

## Another attempt to explore the transient nature of post-graffiti through the history of a term

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### Abstract

The term post-graffiti has a history which seems to be more than long enough to manifest a stable and convenient meaning. However, from 1983 post-graffiti was proclaimed as a completely new art movement several times, which caused confusion and misunderstandings. This essay aims to explore the reasons why the meaning of post-graffiti was so shapeshifting over the time through the analysis of particular stages of its life cycle dated in **New York 1980's** and **Paris 2000s** and how the differences in its meaning between these specific phases affected the modern perception of the term. It appeared to be that the main reason of the transient nature of post-graffiti is in the lack of attention to stylistic features. The artists representing the movement, declared as post-graffiti, were very divergent stylistically. Their artistic practices were not coherent as a whole, there was no aesthetic commitment. Consequently, it is hard to extract the essential features which could represent the movement. Through historical context this writing introduces the idea of *letter construct* which could be used in order to distinguish the movement stylistically.

**Keywords:** Post-graffiti, Art, Graffiti, History, Abstract

Throughout 34 years (1983-2017) *post-graffiti* several times was proclaimed as a completely new art movement, rarely with a common goal of its participants, often without the set of features aimed to fairly distinguish it stylistically. For instance, with a closer look on the two specific stages of the development of post-graffiti term we will notice that in *New York in 1983* Sidney Janis defined post-graffiti as “transition [of graffiti imagery] from subway surfaces to canvas” (Janis, 1983), while the activity which was considered as post-graffiti on the latter stage - in *Paris in 2000s*, was about “visual language intelligible to the general public” (Abarca, 2010: 385) which “unlike graffiti or academic art, is not built from a series of codes (Abarca, 2010: 333). Apparently, different connotations of the term consequently caused misunderstanding, since nowadays post-graffiti is predominantly associated with illegal abstract painting on abandoned constructions.

It is not a secret that one can hardly find the static meaning regarding the classifications of all the movements and sub-movements comprehensively covered by a term *urban art*<sup>[1]</sup>.

Although, unlike the “street art” which is now quite rarely used by artistic community in order to define anything, “post-graffiti” still serves to define a certain part of the scene. The problem is that the meaning of post-graffiti shifted back and forth between the radically opposite directions and eventually stuck somewhere between letters and non-letters, legality and illegality, wall and canvas, intelligibility and unintelligibility. Why has the meaning of post-graffiti been so transient and shapeshifting over time? The main reason is because both times (in 1983 and in 2003) the artists who were representing the movement, declared as post-graffiti, were way too divergent stylistically. Their artistic practices were not coherent as a whole, there was no aesthetic commitment, consequently, it's hard to extract the essential features which could distinguish particular “post-graffiti” from any other movement which happened to be after graffiti.

In comparison to any other “urban” art movement *traditional graffiti* has quite clear features which make it distinctive and stable: **name/tag** as the essence and the “faith of graffiti”;

**repetition** which leads to **competitiveness** in order to gain **fame**; appreciation of **illicit nature** of the **outdoor performance**; the **attitude** based on special set of rules and “**graffiti codes**” as unique language which provides the **exclusivity** of the group and the target audience; particular **freehand style** and the **spray paint/permanent marker** as a common tool. Those pivotal elements will serve as the focal points during our endeavour to analyse the post-graffiti in relation to its historical precursor.

This research aims to examine the two particular stages of post-graffiti history as quite eloquent examples of development of the term. The first stage is signified by “Sidney Janis Gallery” on 57<sup>th</sup> street in New York. It was late 1983, which means that the main graffiti-associated group exhibitions were already behind. In 1983, the “Mudd Club” was already closed; owing to Diego Cortez “graffiti art” already had its minute on the same wall with Warhol at PS1; thanks to Claudio Bruni “European direction” was already discovered by Fab 5 Freddy with Lee Quiñones; and Yaki Kornblit was just about to follow this tendency within his gallery in Amsterdam. As Leonard McGurr (aka Futura 2000) will later reflect on this topic: “A lot of it was me being follower at that time, and also being included in things, but kind of unconsciously. [Feb5] Freddy would say, “Yo, we’re going to do this show at the Mudd Club. We’re going to do a painting” (Lewisohn, 2011: 66). One thing was clear in 1983 – consciously or unconsciously, graffiti trespassed the borders of canvas and art dealer Sidney Janis was the one who decided to celebrate it with a new term. The group exhibition titled “Post-Graffiti” embodied the “transition from subway surfaces to canvas, an extension in scope and concept of their [graffiti artists’] spontaneous imagery” and declared that it was a day when “graffiti artist’s painting no longer transitory or ephemeral, joins the tradition of contemporary art and is recognized as an existing valid movement” (Janis, 1983).

