

Review of Graffiti Expressionism DARE | Sigi von Koeding in Basel

Kai Hendrik Schlusche (author)
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Abstract

The book offers an in-depth exploration of the life and work of Sigi von Koeding, known as DARE, positioning him as a central figure in the evolution of European graffiti. Schlusche moves beyond a conventional biographical account, proposing the term *Graffiti Expressionism* to articulate a bridge between street-based name writing and the expressive traditions of modern art. The review discusses how the book intertwines personal narrative, art-historical analysis, and visual documentation to construct a coherent chronology from DARE's early interventions in Basel to his mature studio practice. It highlights the author's nuanced treatment of DARE's transition from illegal graffiti to studio-based painting and his growing recognition within institutional contexts. Ultimately, the review situates Schlusche's work as an important contribution to the critical re-evaluation of graffiti and street art within the broader discourse of contemporary art history.

Introduction

The book, as an object, is square – measuring approximately **23 x 25 cm** – with a spine about 1.5 cm thick. It has a soft cover and back, each with interior flaps. The design is well executed, with a good layout and a cover image adapted from one of DARE's paintings. The first pages include preliminary material up to page 4 with the technical details, followed by page 5 containing the *Inhalt* (contents). All written content is presented in German and **US**-English, arranged side by side in two columns.

The content is divided into five numbered chapters, followed by notes and acknowledgments. The distribution

of pages is well balanced. The general pattern follows a "text first, images after" logic. Each chapter begins with an image on the facing page, alongside the even page displaying the chapter number and title.

All pages of the book are in color. Overall, the impression is that the book contains more image pages than text pages; however, it is not a coffee table book. The balance between text and images is very well achieved, making the reading experience both engaging and informative. The overall impression is positive – the book feels well constructed, easy to absorb, and conveys a sense of intimacy between the author and the featured artist, DARE.

The First Chapter

In the book's introduction, several questions are raised – both regarding the general placement of graffiti and street art within art history, and the rationale for positioning Basel and DARE at the center of a unique narrative that hints at the book's broader intentions. It is clear from the outset that this is not a "simple" artist biography or portfolio. The book has a distinct purpose: through the figure of the artist, it seeks to arrive at a point where new terminology is coined – namely, "graffiti expressionism."

In short but incisive sentences, the author presents the reasoning behind the absence of graffiti from the traditional art-historical narrative, observing that this omission "recalls in many ways the self-referential positions of the Expressionists at the beginning of the twentieth century." The choice of Basel as a focal point is justified through three main arguments. First, the city's strong cultural vocation – being a tri-border city with a concentration of museums and the renowned Art Basel fair. Second, its physical infrastructure – the abundance of walls and open spaces, the convergence of train lines, and its role as an international hub. Third, and perhaps most personally, Basel is where DARE was both born and passed away.

At this moment, in the middle of a sentence, the reader who may not be familiar with the artist's life is suddenly confronted with his death. The way this information is introduced is a key element, revealing the author's sensitivity and respect toward the artist.

The author concludes the first chapter by outlining several aspects of Sigi von Koeding, known as DARE – notably, that he abandoned anonymity very early. By 1991, he had already appeared on the cover of a mainstream magazine. The author reaffirms his position as one of the pioneers of graffiti expressionism, a recognition also reflected symbolically in the naming of his favorite spray paint color by an international

manufacturer: 085 DARE Orange.

As in all chapters, the images referenced in the text appear at the end of the section. These pages, filled with photographs, lead directly into the beginning of the next chapter.

The Second Chapter:

Follow Your Dreams – The 1990s

This chapter details Sigi's early life, from childhood to youth. Closely referencing the accompanying image pages, the text traces his journey from notebook sketches to his first experiments with spray paint. Statements by DARE, drawn from sources such as exhibition press releases, bring his own voice into the narrative – including his personal motto, "*Follow your dreams.*" This phrase encapsulates the confidence that transformed his passion for spray painting into a lifelong career.

