

Affects and effects of 'pentimento' at the age of neo-muralism

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Abstract

In art history, the Italian word '*pentimento*' is used to point areas in the painting that have been modified or painted over by the painter during the creative process. The process of tagging, covering and buffing existing graffiti fresco or neo-muralism walls is transforming the original visual work. When not restored, these 'agonist ornaments' are generating an in-between graphic status to the mural highlighting an on-going conversation at the scale of the city. This dialogic aspect invites to consider the shape of urban landscape as a collective responsibility. Thus each transformation tends to reveal affects and effects related to hidden power dynamics. Considering the walls of the city as a palimpsest, Mathieu Tremblin analyzes a series of murals through the lens of overpainting dynamics and offers an updated and site-specific understanding of the concept tied up with urban core topics: social control tendencies, game as urban approach, expression of emotions in public space. It leads the author to conclude that the upcoming processual beauty of nowadays muralism can be attributed to a chain of interaction where various actors depends one each other: the 'pentimento' of a collective author.

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

This article is the continuation of a commissioned essay in French language entitled “*Le repentir, nouveau paradigme pour les œuvres urbaines*”¹ [Pentimento, a new paradigm for streetworks²] published in 2022 in *Revue 303*, Nantes, France. From graffiti to contemporary art, this essay depicts the role of various types of muralism in the transformation of the urban landscape as an echo of situated social or specific urban dynamics. Its conclusion is a doorway to the notion of ‘pentimento’ used to describe the successive muralism layers appearing in public space over several decades. These overlapping interventions would be understood as the production of a collective author—as if the City was a *persona*—who covered parts of their own work several times to have it evolved to their renewed taste over time. These two articles are attempts to go beyond the graffiti game centered reading of overpainting reduced to the ‘buff’. Some other authors have already produced data and analysis about the subject of buffing (Vaslin, 2021; Barra, Engasser, 2023) and I collected a corpus of streetworks and urban surveys made by artists related to the buff aesthetics as part of my PhD thesis³—with the help of the community of artists and researchers through the Watchlist⁴, a secured mailing list I initiated in 2016—that were presented in 2020 during the Urban Creativity symposium⁵.

The structure of this article follows research-creation methodology, considering that I’m both artist and researcher involved in the European street art scene. It’s based on a corpus of streetworks created by several artists, activists, citizens, city workers, acting both anonymously, under pseudonym or under their official identity. The narratives of experiences are extracted from confidential interviews in dialogue with publications or press releases collected by the author.

1 Tremblin, Mathieu. 2022. *Le repentir, nouveau paradigme pour les œuvres urbaines*, in: Nom, Prénom (dir.). *Revue 303*, No. 172, “Refaire le mur Peintures murales dans l’espace public”, p. 64–71.

2 I use ‘streetwork’ to make a distinction with the artworks in urban space—public art—, considering that the uncommissioned creative works produced within the city may or may not be art—thus being defined by their site-specific location rather than by their aesthetical properties. See the proceedings of the symposium “Exposer aujourd’hui : l’art urbain” organized by Université de Franche-Comté, Fédération de l’Art Urbain and Bien Urbain festival, the 3rd and 4th June 2021 in Besançon. “J’emploie le terme ‘œuvres urbaines’ pour désigner [des gestes situés et adressés qui ne peuvent être compris que dans leur contexte] ; comme Marcel Duchamp spéculait en 1913 sur la possibilité de faire des œuvres non artistiques, le caractère artistique des œuvres urbaines est déclaratif par essence. Il est lié à la revendication de l’auteur·ice ou de le·a conservateur·ice ou l’historien·ne ou le·a chercheur·euse qui a intérêt ou mission à le désigner ou le conserver pour l’étudier ou le valoriser. Ce choix terminologique prolonge la réflexion sur la possibilité d’une œuvre non artistique formulée par la chercheuse, critique d’art et commissaire d’exposition Sophie Lapalu à propos des écritures urbaines documentées et partagées sur Facebook par l’artiste Julien Crépieux qu’il qualifie d’‘œuvres anonymes’.” [“I use the term ‘streetworks’ to designate situated and addressed gestures that can only be understood in their context; as Marcel Duchamp speculated in 1913 on the possibility of making non-artistic works, the artistic character of streetworks is declarative in essence. It is linked to the claim of the author or the curator or the historian or the researcher who has an interest or mission in designating or conserving it for study or value. This terminological choice extends the reflection on the possibility of a non-artistic work formulated by the researcher, art critic and curator Sophie Lapalu about the activist graffiti documented and shared on Facebook by the artist Julien Crépieux whom he qualifies as ‘anonymous works’.”]

3 Tremblin, Mathieu. *Le repassage comme conversation; Le complexe de la conservation*. 21st October 2021. In: *Pratiques artistiques urbaines et création-recherche : récits d’expériences, dialogues et enjeux*. PhD thesis in visual arts directed by Grazia Giacco and Françoise Vincent-Feria, Strasbourg University, Strasbourg, p. 304–318. URL: <https://www.theses.fr/2021STRAC028>.

4 URL: <http://www.tarmacadamcomplex.org/watchlist/>.

5 Tremblin, Mathieu. 10th July 2020. Cover-up, maintenance and restoration. Urban Creativity. User Experience online conference, Lisbon.

Certain streetworks are created for purposes of experimentation—therefore drawing practical-based conclusions or raising open questions as part of my research-creation process.

I'm using 'urban overpainting' [*repeint urbain*] to introduce a distinction between the tradition of overpainting happening mainly on canvas from xviith to xviiith century—discovered by restorators 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.

In this article, I will first acknowledge the existing dynamics of overpainting in name writing graffiti culture and considered as fair use by the members of the community. Then, I will propose a new definition of types of overpainting for the city context where the urban landscape is understood as a palimpsest rather than a canvas. Finally, I will unroll a series of case study that illustrates a variety of authors' position replying to control, playfulness or emotional dynamics. I will conclude with the notion of 'processual beauty' as a manner of describing the interest that ones should find in the transformation of the urban landscape rather than in muralism aesthetics.

