

ILLEGAL - Street Art Graffiti 1960 - 1995

Ulrich Blanché (Ed.), Publication by Historisches Museum SAAR 9 / Hirmer

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Abstract

"Illegal, Street Art Graffiti 1960–1995" is a book born from an exhibition of the same name. According to its creators, curator Ulrich Blanché and Simon Matzerath, director of the Historisches Museum Saar, the project "represents an antithesis to the urban art exhibitions that have become common since *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* at London's Tate gallery in 2008."

Both the book and the exhibition focus exclusively on "unacceptable," self-authorized works created illegally for public spaces, in contrast to legal, commodified, and portable works by artists who often leverage their early street credibility for commercial purposes. The publication is a substantial volume (approximately 28x22 cm) of high-quality paper and print. Across its 240 pages, available in both English and German, readers will find 12 sections: two introductory chapters, nine theoretical discussions, and one dedicated to a catalog of selected works from the exhibition.

The introductory sections consist of "Instead of a Foreword" and "Introduction." The nine theoretical chapters explore a variety of themes, including *1952–74: Early Street Art to Art, Style, Geography* (focusing on the Greater Region of Saarland, Lorraine, and Luxembourg), *Gender, Writing as Graphic Design, Political Graffiti, First Female Urban Artists, Samo*©, and *Keith Haring in Germany*. Contributions come from authors such as Ulrich Blanché, Myriama Idir, Jacob Kimvall, Sven Niemann, and Johannes Stahl. The exhibition catalog itself showcases 36 selected works, accompanied by images and descriptive texts. This multidimensional publication serves as both a companion to the exhibition and a stand-alone editorial project. It provides detailed historical context, challenges conventional boundaries—both aesthetic and political—and includes groundbreaking discussions, particularly around gender and female authorship. While two chapters are devoted to the German context, the bilingual format might initially give the impression of a regional focus. However, closer examination reveals significant international perspectives and advancements in understanding graffiti and street art as cultural phenomena.

Introduction

I was honored to be invited by Ulrich Blanché to review *Illegal, Street Art Graffiti 1960–1995*. Initially hesitant, as I hadn't seen the exhibition in person, I was reassured by the extensive online documentation available on the official website, which even includes a 3D overview of the exhibition space. The exhibition appears thoughtfully structured, with images projected onto nearly every surface of the museum, large printed elements on walls and floors, and artifacts displayed in glass cases.

This review, however, focuses exclusively on the book, based on a hard copy kindly sent to me by Ulrich Blanché.

First impressions

The book is near A4 size, with generous dimensions (±28x22 cm), a solid volume, and substantial weight. Its softcover design features a bold "ILLEGAL" title in white stencil font over what appears to be an old (1980s?) photo. This photo sets the tone for the book's visual identity. However, before one fully understands its context, it gives an immediate "old-school" impression. Unfortunately, the photo quality is subpar; the graininess and/or resolution detracts from the print's clarity, leaving a blurred appearance. This and other design choices will be discussed in more detail later in this review.

The cover photo depicts graffiti writer Vampirella (Valesca M.) in front of her "VAMPI" piece in Amsterdam on May 1, 1985. Motorcycle police are shown in the background, observing. During Queen's Day riots, someone set fire to the graffiti, and Vampirella uses her cigarette to symbolize the fire. The gesture she makes with her arms reflects her graffiti figure.

A subtitle accompanies the photo in smaller letters, reading "1960 Street Art Graffiti 1995", with the dates in white and "Street Art Graffiti" in red (the only red text).

The top left corner credits Ulrich Blanché as the editor (Hg. / Ed.), while the bottom left corner includes the Historisches Museum SAAR logo (featuring an architectural depiction of the museum building). On the bottom right, the publisher's logo, "HIRMER," is displayed.

The spine of the book is red with white text reading *Illegal*, *Street Art Graffiti*, and *Hirmer*. The back cover features what could be interpreted as a continuation of the front photo, but it is not exactly. It shows two people on a motorcycle wearing amusing retro-futuristic helmets, which seem incongruous with the idea of police uniforms. In the background, a painted image resembling Donald Duck appears. The composition creates a peculiar and unsettling visual language, seemingly staged (?) in a trashed and burned tunnel.

