

Early Street Stencil Pioniers in the US 1969-85: Bojórquez, Fekner, Wojnarowicz and Vallauri

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Abstract

Independent from New York Style writing graffiti Chaz Bojórquez invented the visual signature tag in Los Angeles in 1969. Like John Fekner in New York from 1976 onwards he created rather road art than street art, stencils for car drivers in the urban outskirts. Fekner mixed conceptual art and activist art in his few word poetry warning sign stencils on car wrecks and industrial ruins. Like Bojórquez also David Wojnarowicz and Alex Vallauri used visual signature stencil tags in early 1980ies New York. Both, Vallauri and Wojnoarowicz, also used smaller stencils in a modular way to create larger mixed freehand/ stencil compositions.

Keywords

Stencil, template, street art, USA, New York City, Los Angeles, Chaz Bojórquez, John Fekner, Alex Vallauri, David Wojnarowicz, Burning House, Acrobat, Senior Suerte, Decay, Random Dates

1 - Introduction

The Emergence of street art research as an academic discipline goes hand in hand with the tendency to look back, to the roots of street art, historically and technically. With 25 years of using stencils by the most known street artist Banksy in 2020, it is time to go back even further and focus on the history of stencil graffiti. This essay is a short summary of some chapters in my forthcoming book *Street Art History of Stencils*, which I plan to publish in 2022.

The first street art pioneer to stencil self-authorized directly on public walls was not Blek le Rat, but his fellow Frenchman Ernest Pignon-Ernest in 1966. A few years later, 1969 - and independent from Pignon-Ernest - was the beginning of illicit street art stenciling also in the US. I will briefly touch upon L.A. stencil exception Chaz Bojórquez (*1949) before I switch to New York's stencil high time before the mid 1980ies. Although there were many other stencilists active in New York City in the period 1969-85, most notably Christoph Kohlhofer (*1940), Eric Drooker (*1958) or Anton van Dalen (*1938) working between political street art, concept art, pop art and lofi do-it-yourself punk attitude, I will focus on John Fekner (*1950), David Wojnarowicz (1954-92) and Alex Vallauri (1949-87) as for all of them, at least for a period of time, street stenciling was their main artistic output.

2 - Early Street Stencil Pioniers in the US 1969-85

2.1 - Chaz Bojórquez - Using a Stencil as Visual Signature Tag

Charles "Chaz" Bojórquez, was already a trained artist when he became the first US artist who took his stencil work directly to the street. He had a similar outsider role for a while in the US than Pignon-Ernest in France. In 1969, and only in (East) Los Angeles, Bojórquez used a single stencil motif, because he otherwise made Mexican-American calligraphy, so-called Cholo graffiti. As a Mexican-American local artist, his contribution to street art history was not much known before 1995, when he participated in the Los Angeles graffiti video documentary "Graffiti Verite" (Bryan, 1995).

Bojórquez called his stenciled tag "Señor Suerte" or literally translated "Mr. Lucky" which he spray-painted for the first time to a stairway pillar at the Arroyo Seca Parkway in 1969 (fig. 1). His visual stencil tag was cut from thick plastic foil (Columbus and Deitch, 2011, 147-153). Bojórquez created Señor Suerte as an alter ego of himself at that time: „I'm part Hollywood, I'm part hippie, and I'm part chicano“ (Bennett and Lir, 2018). Señor Suerte was a slightly smiling human skull from the Mexican Day of the Dead (Bojórquez' chicano part), his bone hand holds his fingers crossed which made him Mr. Lucky. The artist adapted this hand

posture from a hand holding a cigarette of which it still reminds. The skull wears a broad-brimmed fedora hat and a fur collar, recalling a stereotypical Afro American movie character (part Hollywood), “pimp daddy from New York that happened in the 60ies in the movies” (Bennett and Lir, 2018). Although Bojórquez was not an African American, and no gang member (PBS, 2013, TC: 3.39) he identified as a Latino with a character that was not white, and ambivalent, but had a strong agency on his own, and that emerged from the 1960ies civil rights movement (“part hippie”). A pimp is a drug dealer or a procurer, a person dealing with gang activities, a gangster. Bojórquez’ street art, his lettering, but also his stencil tag was inspired by Cholo gang graffiti, which got a history in Los Angeles back to the 1940ies. Vice Versa inspired his Señor Suerte tag the gangs who took over his skull tag wearing a gangster hat as a tattoo as a protective symbol within ten years (Bennett and Lir, 2018). Bojórquez’ stenciled self-portrait is also a portrait of his background and his community that reflected back on this community. It is a positive portrait which combined self-confidence with Dead of the Dead humor with identification potential.