2. Redefining overpainting regarding graffiti and street art

In 2012, Cecilia Giménez carried out an uncommissioned restoration—granted by the priest, if the amateur restorer is to be believed—in the Santuario de Misericordia in Borja, Spain. The *Ecce Homo* by Spanish painter Elías García Martínez (circa 1930), depicting Jesus Christ, has seen its face transformed from a rather naive to a very coarse style, interpreted as an overpainting sacrilege by professional restorers, and blasphemy by the believers. Picked up by 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 the meme. Paradoxically, online reception pacified the situation that did put the author at odds. Online distribution generated a pilgrimage of curious believers and meme enthusiasts. Giménez 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*.

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 they are relegated to the same status as the various operator that are tied up to the '*récit autorisé*' [authorized narrative] of the artwork—i.e. defined by French art

historian Jean-Marc Poinsoot as an “organic link” (Poinsoot, 2008, p. 98) between an artwork and its context of creation and diffusion; all the informal informations that document its existence, from its production condition to the name of the collectors or restorers. Contrary to the process of classic painting restoration, in the 21st century, the clumsy restoration of Giménez created its own independent narrative, away from the serious convention of the history of art. The viral potential of the restoration came with the understanding of Giménez as a second author that is overpainting and thus updating the work. Her interpretative gesture created an unexpected shift from the idea of the origin (potential unity) of the artwork to its ‘potential becoming else’, especially because the new artwork was a mural granted with public access, existing at the fringe of a physical space and an online conversation.

So, what does the *Potato Jesus* story tell about the state of the mural restoration today? It tells us that maybe, it's not that bad that unwanted overpainting is happening over the walls here and there; that it brings awareness on intellectual property issues opposed to conservation dynamics that could apply beyond the art history frame; that the collective and transformative aspect of the *Potato Jesus* is bringing more interest onto the mural—even pilgrimage, i.e. the desire to experience the artwork in real life—that wasn't even existing without it, because neither its aesthetics nor its author were especially worth of.

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

In the traditional name writing graffiti game, there is a certain unwritten hierarchy between the form of graffiti practice, 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 toy 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—like we speak about inventing a treasure; discovering and investing a new blank location with your graffiti. Or you will not go over somebody that is more recognized than you are in the graffiti game. 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 piece will end up being covered by a graffiti fresco including background and characters, for example (see Figure 1); itself maybe being overpainted by a mural painting, considering that the neo-muralism movement is also exploiting 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 fresco or as a mural painting is shaped by the sum of interaction that played by the fair or unfair use of covering dynamics in name writing—that could be perturbed by third party actors (city workers, municipality, non-profit organisation, private company) and that might also reset it by censoring, buffing, destroying.

The interesting aspect in this overpainting process regarding the one that existed on canvas is that the wall is acting as a fluid receptacle for intellectual property shift, that could be compared to the existing dynamics in copyleft and open source culture applied to the arts following certain principle inherent to anarchist values—order minus power. 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 licence that could applied to artwork. Named Copyleft Attitude, this collective wrote in July 2000 a juridical text entitled ‘Licence Art Libre⁶’ that will later—between 2005, 2007 and 2014 following the different version of the text—become the equivalent of Creative Commons BY+SA licence 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*⁷ [painting of painters] is a simple infinite and unfinished painting hanging over the couch and exposed the eyes of the visitors of Moreau’s flat.

Like Moreau, writers organised their uncommissioned 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 a infinite and unfinished artwork created by a collective body of authors.

2.2. New categories for urban overpainting

Writers are used to take advantage of the principle of overpainting in graffiti culture for their own agenda. The French writer and artist RCF1 used to paint trucks in Paris in the 2000s and did get a certain fame out of the numbered ones he succeeded to invest without permission. He details his technic:

“In the beginning of the 2000s, I overpainted myself several times on the white trucks parked in Barbès neighborhood 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), see if they would stay, drive along or disappear; 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-up with a more complex graffiti fresco (see Fig. 3).

6 URL: <https://artlibre.org/>.

7 From the more recent to the oldest painting contributors: Damien Dion, Benjamin Arnault, Bernard Brunon, Anaïs Enjalbert, Fabrice Hyber, Miguel-Angel Molina, Stéphane Trois Carrés, Nina Childress, Sholby, Miquel Mont, Klaus Scherübel, Roland Schar, Nadine de Koenigswarter, Roberto Martinez, Éric Arlix, Christian Vialard, Valérie Favre, Yan Pei Ming, Robert Combas, Speedy Graphito, Jérôme Mesnager, Serge Kliaving, Maurice Betite, SP 38, Alain Fraboni, San Froid, Stéphane Mestre, Jean Prachinetti, Abel Roy, Daniel Le, Tsion Agai, Gaspard, Monique Morillon, Antoine Moreau. All the overpainting are certified by art critic and conceptual art collector Ghislain Mollet-Viéville. URL: <http://www.antoinemoreau.org/index.php?cat=peintpeint>.

One evening the owner of a florist business 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 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: marking the spot in order to be able to invest it later. This meta game move of RCF1 suggests the necessity to detail the various ways of overpainting and update the categories of art history so it could fit to the urban context.

In *Lexique des Termes d'art* published in 1880, the French artist and historian Jules Adeline throw the basics of classic painting restoration vocabulary whether it's applied to canvas or mural. 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. — (See Restoration.) 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.⁸” (Adeline, 1880, p. 360)

‘*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.⁹ (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 fits to the taste of the day or different beauty 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 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;

8 *Repeint* — Parties d’un tableau sur lesquelles on a appliqué de nouvelles couleurs. — (Voy. Restauration.) Se dit surtout, dans un tableau, des portions qui ont été peintes à une époque postérieure à l’achèvement de l’œuvre. Les repeints sont à classer parmi les procédés de restauration les plus dangereux et les plus préjudiciables à la valeur d’un tableau.