On the back cover, a brief text (in English and German) provides an overview:

"Wild, free, and ephemeral street art and graffiti are a worldwide phenomenon. From Brassai, who brought graffiti into mainstream art around 1960, to the 'Sprayer of Zurich' in the 1970s and the first Banksy works in the UK, Illegal tells a prehistory of street art and graffiti. The works of around 100 vandals from more than a dozen countries reveal why these artists were significant trendsetters for street art and graffiti before Banksy." Finally, the bottom left corner includes links to the HIRMER publisher website.

Design and Layout:

The cover folds inward, both at the front and back, revealing a plain red background. The first page features the word "ILLEGAL" in a black stencil font over a grey, cement-textured wall. This cement wall motif continues onto the second page, creating the impression of physically turning a wall as one flips the page. This tactile and visual effect recurs throughout the book.

The third page, in white, repeats the title and subtitle and provides a more descriptive acknowledgment of contributors (always bilingual). It specifies that the book is edited by Ulrich Blanché and includes contributions by Myriama Idir, Jacob Kimvall, Sven Niemann, and Johannes Stahl. The fourth page resumes the cement-textured design, with the *Contents* section presented vertically, in German (red) and English (black). This layout characterizes all chapter divisions. However, the table of contents is visually dense, with strong lettering covering the page, which may make navigation slightly challenging. Design choices like this will be addressed in the dedicated design section of this review.

The book consists of 240 pages with no subchapters. Chapters are clearly marked, except for the foreword, which appears after the table of contents. The formal chapter layout begins with the introduction, which features larger text and images. The images, generally large and margin-to-margin, seem well-suited to the book's dimensions. Black-and-white images are only used when they were originally monochrome, suggesting the layout prioritizes quality over design economy.

A significant number of images are presented, and without reading the text, the visual narrative per chapter is already apparent. This same narrative seems to have been adapted from the exhibition. At first glance, the bilingual text (German and English) creates the impression of a larger volume of content than actually exists. This adds complexity to the layout, as the pages of images must align with their corresponding text references, this challenge, however, seems to have been well-accomplished for an English-speaking reader.

Chapter Overview:

The book opens with a short but important foreword (by Ulrich Blanché and Simon Matzerath, Director of the Historisches Museum SAAR). This is followed by the introduction (by Blanché), which spans 26 pages. The first chapter, also by Blanché, runs for 25 pages, combining text and images.

The subsequent “*Style*” chapter (by Johannes Stahl) is shorter, with 11 pages featuring larger images. The “*Greater Region*” chapter (by Myriama Idir, the sole female contributor) has 14 pages and appears to include personal archive images. The “*Gender*” chapter (by Blanché) spans another 14 pages, with some images printed as full or half pages. “*Whole Covers*” (by Jacob Kimvall) also consists of 14 pages, featuring smaller images (mostly book or magazine covers) distributed throughout. The “*Canned Politics?*” chapter (by Sven Niemann) is comparatively brief, with 10 pages and a combination of text and images.

The final four chapters, all authored by Blanché. The chapter on “*Barbara 62 & Eva 62*” is very short, with six pages and three images. The “*Sam©*” chapter spans 11 pages with a larger number of images. The “*Haring in Germany*” chapter extends to 28 pages, predominantly featuring letter reproductions (14 pages). The final chapter, “*Catalog Selection*,” serves as an exhibition catalog, featuring 62 pages of images and descriptive text for 36 elements. Notably, the photo numbering in this final section begins at 100, which might initially confuse readers until they realize the numbering continues sequentially throughout the book. The book closes with acknowledgments, recommended readings, picture/copyright credits, and imprint details.

Going a Bit Deeper

Title

“Illegal” is the central word for this project. It seems that we’ve reached a point where, before discussing Street Art or even Graffiti, one must emphasize the illegal nature of the action, almost as a tautology that certifies its meaning. Yet, at the same time, “illegal” isn’t truly about legality—there is no explicit mention of how laws or their creation are part of this discussion. This omission feels like the proverbial elephant in the room.

