
From Urbex places to official walls in the cities in France: the liminal circulation of street art, from illegal to legal

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Abstract:

Many street artists started their practice as vandals on walls, trains, etc. But we often forget what they did in abandoned places called Urbex. It is in such places that we have been working for many years in proximity, exchanging and sharing with these artists, some of whom have gained recognition in the art world or in urban politics. This fieldwork is both a work about history of contemporary art and an anthropological study. It has enabled us to highlight the need for these artists to remain between the two worlds: that of known and recognized art and that of their origins, *i.e.* illegal, hidden and free. We give an overview here with examples of Urbex locations and artists from the south of France. But we also show the discomfort they feel in the “cultural third places” where their freedom is often limited by those who finance these places.

Keywords: Urbex; urban exploration; cultural third places; liminality; free street art; anthropology.

1. Introduction

Numerous artist who are recognized and solicited to collaborate in mural art in the area of urban creativity started developing their craft in a « vandal » way. They tagged or wrote graffiti on city walls, on trains, etc. They also practiced such activities in abandoned places called Urbex where it was illegal and sanctioned by the law, at least in the majority of Western countries. As one knows, this name Urbex concerns places of urban exploration: industrial, commercial zones, military wastelands, abandoned houses, churches, castles, etc., as one can see in the next pictures:



Fig. 1 Great Urbex place near Tours

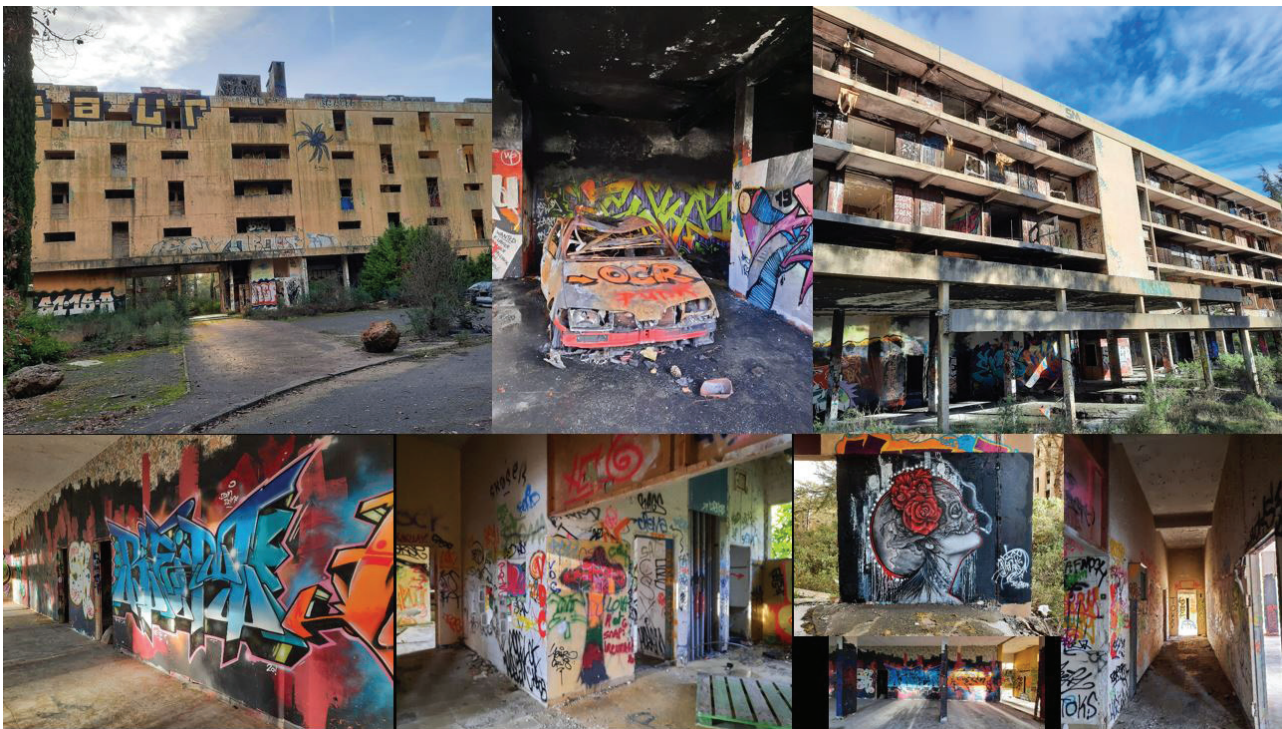


Fig. 2 Six large buildings for retired

Very few books mention that the history of graffiti and street art has been also widely built in URBEX areas. Among them, it is worth mentioning « Anthologie du Street Art »¹ where Magda Danysz writes some interesting pages about Urbex. Here is her presentation of what street artists look for in such places:

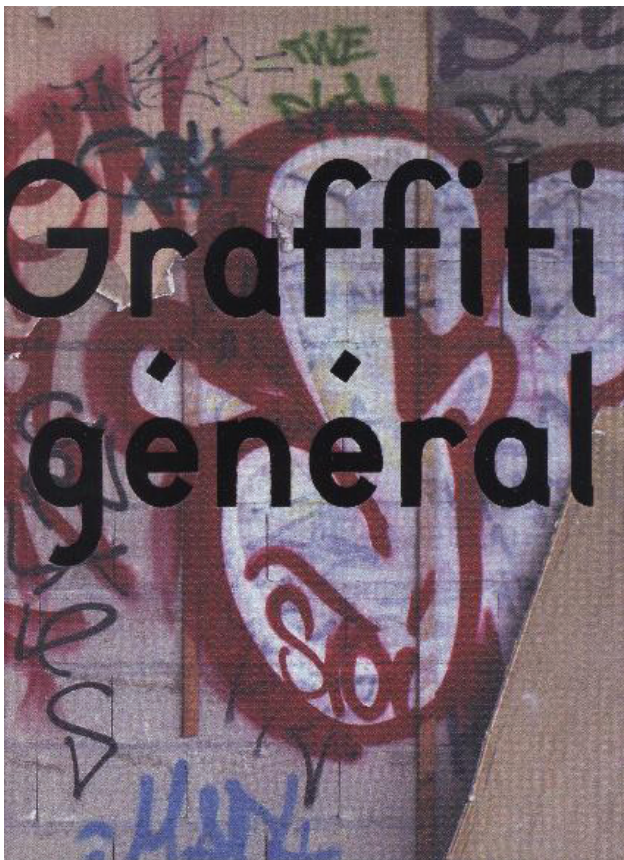


Fig. 3 The book "Graffiti général"

Unlike those who express themselves loudly and clearly, some of street artists prefer to play the card of secrecy; they choose to express themselves in urban areas that are often inaccessible to the general public. This new trend has a name: Urbex.

For these practitioners, it is a question of infiltrating places that are often off-limits, like urban speleologists, and eventually leaving an artistic trace, known only or almost only by them.²

And for other example, Parisians had the opportunity to see the abandoned department stores on the banks of the river Ourcq, in Pantin, closed to Paris. The book « Graffiti Général »³ which is mainly composed of photographs and today difficult to find in its original edition, has paid a beautiful tribute to this place.

We are trying to show three points in this paper:

1. The liminal, intermediary aspect of the artists' experience, from Urbex places to official events.
2. Because of the presence of pieces of art, some of those places have become well known and are exploited in the artistic landscape of certain working class suburbs. They have influenced urban and territorial policies to the point that elected representatives of numerous cities have called for the services of those « vandal » artists to embellish the walls of such areas but also of their cities.
3. One can also find these two aspects in the numerous "cultural third places" in France.

2. From Urbex to official events: liminal and intermediary experience / life.

The liminal, intermediary aspect of the artists' experience – those who began by illegal tags and paint walls before being recognized – can be truly perceived and scientifically translated only *via* an anthropological approach: one has to be with them in their places of action (or "spots") including Urbex, listen to them, see them live and express their art, in order to measure its quintessence. Our methodology mainly consisted in participative observation and listening and looking at the expression of their art in order to measure its very essence. We have done this over the years and that has led us to produce a documentary in an anonymized industrial wasteland; it is the rule about URBEX places to not give their name and geographic localization. In this video we give one of the examples of testimonies *in situ*: the interviews of the three graffiti artists we filmed in this

1 - Danysz, M. 2015. Anthologie du Street Art, Editions Gallimard, Paris.

2 - *Ibid.* pp. 193-194.

3 - Boukercha, K. (texts), Meffre, R. (photos), Marchand Y. (photos), 2014. Graffiti Général, Éditions Dominique Carré, Paris.