His nocturnal graffiti actions alternated with music performances, but, as the author writes, "Ultimately, he chose holding a spray can over holding a microphone." The chapter also describes his first commissions, including an unusually early example (for the 1990s) of a publicly supported street intervention, carried out with the backing of the Munchenstein City Council in the Basel-Land canton.

The chapter concludes with DARE's travels to New York, where he encountered a wide diversity of styles that confirmed his chosen path and solidified his commitment to graffiti as a professional and artistic pursuit.

The Third Chapter:

Milestones Around the Turn of the Millennium

This chapter describes how DARE's network expanded during this period – forming international crews, circles of like-minded artists, and potential business partners across northwest Switzerland, Germany, and Denmark. The author identifies DARE as a central figure in the name-writing scene of the German-speaking world, which led to his invitation to several pivotal events in Hamburg and London.

One of the most significant among these was the *Urban Discipline* exhibition, organized in the summer of 2000 by DAIM, TASEK, and Daddy Cool at the “Getting Up” community studio. In its catalogue – featuring 26 artists in total – the introduction defended the sale of post-graffiti works on canvas, arguing that “if one is occupied twenty-four hours a day dealing with his art, it’s more than O.K. to make some cash money.” The exhibition would go on to have two more editions, *Urban Discipline II* (2001) and *Urban Discipline III* (2002).

In September 2001, the Swiss Embassy in London hosted an image-renovation campaign focused on “young people.” As part of this initiative, an exhibition was organized in the embassy’s garage, featuring artists such as BANKSY, DARE, and TAREK from Basel. Open discussions accompanied the event, including debates on the legality of graffiti.

This is the point where the author introduces DARE’s transition away from illegal graffiti toward new forms of artistic expression. The text carefully explains how the tension between legality and illegality evolved into a focus on stylistic resonance with the graffiti of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States. Although this tangent is highly relevant to reinforcing the conceptual grounding of *graffiti expressionism*, the author eventually returns to DARE’s personal artistic trajectory, noting his deliberate choice to remain centered on the stylistic exploration of letter forms.

The chapter concludes by reaffirming this transition: DARE leaves behind the political context of graffiti and concentrates increasingly on the formal and aesthetic dimensions of writing – now translated onto canvas.

The Fourth Chapter:

Dare to Be Different – The Peak Phase up to 2010

The narrative continues beyond *Urban Discipline III* (2002), describing an intense period of work in which DARE balanced his artistic production with curatorial activity. As the author notes, there was “less and less time for name writing in the urban environment.” His creative focus shifted increasingly to the studio, working with brushes and acrylic paint.

The author identifies a number of themes that characterize DARE’s different creative phases and series, ranging from small to large formats and including commissions that extended into unexpected areas – from watch design to interior decoration. These are all described in detail in this part of the chapter.

This chapter also contains several (unnumbered) subchapters. Between the main narrative and the first subchapter lies the largest sequence of image pages in the book – from page 55 to 92 – where images illustrate and expand upon the text.

The sequence ends with the subchapter titled *The First Ego from Hamburg*. *Ego* is a 130 × 150 cm canvas from 2002, described as “one of his first major works on canvas.” It is here that DARE “discovered” he could create a “seamless tapestry of letters” – a process that became central to his later work. The author notes that DARE used this technique outdoors only twice; it remained primarily a studio method, most often applied to canvas. The images that follow this section are particularly striking.

The next subchapter, *The House of DARE as Landmark*, focuses on a concept first sketched in 2003. Part of a series of thematically related works produced at irregular intervals, these pieces address themes of architecture and urban planning. The project envisions a habitable structure formed from the letters of “DARE,” adapted to accommodate doors and windows. Other less practical but conceptually rich works – such as *Darecity* and *Dareville* (both from 2006) – expand on this idea. Some map-based works are also described. The subchapter concludes by linking this line of work to ideas of reclaiming the city and asserting power over space.