9 *Repentir*. – Premiers contours sur lesquels l’artiste est revenu et qu’il a modifié. Parfois, dans un tableau, d’anciens repentirs reparaissent à travers une nouvelle couche de couleurs posée quand la première n’était pas suffisamment sèche

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.

Contemporary mural painting is mostly not considered as patrimony like other types of public artworks. Thus it's rarely restored¹⁰ or conserved when the destruction of the building¹¹ occurs. Urban overpainting tends to redefine our understanding of what we should expect from streetworks. Through the filter of graphic intervention, the beauty of the urban landscape is a processual beauty: the beauty of the daily micro transformation that is opposed to the frozen aesthetics of the public commissioned and permanent artwork. 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: politics perception, overpainting in the name of power; graffiti and street art perception, overpainting in the name of the graffiti game; social perception, overpainting in the name of affects.

3. Urban overpainting: affects and effects in the city

I hereby propose to 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 permit to describe and analyse in a more subtle way the transformative phenomenon of urban landscape through muralism, thus to embrace a more bold and ambitious way of framing the chain of transformation—rather than sticking to the binary reading of vandal versus decorative that usually opposes graffiti practices to neo-muralism ones.

– Control urban overpainting: an overpainting expressing a will on how the urban landscape should look so to maintain its consensual aesthetics. Control overpainting could be performed by anonymous citizens or any form of legit power (the author of the artwork, some city workers, the owner of the wall, the municipality or the institution commissioning the artwork).

– Playful urban overpainting: an overpainting interacting 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.

10 The *Crack is Wack* mural is a symbol of anti-drug activism. It was painted in 1986 by American artist Keith Haring (who died of AIDS in 1990) over a wall of an East Harlem handball court. It was first restored in 2007, then a second time in 2019 and funded by The Keith Haring Foundation.

11 The *Bleu de Matisse* mural was part of a series of mural commissioned by French ministry of culture Jack Lang. It was painted in 1982 by Haitian artist Hervé Télémaque on the side of Le Liberté concert hall. It was overpainted in 2009 as part of the renewal of the concert hall. On the other hand, in 2016 a team of restorers developed a technic 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 technic on a mural painted by the Italian artist Blu that was meant to be destroyed. It was exhibited in Genus Bononiae, Bologna history museum, as part of "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, ending up by the cover-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.

– Emotional urban overpainting: an overpainting that embodies an affected perception of the author of the intervention, bringing another layer of meaning over the original artwork.

3.1. Control urban overpainting

In 2011 in Rennes, four members of VH crew painted 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 against which the writers stood. The graffiti piece was never overpainted by any writer, considering that even if it could be read as a political slogan, it still remained considered by the local scene as a name writing 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 crew has been long dissolved. The fresco remained intact, like a time capsule of a different urban and political landscape. In 2022, while demonstrations were going on against Emmanuel Macron government’s reforms, Zeko, former member of VH crew—that had not been involved in the painting of the graffiti mural—decided to renew the graffiti to make it fits to the recent political narrative. According to the writer, Sarkozy and Macron, both presidents of French republic, were sharing an authoritarian, corrupted and anti-poor vision of democracy. After a small chat at an opening at Drama gallery, Zeko went by night to proceed to the update of the block letters, replacing ‘Sarko’ with ‘Macron’ (see Fig. 4). The renewed graffiti block letters piece was like an anachronic 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 harbor 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 daily life of people in the 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 Painting closer to reality; to signalize 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 could find on view or graffitied in the neighborhood: “*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 game of word 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] playing around the idea of the expiration date of fresh fish and the possible planned obsolescence of 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 organiser of the festival saying that the municipality 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 a development project in an area. In its current state, the mural seemed rather 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)

The Italian artist Blu is known for murals on the scale of entire buildings, recognizable by the clear line drawing carried out with the pole and the brush and their recurring anti-capitalist themes. They are carried out most of the time without authorization and not sponsored. On the 11th December, 2014, following Blu's request, Lutz Henke of the Kreuzberg Murals organization with the help of other artists entirely covered in black two gigantic walls twenty-five meters high painted 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 blackwashing, their cover-up revealed operation 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*: Blu did not want his iconic work, associated for several years with the identity of the neighborhood, to be used as a marketing tool for the new real estate project which came to gentrify the historic wasteland spaces in Kreuzberg. “Unintentionally,

we had created an ideal visual representation of the imaginary Berlin of the nineties 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 seemed normal that they disappeared with it, to pave the way of a new urbanistic cycle. Mirroring the municipality dynamics, it's common for street artists to destroy, erase or recover their uncommissioned work so that their narrative is not instrumentalized as a communication tool by the city.

3.2. Payful urban overpainting

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 color inspired by an upholsterer's pattern, had the appearance of a backdrop for the graffiti writers, as they testify: “We overpainted Buren's mural by mistake; in the half-light, the blended tone of the stripes suggested that it was an ornamental pattern and not an artwork”. It's a case of the biter bit: 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.

The writers also invested this spot in the height at the level of the skyline. And since it was inaccessible, it will be difficult to clean. It's maybe a godsend for the public commission of Buren, which had become almost invisible to the Parisians. His mural could well find a new youth in this act. Voluntary degradation more often pushes the institutions to take their responsibilities. Restoration is an event, unlike maintenance which, like the passage of time, is a low-noise transformation.