Like Fekner’s later stencils, also Bojórquez’ one was rather “road art” than “street art” as this particular large stencil print was best visible from the freeway. But Bojórquez also spray-painted in the dry concrete river beds around L.A. (PBS, 2013, TC 3.43min.) – not exactly art in streets. His first Señor Suerte stencil stayed at Arroyo Seca Parkway over 15 years, until 1984 (Davalos, 2007), a very long time for an illegal street piece. With his Señor Suerte stencil, Bojórquez is one of the inventors of the visual signature tag, which he created independently from the history of style writing graffiti in Philadelphia and New York. The existence of his stencil challenges the popular narrative that street art derived from style writing graffiti.

2.2 - John Fekner – Warning Sign Stencils Between Concept Art And Activism

John Fekner started his „few word message“ (Corcoran, 2016, 126) graffiti in 1968 (Fekner, 2017a) when he wrote freehandedly the title of a Small Faces Pop song, Itchycoo Park, in his local Gorman Park in New York. „White Lake or Bust“ was the first work he cut in a stencil-like manner to glow it into his car on the way to Woodstock in 1969 (Fekner, 2017b). White Lake was a village nearby the concert venue). Not much later he actually stenciled numbers

on a t-shirt. With both works, Fekner created mobile or moving individual messages in public space. Similar to Bojórquez, „White Lake or Bust“ was rather road art than street art, visible by and made for cardrivers, not so much for pedestrians on a street. In 1976, Fekner actually started self-authorized road stenciling. The trained artist stenciled his Random Dates series with spray paint in the Queens area of NYC – (by then) past, present and future dates. Those dates, for instance „Fall 1968“ were not political yet, but rather l’art pour l’art in a conceptual tradition of On Kavara’s Date Paintings (since 1966) or Jasper Johns’ Alphabet Paintings around 1960. Fekner photographically documented them in a self-published artist xerox book under the pseudonym Gary Hutter (1978), a portmanteau alter ego inspired by pop music again – Gary Brooker from British Band Procul Harum and Ralf Hütter from German band Kraftwerk (Fekner, 2020). Fekner started in the same year as political stencil activist Anton von Dalen – 1976 (van Dalen, 2019). In the same year, British punk illustrator Gee Vaucher would photograph feminist activist stencils on Manhattan’s pavement (Vaucher 1979, 4; Howze 2008, 16). All three works were still typeface only.

From 1978 until 1983 (Fekner, 2011b) he stenciled his most known series of target or warning signs, also called Urban Decay on the roads and industrial outskirts of New York. Those political activist few word stencil graffiti works aimed at random spectators as well as at local politicians to change problems like decaying bridges or remains of industry polluting nature. Many of those stencils Fekner spray-painted on car wrecks (fig. 2), something David Wojnarowicz would do soon as well (fig. 3). Although Fekner started street stenciling at around the same time when punk and with them punk stencils started in New York and elsewhere, Fekner worked more in a hippie-activist or conceptual art tradition. In 1981 (Fekner, 2011a), he also started to use image stencils which are much less known. His life-size image stencils of deers, skeletons or toxic waste barrels dealt rather with the potential future of the places he attached them, not so much the present or the past like his few word messages.

2.3 - David Wojnarowicz – Modular Urban Guerilla Warefare Stencils

In 2020 David Wojnarowicz, who got a large retrospective at New York’s Whitney Museum in 2016, is more known

as an East Village art scene member and AIDS activist artist. Less known and documented are his origins in early street art, especially street stenciling. Aware of Fekner's road stencils (Hair, 2020), with whom he also collaborated in 1982, the self-taught Wojnarowicz started street stenciling in a post punk context. He advertised the band he played in, 3 teens Kill 4, with stenciled posters in the East Village. When he realized the posters were torn down quickly he started stenciling directly on urban surfaces (Carr, 2012, 175), like Fekner for instance on car wrecks. Especially known in the emerging East Village Art scene became Wojnarowicz' burning house stencil (fig. 3) which then paved his way into the gallery art world (Carr, 2012, 210-211). This motive of a simple burning suburbs house that looked like a screaming face with burning eye and ear windows became Wojnarowicz' visual signature tag similar to Bojórquez' Señor Suerte (fig. 1).