The choice to sequence the words “Street Art Graffiti” rather than “Graffiti Street Art” merits a brief comment. It could be argued that graffiti, as an older term, should come first. However, while the term “street art” is more recent, framing it as something that necessarily follows or grows from graffiti could lead to misleading conclusions—namely, that street art is a derivative or subsequent movement. This notion is not entirely accurate. It’s unclear whether this phrasing choice was deliberate or debated, but it is certainly relevant and interesting as a point for discussion.

Foreword

In the text “Instead of a Foreword,” subtitled *Illegal for a Change*, the exhibition’s intent to delineate boundaries between legal and illegal is explicit, particularly by aligning itself with the illegal. This is a marked departure from urban art exhibitions that often collaborate with formerly illegal artists (and their now-legitimized works).

The authors state: “*The aim is not to show street art and graffiti as art in an art museum but rather to take a documentary-historical approach.*” They assert that illegal graffiti and street art (GSA) are inherently transient, tied to specific spatial and temporal circumstances, and therefore unsuitable for museum preservation—although their documentation is not.

Another notable aspect is the exhibition’s effort to challenge the usual narrative that centers the origins of illegal GSA in New York or Paris. Instead, it emphasizes developments beyond these contexts. The text also highlights the transformative nature of walls, cross-connections between street works and album cover designs, and an effort to uncover lesser-known works by both prominent and obscure artists—what is referred to as “street art genealogies.” A declared objective is to produce “*a more international and more feminine (hi)story of street art and graffiti.*”

Introduction

This project aims to construct a narrative that caters to both readers not familiar with graffiti and street art

literature and those with a deeper expertise (although it becomes clear that the last ones will feel more comfortable). After establishing a broad historical framework for graffiti's timelessness, one of the key ideas presented is that it "constitutes a kind of alternative folk art history."

At the same time, the project identifies a historical turning point when "illegal style writing graffiti and unauthorized street art" began to emerge not as anonymous "folk art" but as self-authorized counterproposals to the mainstream art world (museum, gallery, art market, and institutions), created by specific individuals or groups. This delineation, while debatable, is understandably made for the sake of narrative clarity.

The author acknowledges the simplification, explicitly stating that the goal is not to create a revised canon of urban art. Instead, the intention is to "realign perceptions of centers and peripheries," to "question the graffiti-free canon of classical art history," and to challenge "the usual, US-influenced history of street art as post-graffiti".

A significant aspect of this realignment is the acknowledgment of earlier artists who created self-initiated public space interventions—artists who were not necessarily "from below" but classically trained. The overarching aim is to "decipher the dynamics of those interactive processes that made up a globally networked street art or graffiti history."

To this end, the introduction offers a brief yet distinct exercise in defining and differentiating between the following genres: Graffiti, Style Writing Graffiti/Hip Hop Graffiti, Street Art, and Urban Art. Notably, these descriptions clearly avoid solely referencing US-centered historical narratives, aligning with the book's broader objectives.

In the subsequent section of the introduction, the history of Urban Art from 1960 is outlined. The author takes a bold approach, tracing its roots—"in the narrower sense"—to post-Soviet agitprop trains after the 1918 revolution, 1920s Mexican murals, and beyond. Precision is evident in the references, including mentions of Heinrich Zille as the first street art photographer (according to Johannes Stahl), Brassai's documentation of graffiti, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's creation of "the first illegal public

sculpture." Further examples include Situationist graffiti by Guy Debord, Ted Joans' 1950s "Bird Lives" series in New York, and Gérard Zlotykamien's early street art figures from 1967, among others. The text also situates key milestones in graffiti history, such as Julio 204 in New York and Cornbread in Philadelphia in 1967, both of whom used tagging as territorial markers. The evolution from tags to pieces is briefly described, with references to Stay High 149 and Phase 2, culminating in thousands of writers by the late 1970s.

The golden age of style writing graffiti in the 1980s is summarized succinctly, covering renowned artists such as Lee and Futura 2000 while also addressing its spread to Europe. This exportation, catalyzed by books, movies, and album covers, is linked to key European authors (e.g., Shoe, Loomit) and the broader adoption of style writing across various geographies. The emergence of street artists like Haring, Hambleton, and Basquiat in New York is also noted.