The urban space of the 21st century will never again be that of the demonstration of cultural authority. 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. The graffiti is also revealing of its environment. Vandal reluctantly, Idfix and Datura established a plastic dialogue between two forms of public art—one commissioned, the other without authorization—which determine a playful spectrum in which are inscribed all the signs that punctuate 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 in 2014–2015 entitled *Nolens Volens*¹² by Parisian writer Saeio. It has been exhibited as part of his solo show “Phases. Le graffiti comme performance” curated by French curator Laura Morsch-Kihn in 2016 in Frac Sud, Marseille (see Fig. 8). After having saw his graffited trucks in Paris painted over by the throw-ups and pieces of several Parisian writers, Saeio decided to play with the unfair toy as a starting point of clumsy abstractions. He used large brushes and acrylic or glyceric paint to reencat the gesture of the writer covering his ‘Ignorant style’ pieces with a ‘Parisian style’ throw-ups. But he did it in an approximative and expressive manner so that both of the overlapping graffiti pieces started to merge in an unexpected style, as if someone had been rubbing the metal surface with acetone or other solvent, mixing the colors 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 to gather figurative painting in the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. The shape encapsulates both the overlaying of names that determined the organization of colors and lines, and its vanishing 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 oneself nor other: the unpredictable result of a process.

3.3. Emotional urban overpainting

Since the end of the XVIIIth century, with the rise of the urban phenomenon as a dominant frame for interacting as a society, people have been weaving a personal even intimate relationship with the city—especially artists, poets and philosophers like the French graphomaniac Restif de la Bretonne (Restif de la Bretonne, 1788–1794), the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1982), the International Situationist mastermind Guy Ernest Debord (Debord, 1957) or the New-Yorker writer and flâneuse Lauren Elkin (Elkin, 2017). The city became a *persona*, subject and vector of emotions, as the streets became the theater of social life and struggles. Citizens, activists, graffiti writers and street artists appear to be the ones that are drawing a lifesize ‘geography of emotions’ (Bochet, Racine, 2002) where the territory and the map are overlapping. Urban overpainting embodies these particular relations and can give insights of 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, as their death occurs, their name slowly vanishes with their graffiti being destroyed by elements and time, erased by city workers or overpainted by other writers. The common way of creating a memorial in name

12 URL: <http://saeio.paris/nolens-volens-4/>.

writing culture consists in making the name of the dead writers persisting in the city after their death: several writers embody the dead name and go all city using it (see Fig. 9). In the 2000s, the Parisian crews of writers 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 all over the place as a living memorial, so that his name continues to ‘go by’.

On the 21st June 2019, a free party happened at Quai Président Wilson in Nantes during Fête de la musique. Police forces were sent to stop the party. As part of the violent intervention, several dancers fell into the water, ending with one dancer, Steve Maia Caniço, drowning in the river. Several gathering, demonstrations and spontaneous manifestations of solidarity happened in the following days claiming “Justice pour Steve”—posters, graffiti, fresco, demonstration signs and banners all over the city. Nantes Révoltée, a local extreme left activist media, quickly went on site to invest the facade of a building belonging to the municipality with a giant mural impersonating both the scenes of police brutality against the free party participants and Steve Maia 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” in small at the bottom. (see Fig. 10)

The facade had been used first in 2012 as a spot for a muralist program lead by Plus de couleurs non-profit organization, which mission is centered around promotion of graffiti culture. It was repainted as part of another event organized by the association in 2017 until it became in 2019 its headquarters, while the organizers were starting to negotiate with Nantes municipality to take in charge the management of ‘Plan Graff’ and change it to ‘Mur libre’ [free wall] to serve the community of the graffiti writers by offering them various walls among the city for practicing without the existing constraints imposed by municipality since it existed—preliminary declaration of intent for any graffiti over these walls plus some restrictions like no politics, no religion, no sex. After more than ten years of activity with few financial support, the efforts of the organizers were paying off as they would finally have a broad base of support for more permanent activities like workshops and permanent mural program with the two facades of their headquarters changing every two or three months.

Nantes Révoltée painted one of the two walls in front the parking and Plus de couleurs decided to postpone their muralism program regarding the massive claim for social justice that the wall was echoing and symbolizing in France and beyond¹³. Along the next months, extreme right activists went several time over the memorial against police violence writing outrageous messages related to Steve death, that Nantes Révoltée restored each time. On the 18th February 2020, the wall ended up to being covered-up with black paint sprayed using fire extinguisher¹⁴. All human figures

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

14 URL: <https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2721259-20200218-affaire-steve-maia-canico-nantes-fresque-hommage->

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 Nantes¹⁵. It was only restored three months later after the end of the lock down¹⁶.

On the 24th September 2021, the memorial wall was overpainted entirely in black by Plus de couleurs as a symbolic act of grieving (see Fig. 11). After many months of having the wall defaced by the fascists and restored by the antifascists, after many media and social networks daily coverage, the family of Steve Maia Caniço felt it was impossible for them to proceed their mourning. Their son's image happen to be in the middle of an activist symbolic fight, popping up here and there, always 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 like the Italian extreme left activist Carlo Giuliani—killed in 2001 by carabinieri during altermondialist demonstrations in Genoa against the summit of the eight most industrialized countries (G8). But Steve wasn't a declared extreme left activist, he just happened to die while participating to a free party. The family felt like it was time to restore and celebrate the memory of their son's life.

With the help of Ju'Steve collective, Plus de couleurs offered to paint another memorial to Steve 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 started again its mural program after a break of almost two years, declaring that the antifascist struggle was not at all part of the associative mission 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 was playing the game of the authorities by censoring the struggle against police violence; while they totally missed the point by neglecting the affects related to the use of Steve portrait. It was a pity that the symbol disappeared¹⁷, but from activism to graffiti, uncommissioned murals are not meant to stay forever like a stamp over the urban landscape; several other manners of expressing 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 old school writers along the railway in the South of France. This practice came to them as they started graffiti in the middle of

jeune-homme-vandalisee.

15 URL: https://twitter.com/Johanna_Rolland/status/1229769244667150341.

16 URL: <https://www.20minutes.fr/nantes/2781535-20200518-nantes-saccagee-fevrier-fresque-hommage-steve-maia-canico-restauree>.

