Affect and Effect of Overpainting at the Age of Neo-muralism

Mathieu Tremblin [1]

[1] ATR (Arts et Techniques de la Représentation), Strasbourg School of Architecture, 67200 Strasbourg, France;
E-Mail: mathieu.tremblin@strasbourg.archi.fr

Abstract

The art historical term *pentimento* is used to indicate areas in painting that have been modified or overpainted by the artist during the creative process. The process of tagging, covering and erasing existing graffiti and street art murals transforms the original visual work. When not restored, these 'agonist ornaments' generate an in-between graphic status to the mural, highlighting an ongoing conversation at the scale of the city. This dialogic aspect invites us to consider the shape of urban landscape as collective responsibility. Each overpainting transformation can thereby be considered to have the possibility of revealing affect and effect related to hidden power dynamics. Considering the walls of the city as a palimpsest, the author analyses a series of murals through the lens of overpainting dynamics and offers an updated and site-specific understanding of the concept, combined with urban core topics such as social control tendencies, game as urban approach, and expression of emotions in public space. The author concludes that the upcoming processual beauty of contemporary muralism can be attributed to a chain of interactions where various actors depends one each other, the 'pentimento' of the collective author.

Keywords

Neo-muralism; graffiti fresco; overpainting; pentimento; conversation in acts; processual beauty

1. Introduction

When it comes to the overpainting and the erasure of graffiti and street art, one can find many examples of documentarists (McCormick, 2001; Good, 2011), street artists (Stavrov, Kuznetsov, 2018), contemporary artists (Gill, 2006–2008; Martin, 2015; Powers, 2023) and researchers (Vaslin, 2021; Barra, Engasser, 2023) that have been working since the end of the 1990s around the topic of the 'buff', in other words, the vernacular name in graffiti culture for both covering and erasing; the act of overpainting someone else piece being called 'toy' and by assimilation 'toy' is also used to point the non-initiated graffiti writer who overpaint someone else's graffiti acting like a 'toy' (Powers, 1999, p. 154–155). The aim of this article is to go beyond the graffiti-centred reading of the buffing phenomenon, thus to embrace a larger spectrum of the actor's perspective. Graffiti writers, street artists, muralists, anonymous citizens, activists, city workers, members of cultural organisation or elected

officials, but also unfortunate destructions and vagaries are participating to an urban ecosystem in which in their contradictory actions are in fact complementary as many parts of continuum. More than a simple aesthetics (Tremblin, 2021a, 2021c), the painting, overpainting and erasure of graffiti and street art murals illustrates the transformative cycle of the urban landscape, echoing to the one of the city.

In this article, I will first acknowledge the existing dynamics of overpainting in graffiti culture that are considered fair use by the members of the community. I will unravel a series of case studies detailed as narratives of experiences that illustrate a variety of authors' positions replying to control, playfulness or emotional dynamics. I will propose a new definition of types of overpainting for the city context in continuation of the tradition of picture restoration. It will open to the understanding of the urban landscape as a palimpsest rather than a canvas, opening to the idea of *pentimento*, considering that the graffiti and street art we

see in public space is the result of a collective authorship, the sum of artists, activists, citizens and city workers overpainting each other. I will open with a practice-based research experimentation over several existing murals challenging the idea of individual authorship and conclude with the notion of 'processual beauty' to describe the fundamental interest that lies in the transformation of the urban landscape, rather than in the frozen aesthetics of muralism.

The field of research about graffiti and street art shall not be confused and reduced to the studying of an aesthetic, as is typically the case in the consensual approach of the art history field, deriving from the idea that graffiti and street art can be considered as art. "Graffiti is not art" as stated by Spanish researcher and former graffiti writer Javier Abarca (2019). As a matter of fact, graffiti and street art are on the opposite of contemporary art legitimation dynamics: both are to be considered as counter-institutional practices[1] (Tremblin, 2021b).

As with folk art practices, graffiti and street art are situated and addressed practices (Abarca, 2021) that cannot be fully understood and analysed outside of their territory and community. As French historical graffiti writer, artist and cultural producer Fuzi stated it with his podcast moto: "It's for us, by us, to us" (Fuzi, 2020). Therefore, researchers of the graffiti and street art field are developing a participatory observation so as to open up and enable its legitimacy in approaching their actors (Powers, 1999). Research about graffiti and street art is practice-based,

and is researched with and within the graffiti and street art community. Taking part in the process of storytelling, documenting and publishing graffiti and street art culture is the way to collect, gather and analyse data. Thus the data remain in the type of narrative of experiences, the first being the one of the author of the graffiti and street art pieces, the second that of the citizen that will experience it as anonymous creative vandalism; thirdly the one that the researcher will combine at various stages of awareness of the way the piece was produced and evolved away from its author, in the life of unknown neighbours, acknowledged and documented in various and informal ways—including its own.

The material to be studied is not a still object, it is instead a trajectory interfering within the urban phenomenon. Transformations are permanent, silent, imperceptible or brutal, natural or intentional disasters. The case study needs to be analysed through the lens of any given type of data that the researcher could gather: storytelling, narrative of experiences or memories collected within informal conversations or interviews; images, sounds, texts, comments collected within direct field experience, amateur or professional publications, personal or institutional archives.

2. From restoration to overpainting: Creative alteration

In 2012, Cecilia Gimenéz carried out a non-commissioned restoration—granted by a priest, if the amateur restorer is to be believed—in the Santuario de Misericordia in Borja,

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1 - Disappearance as a horizon is the very condition of existence of graffiti and urban art; graffiti writer and street artist chose to be dispossessed of their piece by creating it in the streets without permission. This precariousness offers its protagonists the counterpart of opening up the experience to experimentation. Since the beginning of the 20th century, they have developed modes of operation that are not exhausted by repetition, because they integrate situational and relational variables as constitutive. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben explains that the precarious condition of existence is linked to a form of "destituting power" (Agamben, 2015), a capacity to deconstruct attempts to seize power. He proposes replacing the pairing of "production and action" with that of "use and *désœuvrement* [dispossesion as a choice or as a submission]" to bring about a shift in political strategy. It would serve as a starting point for a rethinking of our relationship to modes of governance, to power and to the people in society. Enlightened by Agamben, the difficulty for graffiti and urban art to come to terms with the institution proves exciting, since the practice and its accompaniment keep the field in the register of the immanence of the living. More than a difficulty, it may even be an ontological impossibility that encourages its actors to generate new configurations and regenerate existing ones, without going through a third-party agent or power, already instituted and centralising, as would be that of globalised contemporary art.

