

The evolution of Halls of Fame in graffiti writing and my run to a masterpiece

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Abstract

Cultural and urban geographical research related to graffiti and street art poses interdisciplinary questions and employs multi-methodical approaches. In recent years, research methods in the field of ethnography have been receiving more and more attention in the German-speaking community of human geography. With this in mind, the following working paper presents a methodological experiment for examining the everyday urban practice of graffiti writing and its spatial relevance. “My run to a masterpiece” presents the current status of this ethnographic research, whereby it has been attempted to localize and analyze legal walls for graffiti writing (some of them considered “Halls of Fame”) in the urban cultural landscape as well as these walls’ potential for integrated urban development policies in Germany.

Keywords: graffiti writing, (auto-) ethnography, urban and cultural geography, legal walls, Hall of Fame

1. Introduction – Halls of Fame and legal graffiti writing

The term “Hall of Fame” is used in many different fields and contexts. In general, the Oxford Dictionary defines a *Hall of Fame* as an institution, be it a real or fictional place, honoring and memorializing the most famous people of a certain field, for example sports, music or science. Halls of Fame are also established for leading figures in certain countries or even regions (Hall of Fame for Great Americans, Hall of Fame for Great Bavarians, etc.). In the graffiti world, the meaning of the term Hall of Fame is quite variable. The following list, based on the “glossary of glossaries” in Jacob Kimvall’s book *The G-Word* (Kimvall, 2014: 203) presents definitions by authors with various scholarly backgrounds in chronological order: “(Famous) writers’ meeting point” (Jacobson, 1996); “A legal or semi-legal walled painting site” (MacDonald, 2001); “Places / walls, where experienced writers (kings) meet and paint high-quality graffiti (masterpieces)” (van Treeck, 2001); “Consistently frequented places to write graffiti” (Lindbald and Jacobson, 2003); “Mostly legal walls on which high-quality pictures are produced” (Ganz, 2004); “Hall of Fame Piece is legally sprayed graffiti” (Ganter, 2013).

It is worth noting that in these definitions is an inconsistency regarding the principle of legality. Several authors define a Hall of Fame as a legal, mostly legal or semi-legal place

for graffiti writing. Others do not mention the principle of legality at all. Also, not all authors mention aesthetic reasons or the quality of an individual graffiti. It is interesting and fruitful how the term Hall of Fame is to be understood and defined by graffiti artists themselves, those who are the users and practitioners of legal areas for graffiti writing. In the understanding of a graffiti artist from Aachen, a Hall of Fame has the important function as a place for exchanging knowledge and developments for new generations of graffiti artists. As described by the graffiti artist LAKE13, “a Hall of Fame is a place with several walls that can be painted on legally. They contribute to the exchange of the scene and the development of the generations of street artists, enabling sprayers to work ‘freely’ and more creatively on the wall” (Kessler, 2013). For other graffiti artists, it is not really graffiti anymore if it is sprayed legally in a restricted area with permission. In some of my interviews, we used the term graffiti-mural¹ for the single final graffiti and for officially sanctioned walls and areas in the urban landscape sometimes even terms like graffiti preserve or graffiti reservation.² In summary, combining these somewhat contradictory statements into one definition, a Hall of Fame stands for a consistently frequented meeting point in a legal sprayable area where graffiti artists exchange knowledge across generations and produce “high quality” graffiti (master-)pieces. Especially worthy of further research is the dissent regarding the principle of legality as it is related

to the process of graffiti being created and where it is located in the cultural landscape of cities.

In some cities, Halls of Fame have a long history in the local legal and illegal graffiti writing culture, and function as an integral part of the urban cultural landscape or even as a landmark. In the past years, their role has been intensively discussed in the media because of the illegal whitewashing of the Graffiti Mecca 5Pointz in New York City. The owner of the building had to pay more than six million dollars in compensation to certain graffiti artists and other people in charge, because of the unsanctioned eradication (“whitewashing”) of the graffiti-murals.³ Today 5Pointz is no longer the landmark it used to be, but this confrontation and kind of dilemma for urban practitioners shows once more the “(...) re-evaluation of graffiti in the light of the importance of creativity to the post-industrial economy (...)” (McAuliffe 2012: 190). Moreover, a re-evaluation is needed of the spatial relevance that graffiti practices have in the transformation processes of the urban cultural landscape. Confrontations in urban politics such as those mentioned and the various urban governance arrangements connected to graffiti in general are significant for my research on the social innovation of graffiti-murals (Hilmer, 2018). This is because I understand graffiti primarily as a social phenomenon and an everyday practice involving the interaction of mainly four larger groups of actors in the local urban setting.