Fig. 4 Outside

documentary⁴. Here is the place (fig. 4 & 5), but obviously we cannot name it or its location, especially because it was a military place still belonging to the French army : one can see it in much more detail in the documentary by following the link.

And here are the three artist: Nick2, A16 and Noyps (Fig. 6). Some of you may have perhaps recognized Noyps who came in Lisboa at the 2019 conference and showed the gigantic art works he is officially making in many places in the south of France. For example (Fig. 7) this wall made in Marseille along the 10 km highway where many artists were invited (and paid).

4 - <https://www.canal-u.tv/chaines/culturegnum/la-parole-est-aux-graffiteurs>



Fig. 5 Inside



Fig. 6 Nick2, Asez and Noyps in the forbidden military Urbex factory. 2021, February



Fig. 7 Noyps, L2 walls, Marseille 2018

The end of this wall (Fig. 7) led to an exhibition in Paris, around the Ministry of Culture. And Noyps found himself in the presence of the minister as seen in Fig. 8.

But the example of this artist, like that of many others, shows that for them, even if they are solicited to work on official legal urban works, their pleasure comes « primary » from illegal art creation in forbidden places, and this remain a necessity, as we wrote in this the scientific journal HERMES :

“Artists coming from the streets who are today recognized, continue to practice on the side of their official work what they used to do. This is because they cannot skip the emotion that transgression makes them feel as well as the results coming from

the risks and the gesture, which is very different when they work on an official or business environment.”⁵

Thus this example of Noyps, which we have also seen in many other street artists' lives, illustrates their intermediate and liminal positions in the art world. Positions of which they are proud but from which they sometimes suffer – though this is not here the place to talk about this suffering.

3. From Urbex to urban and territorial policies.

A lot of abandoned sites, on the outskirts as well as inside the cities, have become more or less official, or at least allowed to be visited. Some cities even organize guided tours such as in Montpellier (south of France) along the Verdanson, Montpellier's graffiti canal, 13 000 feet long, or in Marseille in the Panier district. And many places inside

5 - Gerini, C., 2015. Le street art, entre institutionnalisation et altérité » in *L'artiste, un chercheur pas comme les autres*, Hermès/ La Revue, CNRS Editions, N°72, pp. 103-112.



Fig. 8 Noyps with the French Minister of Culture, Paris, 2018 October

cities are even becoming structures organized as cultural third places where vandal graffiti and street art become objects of their design. This topic was studied international research program on cultural third places which recently concluded with a colloquium in Toulon (France) from which a book will emerge to be published by L'Harmattan in a few months: we will talk of it in the 3rd part of our text.

But first here we give the example of a city where one can see:

1. An urbex site and an illegally painted and tagged district that has become two official places to visit (including by tourists).
2. Many of the city's walls are painted by graffiti artists who are now paid for their work. Here we see the change in policy of the city's elected officials who have integrated street art into the attractive heritage of it.

This city is La Seyne-Sur-Mer on the Mediterranean seaside between Nice and Marseille. For a century and a half this city lived thanks to the huge shipyards that built warships. These shipyards were closed down and abandoned in the 1980s and were later completely destroyed, except for a large mechanical workshop, the remains of which can be seen in the figures 9 and 10. This seaside building quickly became a popular Urbex for taggers as one can see on the fig. And on the hill overlooking these shipyards were the huge fuel tanks that fed them, which were also destroyed, but not the large walls that surrounded them (fig. 11); the taggers and other wall artists call this place "TOTAL" because of the name of the French oil company that owned them. Here we are in front of two really Urbex places, *a priori* forbidden. But the Total spot has gradually become a walking site and has thus acquired a reputation in the field of street art because of the great painted walls that can be admired there (fig. 12).



Fig. 9 and 10 The last large mechanical workshop of the shipyards in La Seyne sur Mer



Fig. 11 and 12 The spot "TOTAL" of the shipyards in La Seyne sur Mer with the great wall by SOCK ((fig.11)



Fig. 13 Hopare finishing his wall, "L'Impasse", January 14, 2016.; and Fig. 14 Official wall by SOCK, November 11, 2021.

But strangely enough, a neighborhood near the city center and the harbor has seen the emergence of street art on its walls, which was initially vandal (and often done by crews), then tolerated because it was organized by a local club called the "Impasse" which regularly invited French or foreign artists to take up residency and organized festive evenings when they finished their works: for example fig. 13, Hopare, 2016 January. Gradually these events became official and even supported by the city.

