# 2 Early Street Art Stencils behind the Iron Curtain

## 2.1 Conceptual Art & Resistance

### 2.1.1 One-off Stencil Pioneers in Poland, 1971–75

Like chapter 2.4 of this book, this chapter on early Polish street art is mostly based on first-hand interviews conducted by and with Tomasz Sikorski (1953–2021). Not only was he himself a significant stencil artist in Poland in the 1980s, he also photographically documented street art and graffiti in Poland starting in 1970 and in New York from 1984 to 1989, among it many stencils, and he conducted interviews with the main protagonists. Photos and information from the book Graffiti w Polsce : 1940-2010 (Graffiti in Poland: 1940–2010),[1] edited by Sikorski and Marin Rutkiewicz, and Sikorski's online list of photos with short information "Art On The Streets In Poland 1962-2015"[2] were the basis of this chapter, combined with an in-depth interview with Sikorski. As this rich material is available almost exclusively in Polish and as the book Graffiti w Polsce is out of print, this summary from a street stencil perspective (enhanced with other sources) is meant to make this content accessible to an English-speaking audience.

As early as 1971, a piece of conceptual and performance art, a performance-like piece that also involved graffiti and stencils, called Zdarzenie Jednej Niedzieli (One Sunday Event) took place in the Polish town of Elbląg and was documented on [silent] film[3] by Stefan Mula (1924–2007).[4] Under the slogans "Precz z ponuractwem!" (Down with gloom!) and "Artystą jest dziś każdy, kto ma poczucie humoru!" (Anyone with a sense of humor is an artist today!), actions were organized in the urban space by Gerard Kwiatkowski, Anastazy Wiśniewski, Leszek Przyjemski, Ryszard Tomczyk from Elbląg, and from Warsaw Krzysztof Zarębski and Marek Konieczny (*1936), an important Polish performance art pioneer.[5] At "One Sunday Event," the artists tried to involve

1 Tomasz Sikorski, Marcin Rutkiewicz (ed.): Graffiti w Polsce. Warsaw 2011.
2 Tomasz Sikorski: Sztuka Na Ulicach W Polsce 1962–2015/Art On The Streets In Poland 1962–2015. zdjęcia/photographs 1962–1990. 21.08.2016, http://artonthestreetsinpoland.blogspot.com/ (accessed May 1, 2024).
3 Zdarzenie jednej niedzieli, 1971, film footage, 5 Min., https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2658/126999 (accessed May 1, 2024).
4 See short bio of Stefan Mula on the website of the Museum of Archeology and History in Elbląg [Muzeum Archeologiczno-Historyczne w Elblągu], https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2658 (accessed May 1, 2024).
5 Marek Konieczny had his retrospective called "Think Crazy" at the Zachęta–National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2012, see https://zacheta.art.pl/en/wystawy/marek-konieczny (accessed May 1, 2024).

passersby and to observe their reactions. As part of the happenings, which took place in an atmosphere of heightened joyful fun, people were singing, dancing and playing on instruments, pavements were painted, passersby were offered to wash their hands, someone took an allegedly carefree nap on a mattress lying on the pavement, and there was general decorating and interfering with the public space. All of this was surrounded by sculptures created as part of the "I Biennale Form Przestrzennych" (1st Biennial of Spatial Forms).[6]

Konieczny splashed paint on a sidewalk that was also painted with white paint showing the stenciled silhouette of a man with the inscription "Człowiek Do Deptania" (man to step on) and another inscription, written clumsily on purpose, seemingly partly with crude stencils, reading "Poczekalnia Galerii EL" (EL gallery waiting room) combined with a bench where some people sat. Another pavement inscription combined with two rawly painted faces read "Strzeż Się Ponurej Gęby" (Beware of the gloomy face/mouth) which is a pun, just one letter different from "strzeż się ponure gęby" (beware of the mountains).[7] Although this highly ephemeral event was legal and tried hard to look innocent, the documented stencil graffiti part, at least, can be read in a subversive way. The "man to step on" could be understood as a reference to violence and oppression behind the Iron Curtain. Also the mysterious slogan "Beware of the gloomy face/mouth" could hint at censorship and the fear of speaking openly in public.

Probably the first artistic mural in Poland was painted by Austrian artist Christian Wabl (*1948) in 1973, on a large wall of the Mechanical Works Zamech company, during the Fifth Biennial of Spatial Forms Cinema Laboratory (Kino Laboratorium), again in Elbląg and organized by the EL gallery. This legal mural was a huge symbolic postal letter "do ludzi" (to the people) that used pictographs of flowers instead of written language, but can be clearly recognized as a letter due to the layout. The title inscription "DO LUDZI" probably used prefabricated stencil letters with a common military or package sign font. The piece was painted on a public wall next to a lawn or garden, and while the real flowers below reflected the freehand flowers of the art piece, the use of stencil contrasted both. The stencil guaranteed good readability for the message, which tried very hard to be unpolitical and positive, but it also conveyed a notion of censorship, as the flowers seemed to hide another message. Without the clear salutation "DO LUDZI," the viewer might not have recognized the letter format of the flowers. While the stenciled letters were plainly comprehensible, the flowers were rather ambivalent—the work as a whole, however, had a positive effect. The stencil was

6 Głos Elbląga, 1971, no. 147 (23 June) quoted by the website of the Museum of Archeology and History in Elbląg [Muzeum Archeologiczno-Historyczne w Elblągu], https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-polskiego-performansu/2658 (accessed May 1, 2024).

7 Tomasz Sikorski: Sztuka Na Ulicach W Polsce 1962-2015/Art On The Streets In Poland 1962–2015. zdjęcia/photographs 1962–1990. 21.08.2016, http://artonthestreetsinpoland.blogspot.com/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

the part the viewer knew before, as stenciled inscriptions were common on the streets of Poland.

The next stencil message in urban public space also used written language and alluded to street inscriptions viewers knew from daily life as passersby. From 1972 onwards, conceptual artist Jerzy Treliński (*1940) had created his series "Autotautologie—o sobie samym—nic" (Autotautology—about myself—nothing). In this series, the artist placed his name as a graphic symbol—often repeated many times—on various objects (art books, postcards, stamps) and during various actions, as well as in urban public space, for instance flags decorating the city or inscriptions in the landscape.[8]

The latter part started in 1973 with a poster Treliński posted on the streets of Łódź. Similar to Daniel Buren's stripes (started in 1966 and put on the streets slightly before May 1968[9]), Treliński made signature art, but in a literal sense of the word. His poster showed a professionally printed, all-over wallpaper-like design containing not stripes, but his surname. The layout, font, typeface and the appearance looked the opposite of self-made, the opposite of a personal, expressionistic handwriting. Instead, "Treliński" had the appearance of a name of a product or company. The poster looked less like advertising and more like wrapping paper for a product. One year later, Treliński carried a large banner with the one-word inscription "Treliński" during the May Day parade in the Piotrkowska street of Łódź. As opposed to Buren, Treliński started with posters and used the banner later. He chose the same corporate design font like in the poster. The May Day parade was a propaganda spectacle staged by the communist party during the Cold War. In communist Poland, citizens were forced to participate in the May Day march. They lost their sovereignty, becoming part of the nameless crowd and demonstrating mandatory "support" of the communist party. The Treliński banner looked similar to propaganda slogans and names of workplaces carried by their representatives, but instead of the state or the party or the collective, Treliński was representing only himself.[10]

In 1975 or 1976,[11] Treliński repeatedly painted the stenciled inscription "Treliński" in the same font, as part of the same series, on the sidewalk of the city of Zielona Góra in broad daylight (fig. 21). He documented not only the result,[12] but also the performa-

8 Filmoteka Muzeum: Jerzy Treliński. Pochód 1 maja 1974. https://web.archive.org/web/20180131142921/https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/trelinski-jerzy-pochod-1-maja-1974 (accessed May 1, 2024).