2. On the run⁴ to a masterpiece – My (auto-)ethnographic research experiment

In order to gain more clarity about the principle of legality as it relates to Halls of Fame and the spatial relevance in the transformation processes of the urban cultural landscape, I have used a multi-methodical approach. I claim that it is essential to visit Halls of Fame in person and in situ. Cultural and urban geographical research related to graffiti and street art poses inter- and transdisciplinary questions that demand multi-methodical approaches (cf. Bloch 2012; Dickens 2009; Kramer 2010; McAuliffe 2012). In recent years, ethnographical research methods have been gaining more and more importance in the German-speaking realm (Everts et al. 2011; Müller 2012; Strüver 2011). Such ethnographic research is often characterized by extensive descriptions of everyday interactions to enable an understanding of unfamiliar living environments. Extensive descriptions of this kind require observation and participation in the world

of the research subjects as they live in it, “to be in the thick of things and not just looking on,” as Martha Müller has described it (Müller, 2012: 179). Furthermore, as a researcher “you also have to face the practical and material handling of things on the spot. Even more than that, you have to keep track of how things actually get to where they are taken” (Frers, 2012: 214). To be “in the thick of things” and to face the practical and material handling of things on the spot, my plan has been to (1) visit and (2) paint on 50 legal walls in 50 different cities. I have postulated that only in situ will I find answers to questions like: Where are legal walls in the context of cities and how can this placement of legal walls be (re-) interpreted? What is the quality of individual graffiti pieces? At these walls, what is the atmosphere and materiality in terms of architectural structures and what kind of arrangements or control is experienced there?

I was inspired to use “my run” as an empirical basis for my fieldwork, by Joseph Murphy’s 1500 km walk as described in *Walking a Public Geography through Ireland and Scotland* (Murphy, 2011). During my visits to legal walls and explorations of their environs, as well as while painting at these walls, I had long conversations with people I met. A difference to other forms of qualitative research might be the fact that I do not initiate conversations with other users of legal walls. Instead I wait until people at the walls interact with me while I am painting. After this first encounter, we discuss various questions, such as: Why do you like to paint graffiti legally? What is cool or not cool about this particular wall? What are the dos and don’ts for you at the walls? Such conversations developed in the course of my research into another purpose for my run: To help people involved in the civic life of cities such as city planners, cultural managers and street workers to organize and become clearer about questions such as: Where, when and how should a legal wall be placed in the landscape of a city? What should a legal wall offer for graffitiists? How can this be balanced to some extent with other users of the same public space and nearby inhabitants? Until now, I have visited 27 legal walls. Since some legal walls in Germany already have people in charge, I decided to interview these experts in order to follow and recreate how legal walls either evolve into a Hall of Fame or are eradicated from individual settings. “On the run to a masterpiece” has used a multi-methodical approach that combines the mapping and localizing of legal walls, participant observation of legal wall users, and, if such people exist, interviews with people in charge of legal walls.

3. Mapping, framing and doing of legal wall writing

Not every legal wall for graffiti writing is automatically a Hall of Fame or becomes one. On some occasions and in some cities, graffitiists, city officials and other people in charge use terms like open walls, free walls or graffiti reserves to emphasize the fact that these are legal places to spray. This does not necessarily mean that high-class graffiti pieces are found on such walls. The unwritten rules of graffiti⁵ often regulate the aesthetics of legal walls. For example, one is not supposed to overpaint (“cross”) a piece that one cannot compete with. The concept of competition in various graffiti styles has to do with how graffitiists compare and value their work based on different aesthetic criteria as well as artisanal and technical aspects. Valuation can be related to the size of an individual piece (“out of human scale”; see Abarca 2016), or specific skills that experienced graffitiists need to have, as for example very clean, thin and energetic (out-)lines written in one flow, or the ability to add character to one’s personal typographic, calligraphic style writing elements. This type

of quality indicator regulates (to some extent) the frequency that the visual appearance of a legal wall changes. It goes without saying that not all people at such walls agree about these criteria. And sometimes you will find “chrome battles”⁶ or some kids or “toys” (unskilled sprayers) using left-over spray cans to add comments on high quality pieces. This is one reason why most graffitiists never leave nearly empty cans with caps at legal walls.