From the beginning of his street stencil works, the burning house was also used in a modular way. Unlike Fekner's or Bojórquez' large road stencils, the actual „street“ artist Wojnarowicz mostly used small stencils, which he combined in a modular way to again and again new compositions of smaller or larger urban guerilla warfare scenes with soldiers, bomber planes, burning houses, targets and victims (fig. 3). According to former stencil collaborator Julie Hair (2020), Wojnarowicz also seemed to be inspired by actual south american guerilla movements, like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, who also used street stencil for propaganda frequently.

This modular stenciling method allowed it Wojnarowicz to play and cover large and quite different sites in a fast and easy way that common printing techniques could not provide, least of all in an illegal street context.

2.4 - Alex Vallauri - Brazilian Modular Pop Art Stencilist in New York

For two years, 1982-83 (Dettmann Wandekoken, 2017, 84), the international Brazilian artist Alex Vallauri worked in New York City. Ethiopian-born, to Italian parents, Vallauri was already an recognized artist in Brazil (his home country only since he was 16), when he started illegal street stenciling in Brazil in the late 1970ies, after traveling and practising artistic printing in Sweden and the UK (Dettmann Wandekoken, 2017). As Vallauri was one of the very first graffiti artists in Brazil, his day of death, March 27, is

celebrated today as the Day of Graffiti in Brazil in his honor. After a rather expressionist phase, Vallauri changed to Pop Art and with it to stencils. Although Vallauri's street stencils also in New York were photographed much, he stayed under the radar in US and European street art history, to a certain extend until 2020. No-one seemed to have known his name there. An US postcard with a street photo of one of his illegal works from 1982 simply stated „New York City Street Art“. His devil stencil even made it on the cover of the widespread illustrated book „Soho Walls. Beyond Graffiti“ (Robinson, 1990), again without mentioning his name. Vallauri liked the work of fellow street art pioneers Richard Hambleton and Keith Haring (Rota-Rossi, 2013, 169-170). So he added his communicative and modular stencils for instance at least ten times to Hambleton's shadowmen. Most of the frequent street photographers that documented Hambleton's work and with it Vallauri's, seemed to have known his name.

Even before Wojnarowicz in New York, Vallauri used his street stencils in a similar, modular way, illustrated and dated for instance in MIS (2017, 14-15). Like Bojórquez or Wojnarowicz, he also had a visual signature stencil tag, in his case an joker-like circus acrobat (fig. 6). Vallauri stated, however, not with his acrobat, but with stencil of a high heeled black boot (fig. 7) in Brazil, already in 1978 (Dettmann Wandekoken, 2017, 14). Then he created an analoge long black fetish glove and other stencils, for instance a tie or a dotted bra. Freehandedly spray-painted he combined those stencils for instance to a woman - wearing boot, glove and bra. When the US American Wojnarowicz stenciled modular urban guerilla warfare compositions, also aware of and criticizing the US financing military dictatorships in South America, the Brazilian stencilist Vallauri, who lived most of his life under a south american military dictatorship, created Pop Art compositions in US or UK tradition. Vallauri's image repertoire contained rarely negative connotated icons - even the rare darker ones seemed to stem from children books, a witch on a broom, a little devil. Most he used consumption products or cartoon accessories, besides boot and glove for instance an oldschool telephone, hearts, stars, cat eye sunclases, musical instruments, etc. The entertaining and communicative aspect of his modular street stencils were in the foreground, although behind the light-hearted tone of his compositions there could be also much irony and light consumption criticism.



Fig. 1: Chaz Bojórquez, stenciled tag "Señor Suerte", stairway pillar, Arroyo Seca Parkway, 1969 Source: <https://api.artinthestreets.org/sirvy/media/cholo-graffiti?service=thumb-small&image=cholo-graffiti7.jpg>



Fig. 2: John Fekner, Decay (Warning Signs Project), 1979 Long Island City, NY Photo (c) John Fekner.