Spain. The piece entitled *Ecce Homo* by Spanish painter Elías García Martínez around the year 1930, depicting Jesus Christ, saw its face transformed from what could be perceived as a naive, to a rather coarse, style, interpreted as an overpainting sacrilege by professional restorers, and blasphemy by the believers. Within internet culture, the cartoonish awkwardness of the drawing became a meme entitled 'Potato Jesus'. This meme appears as a *mise en abîme* of the modes of appropriation and transformation at work in the digital culture of memes. Paradoxically, online reception pacified the situation which in turn put the author at odds. Eventually, online distribution generated what could be termed a pilgrimage to Borja, namely of curious believers and meme enthusiasts. Gimenéz claimed intellectual ownership of her pictorial gesture and reclaimed the financial windfall that the exploitation of her *Potato Jesus* generated, as it was distributed in the form of images or derivative products sold online. She donated half the raised money to the parish, and the unintended success of the restoration ultimately enables her to employ a professional restorer to refresh the original *Ecce Homo*[2].

In the restoration process of an artwork or a mural, restorers usually disappears behind the original author. Their work is meant to be invisible in order to bring back the artwork to its "potential unity" (Brandi, 1963). Therefore, restorers are relegated to the same status as the various operators that are pertain to the "authorised narrative" (Poinsot, 2008) of the artwork. French art historian Jean-Marc Poinsot defines such an authorised narrative as an "organic link" (Poinsot, 2008, p. 98) between an artwork and its context of creation and diffusion. The authorised narrative gathers all the non-artistic information that document the existence of an artwork, from its condition of production to the name of the collectors or restorers. Contrary to the process of classic painting restoration that would have condemned the restorer to relative anonymity, Gimenéz's restoration became an independent narrative in itself, away from the serious convention of the history of art.

The viral nature of the restoration came with the understanding of Gimenéz as a second author that, in the process of overpainting thereby updates the original work. Her interpretative gesture creates an unexpected shift from the idea of the origin of the artwork—its "potential unity" that had to be restored—to a post-modern version, one that is a 'potential becoming else' that the various and successive appropriations of the memetic effect illustrated. This shift was made especially possible due to the fact that the new artwork consisted of a mural granted with public access, existing at the fringe of a physical space and an online conversation.

So, what might the *Potato Jesus* story tell about the state of mural restoration today? It perhaps delineates the position that it is not so lamentable that unwanted overpainting is taking place over the walls we see around us in daily life. Non-commissioned restoration brings awareness on intellectual property issues that are opposed to conservation dynamics. In the beginning of the 21st century, the creative destruction of an artworks saw the rise in the debate on authorship that transcends the framework of understanding in art history. The collective and transformative aspect that *Potato Jesus* gives rise to more interest in the phenomenon of murals and mural painting. Such humorous debate even encourages individuals to go on pilgrimage. It affords the desire to experience the artwork in the flesh rather than within its image, a situation that would not even exist without it, because neither the aesthetics of the original mural nor its author would be especially worthy of such attention.

2.1. A collective body of authors: The practice of overpainting in graffiti culture

In the traditional game of graffiti, there is a certain unwritten hierarchy between the form of graffiti practice, which is supposedly meant to follow the growing amount of skill and energy the writer will need to invest in order to achieve it. Every writer who tends not to be a beginner will respect this hierarchy, to which is attached a second unwritten rule: you are not supposed to overpaint on someone that was bold enough to 'invent' a spot—as is the

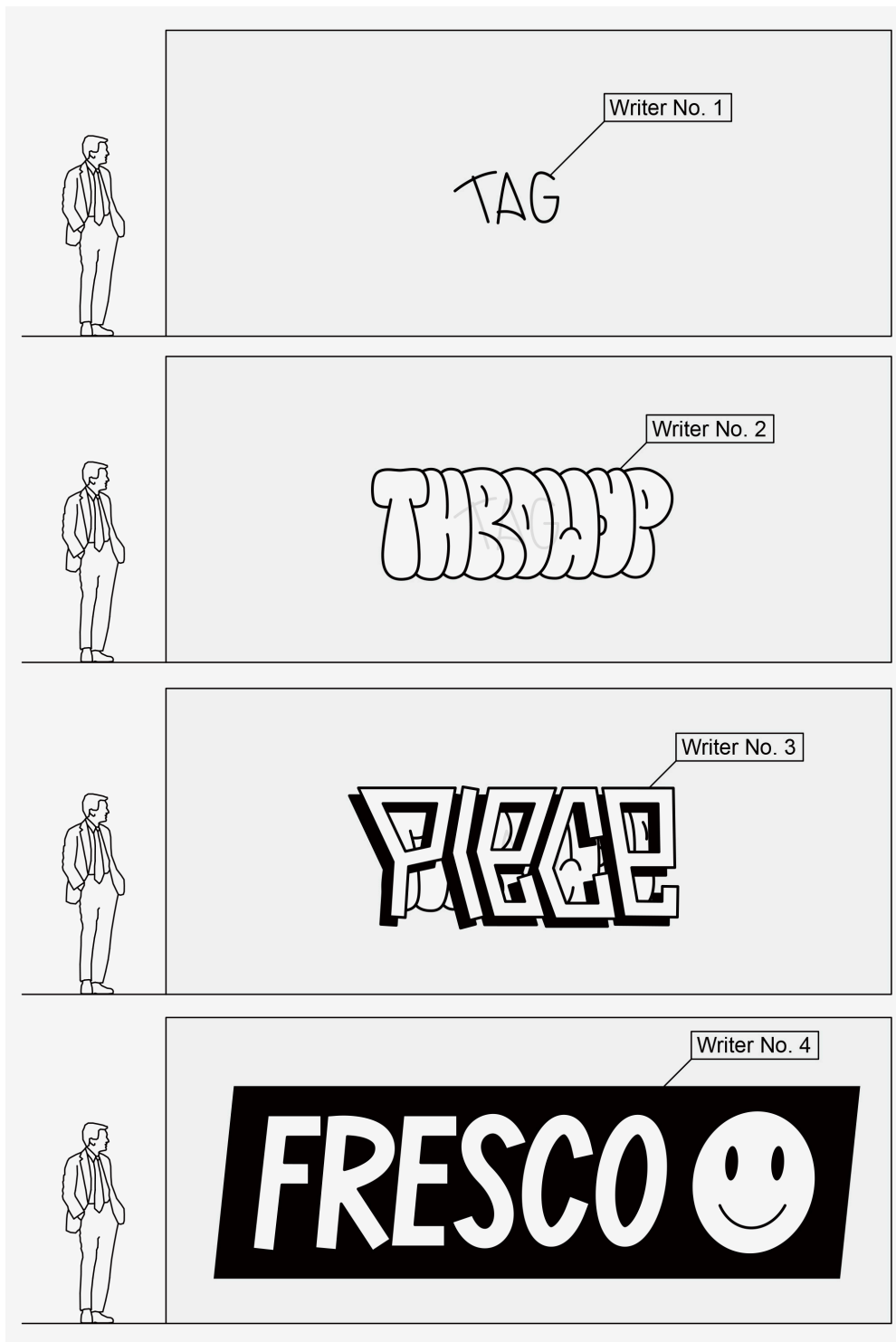2 - URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/europe/botched-restoration-of-ecce-homo-fresco-shocks-spain.html.

Figure 1. Mathieu Tremblin, Fair use of overpainting practice in name writing graffiti culture, 2010–2023.

case when we speak of discovering treasure; discovering and investing a new blank location with your graffiti. Conversely, in the graffiti game one should not paint over the graffiti of someone better known than you.