Other rules and regulations I have encountered so far have to do with certain political, sexist and abusive themes and subjects in wall paintings. Especially fascist and anti-Semitic themes are not tolerated and are crossed immediately. Some privately owned (semi-legal) walls, usually overseen by a local “crew” and/or a graffiti shop nearby, disapprove of chrome (metallic paint) or using tar or asphalt (bitumen) as a basis. This is connected to the principle that effort should be put into the paintings, and that for walls with chrome and tar are not easy to overpaint for the next person wanting to paint a wall.



Figure 1 - Amount of legal walls / Halls of Fame (HoF) in Germany (24.04.2018) (Hilmer 2018)

For my mapping and research about painting on legal walls, I focused mainly on Germany, but I have also visited legal walls in other countries. The first results of my mapping process of legal walls in Germany have shown that Bochum is the capital of legal wall writing, with 25 legal walls (Figure 1). It is interesting to note that the creative and cultural hubs of urban art – the big three in Germany being Hamburg, Berlin and Cologne – are not very striking in this regard. There are smaller cities, cities with less than half a million inhabitants like Bochum, Freiburg and Heidelberg, which have a higher potential for possible case studies in my research. It is very important to mention the fact that the database, this map of legal walls / Halls of Fame (HoF) in Germany, is unstable - as Boris Bouchon puts it in one document I used as a source: “Attention - this list is lying!!!” (Bouchon, 2012). There are only a few official databases or statements of city councils, so I had to use various kinds of PPGIS - public participation geographic information systems or also VGI – Volunteered Geographic Information.⁷ A particular problem with such open access mapping tools used by unprivileged groups

with little financial backing is the validity, control and double-checking of the locations that are added. A large and very helpful mapping tool is the website legal-walls.net. The problem here is its anonymity (i.e. no site notice), lack of control who is mapping (authorization being only an email address), and the lack of double-checks about what kind of area has actually been mapped as a legal spot. I, thus, sometimes found myself in wired situations such as a wall in someone’s private backyard or a wall or area having been demolished months earlier. Other initiatives include wallspot.org, openwalls.info, and graffolution.eu. These sites have a higher validity (i.e. contact information, site notice), but they generally list just a few legal walls. Luckily, an archiving initiative was started in Germany by the pioneer of German graffiti research, Axel Thiel. It was formerly held in Kassel; after his death the archive has been based in Berlin. He and his team collected addresses and background information about different legal walls in Germany since the late 1980s. This is possibly the reason that on legal-walls.net, the longest list of legal walls worldwide are those in Germany.