Although, the artworld and media accepted only some of the artists who were associated with graffiti but didn’t actually practicing it. Therefore, the strongest association with post-graffiti was personified by Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. As later Tristan Manco will admit: “The original “old school” graffiti artists didn’t accept the way artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat were labelled “graffiti

artists” as they clearly came from a different world. It was felt that the art establishment was buying into graffiti style but refused to acknowledge those artists who created the graffiti culture” (Manco, 2004: 9). Surely, you can argue that Futura 2000 and Rammellzee also were quite the faces of this new movement, but that is actually the problem. What do these four artists have in common? Moreover, what is in common between the part of artists from “Post-Graffiti” exhibition like A-one, Crash, Daze, Futura 2000, The Arbitrator Koor, Lady Pink, Lee Quiñones and Rammellzee with the other part like Jean Michel-Basquiat, Keith Haring, Don Leicht and Kenny Scharf? The artistic practice of the first part fully corresponding to aforementioned pivotal elements of graffiti. Through working on the canvas, they were making a shift from *illegality* to *legality*, transition from *outdoor* to *indoor*. If it would be only them, sharing the same style and goal, it could be easy to define “post-graffiti” of the Sidney Janis era – just keep the pivotal elements of traditional graffiti except *illicit nature* and *outdoor performance*. In this case the words narrated by Marc H. Miller in 21<sup>th</sup> edition of “Art/New York” video magazine would have had fairly true sense: “It started on the streets and on the subways over 10 years ago... Now it’s called Post Graffiti, because it’s done legally on canvas” (Tschinkel, 1984).

On the other hand, the second part of the artists involved in “Post-Graffiti” exhibition corresponded to pivotal elements of graffiti in a very slight manner: their practices were not name-based, they had a message which was easy-comprehensible by general audiences, these practices were not based on *graffiti codes*, nor *graffiti style* and they were not limited by *graffiti rules*. What they shared with the graffiti scene was its *illicit nature*, *outdoor performance*, *freehand style* and sometimes *spray paint/permanent marker* as a tool. From those four elements, only half are left after painting on canvas. Those two groups did not share the same milieu, had completely different visions and goals and eventually developed quite distinctive styles. Mixing those artists by covering them with one umbrella caused mixing of their artistic styles into some hybrid and shapeshifting feature of “post-graffiti” with Basquiat and Haring on a front cover.

Paris at the beginning of millennium is a next particular stage of post-graffiti history. In winter 2003 French artist Olivier Kosta-Théaine (aka Stak) as a founder and editor of seminal

“WorldSigns” magazine declared a refusal to “use the words like “street art” and “propaganda”, because they don’t mean anything anymore” (Kosta-Théfaine, 2003:3). Therefore, he started to use “post-graffiti” as supposedly meaningful substitute for the “trendy” words. Three months earlier on the pages of the same magazine Stak and Honet proclaimed the “reconstruction of the new graffiti movement for true artistic future” (Kosta-Théfaine, 2002: 3). Even without naming it post-graffiti yet, it’s quite obvious that they already had a certain idea of the movement in their minds. This idea was based on rejection. Rejection of hip-hop aesthetic, rejection of graffiti style, rejection of strict graffiti rules and codes. It was the moment when “punk spirit” was the reaction against “hip-hop” leitmotif, the moment when post-graffiti became reaction against traditional graffiti. And apparently, this new idea of post-graffiti from 2003 did not include the “from subway to canvas” overtones from 1983. Due to some kind of trendiness of the “street art” label at that moment, it immediately was rejected by the scene and substituted by fresh and not-so-trendy post-graffiti. Yet it seemed more like rejection of the title, rather than ideology, stylistic features or approach behind it.

When it comes to early 2000s in graffiti history the words of Jeroen van Mourik seem to be quite comprehensive: “For graffiti it was a period of experimentation, a moment in its history in which it opened itself up to allow other influences, styles and ideas. Interesting artists with unique personal styles came through weekly, even daily. The boundaries between graffiti and art started to seem unimportant and nobody knew where it was going to and what would happen next” (Eltono, 2012:2). The founder of the influential “Ekosystem” platform – artist known as Eko recalls that moment in similar way: “simple fact of painting something else than letters, not signing one’s work or use another tool than spray paint seemed to us – quite naively – incredibly fresh and inventive” (Eko, 2010). Eventually artists felt freedom and deepened more into experiments with every single element of traditional graffiti. It was a crucial moment when a certain amount of different paths appeared in front of artists within the public space. But even though different paths were chosen, the choice-makers again were sharing the same post-graffiti umbrella, regardless of their philosophy, goals or stylistic features.