The fair use of graffiti practices makes it easy to play by the book until you follow at least the hierarchy of forms of graffiti. A tag will be covered by a throw-up; a throw-up will be covered by a graffiti piece; the graffiti will end up being covered by a graffiti fresco including background and characters (see Figure 1); itself maybe being overpainted by a mural painting, considering that the neo-muralism movement[3] (Abarca, 2016) also exploits the spots that were illegally invented by writers to turn these into commissioned ones with the agreement of the owner of the wall.

Each spot ending as a graffiti or street art mural is shaped by the sum of interactions that played by the fair or unfair use of overpainting dynamics existing in graffiti writing— which could in turn be perturbed by third party actors (e.g. city workers, municipality, non-profit organisations, private companies) and that might also reset it by censoring, erasing, destroying the piece.

The interesting aspect in this overpainting process in comparison to the one that existed on canvas is that the wall acts as a fluid receptacle for intellectual property shift. It could be compared to the existing dynamics in copyleft and open source culture applied to the arts. French artist and researcher Antoine Moreau initiated in the beginning of 2000s a collective of artists, researchers and lawyers meant to conceive an open source license that could be applied to artwork. Named Copyleft Attitude, this collective wrote in July 2000 a juridical text entitled 'Licence Art Libre[4]' that will later—between 2005, 2007 and 2014 following the different version of the text—become the equivalent of Creative Commons BY+SA license created in January 2001 by programmer, activist and hacker Aaron Swartz.

Moreau illustrated this principle applied to the arts by the creation of a painting on canvas on which a series of contemporary and street artists overpainted, one after another, generating an entirely new artwork over the previous one, but over the same frame. Since 2005, *Peinture de peintres*[5], or 'painting of painters' is a simple infinite and unfinished painting hanging over the couch and exposed to the visitors of Moreau's flat.

Like Moreau, graffiti writers organised their non-commissioned graphic activity around the idea that the wall is common palimpsest, a space for creativity to be shared with the respect and acknowledgement of the previous authors they overpainted, as if the wall was welcoming an infinite and unfinished artwork created by a collective body of authors.

2.2. New categories for urban overpainting

Writers are used to taking advantage of the principle of overpainting in graffiti culture for their own agenda. In the 2000s, the French writer and artist RCF1 held the practice of painting trucks in Paris and received a certain amount of acclaim out of the numbered pieces he succeeded to invest in—without permission, it should be noted. He details his technique:

> In the beginning of the 2000s, I overpainted myself several times on the white trucks parked in Barbès neighbourhood in Paris. Sometimes, I was tagging them so I could save the spot for later on. But most of the time I was first doing a throw-up as a test so I could identify how the different trucks behave (see Fig. 2), to see if they would stay, drive along or disappear, to spot the frequency of a specific truck on the market place, or even its habits, if it parks the day before for example. And then I would come back to cover my own throw-

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3 - Neo-muralism corresponds to the dominant worldwide trend since the mid-2000s of commissioned contemporary murals painted on city walls, often on a monumental scale, and not linked to a situated creative practice, as was the case with the militant muralism of the early 20th century.

4 - URL: https://artlibre.org/.

5 - URL: http://www.antoinemoreau.org/index.php?cat=peintpeint.

Figure 2. RCF1, RCF1 Throw-up, 2004, Paris (FR), Photography: RCF1.

Figure 3. RCF1, La pauvreté, les mots, le graffiti, 2004, Paris (FR), Photography: RCF1.

up with a more complex graffiti fresco (see Fig. 3). One evening the owner of a florist caught me doing a throw-up on his truck. I hadn't finished, but he told me where he was going to park, two metro stations away. I joined him and suddenly I was able to make a large *Ghosttown* piece with the stepladder without fearing his anger too much. (RCF1, Tremblin, 2023)

RCF1 follows and plays with the rules of overpainting in graffiti, but he uses it to achieve a different goal than the one of purely aesthetic consideration, namely marking the spot in order to be able to invest it later. This meta-game of RCF1 suggests the necessity to detail the various ways of overpainting, thereby updating the categories of art history so it can fit in with the context of urban life.

In *Lexique des Termes d'art* published in 1880, the French artist and historian Jules Adeline defines the basic elements of classic painting restoration vocabulary, whether applied to canvas or in the context of murals. He acknowledges two transformative gestures that might be discovered later by restorers while using radiography technics applied to artworks. The first one is *repeint* [overpainting] and the second one is *repentir* [pentimento]:

> '*Repeint*' [overpainting]: Parts of a painting to which new colors have been applied. — In a painting, this is especially true of portions that were painted after the work was completed. Repainting is one of the most dangerous and damaging restoration techniques.'*Repentir*' [*pentimento*]. – First contours on which the artist returned and which he modified. Sometimes, in a painting, old *pentimento* reappear through a new layer of colors applied when the first was not dry enough. (Adeline, 1880, p. 360)

In art history, several types of overpainting can be highlighted depending on the reason that motivated the overpainting intervention on the canvas. 'Technical' overpainting consists in restoring to its integrity a part of the painting that has been damaged. 'Style' overpainting consists in the updating of the look of a painting to have it

fit to the taste of the day, or to a different stylistic canon. 'Modesty overpainting' consists in correcting some moral issue of the painting. The most famous one is the covering of the nudity with a veil performed in 1564 by Daniele da Volterra over Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. 'Iconographic overpainting' consists in changing some parts of the painting so as to bring a new meaning. The painting *Bacchus* painted between 1510 and 1515 is attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci's studio. Its original form was representing Saint John the Baptist; between 1683 and 1693, the crucifix that the character held in his hand was overpainted with a thyrsus so that it became the pagan deity of Bacchus.

The term 'Urban overpainting' (*repeint urbain*) introduces a distinction between the tradition of overpainting taking place mainly in the medium of canvas from the 17th to the 18th century—discovered by restorers and analysed by classic art historians—and its particular use in the city regarding the walls covered by various types of signs created by private or public urban actors—from graffiti to street art, including activist slogans and commissioned muralism.

3. Urban overpainting: affect and effect in the city

In this section I detail the various types of interaction—and the various intents behind it—that urban overpainting could lead to, regarding the previous existing art history categories of canvas overpainting. Hopefully, these categories will pertain to its description and analysis in a more subtle way with regards to the transformative phenomenon of urban landscape through muralism, thus embracing a bolder and more ambitious way of framing the chain of transformation—rather than sticking to the binary reading of vandal versus decorative status that usually opposes graffiti practices to muralist ones.

3.1. Urban overpainting: Control

The control type of overpainting is explored at various scales of urban landscape. We begin with the story of the VH crew self-overpainting an illegal slogan, continuing with the narrative of experience of Escif with a commissioned mural that had been partially overpainted by the municipality. We

move then through the press releases of Blu's comrades who overpainted a mural they commissioned ten years before, so as to protest against the instrumentalisation of the anti-gentrification mural.