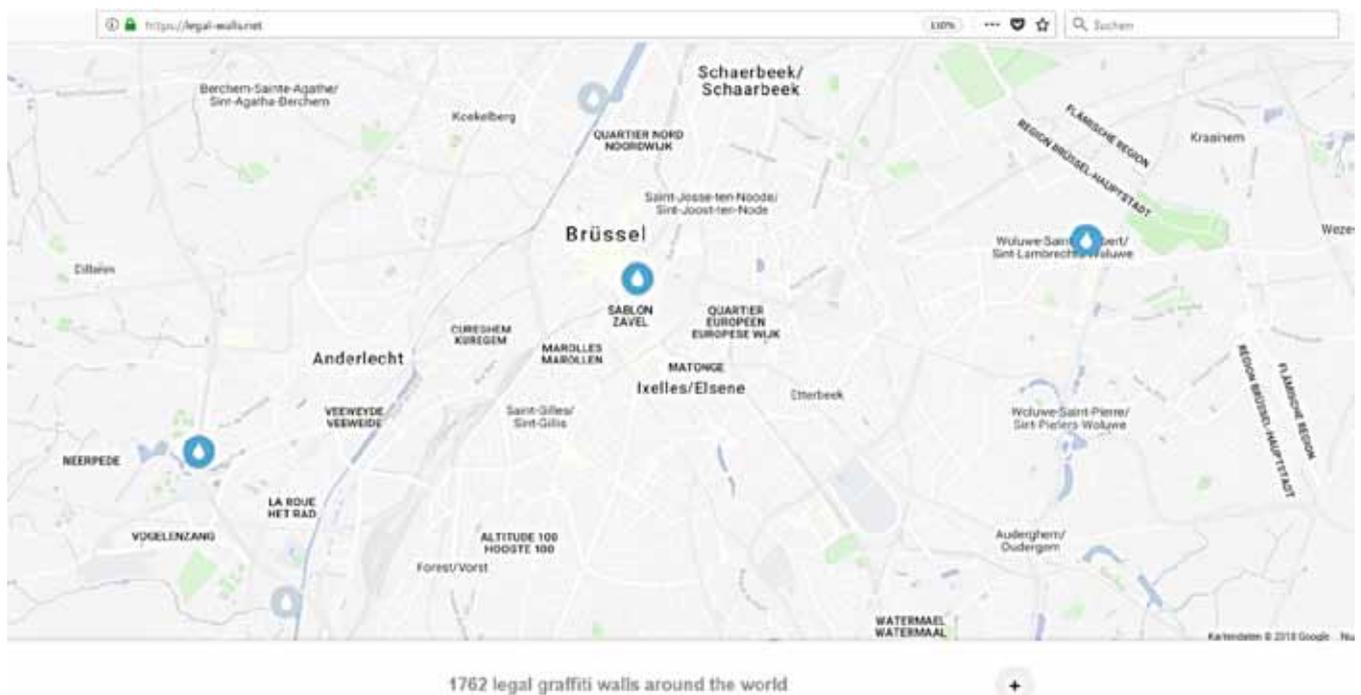


Figure 2 - Screenshot of the VGI on the legal-walls.net homepage. (Modified by Hilmer 2018)

4. Case study: A short discussion of legal walls in Brussels

After the first step of online research, it has been essential to visit individual walls in situ to localize, observe and experience the legal walls in their specific local setting, and to get to know the people who are using them. At an international conference in Lisbon, I described my run with a case study in Brussels, the capital of Belgium. Brussels is a good case study for my run because the city does not have a zero-tolerance policy against graffiti and the municipality provides more than one legal wall for graffiti writing. The legal-walls.net homepage (Figure 2) presents five legal walls in Brussels and its suburbs; these are found in various types of local urban settings. Legal wall number one is almost in the city center of Brussels. Number two is a youth club where permission from the people in charge is needed before one is allowed to use the wall for legal painting. Number three and four are motorway bridges that are further away in the suburbs. And the last spot, number five, is an old abandoned factory that is almost completely demolished; it is not officially legal to paint there but it is not under daily surveillance and “no one really cares.”⁸ The urban landscape setting for legal walls as found in Brussels is characteristic for the legal walls I have experienced so far.

To illustrate some of their characteristics, I will describe my observations, interpretations and personal reflections in more detail about the centrally located legal wall number one and legal wall number four, on the margin of Brussels. The location of legal wall number one in the center of Brussels is quite unusual since it is directly at a tourist hot spot in Brussels, the Mont des Arts. This urban complex and historic site includes the historic Royal Library of Belgium, the National Archives of Belgium, a big public garden and various museums, including those for musical instruments and fine arts. Consequently, it is a very busy area with a large number of international tourists. But at night, it is also a hangout spot for local youth. The wall is labeled as an “OPEN WALL” and is in a sheltered corner between the Royal Library of Belgium and a protestant church. The legal wall itself is a wooden construction attached to a historic concrete wall. Signs at the wall set the limits of the specific area reserved for graffiti and request users to respect and not to paint the surrounding historic buildings not covered with compressed wood. Such precautions and fastened constructions are characteristic of temporary-use walls. Homeless people use the space between the wooden construction and the concrete wall as a shelter during the night. It is a very small