9 Danien Buren, T III 33, Affichages sauvages, April 1968, https://catalogue.danielburen.com/artworks/view/1944/Affichages%20sauvages?_=1632837963947&page=2 (accessed May 1, 2024).

10 Tomasz Sikorski: Czy street art jest sztuką? In: Elżbieta Dymna, Marcin Rutkiewicz: Polski Street Art 2, Między Anarchią A Galerią. Warsaw 2012, p. 371.

11 Earlier sources sometimes state "1975," but on his website Trelinsky dated them to 1976, https://www.trelinski.pl/70 (accessed May 1, 2024).

12 Jerzy Treliński, Szablon [Schablone], Zielona Góra, 1976. Part of the series "Autotautologie–o sobie samym–nic." A photo of the result was published in 1979, autooffset, paper, 55.5 × 71 cm, https://2021.artencounters.ro/en/trelinskijerzy-trelinski-2/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

Fig. 21: Jerzy Treliński, stencil, from the series : Autotautologie – o sobie samym – nic [Autotautology – about myself – nothing], Zielona Góra, 1976. Photo: Jerzy Treliński.

tive act of stenciling. Treliński's stenciling was part of the seventh iteration of the visual arts festival "Golden Grape.".[13] In 1969, presumingly unknown to Treliński, Canadian conceptual art trio General Idea (see book cover) had also photo-documented their street stenciling in a similar way. Like Treliński's, it was a one-off and only a part of a larger project.[14]

This stencil performance happened in the same year and city as another part of Treliński's Autotautology series. This time he had printed his mock corporate design brand name "Treliński" as an all-over pattern on a woman's skirt and—only twice—on another woman's pullunder. What John Fekner had used three years earlier

13 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 37.

14 Sarah E.K. Smith: General Idea. Life & Work. Toronto 2016, p. 7; https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/general-idea/biography/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

in the context of a Halloween party[15]—an individual stencil to customize clothes—later became common for street stencilers. Punk stencils as well as those by Vallauri, Chełmecki, Wojnarowicz, Del Naja, or later, Banksy, were put on t-shirts to serve as walking/mobile stencil graffiti.[16]

Treliński's playful and humorous actions—the May Day banner and the clothes bearing his own name, and stenciling his own name on the street—drew attention to the importance of individual and independent action. It was a call for recognition of the subject's sovereignty in a unified society living under the yoke of a totalitarian system.[17] From a political perspective, Treliński questioned the communist state's monopoly on branding stamps, banners, flags, posters, or clothes. From a conceptual art perspective, he was also examining handwriting and the artist signature. Similar to American style-writing graffiti, Treliński only put his stylized name in the streets, on tags, throw-ups or pieces. His "corporate" design was implemented in different media in different sizes. Unlike in the case of style-writing graffiti, the passersby on the streets weren't aware of what they were looking at, as the unofficial and artistic character of the street work was not apparent. It's possible the Treliński posters, stencils, and shirts were mostly just more unknown state propaganda in their eyes.

Although this street stencil usage was a one-off for Treliński, he can be considered a street art stencil pioneer, as he was working independently from Ernest Pignon-Ernest, for instance, who started in 1965/66, or General Idea and Chaz Bojórquez, who both began in 1969 (fig. 25 and book cover). Information about artistic developments was slow to cross barriers of all kinds, including the Iron Curtain, the Atlantic Ocean, and the chasm between underground and mainstream media; Treliński was likely not aware of Pignon-Ernest, General Idea or Bojórquez. Treliński made use of the capabilities of stencils to look official and yet produce in an individual, do-it-yourself way at the same time. Although he stenciled his own name, passersby might have assumed his work featured propaganda slogans due to the visual style. The fact that an individual openly stenciled his name in an aggressively non-individualistic society was absurd, funny and a subversive political act of rebellion—at that time, at that place.

15 John Fekner on Instagram, 09.03.2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BRbwBbuFUsD/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

16 See chapter 5.3.2.2.

17 Accompanying text of "Jerzy Treliński: Pochód 1 maja 1974" on the website of the Muzeum Nad Wisłą, Warsaw, https://web.archive.org/web/20180131142921/https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/trelinski-jerzy-pochod-1-maja-1974 (accessed May 1, 2024).

### 2.1.2 Birger Jesch's "Wolf Biermann Allee" Stencil Graffiti in East Germany (1976)

On November 16, 1976, while the well-known political singer-songwriter was on a trip in West Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) leaders barred Wolf Biermann (*1936) from returning to the GDR, where he'd lived his entire adult life. Both GDR sympathizers and opponents, including several prominent intellectuals, protested this act. There were protests, graffiti, and pamphlets everywhere[18]—the GDR regime counted 180 cases of pro-Biermann graffiti in the country in the few weeks following.[19] One example was an anonymous resistance stencil on paper in East Berlin: "Holt Biermann in die DDR zurück" [bring Biermann back to the GDR].[20] This slogan was combined with a stenciled portrait of Biermann. Such examples are in the tradition of classic resistance stencil graffiti, as with th anti-fascist resistance during World War II.

Biermann's forced expatriation was, however, also a reason for Birger Jesch (*1953[21]) to paint graffiti that was more complex than simple activism. Jesch illegally stenciled "Wolf Biermann Allee" [Wolf Biermann Avenue] three or four times in the university district of Dresden, before midnight, with the help of a friend. Birger Jesch's stencils were removed without a trace the next day and the artist/activist was interrogated soon afterwards.[22] Although the Stasi (the East German Ministry for State Security, more commonly known as the secret police) knew he spray-painted those stencils, and although those graffiti were enough to send him to prison, they did not arrest him because they wanted to protect their informant. Only 15 years later, after the Wall fell, did Jesch find out that it was the leader of Dresden's hippie circle who had snitched. Jesch and his friend had been with the group right before going out to stencil, and though they did not mention what they planned, the first stencil they painted was only 300 meters away from the snitch's house. Jesch stenciled the pre-cut "Wolf Biermann Allee" at least three times with red car paint from his father's paint shop: once over a

18 Other graffiti examples see https://www.stasi-mediathek.de/medien/unvollendetes-graffiti-zur-ausbuergerung-wolf-biermanns/blatt/95/ (accessed May 1, 2024); Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung und Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft e.V. (ed.): Flugblätter und Unterschriften gegen Biermanns Ausbürgerung in Halle, December 2019, www.jugendopposition.de/145370 (accessed May 1, 2024).