Rennes, 2011, saw four members of VH crew painting a black and chrome block letters graffiti displaying the slogan "*Sarko, les VH te baisent*" [Sarkozy, VH crew fucks you] at the edge of the city. 'Sarko' was the short name for Nicolas Sarkozy, a president of French republic that was implementing an antisocial political agenda which the writers opposed . The piece was never overpainted by any writer, considering that even if it could be read as a political slogan, it still remained to be considered by the local scene as a graffiti piece—thus subject to the same unwritten rules of the graffiti culture regarding overpainting dynamics.

About ten years later, the mural was still standing after three presidential terms, but the group has been long dissolved. The fresco remained intact, like a time capsule of a different urban and political landscape. In 2022, while demonstrations were ongoing against Emmanuel Macron government's reforms, Zeko, former member of VH crew—who had not been involved in the painting of the graffiti mural (VH crew, Tremblin, 2023)—decided to renew the graffiti to make it fit to the recent political narrative. According to the writer, Sarkozy and Macron, both presidents of French republic, were sharing an authoritarian, corrupt and anti-worker vision of democracy. After a small discussion at an opening taking place at the gallery Drama, Zeko went by night to proceed to the update of the block letters, replacing 'Sarko' with 'Macron' (see Fig. 4). The renewed lettering was tantamount to an anachronistic message addressed by a group of writers from the past to the new generation; a *pentimento* graffiti highlighting the fact that the control of the graffiti game can be used to enter in echo with political context.

In 2017, the Spanish artist Escif was invited by Bretagne's Teenage Kicks festival to create a site-specific mural in the harbour of Saint-Malo. In a text shared on the Watchlist and published later on his blog *Street Against*, Escif describes his view on the political spectrum that his intervention puts in perspective:

Any public intervention is political as it modifies the daily lives of people in cities. This modification can be directed in two possible directions, bringing people closer to their reality or away from it. Even if painting is enclosed inevitably on spectacle limits, I thought that there are ways to bring it closer to reality; to symbolise the boundaries between life and spectacle, between presentation and representation, between contemplation and experience, between landscape and territory, between the power of institutions and the power of the people. (Escif, 2017)

The mural intervention of Escif consisted in the collection of the various texts he found on view or graffitied in the neighborhood, activist slogans such as "*Non à la destruction de Notre-Dame-des-Landes*" [No to the destruction of the Notre-Dame-des-Landes ZAD]; "JOSEPH ROTY ii", the name of a boat; graffiti game related lettering like "LTDT" and "WORST GANG". The last text was a play of words related to a naturalist illustration of a gigantic salmon "à *consommer de préférence avant la fin du capitalisme*" [to be consumed before the end of capitalism], which plays with the idea of the expiration date of fresh fish and the planned obsolescence characteristic of modern capitalism. By putting these found texts in dialogue with an aquatic visual element, Escif drew the social context of the harbor in order to "amplify the noise from the street, on the other side it allows me to underline and confront these origins of contemporary muralism" (Escif, 2017).

After the artist arrived back home in Valence, he received an email from the festival's organiser who stated that the municipality was asking for the slogans—already existing in the neighborhood—to be removed, because the financing of the festival depended on the political neutrality of the murals produced by the artists. Thus, the texts reproduced in Escif mural were covered up with grey paint bubbles, despite the willing of the artist. The only text left was somehow the title of the mural "Zone d'espoir" [area of hope] that obviously refers to 'Zone à défendre' (ZAD) [area to be defended], the French neologism used to point a militant occupation meant to physically blockade

Figure 4. VH crew, Sarkozy les VH te baisent, 2011, Rennes (FR), Photography: VH crew. Zeko after VH crew, Macron ! les VH te baisent, 2022, Rennes (FR), Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

Figure 5. Escif, Zone d'espoir, 2017, Saint-Malo (FR), Photography: Escif.

Figure 6. Blu, Reclaim your city!, 2010 [2007–2008], Berlin (DE), Photography: Julia Bource.
Current state of Blu's Redacted Reclaim your city! Mural site, 2023 [2014], Berlin (DE), Photography: Matthieu Martin.

a development project in an area. In its current state, the mural seemed somewhat tainted with melancholy than hope. The grey shapes now acknowledge the control exercised by the institution over the artist's expression, when ironically, the random texts and political slogans remain in the neighborhood. (see Fig. 5)

In a somewhat similar vein, the Italian artist Blu is known for murals on the scale of entire buildings, recognisable by the clear line drawing carried out with pole and the brush and their recurring anti-capitalist themes. They are carried out most of the time without authorisation and not sponsored. On the 11th December, 2014, following Blu's request, Lutz Henke of the Kreutzberg Murals organisation, with aid of additional artists, entirely covered two gigantic walls in black, scaling to a height of twenty-five meters in 2007 and 2008 in the neighborhood from Kreuzberg to Berlin (see Fig. 6). One depicting two figures removing each other's balaclavas (a metaphor of the two Berlins revealed by their hands making 'E' and 'W' gang signs) and the other the bust of a businessman adjusting his tie, fists handcuffed by a gold chain.

During this black-washing, their cover-up revealed a hand making a middle finger and 'your city', part of the original slogan 'Reclaim your City'. The reason for the deletion was explained by Henke in a column in *The Guardian*, where he expressed the wish for his iconic work not to be associated with the identity of the neighbourhood, as well as his desire for it not to be used as a marketing tool for the new real estate project which came to gentrify the historic wasteland spaces in Kreuzberg—the investors were marketing the new built flats as having a breathtaking view on Blu mural: "Unintentionally, we had created an ideal visual representation of the imaginary Berlin of the 1990s and its promises: a city full of wasteland offering plenty of space for affordable living and creative experimentation among the ruins of its recent history" (Henke, 2014). As these murals represented a bygone era of a Berlin takeover by its citizens, it appeared normal that they disappeared along with it in order to pave the way of an urban cycle path. Mirroring municipality dynamics, it is not unheard of for street artists to destroy, erase or recover their non-commissioned work so that their narrative is not incorporated as a commodity by the city.

To conclude, control urban overpainting could be defined as an overpainting expressing a will on how the urban landscape should look so to maintain its consensual aesthetics. Such a strategy could be performed by anonymous citizens or any form of legitimate power, for example the author of the mural, city workers, the owner of the wall, the municipality or perhaps even the institution commissioning the mural.

3.2. Urban overpainting: Playfulness

The playful type of overpainting is explored within the confrontation of styles: through the narrative of experience of Idfix and Datura's radical graffiti which overpainted contemporary artist's public artwork thus highlighting the thin line between cultural legitimacy and authority, via the story of Saeio interacting with the writers who overpaint with his graffiti pieces to enhance his style.