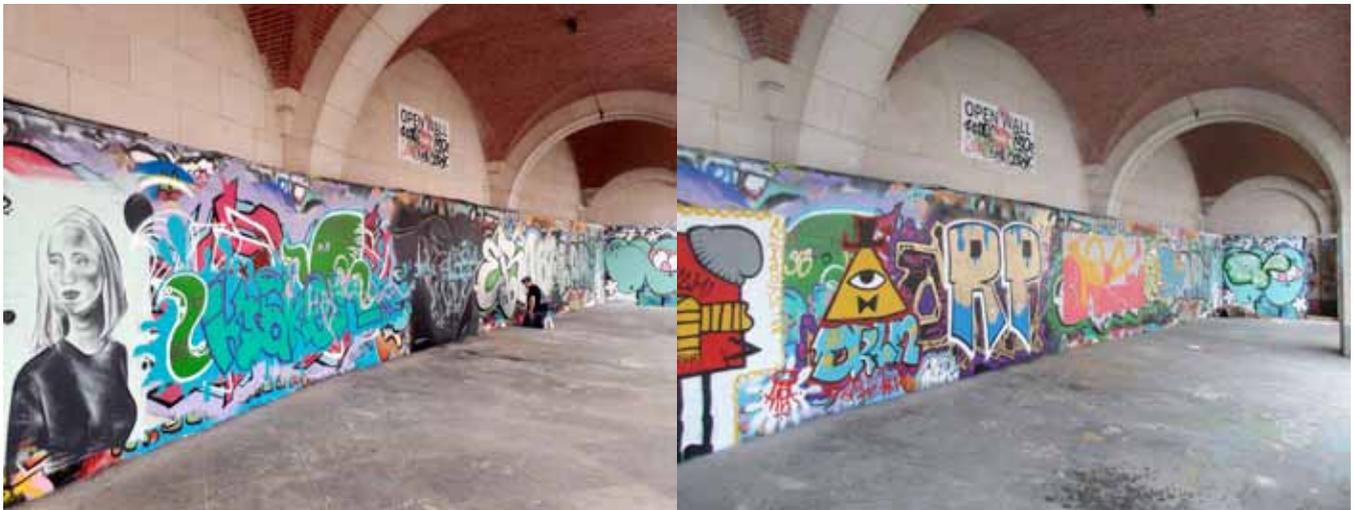


Figure 3 - Legal wall number one in Brussels, city centre “Mont des Arts”. 3.A picture taken 13.04.2018 - 4.26 pm and 3.B picture taken 14.04.2018 - 5.41 pm (Hilmer 2018)

wall with room for approximately five pieces; when I visited the wall, the quality was not particularly high, with pieces that were not demanding, painted in a rush with not much effort. But this does not necessarily mean that the wall is only used by “toys.” While painting there, I met ERA67 from Chicago, who started graffiti writing in the late 1980s. We painted little “throw ups” together because we thought they would be crossed very soon anyway. As one can see in the photos in Figure 3, the visual appearance of the wall changed completely within 24 hours. In short, wall number one is shaped by high public visibility and a high turnover of single pieces. The state of the wall on my one-day visit was one of a low-quality work with effortless and low-skilled pieces. The wall has a strict and limited size, both in length and height, with an undeviating wooden construction and no unique architectural structures. Moreover, the atmosphere is not favorable for painting, in part, because you were often interrupted by tourists passing by who did not hesitate to ask you to pose for their photos. The particular placement of legal wall number one in the context of the cultural landscape of the city leaves room for interpretation and opens up further questions. It might be interpreted as a preventive strategy to protect the monuments and historical buildings nearby and to domesticate the “wild” and illegal graffiti of tourists and local youth in a reservation. The strategy of creating legal walls to reduce illegal graffiti writing is controversial (see for example Bloch, 2016). But this particular wall might also be seen as a sign of a progressive movement of commodification, instrumentalization and touristification of graffiti practices, a movement that brands certain locations as genuine spaces for subculture, here creating a unique trendy atmosphere of the Mont des Arts.