The introduction concludes with "Street Art Pioneers and Their Successors," providing details on early practitioners of illegal stencil, spray, paste-up, conceptual, and sculptural works in the US and Europe from the 1970s to the late 1980s. A brief section titled "The Last Analog Post-Graffiti Street Art Generation" touches on mid-1990s tensions involving trains and commercialization, referencing several European artists who remain active today. Contemporary aspects are notably less explored in this section, likely reserved for later chapters.

The Following Chapters

The chapter "Milestones" by Ulrich Blanché can be considered a significant step forward in achieving the objectives of the project. While the introduction addresses the unavoidable global aspects of graffiti and street art, this chapter delves deeper, proposing a more nuanced understanding. It begins by clarifying that graffiti, in this context, is not limited to style writing. In the sub-chapter "Upvaluation of Early Street Art to Art (1952-74)," Blanché identifies key landmarks that "contributed decisively to an enhancement of the status of graffiti and street art in art and literature". In "Graffiti as Art: Brassai, Desnos, Leiris" is explained how these artists not only recognized the value

of historical graffiti as an art form—one among many—but also proclaimed it as a “true” and pioneering form of avant-garde art. The subsequent sub-chapter, “*Grffiti as a Structural Model for Art: Prévert’s Grffiti Poems*” explores how Prévert not only elevated the value of historical graffiti but also used it as a structural model for his own artistic work. The sub-chapter “*Grffiti Finds Its Way into the Institutions of Art*” describes the trajectory of graffiti into the art world. Ulrich details “the first graffiti [photo] exhibitions of all time” at the MoMA in New York in 1956, held 20 years after Brassai’s initial graffiti photographs. From this milestone, the book *Brassai Grffiti* emerged, furthering research on graffiti through photographic documentation of the same wall over time. This period also marked the beginning of artistic graffiti exhibitions in France, England, and Germany. Blanché briefly discusses “*The Affichists*”—artists who worked with *décollage* and torn posters. Their interaction with the streets and full-body engagement in the process are highlighted. These artists aimed to “capture reality itself instead of depicting it, thereby surmounting the barrier between art and life.” The next sub-chapter, “*The Ennoblement of Grffiti by Prominent Artists*,” examines the relationships and mutual influences between notable figures such as Picasso and Brassai, referencing Picasso’s own graffiti work. The text also notes how Brassai’s photographs were collected by Braque, Miró, Dubuffet, and Wols. Additionally, it describes how figures like Guy Debord and Ted Joans retrospectively claimed authorship of well-known graffiti, such as “*Ne travaillez jamais*” and “*Bird Lives!*” The latter is linked to the 1979 Basquiat graffiti “*Samo© is Dead*.” The final milestone, “*On the Street, No Longer From the Street... The Street Becomes a Recognized Art Venue*,” briefly presents the life and work of Gérard Zlotykamien (Zloty), who consistently created the majority of his works illegally on the streets during the 1960s. Zloty is placed alongside Daniel Buren and Ernest Pignon-Ernest as one of the foundational figures of Urban Art worldwide.

In the chapter “*Style*” by Johannes Stahl, particularly “*Images and Words on Handwriting, Grffiti, and Style Writing*,” the author examines the premise that “graffiti is a profoundly manual product and is, at least to some extent, rooted in

handwriting.” The text explores the characteristics and practice of writing as a learned process and its relationship with personal identity. The tension between legibility and illegibility (or *semiotic revolt*, as described by Jean Baudrillard) and the concept of potential audiences are also discussed. For the first time in the book, the relationship between graffiti and the urban context is introduced, addressing the unquestioned presence of the wall and the possibility of in situ direct critique or commentary on architecture. However, the broader implications of the urban situation as a generator of graffiti are only superficially touched upon. Returning to the term “*style*,” the chapter notes its emergence as a keyword in graffiti, referencing Jack Stewart’s dissertation. It also highlights how Rammellzee, from within the graffiti scene, approached the evolutionary concept of style creatively. This idea was popularized through influential films like *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*, as well as publications such as *Spraycan Art*. While the “*style*” trend remains largely uncontested, recent developments have seen the emergence of “*anti-style*” (referencing Allan Gretzki) or “*style-free*” graffiti, though these are only vaguely mentioned.