17 URL: <https://www.streetpress.com/sujet/1635427442-nantes-fresque-steve-maia-Cani%C3%A7o-mort-police-loire-remplacee-%C5%93uvre-tags-extreme-droite>.

the 1990s. As teenagers, they weren't comfortable with switching from tag to graffiti piece, so they started to paint over the toyed or vanished existing pieces that they could find in the wastelands of their city. Rather than mimicking the gesture or copying the style, the young writers were emboying the *persona* of another writers so that they could feel the flow—thus learn—by filling the letter and drawing the line of another name. After one year of this experiment, the two writers started to develop their own style and graffiti practice.

Almost twenty years later, around 2015, the two writers of TPA crew went back on the paths and places they used to wonder when they started graffiti: the railway around Nîmes. They were surprised to find back some of the pieces they were admiring at the time and therefore they wanted to pay a tribute to the old school writers that have been inflencing them, and whom pieces had almost disappeared. They came back to their starting point, but this time with skills and experience enough to be able to reenact the original gesture of their peers. During 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 tried to reproduce the same flow—i.e. 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 analog films as it could have been done in that period (see Fig. 13). They ended up overpainted their own old pieces, to replace them with the ones from other writers they had been overpainting when they were beginners. That odd learning process they initiated around 1995 as teenagers served of a matrix to contribute as adults to the maintenance of an urban patrimony from Nîmes, that would from now on include graffiti.

UNESCO defines the intangible cultural heritage 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 crafts¹⁸”. The main characteristics of intangible cultural heritage are: traditional, contemporary and living at the same time—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 society—; representative—as the roots of the communities, meant to be transmitted rather than just valuated as a cultural good; community-based—recognize as a cultural good by the concerned community. By performing restoration on old graffiti writers pieces they valuated, the TPA writers advocated for graffiti perceive as an immaterial patrimony and offered some hints for good safeguarding practices in the field.

18 URL: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

4. Conclusion

Considering the various types of urban overpainting described, the notion of *pentimento* becomes more relevant 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 can be considered as belonging to a collective author where the wall appears to be a common.

I wish for a commissioned muralism frame in which the conversation between the graffiti and street art experts and the institution bureaucrats would not be about the amount of layers of antigraffiti varnish that should be applied to prevent the commissioned mural to be overpainted by the graffiti scene; nor about if the selected artists are involved enough with the community of writers so that their mural do not get overpainted by others. I wish for the development of overpainting protocols rather than buffing ones, so that the commissioned muralism do not reproduce the institutional mistakes of permanent art works 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. Then 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 and 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 i.e. ‘dead nature’—parody of the graffiti and street art urban phenomenon.

Following this idea, I initiated a series of *Wrong Restoration* of commissioned street art murals partly destroyed by urban forces—like 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 status, neither accurate nor defaced; a graphical consensus integrating a visual dissensus that highlight the legitimate presence and tensed relationship between graffiti and muralism, vandalism and decoration. The wrong restoration acknowledges the state of transformation of the original mural and materialize its ‘potential becoming eslness’.

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 organized by Démocratie créative association. 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

streetwork using a different color so that the result—a black and red abstract shape—made readable the transformative process it experienced. I proceed in the same way in 2020 with the *Freedom* mural of German street artist Yeah as he was invited in 2015 by Colors muralism festival. The mural that was covered by tags is now displaying a golden geometrical shape that makes it unreadable, but understood as a kintsugi—i.e. traditional Japanese restoration technic that uses gold to magnify the cracks of a restored pottery.

As part of an invitation to the Ljubljana Street Art festival—in which frame this text is written—I performed a wrong restoration of historical Sax Pub mural created by Slovenian painter Jože Slak-Đoka in 1988 and considered as the first graffiti mural in Slovenia. The principle of this one is to invert the colors 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 back the colors in positive. 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 fetishization. Old stories become models for new narratives. Negative memories are turned into positive in order to bring about a paradigm shift.” (see Fig. 16)

If the wall is a common, then the state of the mural shouldn't be the expression of a consensus nor 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” (Ricoeur, 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 insitution that framed the creative desire.