In comparison to legal wall number one, wall number four is outside the city of Brussels in the municipality of Anderlecht, about thirty minutes by tram from Brussels’ central train station. The spot for doing graffiti legally is under a highway bridge. It is the largest area for legal and sanctioned graffiti writing that I have experienced so far, offering room for more than one hundred pieces. Because of the unique size of the bridge pillars, both in length and height, as well as other architectural features such as large tubes and curved elements, the area provides interesting materiality for wall painting. When I visited the spot, at least ten people were working, either in groups or singly, on wall paintings in progress or beginning new pieces. But the area also has some older graffiti pieces and large (neo-) murals⁹ by local and international artists. Some of these were painted in the context of a festival supported by a collective/project called “Urbana.”¹⁰ The wall has lower public visibility than the wall in the city center, since people who do not have an interest or prior knowledge of graffiti writing do not generally pass by. The graffitiists at the wall combine their painting activities with picnics and barbecues because there is a park nearby as well as green fields between the bridge pillars. Such amenities at legal walls support the gathering of graffitiists and create a higher potential for former “non-places,”¹¹ such as this one under a highway bridge, to be transformed into landmarks, a subculture hotspot for graffiti writing culture in Belgium. From this short comparison of these two legal walls in Brussels and by slightly modifying the different definitions of Halls of Fame presented in Section one, it follows that legal wall number four can be defined as Brussels’ Hall of Fame.



Figure 4 - Legal wall number four in Brussels, Anderlecht. (Hilmer 2018)

5. Conclusions: Different categories of Halls of Fame

I have categorized the 27 legal walls I have visited so far based on various observed and experienced factors. These have been inspired by a project of Ferrel and Weide (2010) to spatialize graffiti writing. They have investigated “(...) in deep ethnographic fashion the physical placement of graffiti, providing situated spatial analysis of graffiti’s engagement with the urban environment through the categorization of the ‘spots’ that writers access and select to showcase their work” (Bloch 2016: 444). In addition to the work of Ferrell and Weide, I am mainly concerned about the showcase of legal graffiti writing and the disunity of the definitions in chapter one about Halls of Fame opens up further discussion. In general a Hall of Fame does not have to be an official sanctioned or legalized wall. On my run, I experienced also illegal and semi-legal walls/areas that are used for graffiti writing. Some illegal Halls of Fame were formerly legal, but after a change of ownership or due to the fact that the ownership is unclear, the walls lost their legal status. Some illegal Halls of Fame are found in abandoned infrastructure areas that are not under daily surveillance and where the public is indifferent

and do not confront graffitists (“no one really cares and calls the police“). With the category “legality” in mind, the Halls of Fame have developed different characteristics related to public visibility, quality of pieces, the atmosphere for painting and the durability of individual pieces. Old and/or higher quality pieces are usually found in abandoned buildings or on road bridges at city peripheries. The space for painting in such areas is normally not as limited as in centrally located areas. Moreover, the more central a spot is - locations that are easy to reach and close to tourist attractions - have a higher frequency of pieces that are often of lower quality. However, this is not necessarily so. For some semi-legal walls, one needs permission; sometimes those in charge do not allow certain colors, styles, and/or materials. Some regulations permit painting at a legal wall only at a certain time of the year or day, as for example during festivals or the opening hours of a nearby graffiti shop. For some long-established, privately-owned Halls of Fame, one needs a recommendation, invitation or work sample proving that one does high-skilled painting (“*Just Kingz*“) or that one is not part of the “wrong” crew.

Illegal	Illegal	Semi-legal	Semi-legal	Legal
(prosecute by law - criminal property damage - daily surveillance)	(prosecute by law - no daily surveillance - „no one really cares“)	(limited period of time, event, opening hours, application)	(regulated and controlled by owner)	(no permission and prior contact necessary)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mostly former legal walls • state ownership / process of changed ownership • no 48hours cleaning policy (zero tolerance) • Central in city or near traffic axis -> high visibility • used by (local) graffitists • low(er) quality pieces - more throw ups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • state and privat ownership • Abandoned Buildings or „non-places“ • Outside of city - „Hidden spots“ • Low visibility (just peers, urban explorer and "streetart hunters") • used by local graffitists to develop and present "higher quality pieces" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private organization and state owned territory • Festival for HipHop, Graffiti, Streetart ...) • Application or invitation • Temporary painting/ use • Highest visibility (peers, magazine, media...) • used by (inter-)national graffitists to present "highest quality pieces" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private ownership • contact details necessary - Name, sample of artwork.. • Rules in terms of style and material (No chrome, just KINGZ ...) • High visibility (peers, magazin) • used by national artists to develop "highest quality pieces" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • state owned • Some Regulation -> „Unwritten rules of Graffiti“ • High(er) visibility (peers, "street art hunters", passersby, public) • used by local artists to develop "high quality pieces" and beginners to start • Low durability of pieces