19 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung und Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft e.V. (ed.): Die ganze DDR protestiert gegen Biermanns Ausbürgerung, December 2019, www.jugendopposition.de/145339 (accessed May 1, 2024).

20 Graffiti "Holt Biermann in die DDR zurück," 1976, signature: BStU, MfS, BV Bln, Abt. XX, Nr. 2983, Bl. 84. https://www.stasi-mediathek.de/medien/graffiti-holt-biermann-in-die-ddr-zurueck/blatt/84/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

21 According to the website of the Verband Bildender Künstler Thüringen e.V. https://www.vbkth.de/112,1348 (accessed May 1, 2024).

22 Bernhard van Treeck: Das Große Graffitilexikon. Berlin 2001, p. 315.

billboard, a second one on a bench. The third was on a street corner, at the height an actual street sign would be—a very site-specific strategy. He did not, however, copy the style or font of German street (name) signs. It was Jesch's first stencil graffiti—a technique he had learned as a painter and decorator—but not his first political graffiti. He had worked with chalk before and another earlier graffito had also mentioned Biermann. He found a photo of it in his Stasi file years later. Unfortunately, neither the Stasi nor Jesch photo-documented the "Wolf Biermann Allee" stencil. Jesch never did graffiti again.[23]

Graffiti researcher van Treeck mistakenly thought Birger Jesch was a female activist,[24] but the autodidact and trained painter and decorator is actually a male political conceptual artist who has been part of the international mail art network since 1979.[25] In 1976, Jesch stated that he thought his "Wolf Biermann Allee" stencil was more activism than conceptual art .[26] After the Biermann stencil, and especially as a mail artist, Jesch was observed by the Stasi. Van Treeck wrote that Jesch quoted a Biermann song called "Bau'n wir eine Stalin Allee"[27] [let's build a Stalin Avenue], but there is no song of that title and also no Biermann song with that exact lyric. Jesch's stencil did, however, allude to a song by Biermann from the mid-1960s: "Acht Argumente für die Beibehaltung des Namens Stalinallee für die Stalinallee" [Eight arguments for keeping the name Stalin Avenue for Stalin Avenue]. This song was not part of the over four-hour concert Biermann gave in Cologne in 1976, aired on West German TV a few days later,[28] which is how many GDR residents (watching illegally) heard Biermann's songs for the first time. Though Jesch couldn't have known the song from this specific concert, since Biermann didn't perform it, he must have known it from hearing it illegally somewhere, as Biermann had not been allowed to give concerts in the GDR since

23 Jesch Interviewed by the author, 29.07.2021.

24 According to my interview (29.07.2021) with the artist, Jesch had sent van Treeck a letter after reading some of Treeck's publications on graffiti. Van treeck included information from that letter in the last edition of his Graffiti Dictionary. Bernhard van Treeck: Das Große Graffitilexikon. Berlin 2001, p. 315.

25 According to the website of the Verband Bildender Künstler Thüringen e.V. https://www.vbkth.de/112,1348 (accessed May 1, 2024).

26 Jesch Interviewed by the author, 29.07.2021.

27 Bernhard van Treeck: Das Große Graffitilexikon. Berlin 2001, p. 315.

28 According to the track List of Wolf Biermann – Das Kölner Konzert 13. November 1976 [2 DVDs].Indigo 2011.

December 1965.[29] "Acht Argumente" was published as a Dutch bootleg in 1970 and officially available only in West Germany in 1973.[30]

Like Jesch's stencil, Biermann's problems were also related to incidents that happened on the street, in Biermann's case, on a particular street. Instead of "let's build a Stalin Avenue" like van Treeck stated, Biermann sang "Dann bau'n wir uns 'ne Karl-Marx-Allee!" [Then we'll build ourselves a Karl Marx Avenue!] because the GDR regime changed the name of Berlin's Stalinallee to "Karl-Marx-Allee" on November 13, 1961, the same year the GDR government secretly removed a Stalin bronze monument from that street. In "Acht Argumente," Biermann criticizes the GDR government's treatment of the street, saying they should keep the name "Stalin". Stalinallee was a central site of the East German uprising of 1953, during which thousands of people demonstrated against the GDR, and 55 people died. In "Acht Argumente," Biermann lists several famous communist thinkers and leaders who, in his mind, actually deserve to have an avenue named after them, unlike the dictator Stalin. At the end of the list, he jokingly suggests that he himself should get at least a street (not a larger avenue) named after him. When Jesch stenciled "Wolf Biermann Allee," he hinted at this specific line—"Dann bau'n wir uns 'ne Biermannstraße!" [then we'll build ourselves a Biermann Street!] It was Jesch's idea to suggest the "Wolf Biermann Avenue," and anyone who knew that song (probably circulated as a bootleg copy) would have understood the reference. Jesch's stencil worked, however, even if one didn't know the song, because it was widely known that the GDR regime was hostile toward Biermann; mentioning Biermann at all obviously meant it was a piece of resistance graffiti. Although Biermann and Jesch criticized the GDR, it can't be assumed that they opposed communism or socialism per se. Biermann, at least, opposed only East Germany's version of socialism; he had a more idealistic understanding of socialism, which is apparent in "Acht Argumente," in which he dreams of building all these streets dedicated to the "true" socialist thinkers, not dictators like Stalin. Jesch's playful and allusive conceptual approach was an example of stencil graffiti where autonomous (conceptual) art in the GDR was combined with activism.

29 Jörg Bernhard Bilke: Der Widersprüchler. Tagesspiegel, 16.11.2011, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/der-widerspruechler/5891490.html (accessed May 1, 2024).

30 Wolf Biermann – Der Biermann Kommt (Unveröffentlichte Biermann-Songs) No Label. 1970. Wolf Biermann – Warte Nicht Auf Beßre Zeiten. CBS 1973 [West Germany]. Biermann's friend and fellow protest song writer Franz Josef Degenhardt smuggled the tapes in 1970 to West Berlin. Jörg Bernhard Bilke: Der Widersprüchler. Tagesspiegel, 16.11.2011, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/der-widerspruechler/5891490.html (accessed May 1, 2024).

### 2.1.3 One-Word Street Stencils by ГРУППА СЗ [Group SZ] in the USSR (Dec. 1980)

A few years after the first unsanctioned Polish stencil art experiments in public space, stenciled statements appeared on the streets of Moscow in December 1980.[31] Similar to Wabl and Trelinski in Poland and later John Fekner in the US, Victor Skersis (*1956) and Vadim Zakharov (*1959) of the Группа СЗ [Group SZ[32]] stenciled one-word slogan graffiti in the USSR in a concept art context. SZ existed from 1980 to 1984 and was part of the second wave of Russian or Moscow Conceptualism. Both members belonged to the so-called "неофициального искусства" [unofficial art] circle. One of their actions made use of stencil graffiti.