Let’s take an influential Parisian exhibition “Nusign 2.4”

from July 2004 as an example. This event was promoted by its organizers and participants as an exhibition dedicated to “European post-graffiti scene”. It is not hard to notice the stylistic differences among the forty artists who were representing this particular post-graffiti scene within this exhibition. In accordance with a structure proposed by Tristan Manco in “Street Logos” the artists involved in “Nusign 2.4” exhibition fall into different categories, for instance: “**Urban Characters**” category is represented by KRSN, Akroe, André, Microbo, Bo130 and Gomes; “**Signs**” category: Zevs, Francois Morel; “**Iconographics**”: Influenza; “**Logos**”: Stak, Honet, 108, Eltono (Manco, 2004). This time artists from different categories practically share the same social environment, but their artistic practices were dissimilar. Even if we will try to consider post-graffiti as something anchored with such distinctive elements as “public space; behavior without permission; intelligible visual language; general audience [as target]; repetitive motive and recognizable style” (Abarca, 2010: 385), still it is too wide stylistically, since such artists as 108 and Shepard Fairey are sharing the same category according to it. Undoubtedly, it is not an easy task to categorise the young artists at the simultaneous rise of the new movements, but still it is crucial to distinguish one thing from another. The aforementioned group of artists had two principles in common: they were operating on the street and they rejected the style of traditional graffiti. Eventually it was not enough to homogenize the movement, since a variety of artistic practices within a particular scene made it nearly impossible to distinguish the artistic approach and recognisable stylistic features of post-graffiti.

It is important to mention that the impact made by Stak and Eltono became highly influential for the next generation of significant artists. Stak’s idea of the “*logo as a name*” and the active period of his abstract logos (1995 – 2004) was a game-changer for certain artists. Italian artist Guido Bisagni (aka 108) stated: “Stak is the artist that really changed my vision in graffiti. I always liked him and Honet and their European way to do letters. Anyway, one day, probably it was in 1996 I saw his strange “signs” on Roman trains in some graffiti magazine. It was totally new. It was like to see the real birth of a new culture to me” (Bisagni, 2012). American artist MOMO with the French artist Nelio are stating the strong influence of Eltono on their artistic way to abstraction. Needless to say, 108, MOMO and other inspired artists eventually influenced the next generation. So, now we have the scene of self-

proclaimed post-graffiti representatives who fairly follow the artists which made the influence on them, rather than the movement. Abandoned constructions as best accessible surfaces in Parisian suburbs remained in preference rather as aesthetic sentiment in a modern day; the letters of the names once reduced to logotypes transformed into pure abstract shapes; the *idea of graffiti* replaced the actual graffiti.

## Conclusion

Definite stylistic features are crucial when we are talking about an *art movement*, or a term which aims to describe an art movement. Significant exhibitions are meant to present the tendencies based on features which are making particular art practices recognizably different from any other manifestations. This is how it works. Although, in both cases examined by this essay post-graffiti term was applied to phenomenon which was quite diverse by its nature: in 1983 post-graffiti was meant to describe the “graffiti” on canvas, but the moment of transition from freight trains to gallery was overshadowed by those who just used the street as an extension of their studio practice; in Paris 2003-2004 differences between the artists who were representing the scene were ignored again since post-graffiti term was used mainly to embody the refusal from “hip-hop keynote” of traditional graffiti, with simultaneous rejection of the popular - at that time - street art label.

I suppose, the problem is that even today most part of group shows is attempting to imitate the model of “New York/New Wave” exhibition from 1981. Such exhibitions do not represent the tendencies but are focused on attracting as much audience as possible, which means the artists should be radically different in order to satisfy every taste. The “museum-as-funhouse” model of art exhibition could be quite risky in terms of further influence. It is quite hard to detect the development of any art movement with such an approach. Especially when so many different artistic practices are covered with one umbrella just as it was at “Post-Graffiti” exhibition in 1983, or “Nusign 2.4” show in 2004, or many other exhibitions, events and publications regarding urban art. The transient nature of post-graffiti term is caused by the lack of attention to its *stylistic features*. Every time this term appeared it aimed to involve as much features as it could in order to be broad and significant.

Therefore, it became unclear and shapeshifting.