Figures

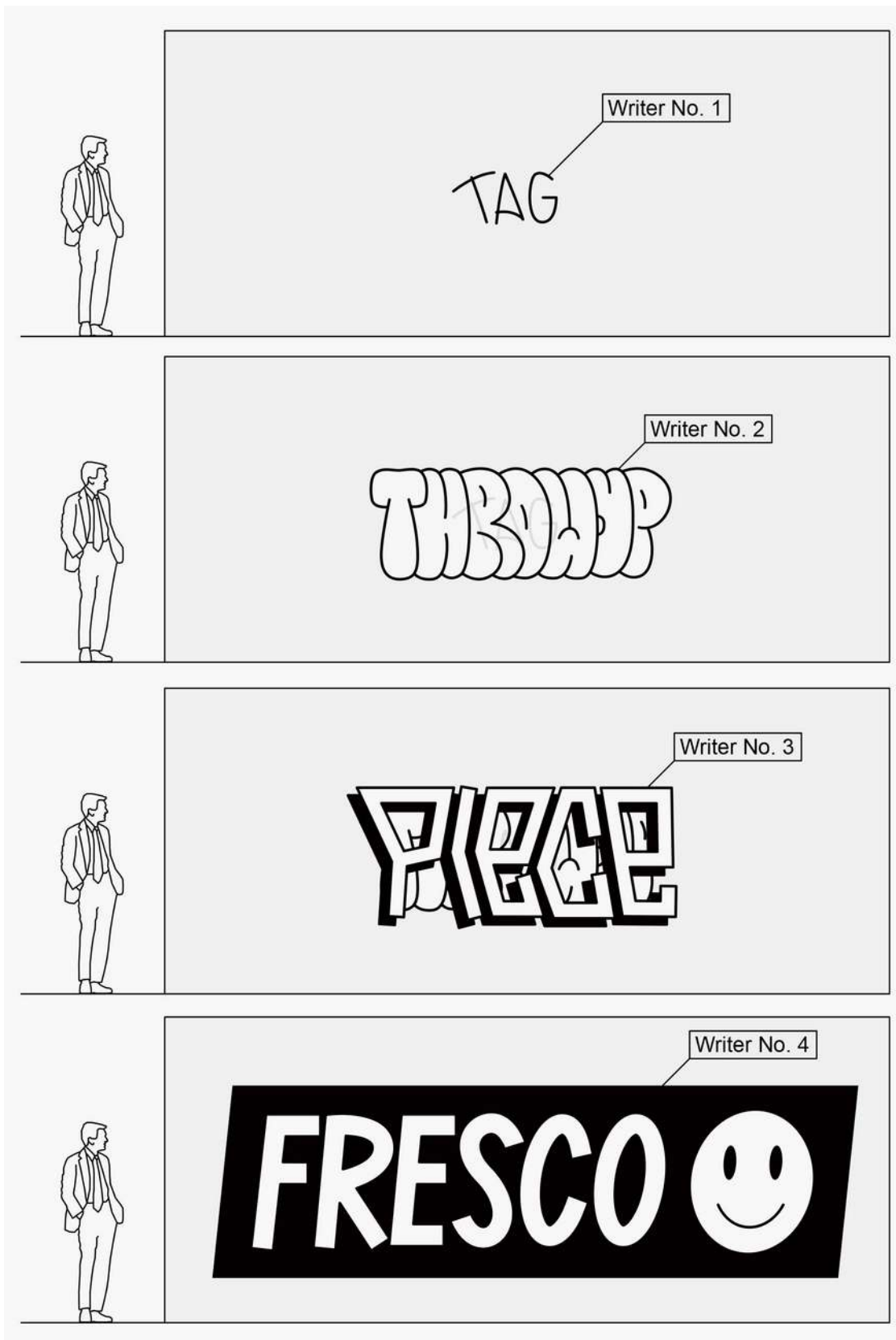


Figure 1. Mathieu Tremblin. Fair use of overpainting practice in name writing graffiti culture. 2010–2023.



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.



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.



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.



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

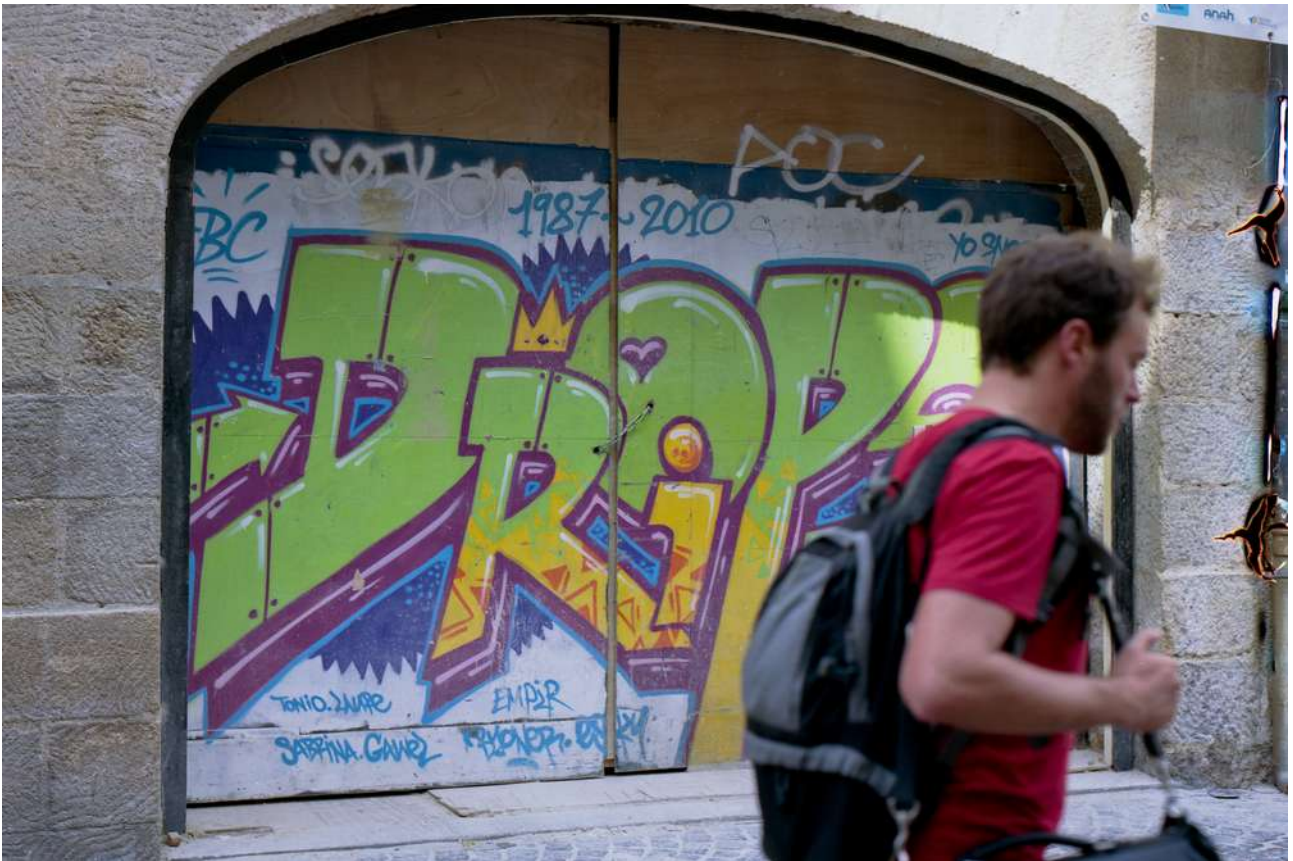


Figure 9. Anonymous. † Drop RIP graffiti. 2020. Nantes (FR). Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