SZ stenciled small, clear, uppercase and absurd messages with car[33] spray paint on walls and lampposts only once (fig. 22). They called them "надписи" [inscriptions, lettering], which Zakharov translated to English as "tags" much later.[34] None of the stenciled words were longer than two to five letters (similar to, but independent from style writing graffiti tags), and all were combined with a punctuation mark, either an exclamation point or a question mark. In a signed artist statement, Nr. 3 from December 18, 1980,[35] SZ commented on this action: "С чувством глубокого удовлетворения СЗ сообщает,: ОЙ!, АЙ!, ВОТ!, КАК?, ШЛЯПА! и другие функционируют нормально."[36] In 2004, SZ translated this as: "With deep satisfaction, SZ announces that tags such as Ouch! Hey! There! Why? Nut! and others appeared in different places of Moscow are functioning properly."[37] My alternative, maybe more literal translation

31 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalogue, Moscow 2004, p. 34.

32 "The name is formed of first letters of the artists' last names and has no connection with the famous post-structuralist opus 'S/Z' by Roland Barthes." Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalogue, Moscow 2004, p. 161.

33 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.

34 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalog, Moscow 2004, p. 34, 46; Vadim Zakharov: Group Sz–Victor Skersis/Vadim Zakharov. https://www.vadimzakharov.com/sz-group-1980-84-89-90 (accessed May 1, 2024).

35 The statement is on Zakharov's website but better reproduced on http://ekartbureau.ru/, the website of a SZ group retrospective exhibition in 2004, http://ekartbureau.ru/projects.php?project=74 (accessed October 25, 2023).

36 Vadim Zakharov: Group Sz–Victor Skersis/Vadim Zakharov. https://www.vadimzakharov.com/sz-group-1980-84-89-90 (accessed May 1, 2024).

37 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022; Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalog, Moscow 2004, p. 46; Vadim Zakharov: Group Sz–Victor Skersis/Vadim Zakharov. https://www.vadimzakharov.com/sz-group-1980-84-89-90 (accessed May 1, 2024).


Fig. 22: Группа С3 [group SZ], BOT!, stencil graffiti, Moscow, December 1980. Photo: SZ group, https://www.vadimzakharov.com/sz-group-1980-84-89-90?pgid=jq6x7q6d-9df22cea-c403-4785-af69-ac92ae385a5d (accessed May 1, 2024).

would be: "With a sense of deep satisfaction, SZ informs that the inscriptions that appeared at different ends of Moscow: OH!, HEY!, HERE!, HOW?, HAT! and others are functioning normally."[38] To call the work "tags" might put it retrospectively in a style-writing graffiti tradition, although the term "tag" is not limited to graffiti tags.

Few photos of only two different SZ stencils exist. The most well-known is the one with the word "BOT!" stenciled on a lamppost in front of a car, shot at the embankment near the Tretyakov state gallery.[39] They realized there was someone in that car so they ran away, afraid it might have been someone from the KGB.[40] They cut the small cardboard stencils themselves. Zakharov kept the "BOT!" stencil, it measures only 19 × 25 cm.[41]

A second inscription, КАК? [AS? or: HOW? or: WHY?], was stenciled on an outside brick wall next to a storm drain on a side street, also near the Tretyakovskaya

38 Translation by the author.
39 Photo and info under Alexandra Oboukhova text Strangers from the Future, 2004, http://ekartbureau.ru/projects.php?project=74 (accessed May 1, 2024).
40 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.
41 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022. Zakharov emailed me a scan of the original BOT-stencil tool.

gallery.[42] SZ stenciled several tags early in the morning around 6 a.m. (in order to avoid charges of hooliganism and anti-Soviet deeds) in several central districts and places of Moscow, such as Tretyakovka ("ВОТ"[43]), Yuri Dolgoruki's monument ("АЙ!"[44]), not far from the Fountain of Arts (КАК?[45]), etc. Despite claiming they worked at"different ends of Moscow,") their put their works up only in the very center of Moscow for maximum of visibility,[46] and they were no more than a 30-minute walk from each other. Vadim Zakharov recalled in 2022 that they stenciled "ВОТ" at at least three different locations, but never more than once on the same wall and only on this one particular day. They deliberately did not not work freehand, as stencils make a more conceptual and official impression, and looked less like young people spontaneously painting nonsense.[47]

"ОЙ!" or "АЙ!" [OH! or: Ouch!], mentioned in the artist statement, but also some that were not mentioned there, like "ТЁПА!" [Tena! (?), a female name] or "ХРЮ? ХРЮ!" [OINK? OINK!] were stenciled directly on the indoor walls covered with yellow paper of their first exhibition (called "1st SZ personal exhibition") in the underground gallery APTART in February 1983.[48] To SZ, yellow paper was the opposite of everything the gray Soviet regime represented at that time.[49] The two mentioned outdoor stencils on photos and the mentioned artist statement were also on the walls at this show. The indoor use of the stencils seemed to be deliberately spray-painted in a rough and quick way that resulted in over-spraying the stencil to look less official. In contrast, both outdoor examples were painted neatly so they appeared more official. Zakarow said retrospectively in 2021: "All this graffiti was directly incomprehensible, not understandable directly! It was important to create a dead end or kōan in the brain of the Soviet people. The Soviet era was full of ideological slogans in the streets. Interjections like OH! HEY! HERE!, which we were using at the time, immediately stopped people. They had to think—what is it? What does it mean? Who wrote this? Does it

42 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalog, Moscow 2004, p. 164.

43 Location circa according to Zakharov: Kadashevskaya Naberezhnaya, 6–10, Moskva, 119017.

44 Location circa according to Zakharov: Tverskoy Proyezd, Moskva, 125009.

45 Location circa according to Zakharov: Ordynskiy Tupik, Moskva, 119017.

46 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalogue, Moscow 2004, p. 164.

47 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.

48 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalogue, Moscow 2004, p. 37; illustrated in Ekaterina Degot, Vadim Zakharov (eds.): Moscow Conceptualism. Moscow 2005, p. 313.

49 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.

make anti-Soviet sense or not? etc…"[50] For SZ, it was important at that time to reach a general audience, not only the small Moscow art world, and to do it only once, as a single statement, not as a long and ongoing series. SZ was not caught; if they had been, it's difficult to say what the consequences would have been. The KGB would have most likely interrogated the artists, possibly even barred them from going to university. They might have found out who their friends and relatives were and would have made their lives very difficult.[51]

On the walls of the same underground show, SZ also painted other pictorial stencils they had planned to put on the street but didn't in the end: "The CSKA—Spartak project. Each member of the group has made a choice between the two opposing football teams. First SZ planned to mark real street graffiti (like 'Spartak is a champion' or 'CSKA are horses') with their heraldic emblems. According to their idea Zakharov was to put his signature (a Minotaur silhouette) under the Spartak lines, while Skersis had to mark the Army Club fans' graffiti with his Centaur silhouette. At the 1st personal SZ exhibition one wall of the APTART gallery was covered by the graffiti from the CSKA—Spartak transferred to a yellow paper."[52] SZ made not only one but six different pictorial stencil silhouettes of each signature animal. While the form of the work was graffiti, the show happened in a gallery—but it was an illegal exhibition located at artist Nikita Alexeev's apartment,[53] so it was still illegal art. The exhibition was raided by the KGB.[54] They did not make the connection with the street stencils, but SZ's football stencil graffiti in the gallery was perceived as homosexual graffiti; the KGB interrogated SZ about this. If the KGB had followed this path, SZ would have ended up in prison for two and a half years. Although none of the stencils were overtly political or had an explicit anti-Soviet message—"you won't find one explicit anti-Soviet work in all Moscow conceptualism"[55]—SZ was in danger. It was free thinking, which was considered dangerous by the KGB—to have a free mind was in and of itself political—today they might paint "BOT!", tomorrow something anti-Soviet.[56]

50 Vadim Zakharov, 25.05.2021, in email conversation with Miriam Miskovic, a student of the author in his course Stencil Graffiti held at PH Heidelberg/Heidelberg University in summer 2021.