In 2020, the French writers Idfix and Datura painted their name over the mural *Soleil et Garde-corps* created by Daniel Buren in 1996 on the roof of the Théâtre des Abbesses in Paris (see Fig. 7). The contextual dimension of Buren's visual tool, these famous 8.7 cm wide strips of colour inspired by an upholsterer's pattern, had the appearance of a backdrop for the graffiti writers, as they claim that "we overpainted Buren's mural by mistake; in the half-light, the blanded tone of the stripes suggested that it was an ornamental pattern and not an artwork". It's a case of the biter being bitten: Buren's artwork is so *in situ* that it disappears and becomes the decorum—the background—of another type of visual tool, a graffiti based one: block letters in chrome and black. The chrome and black graffiti is an archetypal sign-stamp that is often found under bridges along ring roads because it flashes in the light of the car or train headlights.

This urban overpainting is a determinism of the end of the 20th century which underlines the bankruptcy of the modern fantasy of the sacred and the eternity of public art and of the romantic and demiurgic image to which the artist is associated. Graffiti also reveals its environment. Vandal reluctantly, Idfix and Datura established a plastic dialogue between two forms of public art—one commissioned, the other without authorisation—which determine a playful spectrum in which are inscribed all the signs that punctuate

Figure 7. Idfix and Datura pieces over Daniel Buren's Soleil et Garde-corps commissioned work, 2021, Théâtre des Abesses, Paris (FR), Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

our daily journeys. It comes to point out the latent balance of power about who is legitimate to define what the urban landscape should look like.

Another example of playful overpainting is the series of urban overpainted trucks between 2014 and 2015 entitled *Nolens Volens*[6] by Parisian writer Saeio. It was exhibited as part of his solo show 'Phases: Le graffiti comme performance' conceived by French curator Laura Morsch-Kihn in 2016 at Frac Sud, Marseille (see Fig. 8). After having witnessed his graffiti pieces on trucks in Paris overpainted by the graffiti pieces of several Parisian writers, Saeio decided to play with the unfair overpainting as a starting point of what could be seen as clumsy abstractions. Large brushes and acrylic or glycero paint were all employed to

reenact the gesture of the writer covering his 'anti-style' pieces with 'Parisian style' throw-ups. Yet this was executed it in an approximative and expressive manner in order for both the overlapping graffiti pieces started to merge in a unexpected style, as if someone had been rubbing the metal surface with acetone or other solvent, mixing the colours and melting the pieces together.

The final render is close to the Bad Painting, an American style of figurative painting on canvas from the 1970s—its title given by American critic and curator Marcia Tucker with the aim of gathering figurative paintings in the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. The shape encapsulates both the overlaying of names that determined the organisation of colours and lines, and its vanishing

6 - URL: http://saeio.paris/nolens-volens-4/.

Figure 8. Saeio, Nolens Volens, in: "Phases. Le graffiti comme performance", 2016, Frac Sud, Marseille (FR), Curation: Laura Morsch-Kihn, Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

process. Saeio exploits the fair use of overpainting of graffiti and brings it to another field of expression, where the pattern to be looked at is neither one nor the other, the unpredictable result of a process.

To conclude, playful urban overpainting could be defined as an overpainting which interacts in the frame of the common and informal rules of graphic intervention fields; the intervention could be addressed to the member of the community of inhabitants or to the ones of graffiti and street art scene.

3.3. Urban overpainting: Emotional

The emotional type of overpainting is explored within the personal and memorial relations to space, like Restif de la Bretonne engraving his diary in the stones of the bridges of Île Saint-Louis in Paris; by the story of the Steve Maia Caniço mural memorial which is traversed by various personal interpretations of the parties involved; and through the narrative of experience of TPA crew members who restore graffiti pieces from older writers, thus maintaining a kind of intangible cultural heritage alive.

Since the end of the 18st century, with the rise of urban life, individuals have been drawing a personal even intimate relationship with the city—especially poets, artists and philosophers like the French graphomaniac Restif de la Bretonne (1788–1794), the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1982), the International Situationist thinker Guy Debord (1957) or the New York writer and flâneuse Lauren Elkin (Elkin, 2017). The city became an entity, subject and vector of emotions, as the streets became a theatre of social life and struggles. Citizens, activists, graffiti writers and street artists take the role of drawing a life-size 'geography of emotions' (Bochet, Racine, 2002) where both map and territory overlap. Urban overpainting embodies these particular relations and can give insight into these intimate narratives.

Emotions come obviously in graffiti writing with the question of ephemerality; each tag is in itself a self portrait and still life painting of its own author. The life of the writers and the energy they dedicate to writing is the condition of

existence of their name. As their activity stops, and as their death occurs, their names slowly vanish alongside their graffiti succumbing to the elements and time itself, erased by city workers or overpainted by other writers.

The common way to create a memorial in graffiti culture consists of making the name of the deceased writers alive in the city, long after they have passed away. Several writers embody the dead name and paint his name all over the city (see Fig. 9). In the 2000s, the Parisian writer groups UV and TPK often paid tribute to their friend Zeab who died in a car accident by painting his name. After Saeio died in 2017— also in a car accident—his friends from PAL crew continued to tag his name in various places in order to enact a living memorial, so that his name continues to be passed on to this day.

On the 21st June 2019, a free party took place at Quai Président Wilson in Nantes during Fête de la Musique. After police forces were sent to stop the party, a violent altercation ensued, with several dancers falling into the river, resulting in one partygoer, Steve Maia Caniço, tragically drowning. Several gatherings, demonstrations and spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity occurred in the following days claiming 'Justice pour Steve'— posters, graffiti, fresco, demonstration signs and banners throughout the city. Nantes Révoltée, a local hard left media organisation, quickly went on site to paint the facade of a building belonging to the harbour company with a giant mural impersonating the scenes of police brutality against the free party participants, with Steve Maïa Caniço in the center of the composition surrounded at the top by the question "Que fait la police?" [What is the police doing?] and "Justice pour Steve" at the bottom. (see Fig. 10)

The facade had previously been used first in 2012 as a spot for a muralist program led by Plus de Couleurs, a non-profit organisation, whose mission is centred around promotion of graffiti culture. It was repainted as part of another event organised by the association in 2017 until it became its headquarters in 2019, while the organisers were starting to negotiate with Nantes municipality to take charge of the management of 'Plan Graff' and change it to 'Mur libre' [free wall] to serve the community of the graffiti writers by

Figure 9. Fuzi, Trane, Rap, Salo, Kilo, Zeab RIP graffiti, France, Photography: Fabien 'Rap' Azou.

offering them various walls among the city for engaging in their practice without the existing constraints imposed by municipality. This was to be a preliminary declaration of intent for graffiti over the walls, including specific restrictions, such as no political, religious or sexual content. After more than ten years of activity, and with minimal financial support, the efforts of the organisers began to reap their benefits as they finally found a broad base of support for more permanent activities like workshops and permanent mural programs, seeing two facades of their headquarters changing every two or three months.

Nantes Révoltée painted one of the two walls in front of the nearby car park. Plus de Couleurs subsequently decided to postpone their muralism program which encompassed their demand for social justice that the wall was echoing and symbolising in France and beyond[7]. In the following

months, extreme right activists scrawled controversial messages over the memorial against police violence, with certain messages relating to the death of Steve Maia Caniço. After each incident, Nantes Révoltée restored them respectively. On 18th February 2020, locals saw the wall being covered with black spray paint in the form of a fire extinguisher[8]. All human figures were redacted and a giant Celtic cross—fascist symbol of GUD far-right students union from the 1960s—was drawn in the middle of the wall. The degradation of the mural received a big media coverage and was even condemned by the Mayor of Nantes[9]. It was only restored three months later after the end of the lockdown[10].