And since the election of new city leaders in 2020, not only has this district become official and proposed to the tourists, but more and more of the city's walls are being painted by street artists, some of whom were originally the vandal taggers of the two Urbex sites in the old shipyard: for example SOCK (Fig. 14).

Finally, beyond the official mechanism of reappropriation of the Urbex heritage and of the skills of the artists who express themselves in it, we can observe in La Seyne Sur

Mer as well as in many other cities how the strategies of territorial policies intersect with those of the artists. And so the liminal experience of these artists, between legal and illegal, visible in the city or hidden in the Urbex, is gradually denied by urban politics, and they deplore it. Faithful to their previous lives and to the illegal beginning of their art, they therefore go in search of new Urbex places where they can freely express it.

4. Between Urbex & official places: liminality

Liminality is often neglected in the literature. Few studies observe why, in order to live from their art, artists compose between vandal art and official art. In French hip-hop culture, an answer can be found thanks to the French rap group IAM, in the song "Reste underground! (Stay underground)". In this excerpt from this song says one can see how the liminal experience of artists is included in the places where they live, including in the often protesting world of rap music:

Refrain :

Ouais c'est ça reste underground
Dessous tu es, dessous tu resteras [...]

1. Akhenaton :

Ignores-tu mes qualités avec un stylo ?
Pour halluciner comme après une ingestion de psylo
Le ring se vide, début du premier round
Opposant mon intégrité
aux petits juges de l'underground
Et il a bon dos, qui sont-ils pour jauger ?
Qui est plus, qui est moins, qui devient faux, qui reste vrai [...]

2. Shurik'N

Mais Chill, attention ! il faudra pas cartonner
On va y passer des heures, des nuits et des journées
Se faire greffer un sampleur, tout ça pour ne rien gagner
Oh ! Tu m'a pris pour qui ? Ici-bas rien n'est gratuit
Regarde-moi, est-ce que j'ai l'air d'un Jésus Christ ?
«Non.» Bon, j'explique, pourtant c'est logique
J'entame une carrière mais je ne veux pas vendre un disque
Je fais un concert mais vaut mieux pas l'annoncer [...]

Et puis pas de promo, aucun journal
Cela pourrait nuire à notre image
C'est beaucoup trop commercial
Surtout très peu d'ambition
Il ne faudrait pas que le rap déchaîne trop les passions
Pas question d'une éventuelle évolution
Pour qu'on m'accuse de trahison
Ah non ! De l'underground je suis le champion

Refrain:

Yeah that's it stay underground
Underneath you are, underneath you will stay [...]

1. Akhenaton :

Do you ignore my qualities with a pen?
To hallucinate like after a psylo ingestion
The ring empties, the first round begins
Pitting my integrity
against the little judges of the underground
And he's got a good back, who are they to judge?
Who is more, who is less, who becomes false, who remains true

2. Shurik'N

But Chill, be careful ! you won't be able to make it
We'll spend hours, nights and days there
I'm gonna get a sampler, all for no money at all
Oh, who did you think I was? Nothing is free down here
Look at me, do I look like a Jesus Christ?
"No." Well, I'll explain, but it makes sense
I'm starting a career but I don't want to sell a record
I'm doing a concert but I'd better not announce it [...]

And then no promotion, no newspaper
It could damage our image
It's much too commercial
I don't want to sell a record, but it's better not to announce it
Rap shouldn't stir up too many passions
No question of a possible evolution so that
I could be accused of betrayal
Oh no! I'm the champion of the underground

We observe that the environment where graffiti artists paint gives us some good comprehensive elements about this process of liminality: spaces and crews or collectives. Urbex and abandoned sites are places where artists use walls for their creations, illegally, without payment, but paradoxically with more freedom. But sometimes, the life of these places enters in the liminality too. From an abandoned site, used like a support by the artists, a community of life is gradually investing the place. It becomes a so-called “cultural third place”. Artists are the center of the community created in this place. However we observe a lot of puzzling situations with some contradictory powers in the background. With a critical approach, we will present two situations where two forms of *territorial power*, from the urbex experience, try to build a “cultural third place”.