51 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.

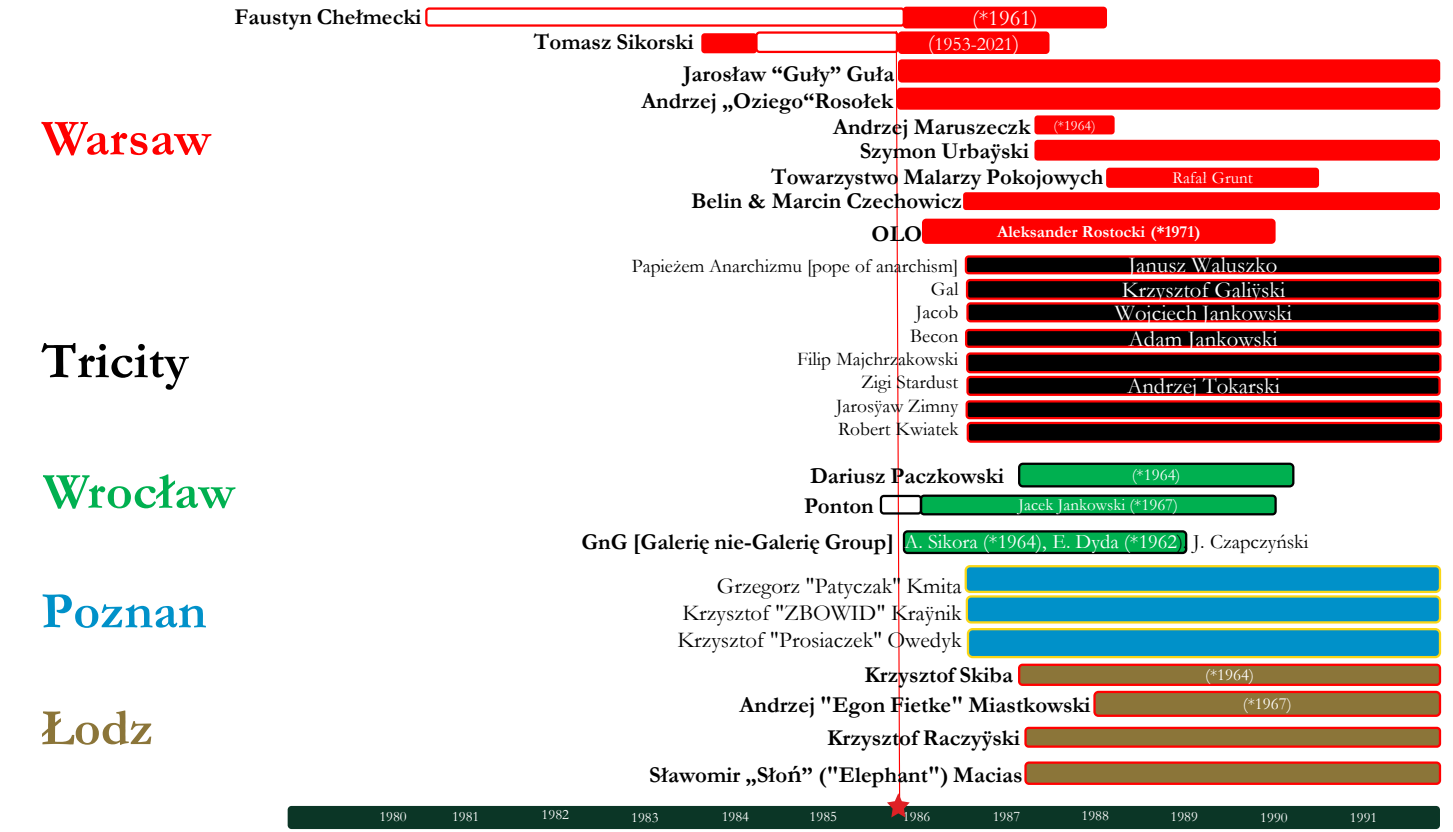
52 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalog, Moscow 2004, p. 35, 84–87; 96–97.

53 Vadim Zakharov, Alexandra Oboukhova (eds.): Group SZ. Victor Skersis Vadim Zakharov Collaboration. E.K.ArtBureau, Art Projects Foundation, ArtChonika. Exhibition catalog, Moscow 2004, p. 162.

54 Ekartbureau: SZ group, 2004. http://ekartbureau.ru/projects.php?project=74 (accessed May 1, 2024).

55 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.

56 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.




Graph 4: Polish stencil graffiti movement.

So, from then on, SZ did not use stencil graffiti any more to avoid persecution as the KGB had begun to monitor their activities. SZ had planned to do the football stencil graffiti, but did not do it. They planned to use them on the same or similar walls where fan graffiti of real football clubs had also appeared. Football fans also used spray paint. But the planned SZ stencils were also meant to look like pieces by individual fans, and they planned to use their real names—Vadim and Victor—and insult each other as individuals.[57]

In 2018, Zakharov retrospectively stated the SZ group was "working on the idea of 'functioning in culture' and developed new ideas: Filling the Voids, Simulations in Culture, Phantoms, Symbiosis, Co-authorships and Bypassing. These directions in our activity themselves became important terms for the group. But they could all be united under the word Activity."[58] Their street stencil activity was "Filling the Voids" (another SZ action from December 1980) in public space, the simple and clear inscriptions were attached anonymously ("Phantoms") by a group ("Symbiosis, Co-authorships"). The stencils "functioned in culture" or were "functioning normally/properly" as they were "Simulations" of authoritarian messages in public space. The usage of a stencil enhances their concept art aim to avoid personal handwriting. In these works—at least on the street— the individual artist was replaced with an anonymous collective that simulated, quoted, and parodied the simple, short authoritative clearness of street signs and military orders but deprived them of the site-specificity of a street sign; none of the terms used bore an obvious reference to the site they were stenciled on. By choosing those particular spots, the stencils were, however, also not far from art locations, and they were meant to reach a large general audience. In other words, they were in a broader sense implicitly site-specific.

SZ stencil graffiti was similar to (but independent of) contemporary work by the American conceptual artist John Fekner and the Jasper Johns/Robert Indiana-inspired English punk band Crass in that it could have been perceived as political and conceptual, and was primarily word-based.