On 24th September 2021, the memorial wall was overpainted entirely in black by Plus de Couleurs with the help of Steve Maia Caniço's family as a symbolic act of

7 - URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/world/europe/france-death-anger-police.html.

8 - URL: https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2721259-20200218-affaire-steve-maia-canico-nantes-fresque-hommage-jeune-homme-vandalisee.

9 - URL: https://twitter.com/Johanna_Rolland/status/1229769244667150341.

10 - URL: https://www.20minutes.fr/nantes/2781535-20200518-nantes-saccagee-fevrier-fresque-hommage-steve-maia-canico-restauree.
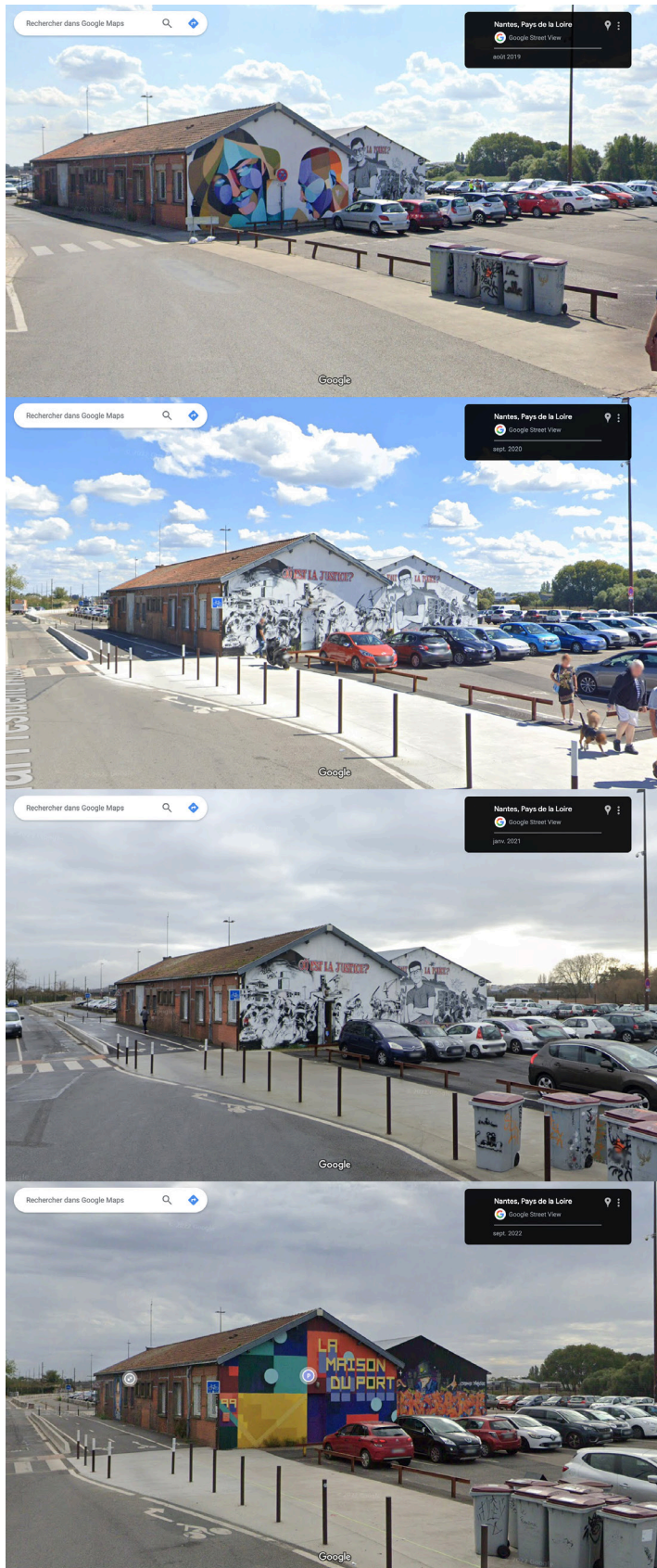
Figure 10. Google Street View, " Que fait la police ? Justice pour Steve" by Nantes Révoltée over Plus de couleurs headquarters, quai Président Wilson, Nantes, August 2019, September 2020, January 2021, September 2022, Source: Google.

Figure 11. Plus de couleurs, " Steve Maïa Caniço memorial covered in black" over Plus de couleurs headquarters, quai Président Wilson, Nantes, September 2021, Source: Plus de couleurs.

grieving (see Fig. 11). After many months of having the wall defaced by the fascists and restored by the antifascists, and following daily attention from several media and social networks, the family of Steve Maïa Caniço felt it was impossible for them to continue their process of mourning. They commented that it was difficult for their son's image to be in the middle of an symbolic fight among activists, appearing randomly across the city, constantly being associated with various types of symbolic and graphic violence from the fascists. The use of their son's image by Nantes Révoltée made him a local martyr of police violence, with several parallels with the Italian leftwing activist Carlo Giuliani—killed in 2001 by the Carabineri during alter-globalisation demonstrations in Genoa against the summit of the eight most industrialised countries (G8). It must be noted, however, that Steve Maia Caniço was not a self-defined leftwing activist; he simply happened to

die while attending a free party. The family felt that it was simply time to restore and celebrate the memory of their son's life, without political agendas getting involved.

With the help of Ju'Steve collective, Plus de Couleurs offered to paint another memorial to Steve Maia Caniço, limited to his portrait and his name on a blue background on the side of their headquarters, in order to separate the tribute from the fight for justice (see Fig. 12). Following this move, Plus de Couleurs restarted its mural program after a break of almost two years, declaring that the antifascist struggle was not at all part of the associative campaign for which they had the building made available and responsible of. On their side, Nantes Révoltée made a press release claiming that Plus de Couleurs assumed the role of the authorities by censoring the struggle against police violence, while totally missing the point by neglecting

Figure 12. Plus de couleurs, " Steve Maia Caniço memorial" painted over Plus de couleurs headquarters, quai Président Wilson, Nantes, September 2021, Source: Plus de couleurs.

the affect related to the use of Maia Caniço's portrait (Sirizzotti, 2022). It was a great shame that the symbol disappeared[11], but from activism to graffiti, non-comissionned murals are not meant to stay forever like a stamp over the urban landscape; several other manners of expressing emotional attachment to a cause or celebrating the memory of past generations exist in order to transmit and maintain the culture alive.