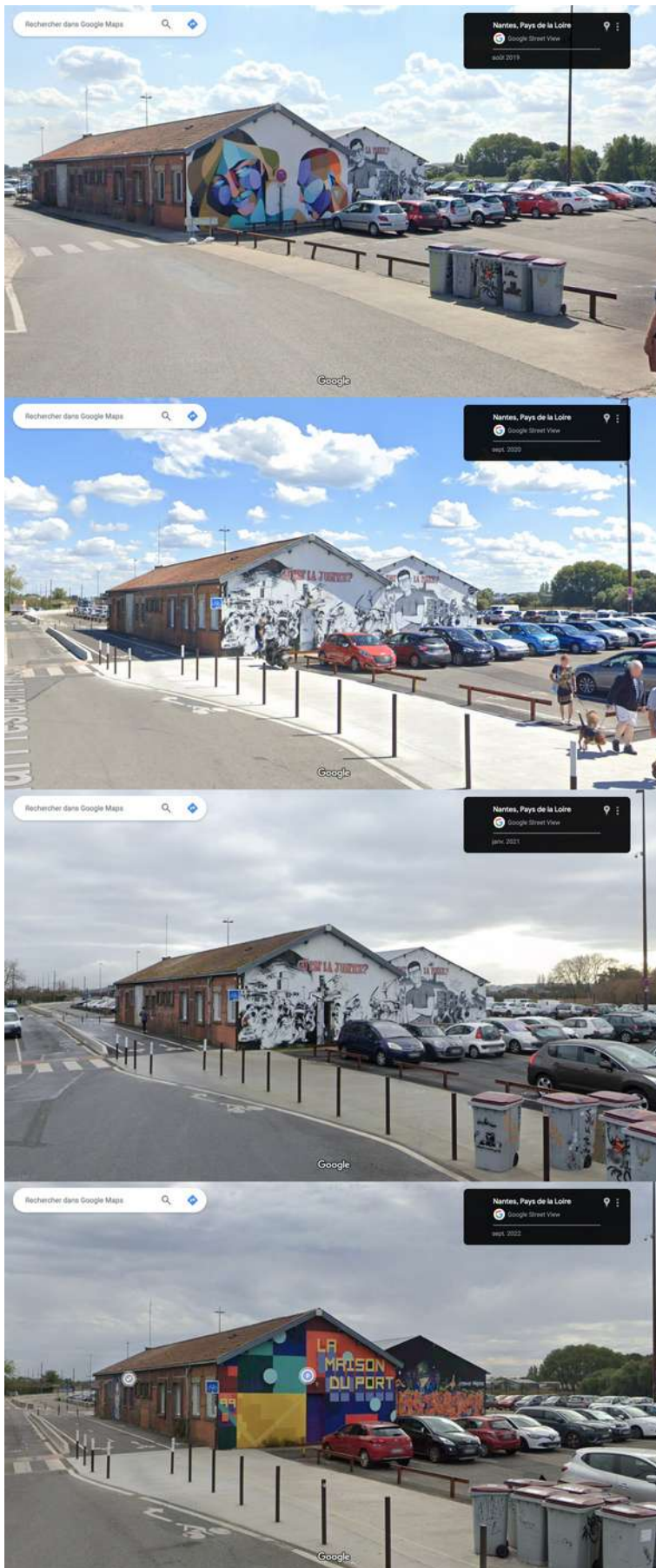


Figure 10. Google Street View. “ Que fait la police ? Justice pour Steve” by Nantes Révoltée over Plus de couleurs headquarters, quai Président Wilson, Nantes. August 2019, September 2020, January 2021, September 2022. Source: Google.



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



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.

