worldwide (see graph 8) used stencils unsanctioned in public spaces before Blek started, or at the same time, independently from him. Bart Bosmans noted this already in 1992: "The pochoirs, in their mass application, are thought to have originated in France, and from there have spread throughout Europe and are even now found in New York. This evolution, however, should be accepted with reservations. It is the view frequently expressed in the French-language literature, but there are numerous indications that this evolution is not centered in France alone."[16] Also Josh MacPhee wrote similarly in 2004: "Manco's *Stencil Graffiti* does a good job of tracing the history of much of the modern European stencil movement to Parisian artists like Blek le Rat, who began stenciling around 1982. Even earlier than this, there was an explosion of stencil usage in New York, Baltimore, Mexico, Nicaragua, South Africa, England, and on the Berlin Wall. There is no clean and simple narrative history of how exactly stencils jumped off city-painted street signs and ornately decorated furniture onto walls in the form of rebellious slogans and magical images. Instead there is a complex web of evolution that connects and dis-connects along the way."[17] I will return to this more than once in the following analysis.

Like street art from 2000 onwards, the French pochoirists created a movement (graph 1), though it was small and short-lived in comparison to street art. And they were not the only one or the earliest stencil movement. Alex Vallauri started one in Brazil in the late 1970s (graph 7),[18] Faustyn Chełmecki and Tomasz Sikorski another one in the mid-1980s in Poland (graph 4).[19] There were also several stencil artists in New York in the early 1980s (graph 9),[20] in addition to John Fekner and David Wojnarowicz, for instance, Jane Baumann, Julie Hair, Mark C, Luis Frangella, Huck Snyder, and Seth Tobocman. Other New Yorkers like Anton van Dalen and Michael Roman stenciled on (street) posters, Eric Drooker and Christof Kohlhöfer (fig. 35) stenciled only a few times on the street only, though prominently. If we are to believe Xavier

15 Prou in Blek le Rat. Original Stencil Pioneer (29.52 Min., dir.: King Adz) 2006, TC: 16.38–16.46 Min.
16 Bart Bosmans: Aspecten van graffiti: een empirisch-sociologisch onderzoek naar de communicatieve waarde van illegale sjabloongraffiti in Brussel. Vol. 1. Brussels 1992, p. 61. [translation by the author].
17 MacPhee 2004, p. 13.
18 Tristan Manco: Graffiti Brasil. London/New York 2004, p. 14.
19 See chapter 2.1.2.
20 Tristan Manco: Graffiti Brasil. London/New York 2004, p. 14.

Prou, the largest, the French pochoirist movement (graph 1), started in 1981.[21] It was en vogue 1984 until the end of 1987, according to Maisenbacher[22] and faded away until 1991, according to Goudaillier.[23]

Like street art in the new millennium, the 1980s in France cannot be reduced to stencils/pochoirs. Some of the key protagonists, like Speedy Graphito, Epsylon Point,[24] Vive la Peinture or Nuklé-Art, were not just pochoirists but also or mostly painters in freehand Figuration Libre style, the French version of neo-expressionism, similar to Haring/Basquiat/Hambleton/Condo in New York or the Mülheimer Freiheit neo-expressionist/Neue Wilde painters in Cologne, all of whom occasionally painted illegally on the street in the 1980s—but without using stencils. Important 1980s Paris street art painters like Jérôme Mesnager, Banglieu-Banglieu, and Paella did not use stencils at all. Some of the key pochoir protagonists, for instance Blek le Rat, Miss.Tic, Jef Aérosol were and are still active in the times of street art or they returned because their trade was en vogue again,[25] also due to the so-called "Banksy effect."[26] Pochoirists influenced street art directly or indirectly, or are at least recognized as predecessors.

1 May 1968, Pignon-Ernest, and the 1980s Pochoirists in France

1.1 The Importance of Paris '68 for Later Street Artists like Banksy

The visual side of the student protest on the streets of Paris in May and June 1968 influenced key group. who made street stencils later, including punks around 1980, the pochoirists of the 1980s and street artists since the late 1990s, in different ways.

In 2018, Banksy, the best-known stencil and street artist, suggested street stencils (and with it, street art) derived from '68, i.e., the student revolts in Paris (fig. 10): "Fifty years since the uprising in Paris 1968. The birthplace of modern stencil art."[27]

21 See chapter 1.3.
22 Christoph Maisenbacher in Pochoir 2000, p. 12.
23 Jean-Pierre Goudaillier: Les Pochoirs Muraux Défonce D'afficher…22, V'LÀ OLGA! In: Communication et langages, n°87, 1er trimestre 1991, p. 37–38. Translation by the author.
24 Quentin Gassiat: Epsylon Point [interview], QG Des Artistes, July 2017, https://qgdesartistes.fr/epsylon-point/ (accessed May 1, 2024).
25 Paris Pochoirs 2011, p. 158–160.
26 Marc Schiller: The Banksy Effect, woostercollective.com, 13.02.2007, http://www.woostercollective.com/post/the-banksy-effect (accessed May 1, 2024).
27 Banksy on his Instagram account, 28.06.2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BkfY9AkhdMd/ (accessed May 1, 2024), see also https://www.instagram.com/p/BkiZOE-B85N/ (accessed May 1, 2024).