Two members of the TPA crew developed a specific manner of approaching overpainting practices through the restoration of vanished graffiti pieces made by older writers along the railway in the South of France. This practice came to them as they started graffiti in the middle of the 1990s. As teenagers, they were not comfortable with switching from tag to graffiti pieces, so they initiated a practice of

painting over the manipulated or vanished extant pieces that they could find in the wastelands of their city. Rather than mimicking the gesture or copying the style, the young writers were embodying the *persona* of another writers in order for them to be able to feel the flow, and thus learn by doing, and also by filling letters and drawing the line of another name. After one year of this experiment, the two aforementioned writers began to develop their own style and graffiti practice. (TPA crew, Tremblin, 2023)

Almost 20 years later, in 2015, the two writers of TPA crew went back on the paths and places they used to wander around when they started graffiti, namely the railway surrounding Nîmes. They were surprised to rediscover some of the pieces they were admiring at the time. Thanks to this, they wished to pay tribute to the writers of the 'old

11 - URL: https://www.streetpress.com/sujet/1635427442-nantes-fresque-steve-maia-Cani%C3%A7o-mort-police-loire-remplacee-%C5%93uvre-tags-extreme-droite.
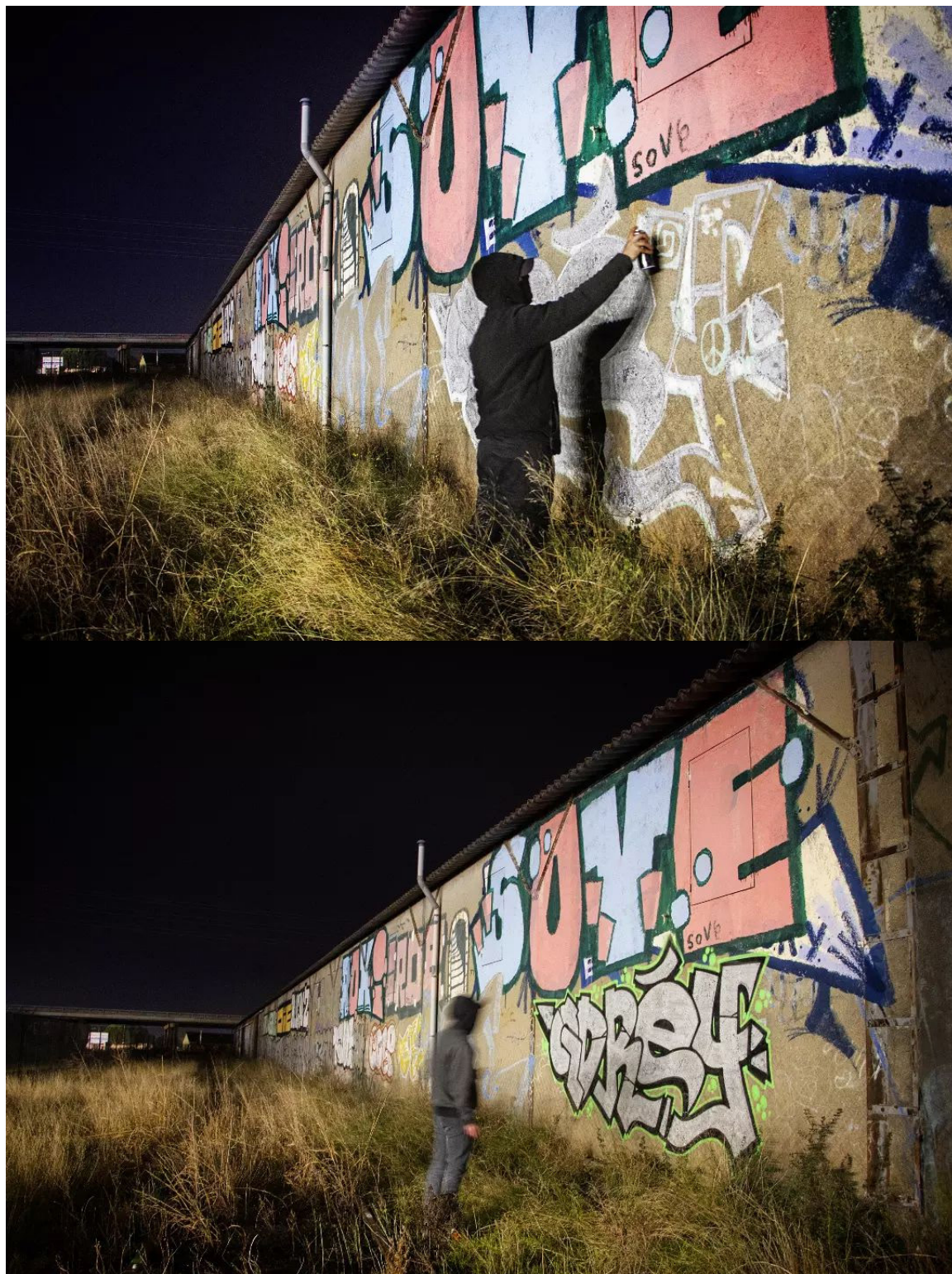
Figure 13. TPA crew, Restoration of 'Odrey' graffiti piece attributed to Sten originally painted in the beginning of the 1990s, 2023 Nîmes railway (FR), Photography: TPA crew.

school' that have been influencing them, and whose pieces had almost disappeared. They came back to their starting point, but this time with sufficient skills and experience to be able to reenact the original gesture of their peers. During a period of five years, drawing from their memories to the few pigments that remained on the walls, they performed between thirty and sixty restorations of the pieces of the writers they considered influential in their personal history. They aimed to reproduce the same flow—for example, electric filling of the piece—using the same type of cans that have been used at the time (Auto-K or Julien rather than Montana), and documenting it with cheap analogue film as could have been done in that period (see Fig. 13). This process found its conclusion in overpainting their own old pieces, to replace them with the ones from other writers they had been overpainting when they were beginners. (TPA crew, Tremblin, 2023) Such a peculiar learning process they initiated around 1995 as teenagers served as a matrix to contribute as adults to the maintenance of an urban patrimony from Nîmes, that would from that moment on include graffiti.

UNESCO defines the concept of intangible cultural heritage[12] as including "oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts[13]". By performing restoration on old graffiti writers pieces they evaluate, the TPA writers advocated for graffiti perceive as an immaterial patrimony and offered some hints for good safeguarding practices in the field.

To conclude, emotional urban overpainting could be defined like an overpainting that embodies an affected perception of the author of the intervention, giving rise to another layer of meaning over the original artwork.

3.4 Practice-based hypothesis: Urban overpainting as co-authorship

In order to put these singular case study exploration in perspective, I developed several experiments to investigate the ways such types of urban overpainting could be put in motion so as to create an assumed co-authorship between the original author of the commissioned mural, the creative destruction performed by anonymous citizens and my approach that aims to visually articulate these two conflictual gestures.

I initiated a series entitled *Wrong Restoration*, which including reworkings of commissioned street art murals partly destroyed by urban forces—such as city workers— or defaced by graffiti, an "agonist ornament" (Schacter, 2014) against the urban order that somehow neo-muralism embodies. The resulting shape appears as an alternative version of the mural. Instead of bringing back the mural to its original state, it maintains its aspect in-between two statuses, neither accurate nor defaced. This could be seen as a graphical consensus integrating a visual widespread dissent that highlights the legitimate presence and tense relationship between graffiti and muralism, between vandalism and decoration. The 'wrong' restoration acknowledges the state of transformation of the original mural and materialise its 'potential becoming else'.