The Innocence Twins is the following subchapter – the only section of the book where text and images appear on the same pages. It focuses entirely on two of DARE’s canvas paintings: *Innocence* (2008) and *Childhood Innocence* (2009). Nowhere else in the book does the author offer such detailed visual and narrative analysis. Comparisons between the two works – and with others

— are developed at length. It is here, through reflections on *Childhood Innocence*, that the reader learns of Sigi von Koeding's age at death: forty-two.

As before, information about DARE's death appears with deliberate care in specific moments of the text. In this case, it emerges during the transition to the final period of his life, in the subchapter *Greenhorn Without Successor*. The painting *Greenhorn* (2007) is described in detail; it drew considerable attention and travelled from Basel to Zurich, then Paris, and eventually to an American collection. After initially declining several requests for similar works, DARE finally accepted one last commission. Although preparatory sketches and a background canvas were completed, the final piece remained unfinished. "Sigi von Koeding died in March 2010 in a hospital in Basel from a brain tumor that had been diagnosed too late."

The Fifth Chapter: *Summary*

In the concluding chapter, the author returns to the central questions raised at the beginning of the book: the position of graffiti and street art within the art world, and the mutual challenges faced by both sides. He also acknowledges the difficulties that academics encounter in stabilizing terminology.

The narrative is supported by several statements from DARE himself, such as: "I find it simply wrong to call graffiti art. It is and will remain youth culture." (Interview, Feb. 2, 2006, DARE-Archiv, Bottmingen, Switzerland). DARE also described graffiti as "an egotistical contest to outsmart your mates and rivals within the culture, while outwitting the police," reinforcing his distinction between graffiti and the institutionalized art world.

Building on these reflections, the author argues that "all the works later derived from it that no longer pursue the goal of a position within the scene should be seen as something new and called Post-Graffiti Art," and adds that "a broad audience in highly frequented urban spaces is not an absolute requirement for this new form of expressive painting." Before the final image section, he concludes this argument by stating, "Ideally, innovative galleries and private collections appreciate such Graffiti Expressionism."

The first subchapter, *Looking Back*, further explores the tensions between graffiti and street art's origins in urban space and their transition into galleries. It also addresses the so-called "sellout of the graffiti soul," arguing that this criticism is unfair given that the leading figures of the movement have followed similar paths. The author asks, "Why shouldn't Graffiti Expressionism, the youngest important innovation in the genre of expressive painting, be in a position to conquer the great museum temples of art?"

Here, the book draws an insightful parallel with the early twentieth-century artists' association *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*), exploring links between their practices and those of graffiti and street art in general — and of DARE in particular. The author details how the search for spontaneity, combined with emerging commercial strategies, provides a conceptual foundation for the proposed term *Graffiti Expressionism*.

The final subchapter, *Looking Ahead*, speculates on where DARE's work might have evolved had he lived longer. The author seeks answers by considering both DARE's artistic trajectory and that of his contemporaries, such as DAIM and DOES. Their respective evolutions are examined within the framework of DARE's hypothetical development. The author also reflects on possible future commissions, drawing somewhat speculative parallels between DARE's architectural lettering concepts and the built works of MVRDV and Herzog & de Meuron.

The book closes with the mention of an official tribute: the Basel municipal authority's decision to name a public square near the railway line *Sigi von Koeding-Anlage*.

Short Review Conclusion

This is an enjoyable and accessible read, particularly well suited to those with a visual sensibility. It resonates strongly with me — and, I imagine, with others of my generation — as its timeline and events coincide with our own experiences. The reading is engaging and familiar, offering a pleasant and necessary approach to documenting and recognizing the authors and movements that have shaped this cultural field.

While not an extensive biography nor a dense theoretical treatise on Post-Graffiti Art or *Graffiti Expressionism*, the book finds a balanced middle ground between the two. It contributes meaningfully to the ongoing process of recognition, helping to establish and celebrate a wide range of artists who deserve to be correctly identified, acknowledged, and appreciated.