The chapter “*An Epic of Grffiti in the Grande Région*” by Myriama Idir examines the emergence and evolution of New York-style graffiti in the *Grande Région*, encompassing Saarland (Germany), Rhineland-Palatinate (Germany), Lorraine (France), Wallonia (Belgium), and Luxembourg. The region’s first contact with graffiti dates back to 1982 through *The Roxy Tour*, a blend of dance, music, and visual art events featuring figures like Dondi, Phase2, Rammellzee, and Futura 2000. The detailed account traces the evolution of graffiti in the region, highlighting the influences and networks of key personalities. The unique characteristics of the region, such as its constellation of old industrial and military zones, are emphasized and connected to the development of graffiti. The area’s dual nature—remote yet cosmopolitan—was shaped in part by the presence of American military bases in Heidelberg, Mannheim, and Strasbourg, as well as international schools that facilitated encounters between working-class youth. The chapter showcases several prominent local writers from the mid-1980s and notes that the region “was on par with the

major cities of Europe." A brief overview of the evolution of illegal graffiti in West Germany provides additional context. Myriama Idir describes the key figures and the local evolution within each of the sub-regions, presenting a compelling patchwork of chronological and geographical graffiti expansion.

The following chapter, authored by Ulrich Blanché, focuses on gender and is titled "*Female Street Art and Graffiti Pioneers - Gender, Material, and Techniques.*" In the introduction, Blanché situates the study of gender in graffiti historically, starting with Jack Stewart's research in 1989, and references Nancy Macdonald's work on graffiti and masculinity. The chapter develops under the section "*Anonymity, Style, and Gender,*" where recent research on gender in graffiti (e.g., by Vittorio Parisi and Sofia Pinto) is discussed, along with unresolved questions on the impact of gender in graffiti and street art (drawing on Malin Fransberg's work). Lady Pink's statements are also highlighted, addressing differences in how girls were approached within the hip-hop context in the U.S. versus Europe. The chapter mentions early female graffiti writers, including Barbara 62 (featured in a separate chapter of the book). The conceptual significance of the book's cover becomes clear here: it features Mickey and Vampirella, identified as the first female graffiti writers in Europe. The cover thus reflects the book's focus on its less-emphasized findings: *illegal, European, and the first female graffiti writers.* Street art is addressed in a dedicated section of paragraphs that identify Jenny Holzer's "*Truisms*" in 1977, but the boundaries blur as Barbara 62, referenced in *The New York Times* in 1971, is also included. The chapter offers insights into "*gender in conjunction with training, materials, and techniques in street art and graffiti,*" addressing the challenges faced by female practitioners, often working in male-dominated groups. For instance, stencils in graffiti were once stereotypically dismissed as "*gay,*" reflecting the sexism present within the medium. The chapter's final remarks clearly emphasize forward-looking ideas, proposing that "*literature and exhibitions can make a decisive contribution to escaping this dilemma.*"

The chapter by Jacob Kimvall, titled "*The Art of Style Writing as Graphic Design and Marketing in the Music Industries,*" opens with a near-poetic description of the Bronx and Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's 1984 book *Subway Art*. The book's connection to Phase 2's "Tuff City" painting is highlighted as pivotal in linking graffiti to the music industry, with some controversy surrounding the absence of this painting in the 25th-anniversary re-edition of the book. The chapter establishes that "*style writing graffiti has been utilized as applied art and in market communication since the 1970s.*" This leads to a discussion of the persistent tension between "*authentic, artistic, and liberating (illegal) style writing*" on one side and "*unauthentic, commercialized, domesticated graffiti*" on the other. Kimvall emphasizes that "*in the research of the visual culture of contemporary graffiti and style writing, record covers provide a unique source of material,*" navigating the fine line between subcultural ideals and mainstream recognition, touching on blackbooks, canons, icons, seriality, rebranding, and the cult of the "*old school.*"