## 2.2 The Polish Stencil Graffiti Movement in the 1980s

If 1970s pioneers like Christian Wabl and Jerzy Treliński introduced street stencils as a one-off medium of choice, 1980s artists Faustyn Chełmecki (*1961) and Tomasz Sikorski (1953–2021), at least for a certain period of time, frequently used stencils on the street. Chełmecki and Sikorski started a stencil graffiti boom in Poland (graph 4,

57 Interview with Vadim Zakharov 20.01.2022.

58 Vadim Zakharov: Actions 1978–2015 – an attempt at a typology, 2018, https://www.vadimzakharov.com/actions-1978-83 (accessed May 1, 2024).

chapter 2.2),[59] especially in Warsaw in the mid/late 1980s, similar to the French Pochoirists (graph 1, chapter 1.4) who had their peak around the same time. "In this first period (1985 to around 1989), of all street art techniques the stencil was most used on Polish streets."[60] The following subchapter focuses on Chełmecki and Sikorski only, who seem to have been the first two to do street stencils in Poland in the 1980s.

According to Sikorski, the 1980s in Poland were a difficult period of political change combined with the collapse of the economy. At the same time, a decade of deep cultural change drove the people of Poland to search for alternatives in the ideas and wisdom of other worlds—liberalism, pacifism, anarchy, Far Eastern traditions, non-violence, ecology, vegetarianism, macrobiotics, quantum physics, alternative worlds, positive vibrations, etc. Various forms of graffiti were a suitable expression of this. It did not have to be actions pursuing specific political goals, for example a free Poland, free elections, free trade unions, democracy, human rights, a civil society, a secular state, transparency. The effect the graffiti had on the collective consciousness, however, more or less direct, was the collapse of a sick power system and the creation of new state structures. Graffiti gestures were often simply an expression of disagreement with what was, and also an articulation of desire, some primary and healthy longing for something better.[61]

Jerzy Treliński used a street stencil of his name on clothes in 1975/76. In the late 1970s and early '80s, Faustyn Chełmecki was designing and sewing clothes for himself but also for musician friends and rock bands. "It is a technique that easily transforms an ordinary t-shirt into an avant-garde and provocatively decorated t-shirt."[62] In this context, he started printing stencils on cloth with an airbrush or a paint roller. Then, some time before an exhibition in December[63] 1980, or before martial law in Poland,[64] which began on December 13, 1981, he took stencils to the streets of Warsaw, until 1987, when he realized he was no longer the only one doing street stencils. There was a stencil graffiti movement in Poland from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s (graph 4, chapter 2.2).

It is more difficult to determine who started stencil graffiti in Wrocław, another large Polish city. According to Jacek "Ponton" Jankowski (*1967), who started painting his first stencils in 1985 or 1986, stencil graffiti was too risky before 1985; people

59 Ewa C. Chabros: Polskie graffiti lat osiemdziesiątych w świetle relacji jego twórców [Polish graffiti of the eighties in the light of the accounts of its creators, title Translation by the author], in: Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość 10/1 (17) 2011, p. 211–230, here p. 216.

60 Tomasz Sikorski: Szablon Kwitnie Na Ulicach [Stencil Flowers on the Street]. In: Format No. 52 (1–2/2007), p. 88–91. Reprinted on http://www.tomaszsikorski.net/teksty-texts (accessed May 1, 2024).

61 Tomasz Sikorski in Sikorski, Marcin Rutkiewicz (ed.): Graffiti w Polsce. Warsaw 2011, p. 8.

62 Stencil artist Paweł Jarodzki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 102.

63 Chełmecki in his short bio on his website, http://chelmeckiwilski.com/en/faustyn/ (accessed May 1, 2024).

64 Chełmecki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 88.

were threatened with reprisals by the militia and the Security Service. It was easier to make leaflets with stencils because sticking something small on the wall took less time than painting a stencil with a roller. Like Sikorski, Ponton was inspired by New York street art, not via a trip, but through the "Literatura na ÿwiecie" publishing house, where he found information about new social movements and the activities of their participants.[65]

As in France in the 1980s, the Polish stencil graffiti movement also featured many anonymous protagonists and some artists that stood out (graph 4, chapter 2.2). Ewa C. Chabros and Sikorski list and discuss the most active stencil graffiti artists and their nicknames in Warsaw, Wrocław and Łódź.[66] Most were born after 1960 and they all started after 1985. Frequently nicknames were used for fear of repression.[67] Nearly all protagonists of the Polish stencil graffiti movement were also associated with punk rock music, and the stencils printed on the walls often served as a poster, as in the case of the bands "Joanna Makabresku" or "Egon Fietke Ventilator Rasta Band[68]." Many stencils were inspired by the work of Polish punk bands such as "Dezerter" or "TZN Xenna,"[69] who both started in 1981.

Although the early stencils of the pioneer Chełmecki coincided with the begin of the Solidarność [Solidarity] movement that led to the end of communism in Poland, he did not paint political Solidarność stencils but small anarchistic or anachronistic, hippie-inspired letter stencils like "Viva anarchia" [Viva anarchy] or ,,Niech żyje LSD" [Long live LSD]. At the same time, he also began with pictorial stencils like the

65 Jacek"Ponton" Jankowski interviewed by Ewa C. Chabros, 12 April 2010, paraphrased in: Ewa C. Chabros: Polskie graffiti lat osiemdziesiątych w świetle relacji jego twórców [Polish graffiti of the eighties in the light of the accounts of its creators, title Translation by the author], in: Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość 10/1 (17) 2011, p. 211–230, here p. 218.

66 Ewa C. Chabros: Polskie graffiti lat osiemdziesiątych w świetle relacji jego twórców [Polish graffiti of the eighties in the light of the accounts of its creators, title Translation by the author], in: Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość 10/1 (17) 2011, p. 211–230, here p. 216–218; Tomasz Sikorski, Marcin Rutkiewicz (ed.): Graffiti w Polsce. Warsaw 2011.

67 Most of these stencil artists are featured in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011 or on the Tomasz Sikorski-created website DZIKA GRAFIKA 1980–1989 (Warszawa, Wrocław, Dębki), posted 25.01.2015, http://dzikagrafika.blogspot.com/2015/01/1980-1989-dzika-grafika-warszawa-wrocaw.html (accessed May 1, 2024). See also graffiti pioneer Krzysztof Skiba in Tomasz Sikorski, Marcin Rutkiewicz (ed.): Graffiti w Polsce. Warsaw 2011, p. 70. https://issuu.com/urbanartfoundation/docs/40.40.ca_os_c_ (accessed May 1, 2024).

68 Adam Wasilkowski and Andrzej Miastkowski "Egon Fietke" recorded by Chabros 10./22.03.2010, quoted after Ewa C. Chabros: Polskie graffiti lat osiemdziesiątych w świetle relacji jego twórców [Polish graffiti of the eighties in the light of the accounts of its creators, title Translation by the author], in: Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość 10/1 (17) 2011, p. 211–230, here p. 220.

69 Dariusz Paczkowski interviewed by Chabros 15.07.2009, quoted after Ewa C. Chabros: Polskie graffiti lat osiemdziesiątych w świetle relacji jego twórców [Polish graffiti of the eighties in the light of the accounts of its creators, title Translation by the author], in: Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość 10/1 (17) 2011, p. 211–230, here p. 220.