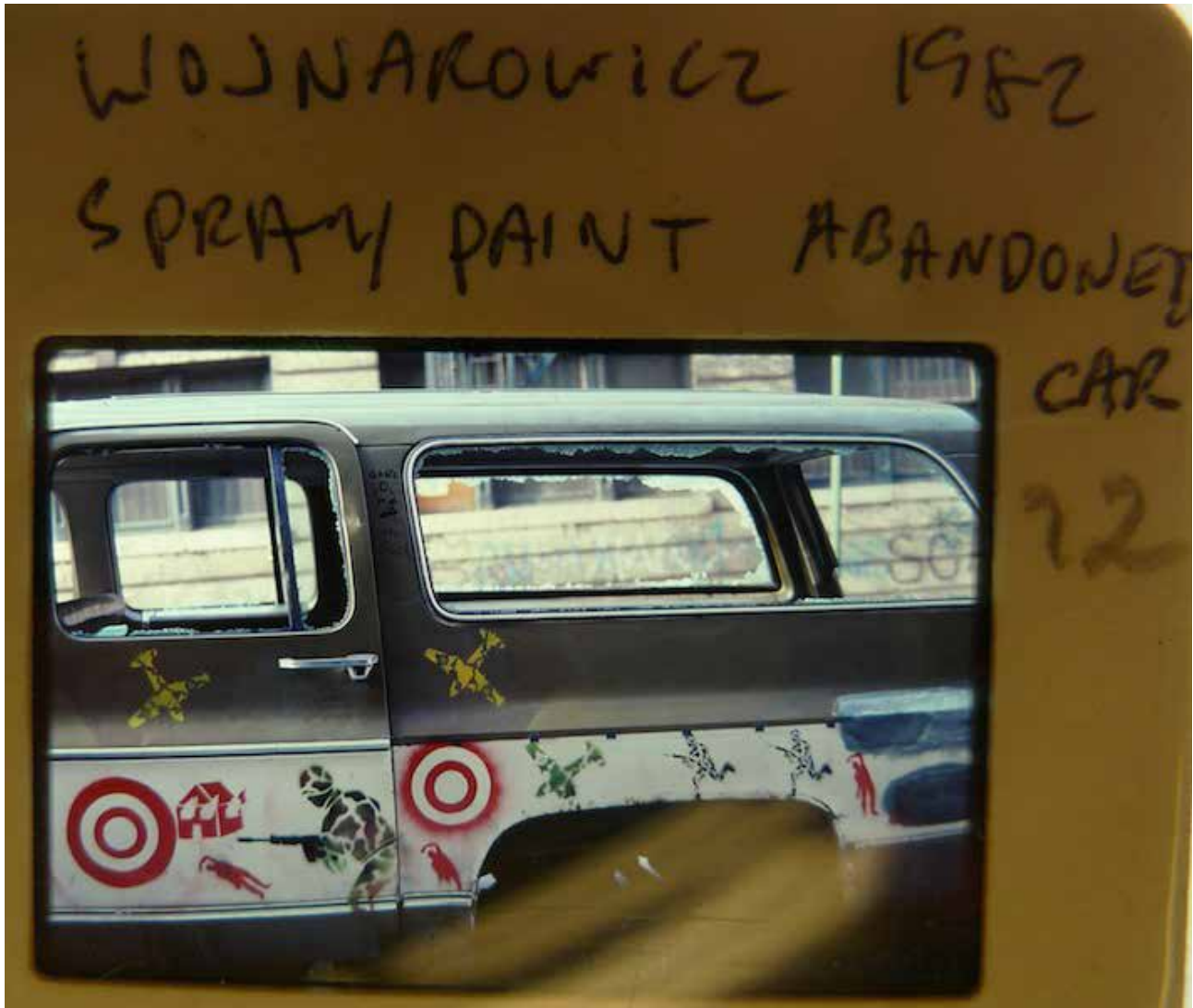


Fig. 3: David Wojnarowicz, [stencils and] Spray Paint Abandoned Car, [New York City] 1982. Source: https://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/DavidWojnarowicz/KnowledgeBase/index.php/File:SprayPaintAbandonedCar_1982.jpg



Fig. 4: Alex Vallauri on a Bench in Sao Paulo, next to him his first street stencil „Bota“ [boot], ca. 1980. Source: <https://urbanario.es/web/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Vallauri-1.jpg>

In 1982, Vallauri made his largest and most structured modular stencil composition in the US, sometimes entitled „Los três panteras y las panteretas“, covering an open band shell in Tompkins Square Park, New York, illustrated in MIS (2017, 18-23). On the outer two of the three walls three female singers each, the panteras, accompanied three musicians in the middle in a nature setting with trees and birds, hinting at the location, a stage for music in a park. In it, Vallauri summed up his best of, the boots, the gloves, the telephone, his signature acrobat, all together more than 20 stencil tools in one composition.