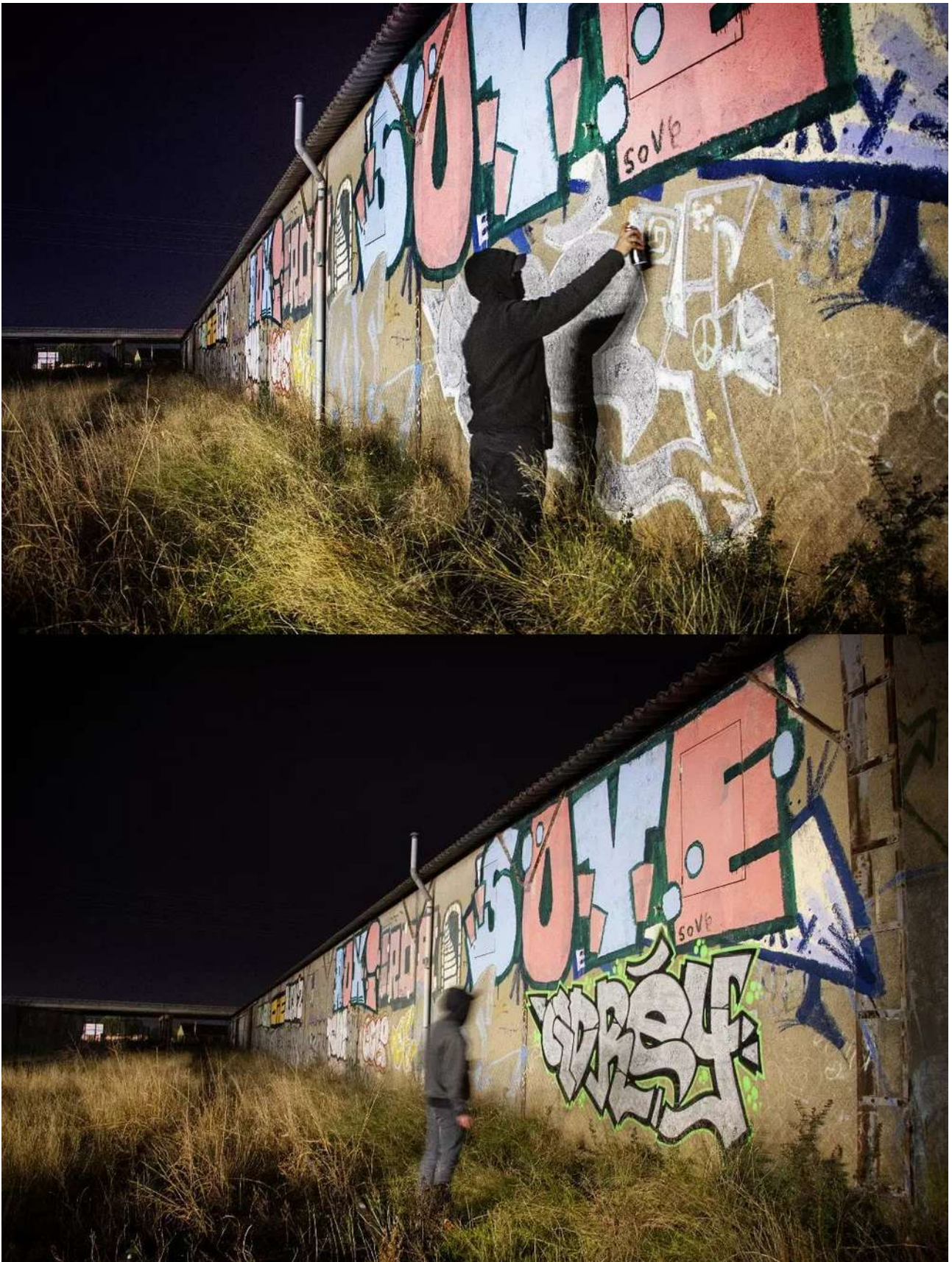


Figure 13. TPA crew. Restoration of 'Odrey' graffiti piece attributed to Sten originally painted in the beginning of the 1990s. 2023. Nîmes railway (FR). Photography: TPA crew.

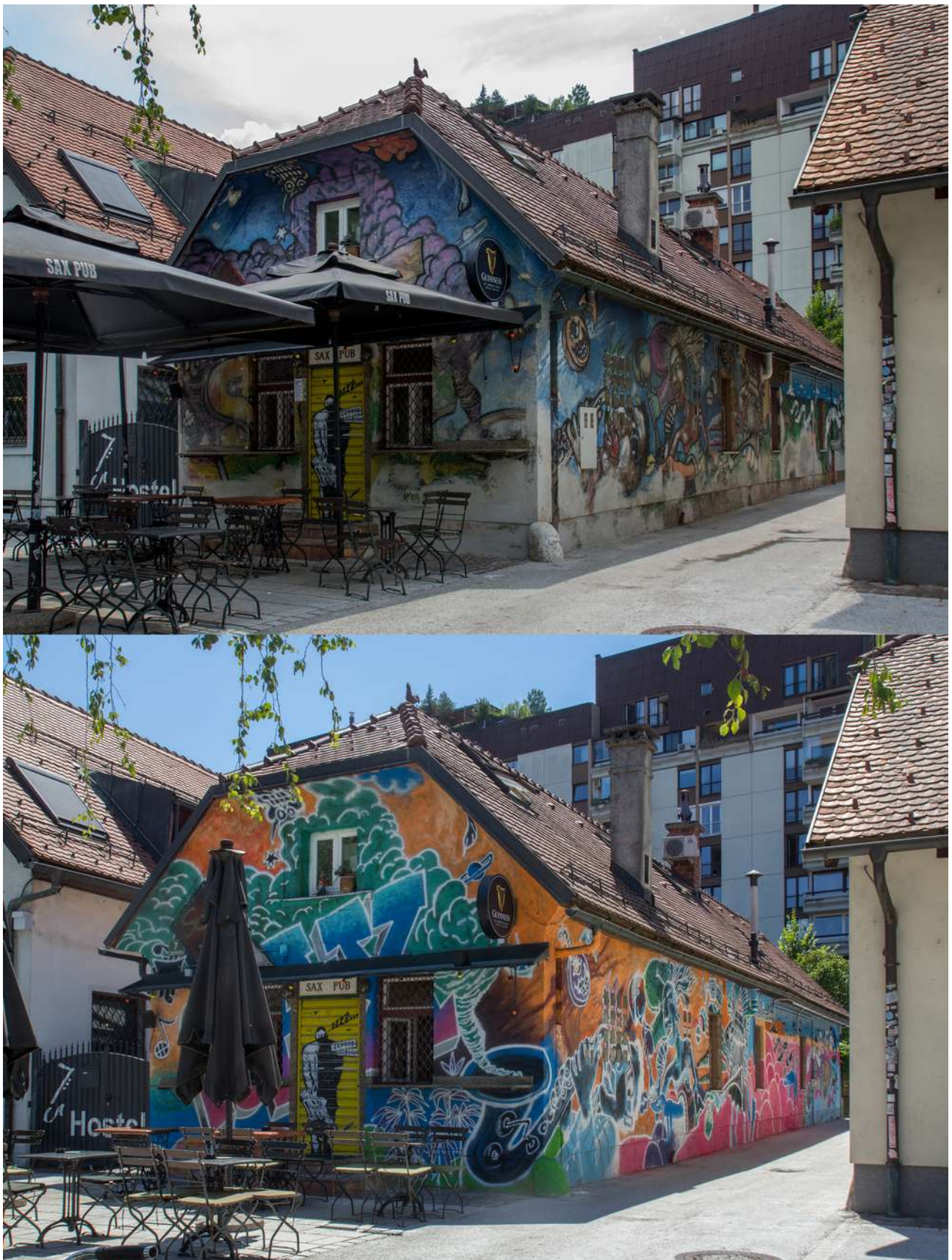


Figure 14. Mathieu Tremblin after Jože Slaka-Đoka & 1107 klan. Wrong Restoration "Sax Pub". 2022. Ljubljana (SI).
Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.



Figure 15. Mathieu Tremblin after Jože Slaka-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 Slaka-Đoka & 1107 klan. Wrong Restoration “Sax Pub”. 2022. Ljubljana (SI). Photography: Mathieu Tremblin.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author(s) also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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