Hindu god Vishnu (ca. 1980/81), inspired by Vishnu's popularity in hippie culture, that existed in two versions, armed and unarmed, and in different sizes: 2m, A3, A4 or A5. Chełmecki painted his Vishnu stencils not only on walls but also used it as a kind of artist logo similar to Alex Vallauri's acrobat or David Wojnarowicz's burning house on the back of canvas paintings and at international sites when Chełmecki started traveling after 1989.

On principle, Chełmecki never signed or photographed his illegal street stencil works,[70] like many pochoirists in France did, or later Banksy for a few years: "for me […][signing] was a denial of the idea of attaching stencils on the streets in a common space. Signing is some American absurdity. Because it is about copyright that everyone wants to have the exclusive right to what he has created."[71] Chełmecki mostly applied his stencils with a paint roller, as spray cans not only "dirty hands" but were also hard to get; in artist Krzysztof Skiba's words: "The appearance of sprays in Poland had a great impact on the development of graffiti art […]. They were very expensive and difficult to access, so at the beginning they were smuggled, like weapons, from Germany or Czechoslovakia. I sensed such a private automotive store in Lodz. We bought German, extremely expensive sprays in such private shops and car garages, a little oblique, semi-legal. It was a big problem for us, because we were not financially wealthy."[72] You could also be arrested for owning spray cans.[73]

Chełmecki preferred small stencils. They fit into a backpack, they attract attention because they have precise shapes, are clearly visible, are more accessible than many freehand graffiti, represent something, and at the same time they were not big enough to be painted over the next day.[74] Chełmecki always had his stencil with him. Instead of engaging in a one-off art performance stenciling, he seemed to have been the first to make stenciling a habit in Poland.

Only thanks to Tomasz Sikorski do we still have some photos of Chełmecki's street stencils. In Graffiti w Polsce 1940-2010, Sikorski stated he himself began stenciling in the US in the summer of 1985, a while after he went to New York City.[75] Sikorski was there from summer 1984 to fall 1985 (and again from fall 1987 until fall 1989),[76] during which time he photo-documented all kinds of street art, including a

70 Chełmecki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 89.
71 Chełmecki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 89.
72 Krzysztof Skiba in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 70; other used shoe polish in a spray, see Aleksander Olo Rostocki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 107.
73 Tomasz Sikorski: Graffiti Nad Wisłą [Graffiti Over the Vistula] In: Obieg, nr 11/12.1991–1.1992. Reprinted on http://www.tomaszsikorski.net/teksty-texts; "Originally it was noble, fighting, but later the sprays became cheaper, they became widely available, any idiot could buy them and write, for example, "Fuck Legia." And this caused a huge vulgarization of graffiti." Krzysztof Skiba in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 70.
74 Chełmecki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 89.
75 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 96.
76 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 96–01.

variety of stencil graffiti, especially by Alex Vallauri (though Sikorski didn't know his name) and by various others, often anonymous stencilers.[77] "Wandering on the bike in search of more works, I understood how important context is in artistic graffiti. Any context—visual, spatial, manual, political, even sound and fragrance."[78] He had made his first attempts at street stenciling in Poland two years earlier (fig. 23): "the first outdoor stencil I printed in June 1983 on a dirt road in a small village in Eastern Poland—Wólka Krasienińska. In the picture a man runs in opposite directions, away from himself. I gave it the title of Bob Marley's song Running Away, which I passionately listened to at that time."[79]

After his first New York trip, back in Poland, Sikorski organized slideshow lectures with his street art photos combined with recorded sounds of New York City streets. Already in 1982/83 Vallauri had done something similar for a São Paulo exhibition of photos of his own New York City stencil graffiti as well (graph 6, chapter 4.1).[80] And Sikorski began stenciling on the streets of Warsaw.[81] In an article from 2007, Sikorski still believed he was the first street stencil artist in Poland.[82] Only in 2010 did he learn about the stencil work of Chełmecki, who never documented his own work. We have only Chełmecki's own words as a source for his alleged start date of 1980 and similarly, the one by Sikoski for 1983.

According to Sikorski, his first stencil in Warsaw was a mermaid in "V" form, throwing away her scimitar and shield, which he occasionally also stenciled on the typically gray stains left by the authorities' overpainting of political resistance graffiti, something activist/artist/art historian Waldemar "Major" Fydrych started in Poland in 1982 when he began to paint orange dwarfs over those censored walls.[83] As Sikorski stenciled the running man earlier, the mermaid might not have been his first stencil.[84]

77 Tomasz Sikorski, photos of New York Street Art, 1984–1989, http://newyorkstreetart.blogspot.com/2015/02/blog-post.html?m=1 (accessed May 1, 2024).

78 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 95.

79 Sikorski in email conversation with the author, 19.05.2020.

80 Maria Olímpia Vassão/Maria Adelaide do Nascimento: Dados biográficos de Alex Vallauri. São Paulo 2002. Vallauri showed 150 color xerox copies of photos of his stencil graffiti in his solo exhibition "Grafite in New York" at the Cafe Paris, a cultural space, in São Paulo. According to Spinelli 2010, p. 209 this was in 1982, according to the poster in January/February 1983, see https://www.instagram.com/p/Co2IRCfrZTq (accessed May 1, 2024).

81 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 96.

82 „Here, in the autumn of 1985, the author of this text [Sikorski, note by the author] made the first prints of his stencils on Warsaw's streets. In Warsaw they were certainly the first street art stencils." [original in Polish, Translation by the author] Tomasz Sikorski: Szablon Kwitnie Na Ulicach [Stencil Flowers on the Street]. In: Format No. 52 (1-2/2007), p. 88–91.

83 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 60–69, see photo by Sikorski, http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-IsYhCVO07sQ/VMV8yAqi2JI/AAAAAAAAFUo/BnpaHwjohPg/s1600/1985%2BT.Sikorski%2BSYRENKA%2C%2BWarszawa%2C%2Bul.Ksia%CC%A8z%CC%87e%CC%A8ca% 2C%2Bfot%2BTS%2B1985.jpg (accessed May 1, 2024).

84 Sikorski in email conversation with the author, 19.05.2020.

Fig. 23: Tomasz Sikorski, Running Away, stencil graffiti, June 1983, Wólka Krasienińska, Eastern Poland. Photo: Tomasz Sikorski.

The anti-militarist mermaid was a symbol of the coming victory of reason, according to Sikorski. The mermaid is also a symbol of Warsaw, referenced for instance by Picasso in a charcoal graffiti he left in Warsaw in 1948.[85] Sikorski's father painted resistance graffiti in WW2, he might have known the historic V-campaign and might have transferred that knowledge to his son. Although Sikorski's stencils were not all overtly political in content, they were political in context, due to location and the simple act of disobedience and self-empowerment in a totalitarian system: "The consequences could have been […]: arrest, snatching the earring off, beating at a police station, council, court. However, I repeated the mantra: 'My father as a teenager risked his life doing anti-Hitler graffiti in occupied Warsaw (a member of the Gray Ranks, later fought in the Warsaw Uprising in the "Parasol" AK battalion), and I risk incomparably less—in the worst case beating.'"[86] Stencil/graffiti pioneers like Chełmecki and Paczkowski reject

85 Anne Chatham: Picasso's 'Mermaid' returns to apartment wall 66 years after being washed off , The First News, 02.10.2019, https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/picassos-mermaid-returns-to-apartment-wall-66-years-after-being-washed-off-7890 (accessed May 1, 2024).