In the chapter "*Canned Politics?*" by Sven Niemann, "*academic perspectives on the phenomenon of political graffiti*" are explored. Notably, this is the first chapter to explicitly address current events, incorporating examples and situations from 2023. For "*scientific need*" (citing Andreas Klee), Niemann distinguishes between style writing graffiti and word, symbol, and slogan graffiti. The chapter carefully addresses various perspectives, noting, for example, that while style writing graffiti is not typically perceived as political in a narrow sense, it is inherently political in a broader sense. Nuances such as shared practices and overlapping aesthetics between street art, football graffiti, and political graffiti are examined. Even the extreme left and right ideologies are considered, highlighting how both sides utilize graffiti, despite its previous rejection by the far right until the late 1990s. The role of political parties in either promoting or eradicating graffiti is also discussed. Niemann concludes by emphasizing the need for multi-angular perspectives to analyze political graffiti on both micro and macro levels.

The chapter “*More Than Just the First Female Urban Artists?*” by Ulrich Blanché is a revelation. The titular question is gradually answered throughout the text. Barbara 62 and Eva 62 are shown to be much more than just early female graffiti writers. They were central figures in the first media references to style writing graffiti in both the U.S. and Europe. The chapter states: “*If writer Taki183 was exceptional because he did not merely tag his street (...) but the whole city, Barbara 62 and Eva 62 seemed to have gone much further by installing their tags in other states too.*” This claim is supported by several testimonies. Moreover, they are credited with creating the first “*signature pieces*”—one-line signatures with an outline, marking the next evolutionary step after tagging. Despite their significance, they remain unknown and have never given personal testimony about their pioneering contributions. The chapter ends with a challenge and call to Barbara 62 and Eva 62 to share their stories. Personally, I see this as a win-win situation: while it would be wonderful to hear their testimonies, it is also meaningful to imagine that any elderly woman walking down the street today could be a pioneer of style writing graffiti.

The book includes two additional articles by Ulrich Blanché, one about SAMO© and the other about Keith Haring. These are pieces of rigorous, in-depth research. The first focuses on the Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz project, which began in a school newspaper. Groundbreaking research by Henry Flynt 30 years ago initially identified 60 photos of SAMO© graffiti, but since then, more than 100 additional photos have been discovered. Ulrich describes the process of incorporating these photos into the project and the implications this has for understanding SAMO©’s significance in Basquiat’s early work.

The final article, titled “*When Haring Was Discovered in Germany ... Klaus Wittmann - A Documentation,*” examines a missed opportunity in Haring’s communication strategy during the 1980s, both globally and locally (in Germany). It also highlights Ulrich’s remarkable work in recovering art history. The article details the efforts of Klaus Wittmann, an art educator who tragically passed away at 37 in 1989. Wittmann proposed an article about Haring to an

art magazine and initiated the first exhibition of Haring’s work in Germany—though it ultimately occurred without him. The inclusion of this chapter aligns perfectly with the book’s objectives, offering a meaningful opportunity to document this history.

Final Comments

Regarding some design decisions, I would have approached certain aspects differently. For instance, the quality of the cover photo could be improved. The distortion of the letters on the spine should not occur, as it makes them harder to read, and there is also no space to breathe. In the table of contents, the stencil-style letters are difficult to decipher; for example, the number 73 can easily be misread as 13. However, the separation between English and German is well executed, particularly with the use of bold text.

Another aspect, in this case to avoid having Ulrich Blanché listed as the author for 8 out of the 12 entries in the table of contents, is that the organization of the book could have been slightly different. For example, creating a dedicated section for invited authors would allow the four invited texts to be presented separately, while clearly distinguishing the rest of the content as the work of the book’s editor/main author. That said, the current organization also works well as it is.

Overall, without viewing this publication purely as a catalog (as I did not visit the exhibition), while there is room for improvement in the aspects mentioned above, the book itself is an interesting object. The content—especially from the perspective of style writing graffiti and street art history (within the stated range of dates, 1960–1995)—makes it an essential document. With only slight deviation in the *Canned Politics* chapter, the emphasis on historical aspects is very clear throughout the book. This work, while not taking a strong contemporary stance on controversial issues, provides an unquestionably fact-based, scientific contribution to the field with many new facts and angles.

In summary, the objective of producing “*a more international and more feminine (hi)story of street art and graffiti*” feels successfully achieved through this book.