4.1 A municipal cultural third place

In the nineties, in a popular district of Nice, the old military barrack called Saint-Jean-d'Angély was a big place of alternative artistic life, full of vandal graffiti. Nice have the best anti-tag police in the country. So, the local political power found a way to annihilate this alternative & independent artistic dynamic: during the years two thousand, they destroyed the military barrack to build... a new university campus. The result was dreadful. What about the artistic community living here? Some left the city of Nice... Others stayed there, with the aim of rebuilding a community in another place. But, they were divided between those who wanted to work with the municipality and those who wanted to stay more independent. The latter have almost no collective audience anymore. The former found a place in the same district of the city: the old slaughterhouse. The municipality, owner of this structure, did let them do so for a symbolic rent. Therefore, since fifteen years, we have in Nice a “cultural third place”, conceded by the city council, called “Le 109”, wordplay which can be translated as “The one hundred and nine” or as “The new blood”. Through this example, we understand how the collective liminal experience, faced with a political injunction of order and control, changed a lot of questions. After the violence of eviction, the choice between 1) staying in relation or in negotiation with the public power, 2) or refusing and staying in confrontation or in secret activities changes the conditions of artistic creation.

And, from the collective choice, the artistic conditions change too. What about graffiti? From there – *Le 109* –, some artists have turned to a career as street artists in the contemporary art scene and *Le 109* hosts contemporary art exhibitions. Others continue to paint in the street, but under the town council sponsorship, in a very small and identified group, as official artists: the only ones who can work in the street, without being immediately erased. The “cultural third place” collective *Le 109* goes on working with popular or alterative artists, but the heavyweight of local politics prevents the emergence of these subcultures, by locking them up within the walls of the old slaughterhouse, away from the city center. For example, in 2022, an “official” street artist from Nice was implicated in a femicide case. During the judicial process, the municipality did step up to support the suspect by raising funds and organising an event with others in the official artistic network. Where? In the cultural third place *Le 109*. Why? Because the municipality is the owner. The “third place” collective withdrew from the organisation, but the event took place. And hardly anyone in the local arts community supported the victim's family.

Why are we discussing this example? Not to speak about sexism in the graffiti scene, which exists, like in many artistic circles, and needs to be studied further, and needs to stop. Neither to blame here the municipality, the official artistic circle, or the clientelist support in Nice (even though we do it elsewhere). But only to show, on the one hand, the limits of the lack of independence of a cultural collective like “*Le 109*” and, on the other hand, the ethical limits for artists to be involved in the power circles. So, if we are speaking about difficulties of a cultural third place liminal situation, we override here the liminal stage of artists implicated in this case.

4.2 A cultural third place of real estate business

We want to show another example of “cultural third place” regarding our interest in the liminality of graffiti. In the town of Lyon, we followed and observed graffiti artists who, since seven years, are working in artist's workshops owned by estates agents in a place called *Le Terminal* that they transformed into an intergalactic station, open to the public. Since summer 2021, this collective stays in an old mechanical workshop, in an industrial and popular area of

the Lyon district called *Gorges de Loup*. They themselves renamed this place *Magonia*, like an imaginary utopia, and they strive to give it a social character, like a “cultural third place”. What is our analysis? For some big buildings, between buying time and selling time, before the construction or renovation work which can take several years, the leaders of the real estate sector found what they consider as a good idea. During this “liminal” time of these places, if they leave them empty, it may be squatted, occupied by local inhabitants and vandal artists, and they are afraid of that for many commercial reasons. Therefore, to prevent that, they find recognized artists, or artists in a liminal situation, and they become their sponsors: purchasing their artwork and providing workshop and exhibition spaces. In this win-win commercial deal, different crew may be opposed: vandal against recognised. But it raises a lot of questions that will form our conclusion.

Conclusion

Is liminality a space in the artist life between illegal and legal practices? Vandal and official arts? Independent & affiliated positions? Artisanal or industrial productions? Free or commercial offers? It's not our job nor our intention to judge the artists' pathway, we just observe in order to understand. But in each situation we saw that it's important for many artists to keep their freedom, their contesting potential and their survivability. In short, artists have to leave from their art to keep their real soul alive. We have seen how collectives can construct forms of liminality, from free practices in Urbex places, to the possibilities offered by “cultural third places” but with the risks of political or commercial influences on their freedom. Is this liminal position the balance to be found for a utopian artistic life? Some anarchist philosophers advised “to reach the heart of the system to make it explode”. So why are these territorial authorities trying to build a ‘cultural third place’ from the Urbex experience? With our observations and listening to the artists, we propose an answer: using alternative culture to control alternative culture.