86 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 96.

Sikorski's separation of "fighting graffiti" and "artistic graffiti" in the book Graffiti w Polsce: "I oppose the division into engaged art and street art. Everything was involved then; the same people who made anti-communist stencils also had artistic stencils and mirrored them next to it."[87] Once chosen as a stencil location others appeared there as well: "Where the first stencil was attached places were created that became the nucleus of crystallization, in which subsequent stencils appeared. And we know what the situation was then: media monopoly, no ads."[88] Inspiration and artistic exchange were slow behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s; information and graffiti worldwide was hard to access: "We did not have contact with world graffiti because people like us were not released to the West […]. People sat in the country like rabbits in a cage. Of course, some Keith Haring, etc., I read about it somewhere." Even the exchange between different Polish cities was slow. Although street stencils appeared in Warsaw as early as 1980, the first to appear in Wrocław—maybe by GnG[89]— seem to have been applied only in October 1986,[90] partly inspired already by French pochoirs.[91]

Sikorski's collection of about 20 stencil tools consisted mostly of silhouettes of athletes running (fig. 23), jumping, swimming, and a series of heads looking or kissing. Like Chełmecki, Sikorski cut only small stencils (fig. 23). Apart from Warsaw, his stencils also appeared on the walls of the city of Zielona Góra, but only because a friend used his stencil tools there.[92] Copying stencils of others was also a good way of learning the technique. Often the same stencils from the street were also used on leaflets or vice versa.[93] Duplicating and distributing stencils by others was common practice then, as various Polish graffiti pioneers remember: "The group that made the stencil, e.g. in Poznań, sent it to the anarchist team in Gdańsk. The idea was for a stencil to suddenly become a strong form of expression present in many places at the same time. A stencil distribution system was in operation. Someone came up with a cool stencil, mailed it to another city and it was repeated there later. Nobody claimed to copy and duplicate designs arbitrarily. This was not only an accepted but welcome practice. We know: the more stencils against power and the system, the better. In the world of graffiti there were a lot of creative people, but also many who only duplicated original designs. Nobody blamed it at the time. Everyone thought that those who duplicate themselves do the same, no matter whose stencil they attach."[94] Later that changed: "Orthodox

87 Dariusz Paczkowski in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 75; see also Faustyn Chełmecki in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 88.
88 Jacek "Ponton" Jankowski in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 110.
89 GnG = Galeria (Alexander Sikora, Elżbieta Dyda and Jacek Czapczyński).
90 Alexander Sikora in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 116–117.
91 Alexander Sikora in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 116.
92 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 100.
93 Dariusz Paczkowski in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 74.
94 Krzysztof Skiba in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 71; see also Dariusz Paczkowski in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 74–75.

graffiti is all about signing, duplicating your nickname. One of the worst things that brought the turn of the late 1980s was the shift from 'we' to 'me'. Symptomatic that it was then that someone began to attach my stencils with their signature."[95]

From 1979 to 1987, in his stencil period, Sikorski co-directed (with Jerzy Onuch and Joanna Kiliszek) the Workshop Dziekanka, an interdisciplinary artistic and educational center of the Academy of Fine Arts and the Academy of Music in Warsaw. "Dziekanka" was at that time one of the most important places of alternative culture in Warsaw, hosting both new expression painters like "Gruppa" as well as punk bands Dezerter and TZN Xenna.[96] Like in Germany, France, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, punk and stencils were also closely related in Poland. Dariusz Paczkowski saw his stencil designs at punk concerts painted on leather jackets.[97] Sikorski stopped street stenciling at the end of 1986, as many other stencilers and other graffiti had started.

In June 1990, Sikorski (in cooperation with Ewa Gorządek) was the curator of the exhibition "Sztuka szablonu (antyplakat)" [The art of stencil (anti poster)] at the Center for Contemporary Art at the Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. After "Sztuce szablonowej" [Stencil Art] at Galeria W Pasaż in Wrocław in 1989, this was the second presentation of street stencils at an art institution in Poland.[98]

## 2.3 Short Conclusions

The small-format, monochrome, mostly text-heavy conceptual art stencils behind the Iron Process of the 1970s were mostly illegal, and even the rare sanctioned stencil in Poland would appear to be illegal to the uninformed viewer. Apart from Wabl, they were heavily integrated into performances in Poland, but the performative element was also important for Jesch and the SZ group (fig. 22), as the illegality in the case of SZ reinforced the absurd character, as the involuntary art appraisers on the street had to ask themselves under what circumstances these messages got there. In each case, the use of stencils made sense to lead away from the classic "art" character. Trelinski chose the clear and repetitive design and advertising optics, Wabl, Jesch and SZ the stenciled information sign, and the Sunday Event crude childish stencils to point out to passersby in the public space that these works were about ideas, concepts and utopias, not about a "classic" painterly or illusionistic art. In all cases, a political, critical element

95 Dariusz Paczkowski in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 79.
96 http://cultural-opposition.eu/registry/?uri=http://courage.btk.mta.hu/courage/individual/n26577 (accessed May 1, 2024).
97 Dariusz Paczkowski in Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 74.
98 Sikorski/Rutkiewicz 2011, p. 101. On the 16-piece postcard-set issued with the show at Ujazdowski Castle the show was alternatively entitled "Szablon/Sztuka Miasta" [Stencil/Art of the City or: Stencil/City Art], 19.06.1990 do 30.06.1990, https://mediateka.u-jazdowski.pl/zasoby/sztuka-szablonu-224150877 (accessed May 1, 2024).

can be read through the attachment of the works in public within the framework of a political system that hardly tolerated dissent. If they were caught, SZ or Jesch would have had to face severe consequences. Openly political statements, however, were only made in the case of Jesch and he, too, added a humorous, playful touch that distinguishes "Wolf Biermann Allee" from pure political activism.

The 1980s stencil graffiti movement in Poland (graph 4, chapter 2.2) proves that the better-known, better-documented pochoirist movement (graph 1, chapter 1.4), which to this day holds a more prominent position internationally, was not the only one. And that its pioneer Chełmecki, according to his own testimony, began as early as (or earlier than) Blek le Rat claims to have started. At least from the photographic material that has been preserved, it can be seen that the Polish stencil graffiti movement was much more political and even more inspired by punk than the pochoirists. Contrary to many French pochoirists, the majority of today's most famous Polish protagonists did not sign their works. Only the later stencil graffiti in Wroclaw, some of which were created independently of the Warsaw scene, were actually influenced by the French pochoirists. In contrast to the pochoirists, their Polish counterparts were partly familiar with New York stencils via the traveler Sikorski through his photos, especially those of Alex Vallauri's (without knowing his name and without identifying a whole series of stencils as originating from that one artist). Apart from Sikorski's stencils themselves, which are similar to Vallauri's in their serial, modular, and silhouette-like nature, many of the stencils seem to have not broken away from the rectangular poster format with the associated text-image division.