During the reading of the book some questions arised in my mind, I have decided to extend the review with an interview to the book author:

1. Do you have any personal relation with DARE. If yes, tell us more.

In fact, I met Dare personally during my lifetime, when I met him for the first time shortly before Christmas 2008 in his studio, less than 10 km from my home, for the purpose of requesting a commission. It was around midnight and he initially thought I was an investigative detective. After an entertaining conversation until the early hours of the morning, he gave me a booklet of himself to take with me and signed it with the momentous sentence: "It's never too late for spray stories". Despite his numerous trips abroad and several exhibitions, we always found time and opportunities to exchange ideas about graffiti and increasingly private things in the following year. DARE was a true bridge builder and tried – wherever possible – to mediate between his illustrious sprayer scene and "normal" art lovers. I still remember a jointly organized lecture evening in our Rotary Club, where an enthusiastic 80-year-old Rotarian spontaneously bought a picture. In the end, everything happened very quickly: At Christmas at the end of 2009, DARE gave me one of his wooden boxes painted with a fine brush, only 10 weeks later he succumbed to a fatal brain tumor. This one year with DARE has had a strong influence on me to this day. Much - although not all - of what I had previously located as vandalism in my profession as a civil engineer got a new perspective afterwards. I was able to get to know some scene stars personally and visit their studios, started collecting and actually started - as predicted by DARE - with various spray stories in magazines and in book form.

2. I understand the core concept for Graffiti Expressionism, but do you feel it will have adherance both with the artists and within the museums, galleries or collectors?

The doubts in your question are quite justified. I am firmly convinced that something like GRAFFITI EXPRESSIONISM will establish itself in the classic canon of art styles, at best even by about 2030. But there are still some obstacles to overcome until then. First, the current updating of the canon is predominantly retrospective. Its gaps seem too large in view of an apparently too Eurocentric orientation in connection with a lack of diversity. And secondly, the research circles that have now been established at universities and academies with a focus on artistic interventions in urban space are – rightly – still on the road with the claim to research as 100% as possible in all directions of time and space. This ranges from Stone Age cave scribbles to contemporary knitting and crochet work around lampposts. In the art-historical reappraisal of the last 30-50 years, something like a "reduction of complexity" would be helpful, but this is also fraught with risks. Is it enough, for example, if in the German-language version of Susie Hodge's "Short Story of Modern Art" only artists such as Basquiat, Haring, Banksy and Jenny Holzer are strung together under "street art" on only half a page? Not a word about letters as the fundamental essence of graffiti, which have evolved from the short territorial marking of a pubescent to the perfected name writing of a 50-plus-year-old "style king". There is no indication of the recent extremely rapid spread of large-scale XXL murals worldwide, which have increasingly established themselves as the epitome of street art with mostly socio-political claims.

While the latter cannot be archived as original works for understandable reasons, style writing with a more aesthetic claim is possible in a reduced format and – as DARE proves – does not lose any of its expressiveness. For all sprayer legends who can deal similarly strongly with their letter design on a smaller scale, the GRAFFITI EXPRESSIONISM category awaits as an open vessel for art-historical self-positioning.

What is special about this is that within modern painting, the distinction between abstract and representational art has so far been part of the essential orientation grid. The positions of GRAFFITI EXPRESSIONISM lie as a hermaphrodite (/hybrid?) exactly in between - the letter base is actually representational, expressive lines make something strange and abstract out of it. Perhaps the art world has been waiting for such an exciting hermaphrodite (/hybrid?) as something completely new?