Figure 5 - Categorization of Halls of Fame on the basis of the principle of legality (Hilmer 2018)

To conclude, following the definitions presented in Section one, a Hall of Fame can also exist in illegal surroundings. Not every legally sprayable wall gains the status of a Hall of Fame. In addition to the definitions in Section one, my observations have shown that a Hall of Fame needs to have certain material characteristics that are more than just being a legal spot where painting is officially sanctioned. Those reservations of the wild graffiti developed (mostly) out of the graffiti writing culture. Some of those areas rise(d) to a Hall of Fame with an enormous variety and reputation of the artworks of styled letterism. Besides the possibility to paint free and legally, those places function not only as spaces for worshipping and presenting single artworks but also the whole process of creating the wall paintings. The spaces can be seen as battle arenas and as walls of memory of (old-school) graffitiists who proved themselves in former battles. Furthermore, Halls of Fame function as meeting points, where you exchange intangible knowledge about local distinctions, certain skills of handling the coloring tools and "(...) just celebrate yourself and the lifestyle of painting walls"¹².

Reflecting this research's ethnographic approach and as advice for practitioners, improvements in the planning and communication process for legally sprayable walls are desirable, both in Germany and worldwide. City planners, members of local municipalities and social workers need to be aware of the socially innovative and integrative potential a legally sprayable area is able to stimulate if it is placed in the urban cultural landscape. The transformation processes of non-places like road bridges through legal graffiti writing have shown that Halls of Fame for graffiti writing, if balanced with a multidimensional approach and planned in a socially innovative and responsible manner, have a high potential for integrated urban development. This also has to do with basic concerns about "how to keep it real" (on this, see McAuliffe/Iveson 2011; Merrill 2015). But that is a whole other essay and discussion, one that may be presented next year at the conference in Lisbon.

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EndNotes

1 - On the term graffiti-mural, see Bloch 2012, Healey 2016 or Hilmer 2018.

2 - For more about legal graffiti writing, see for example Kramer 2010.

3 - See for example; Kilgannon, C. (2017): 5Pointz Graffiti Artists Whose Works Were Erased Will Get Day in Court. In: *New York Times* (accessed on 10.08.2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/09/nyregion/5pointz-graffiti-artists-whose-works-were-erased-will-get-day-in-court.html>) Or see Howard, G. (2018): Graffiti Gets Paid at 5Pointz. Now What? In: *New York Times* (accessed on 10.08.2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/nyregion/graffiti-artists-5pointz.html>)

4 - The sub-title “on the run” commemorates the first graffiti magazine that appeared in Germany (OTR, first published in 1992) as well as to the graffitist ODEM, a pioneer of German graffiti culture, and his “stylism mission.” ODEM passed away last year (2017); his book *Odem – On the Run* (1997) is an autobiographical insight into the German graffiti writing culture.

5 - To understand the “unwritten rules” of graffiti, it is helpful to see the statements and results of the online discussion about the exhibition “SPLASH – Rules of Vandalism” by („Germany’s most wanted graffiti artists and TOPSPRAYER“) MOSES and TAPS: “Amazingly enough, but not surprisingly,

the most repeated answer was ‘there are no rules’.”<http://thegrifters.org/moses-and-taps-interview-exclusive-for-the-grifters-journal/> (accessed on 31 July 2018).

6 - Undemanding pieces often in silver and black crossing multicolored pieces.

7 - For VGI see Schomacker et al. (2015)

8 - In my discussions with graffitists and other users and visitors of legal walls, the phrase “no one really cares” was often used to describe the public perception of where legally sprayable areas are placed in the context of a city.

9 - For neo-muralism, see the contribution of H. von Busse in this journal or Besser (2010)

10 - See for more <http://www.urbana-project.com/>

11 - About non-places see Marc Augé (1995)

12 - Comment of a graffitist I met on a legal wall.