In 2017 in Strasbourg, I restored the *Point Noir* [black dot] which French street artist Benjamin Laading painted in 2011 as part of Perffusion festival organised by the association Démocratie Créative. After few years of existence, the mural representing an oversized fat cap spray paint black dot was covered with various graffiti. With the agreement of Laading, I came to restore the mural using a different colour so that the result—a black and red abstract shape—

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12 - The main characteristics of intangible cultural heritage are works that are:

– Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time, in other words, not limited to the past, but also embracing rural and urban contemporary practices;

– Inclusive, contributing to social cohesion and helping individuals to feel part of communities and wider society;

– Representative, existing as the roots of certain communities, meant to be transmitted rather than just evaluated as a cultural good;

– Community-based, recognised as a cultural good by the concerned community.

13 - URL: https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003.

Figure 14. Mathieu Tremblin after Jože Slak - Đoka & 1107 klan, Wrong Restoration "Sax Pub", 2022, Ljubljana (SI), Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

made the transformative process readable. I proceed in the same way in 2020 with the *Freedom* mural of German street artist Yeah as he was invited in 2015 by muralism festival Colors. The mural that was covered by tags now displays a golden geometrical shape that makes it unreadable, but understood as a kintsugi—a traditional Japanese restoration technique that uses gold to magnify the cracks of a restored pottery.

As part of an invitation to the Ljubljana Street Art Festival, I performed a 'wrong' restoration of historical Sax Pub mural created by Slovenian painter Jože Slak-Đoka in 1988, considered to be the first graffiti mural in Slovenia. The principle of my intervention was to invert the colours of the original fresco and repaint it completely (see Fig. 14) so that its original state could be only perceived through the lens of a digital camera (see Fig. 15), inverting the colours in its positive condition. The Sax Pub mural is completed by a sentence painted in the backyard of the house and highlighting the stakes of the restoration gesture: "The best way to keep a culture alive is to prevent its objectification, sus fetishisation. Old stories become models for new

Figure 15. Mathieu Tremblin after Jože Slak - Đoka & 1107 klan, Invert documentation of Wrong Restoration "Sax Pub", 2022, Ljubljana (SI), Photography: Črt Piksi (Ljubljana Street Art festival).

Figure 16. Mathieu Tremblin after Jože Slak - Đoka & 1107 klan, Wrong Restoration "Sax Pub", 2022, Ljubljana (SI), Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

narratives. Negative memories are turned into positive in order to bring about a paradigm shift." (see Fig. 16)

In their book *Antigraffitism*, French researcher Jean-Baptiste Barra and Timothée Engasser describe the graffiti removal policies as a manner of controlling space and bodies. When Julie Vaslin, in *Gouverner les Graffitis: Esthétique propre à Paris et à Berlin*, analyses these same policies from a quantitative point of view, she concludes that the dominant trend that puts commissioned muralism and illegal graffiti practices in opposition. I pledge for the actors to include the development of overpainting dynamics rather than buffing ones, so that commissioned murals would not reproduce the institutional mistakes of public art in urban space—the scale of space and time related to the city rather than to its inhabitants, that leads the

public artwork to be separated from the community. Thus the determinism of the vanishing of graffiti and street art could be pursued into the commissioned pieces, by having these adhere to the processual beauty of the unstoppable transformation of the urban landscape. This dynamic would be a new type of commissioned public artwork that would be transformative, in a process of becoming other through the process—from the individual to the collective brought by overpainting interactions—rather than a permanent and boring *nature morte*—'still life' but in a literal negative French sense, in literal terms, 'dead nature', a parody of the graffiti and street art urban phenomenon.

4. Conclusion

Contemporary muralism is mostly not considered as patrimony like other types of public art. Thus it is rarely restored or conserved when the destruction of buildings occur. One example would be the *Bleu de Matisse* mural, painted in 1982 by Haitian artist Hervé Télémaque on the side of Le Liberté concert hall as part of a series of mural commissioned by France's then Minister of Culture Jack Lang. This work was overpainted in 2009 as part of the renovation of the concert hall. On the opposite, the *Crack is Wack* mural was painted in 1986 by American artist Keith Haring (who died of AIDS in 1990) over a wall of an East Harlem handball court. As it became a symbol of anti-drug activism, it was first restored in 2007, then a second time in 2019, funded by The Keith Haring Foundation. On further level of complexity, in 2016 a team of restorers developed a technique for allowing to separate a very thin film from the surface of the wall in order to extract a mural painting while preserving both the materiality of the paint and its support. They applied their innovative technique on a mural painted by the Italian artist Blu that was intended to be destroyed. It was exhibited in Genus Bononiae, at Bologna's History Museum, as part of the exhibition 'Street Art, Banksy & Co. / L'arte allo stato urbano' curated by Italian-French art historian Christian Omodeo and Italian restoration historian Luca Ciancabilla. The exhibition generated a polemical answer from the local graffiti scene, resulting in the covering up of all the illegal murals by the Italian artist, in order to protest against the removal and exhibition of Blu's work without his consent.

Urban overpainting tends to redefine our understanding of what we should expect from graffiti and street art pieces. Through the filter of graphic intervention, the beauty of the urban landscape could be considered a processual one, the beauty of the daily micro-transformation entering in dialogue at a human scale. This transformative beauty could be opposed to the frozen aesthetics of the imposing public art and certain commissioned murals over oversized proportions, conserving their authoritarian aesthetics even when confronted to a lower scale type of transformation. The various expressions of this processual beauty come with a typology of interactions within the city.

Urban overpainting proceeds differently depending on the position of the author of the overpainting, encompassing perceptions of politics, overpainting in the name of power perceptions of graffiti and street art, overpainting in the name of the graffiti game; social perceptions, overpainting in the name of affect.

These overlapping interventions could be understood as the production of a specifically collective authorship. One could consider a collective body of authors who would overpaint parts of their own work several times so that it evolved over time to their renewed taste. We could use the term 'urban pentiment'' to define successive layers appearing in public space over the same walls over several decades. Considering the various types of urban overpainting explored, the notion of *pentimento* becomes more relevant to describe how the process of successive overpainting becomes the subject of the discourse, rather than the piece, as an autonomous artwork could be perceived. Considering that what we are looking at—the processual beauty of murals—is produced by a chain of interaction of various actors that depends one each other. The responsibility of the transformation of urban landscape could be considered as belonging to a collective authorship where the wall exists as a form of commons.

If the wall is indeed a common space, then the state of the muralism should not be the expression of a consensus nor the unwilling expression of a dissensus. It should embodies multiple authors and be the explicit subject of the controversy— dissensus within the consensus— both aspects being the spectrum of the democratic conversation: an "institutionalised conflict" (Ricœur, 1991, p. 175) rather than the pacified expression of the authority of both the author of the mural, the owner of the wall and the institution that framed their creative desire.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely the participation of subject anonymity and/or consent to publish.

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