3. I was interested to understand better, if you can help, about the approach of DARE, to the home, city and ville. Personally I'm interested in this relations but I felt that Dare approach was a bit literal, or in some ways naif. Do you like comment or add something about this?
 I don't want to overinterpret anything on this question, but it can be proven on the basis of several sketches that the Basel artist had a great interest in architectural forms, perspectives, facades and lines (layout). And he had a special sense of humor with which he could sometimes smile at himself. Perhaps he really didn't just want to depict different moods in the urban jungle with his letter-like skyscrapers on canvas, but also wanted to provide proof of success with regard to the widespread graffiti motto "Reclaim the City" - in a way self-ironic? In one point, his ideas for a letter architecture were even caught up with reality: In Mannheim (approx. 320,000 inhabitants), three high-rise buildings, each with 15 floors, were occupied for the first time at the beginning of the year on a former US garrison site. The special thing is the letter shape of the buildings, which were originally intended to form the word "H-O-M-E" when read together. For structural and financial reasons, the striking M-shaped building has so far been missing. For the time being, all air travelers looking out of the windows on the approach to Frankfurt Airport will only see an "H-O-E". DARE would certainly have been deliciously amused by this play on words.

4. Did you follow the process of urban square name attribution, can you share what you know about this process?

Yes. The trial dragged on for a total of 8 years. Initially, in 2016, a footpath along the famous Basel Line was to be renamed "Sigi-von-Koeding-Promenade", but

this was rejected due to the historical significance of the previous old name. A few months before the 10th anniversary of DARE's death, a second attempt was made: After I had made some material available to the chairman of the responsible nomenclature commission in November 2019, which is why DARE would actually have deserved a public honor, the Basel graffiti blogger (with the pseudonym) Tommy Tombola initiated a public petition five months later, which was joined by over 260 art lovers in a short time. However, it took another four years until the suitable location for a new name was finally found. The rest is already history: on 26.8.2024, the highest-ranking police director honoured a former graffiti sprayer with the public inauguration of a street sign not far from Basel's main railway station SBB. Where has something like this ever happened in Europe?