How can we possibly distinguish the post-graffiti movement stylistically? It is not hard to notice a significant moment in the late 1990s/early 2000s which could be considered as a true game-changer in the history of *graffiti-associated movement*. When Olivier Kosta-Théfaïne (aka Stak) came up with an idea of “*logo as a name*” in 1995 and adapted the letters of his tag into abstract shape, he constructed the new stylistic approach. This idea became a fork, the point where movement divides into two parts: where the letters of a name become structure for predominantly abstract imagery; or where the letters of the name are rejected as idea, as structure, or a shape<sup>2</sup>. Both directions share the common idea of rejection of “hip-hop” aesthetic along with the strict rules, style and the codes of *traditional graffiti*. However, each one of these two directions demonstrates distinctive stylistic and structural features which is quite crucial when someone attempts to define and analyse the tendency.

We will drop the latter direction as the one which is less relevant regarding the post-graffiti discourse and will focus on the direction where the idea of the name and graphemes becomes the structure for a new artistic imagery with intangible reference to the heritage of traditional graffiti. Abstract logo which was born from the name “Stak” aimed to reject the style of traditional graffiti, but still it partly stayed within the social construct of graffiti. It was mentally connected with its predecessor and the main link was in its *letter construct*. Just as a grid structure declared modernity, through becoming autonomous milestone between the present and the past, this writing proposes to use the *letter construct* of abstract shapes in order to stylistically distinguish the post-graffiti movement. By following this model, we will have the *traditional graffiti* based on letter structure which is comprehensible and readable by an exclusive audience (due to graffiti codes); on the other side we can easily distinguish the *post-graffiti* which is also based on letter structure, although this time letter is considered by the artist as an abstract shape, therefore it becomes just the base for the abstract composition and doesn't mean to be readable at all. In this case if we will come back to the artists who were showcasing at “Nusign 2.4” exhibition, we can notice that such artists as Stak, Eltono, Eko, Cke were operating within the frame of letter construct. Their imagery

was abstract yet still had some sort of link with reality, because those forms didn't come from pure nothingness, those shapes and silhouettes were constructed through "a distillation, a purification of a moniker into its essential forms" (Eltono, 2012: 3). The abstract shapes of post-graffiti are composed as if it were letters, with the familiar logic and constitution, yet this time it is more like the subject of habit. In this case *letter construct* signifies the *stylistic feature*, where composition of the artwork has rather the "feeling of graffiti", the slight savour of it. Intangible presence of letters is unconsciously decisive for the artists with such a stylistic approach, yet still it gives them the freedom and space for the mistake as valuable extension of artistic endeavour. Going by the words of Christ from Moderne Jazz Crew: "At the end of the painting it's often the same: **writers find words, people see things**" (Kuhnert, 2017: 22).

### Footnotes

1 - Urban art here refers to: "*forms of independent artistic performance in the public space that go beyond the graffiti*" (Abarca, 2010: 35).

2 - Obviously in this case letters are regarded as graphemes, and not as part of language with objective or practical meaning such as word, phrase, slogan etc.