2.5 - Institutionalization of Street Stencils

Although a trained artist already in the late 1960ies, Bojörguez did not start exhibiting before 1981 (Davalos, 2007). Vallauri, Kohlhöfer and Fekner all exhibited before they started street stenciling. Only Wojnarowicz used street stencils as a spring board for his art career. All had solo shows with stencil works in galleries before 1985. Those artists were, however, not the only street stencilists in the US in the period 1969-85. For instance, besides Fekner more than 90 artists participated with stencils in the exhibition „Homeless NYC“¹ curated by Carlo McCormick in 1985.

The group show „Street Stencils of the Lower East Side“ (1988/89) curated by stencil artist Anton van Dalen, was a retrospective covering about the same period like this essay, the late 1960ies until the mid 1980ies. Van Dalen showed there three dozen stencil artists, among them works by Fekner, Kohlhöfer or Wojnarowicz, as well as by Seth Tobocman or Michael Roman.² Tobocman and Kohlhöfer were two of the first editors of the World War 3 Illustrated, an American comics anthology magazine, first issued in 1979/80.³ Frequent contributors were besides Tobocman and Roman also other New York stencilists like James Romberger or Eric Drooker,⁴ who started stenciling

in 1979.⁵

The mentioned shows in New York in the 1980ies were rather self-organized pop up shows, not institutional shows. Compared to Brazil where in the early 1980ies Vallauri and other brazilian street stencilists like the Vallauri collaborators Carlos Matuck and Waldemar Zeidler were already shown in museums, institutional merits for street stencils artists are still rare. Bojörguez, Fekner, Kohlhöfer or Wojnarowicz are and were shown in museums from time to time, but apart from Bojörguez and Fekner, not much for their street stencil work. Vallauri's work is exhibited frequently, but mostly in Brazil.

Conclusion

Chaz Bojörguez seemed to have invented the visual signature tag stencil in late 1969, independently from the style writing graffiti movement in Philadelphia and New York that started around the same time. Apart from stencil exception Bojörguez in Los Angeles most developments happened in New York City. There, similar to style writing graffiti, the tendencies in early self-authorized street stencils in the US between the 1970ies and the mid 1980ies went from typeface to more image-based works, from small to large, from monochrome to color, although stencil artists worked in different parts of town, not on trains, rather in the East Village and Soho. The analyzed stencilists were older than graffiti writers and mostly trained artists, apart from Wojnarowicz, who had a DIY punk background. Like Bojörguez, also Fekner was more a „road artist“ than a „street artist“ as both their stencils were made for car drivers with reference to size and placement. Apart from visual signature tags like the ones of Bojörguez, Wojnarowicz or Vallauri, the two latter ones used smaller stencils in a modular way to create large mixed stencil/freehandedly sprayed composition murals. The largest of these seemed to have been Vallauri's musicians in Tompkins Square Park combining more than 20 different stencils.

1 - Homeless NYC, group show, Storefront gallery, 12.10.-02.11.1985. The participants had to stencil their motif also on the streets of Manhattan at least 20 times. See flyer digitalized at <https://archive.org/details/198510HomelessAtHomeNewsletter/page/n1/mode/2up>

2 - Carlo McCormick: Street stencils of the Lower Eastside. In: Artforum International, May 1989, p. 153.

3 - Peter Kuper, Seth Tobocman, Christof Kohlhöfer (ed.): World War 3 Illustrated #1, 1979 [May 1980?], <https://www.comics.org/issue/853329/>

4 - Josh MacPhee: Stencil Pirates. New York 2004, p. 16.

5 - David Robinson: Soho Walls. Beyond Graffiti. New York 1990, p. 12, 48-49.

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