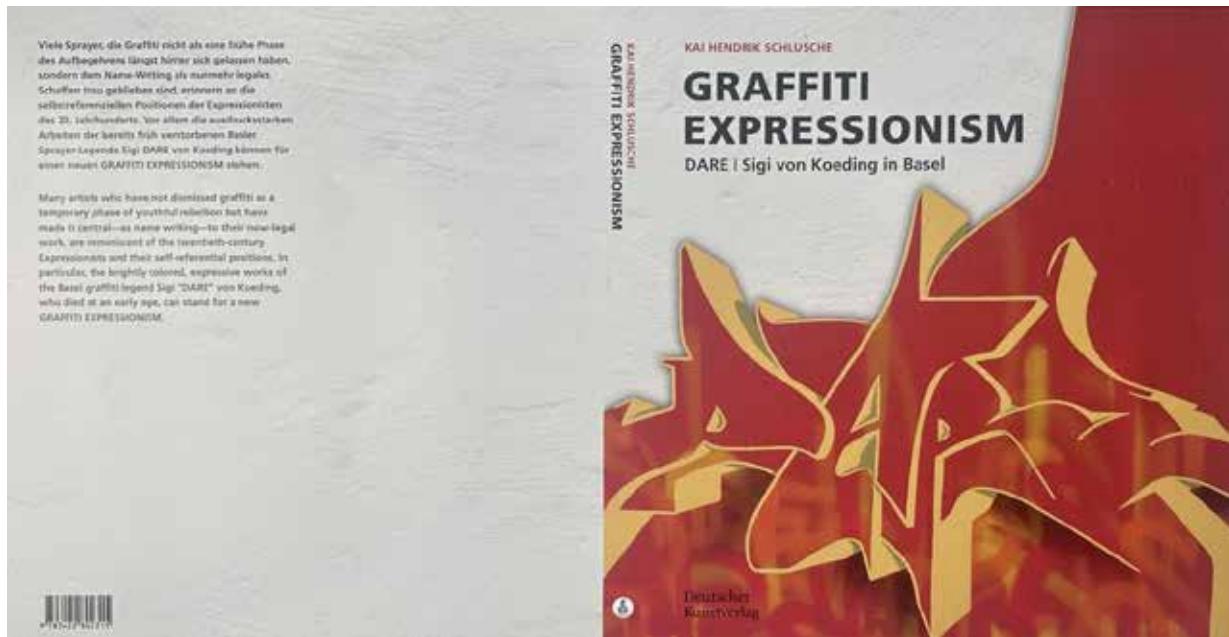


Figure 1 - Back-/frontpage D/E

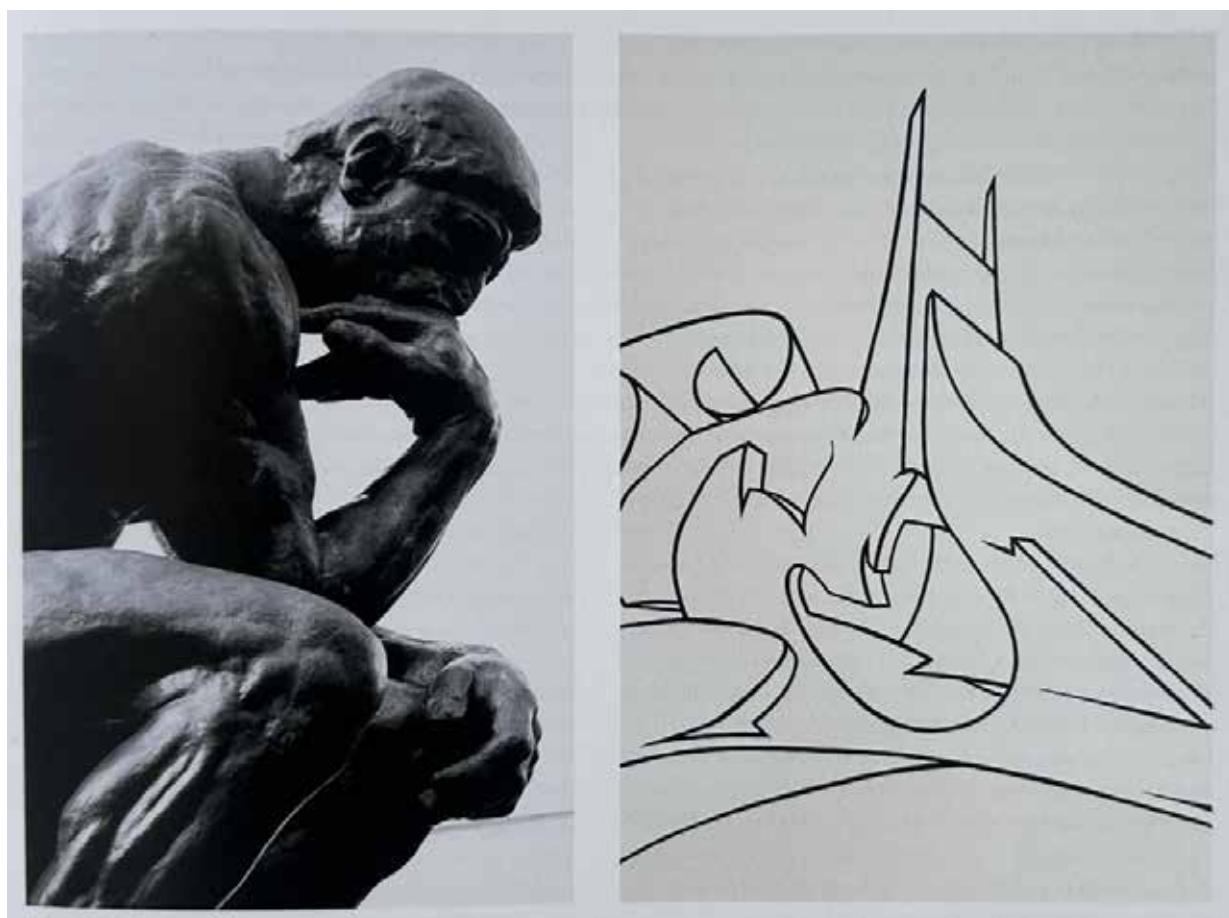


Figure 2 - The Thinker (Rodin) & Thoughtful E, p.127



Figure 3 - Flowering time & Autumn foliage", p.140