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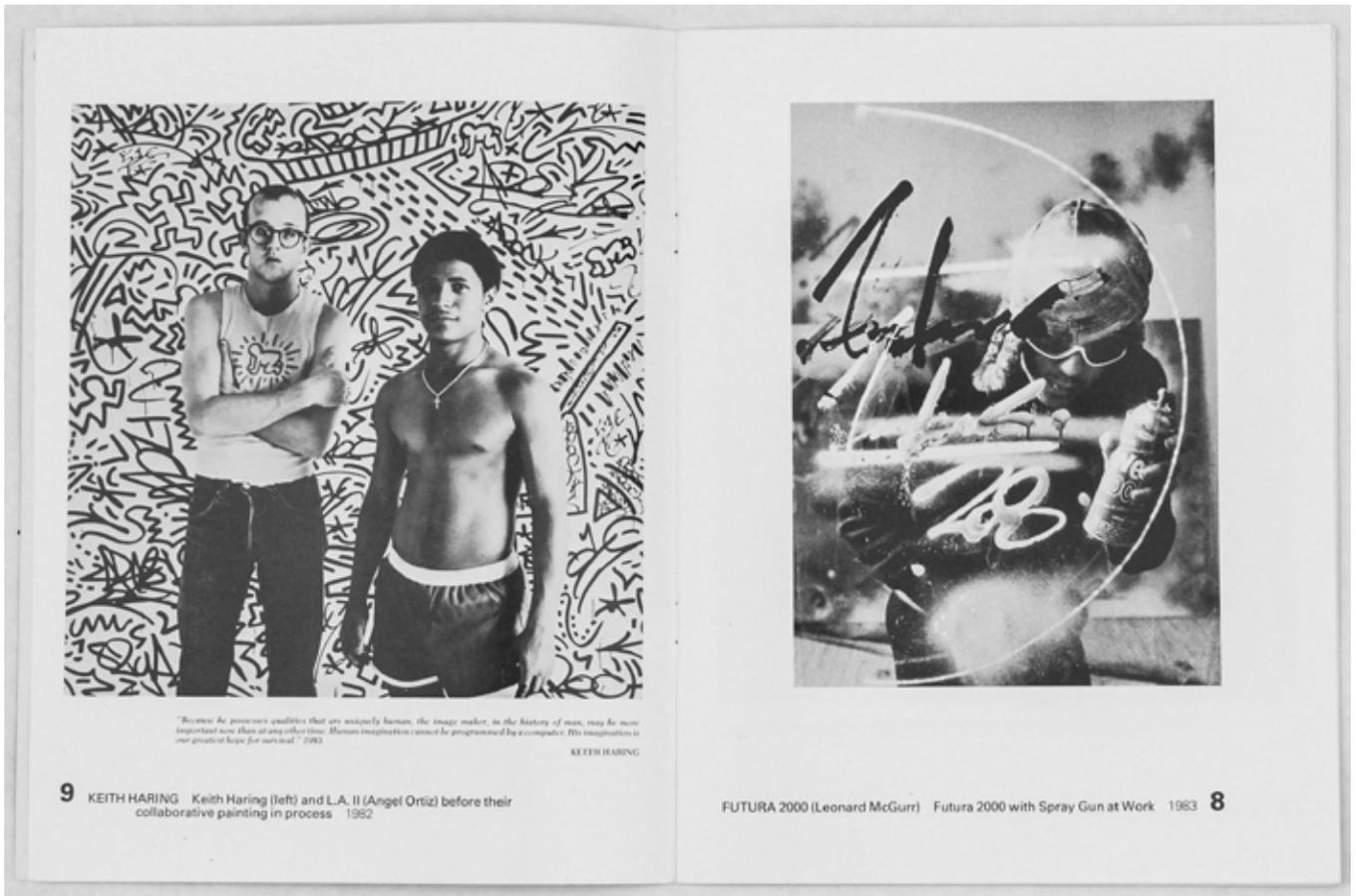


Fig. 1 - Keith Haring, L.A. II and FUTURA2000 in Post-Graffiti Catalogue, Sidney Janis Gallery NYC, 1983. Courtesy of Yves Stohr.



Fig. 2 - Post-Graffiti Catalogue cover made by John Matos (aka CRASH) and Chris Daze Ellis for Sidney Janis Gallery NYC, 1983 Courtesy of Yves Stohr

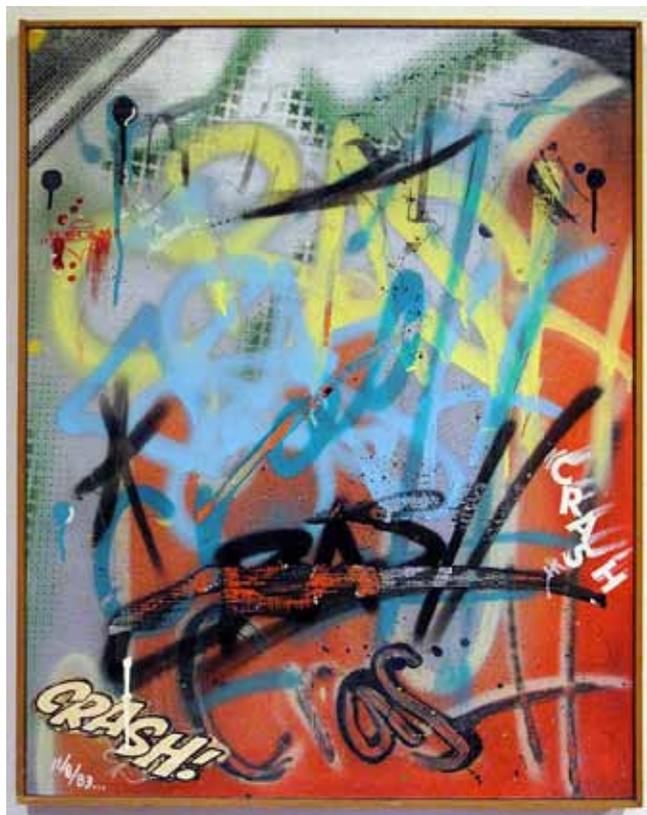


Fig.3 - Tags canvas by John Matos (aka CRASH), 1983. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4 - *Eko*, 2017. *Courtesy of the artist*



Fig. 5 - *Logo as a Name* by Olivier Kosta-Théfaine (aka Stak), Modena 2002. *Courtesy of the artist.*