

Graffiti & Bananas. Street Art in Linz

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Abstract

Is this art, or does it go into the bin? Graffiti and street art polarise. Vandalism and damage to property in the eyes of some, added value or even art for the City and its inhabitants for others. Born as a US American subculture in the 1960s, graffiti has today conquered public space all over the world. Since the 1980s, a street art scene has developed in Linz, which came of age and became attractive for tourism and business at the latest with the foundation of the Mural Harbor, 'Europe's biggest outdoor graffiti and street art gallery. Covering a wide range from signatures, political slogans, stencil images and stickers on dust bins to large-scale colourful spray paintings, these anti-establishment comments are to be found practically everywhere in Linz's urban landscape. Unauthorised art invades the City and playfully raises the question of who public space belongs to. Heteronomy, permission culture and self-empowerment as parts of our social structure have significantly been gaining importance in this context, especially since COVID-19 took on pandemic dimensions. The exhibition "Graffiti & Bananas", curated by Klaudia Kreslehner, documented for the first time the development of graffiti and street art in Linz. Photos, reports and contemporary works of art testify to an urban movement whose pithy pictorial language paints the social climate on our City's walls.

Keywords

(City)museum; exhibition; graffiti; hidden town; Linz

1. Let's go Bananas!

'What's the connection between graffiti and bananas?

Export hit, baby food, art motif, phallic symbol, achieving fame as an album cover, stuck on the wall with tape, elevated to a high-priced work of art and reproduced as a stencil—this is how the banana made its reputation. When the exotic fruit first reached Europe, it was a luxury item, but later it became a mass import commodity. In post-war Austria, it was an icon of the economic miracle and the new consumer society; in the era of the German Democratic Republic, it was in short supply and finally became a symbol of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"Banana" has even gained currency in linguistic usage, whether as a counterpart for the bum bag as an accessory that reappeared in the 1990s, as a term for "crazy" in the sense of "totally bananas", a description of shapes such as a boat, a bicycle saddle or a cap for a spray can, or in the term "banana republic" with its economic and moral associations indicating exploitation of the Global South, international disequilibrium and corruption. Notably when the East

opened up after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Linz was considered the "Banana Capital". From 1989-2011 the company Mathy was based at the Linz freight yard and operated a banana ripening facility there. Most of the bananas came by railway wagon from the seaports and were sold from Linz. To this day, a bunker which the company had decorated at one time with large sprayed-on bananas still stands on railway land. Some rail travellers still consider this an unofficial Linz sign.

The banana is also promoted in artistic circles, ranging from a luxury item to a mass commodity. In 1967 pop-up artist Andy Warhol placed the banana in stencil format on the album cover of "The Velvet Underground & Nico". German artist Thomas Baumgärtel uses the same technique: known as the "Banana Sprayer", he reproduces the stencil in a wide range of variations and has even left a few examples on walls in Linz, such as at the LENTOS Art Museum and the entrance gate to the Museum Francisco Carolinum. Imitated stencils are also to be seen throughout the City. When

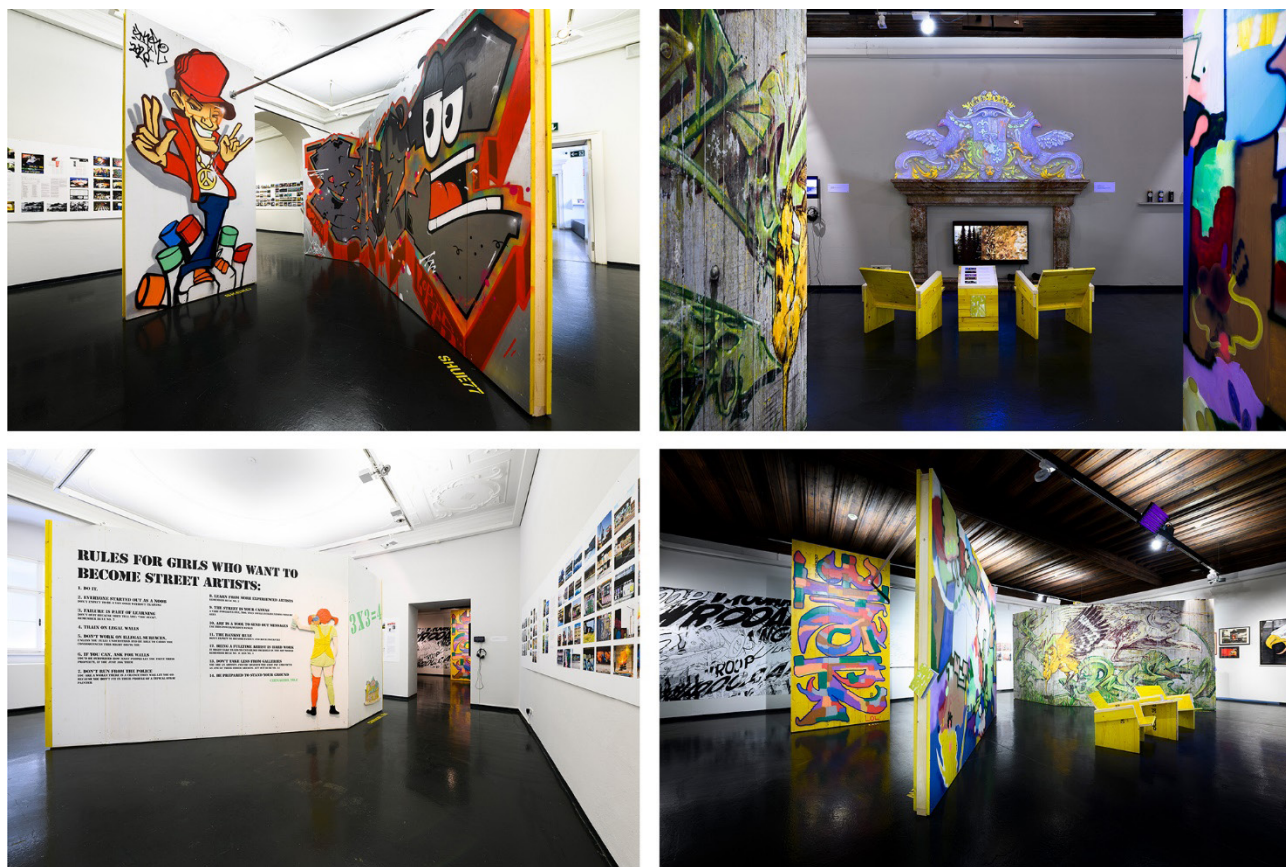


Figure 1. Exhibition views of "Graffiti & Bananas", 2020, Nordico Stadtmuseum Linz © Norbert Artner



Figure 2. Banana bunker view from the train (left) and a banana graffiti by Thomas Baumgärtel at the Francisco Carolinum (right), 2019 © Klaudia Kreslehner.



Figure 3. Exhibition view of the Installation Marta Grossi, © Norbert Artner.

Italian artist Maurizio Cattelano stuck a banana to the wall with tape at the Art Basel Miami Beach 2019, thus declaring it to be art, this event caused a new sensation in street art in the form of memes created by Australian graffiti artist Lush Sux. Italian artist Marta Grossi finally created banana graffiti in the most diverse forms.

The banana and its use are ultimately as wonderful, quirky, alienated, characterised, flexible and contradictory as the scene surrounding graffiti and street art itself. In this way, we push the boundaries of conventions and expectations and open the door to new art forms. Let us simply accept that graffiti, in all its variations and related disciplines, is an exciting, sensual, flexible and elastic part of a colourful urban world.

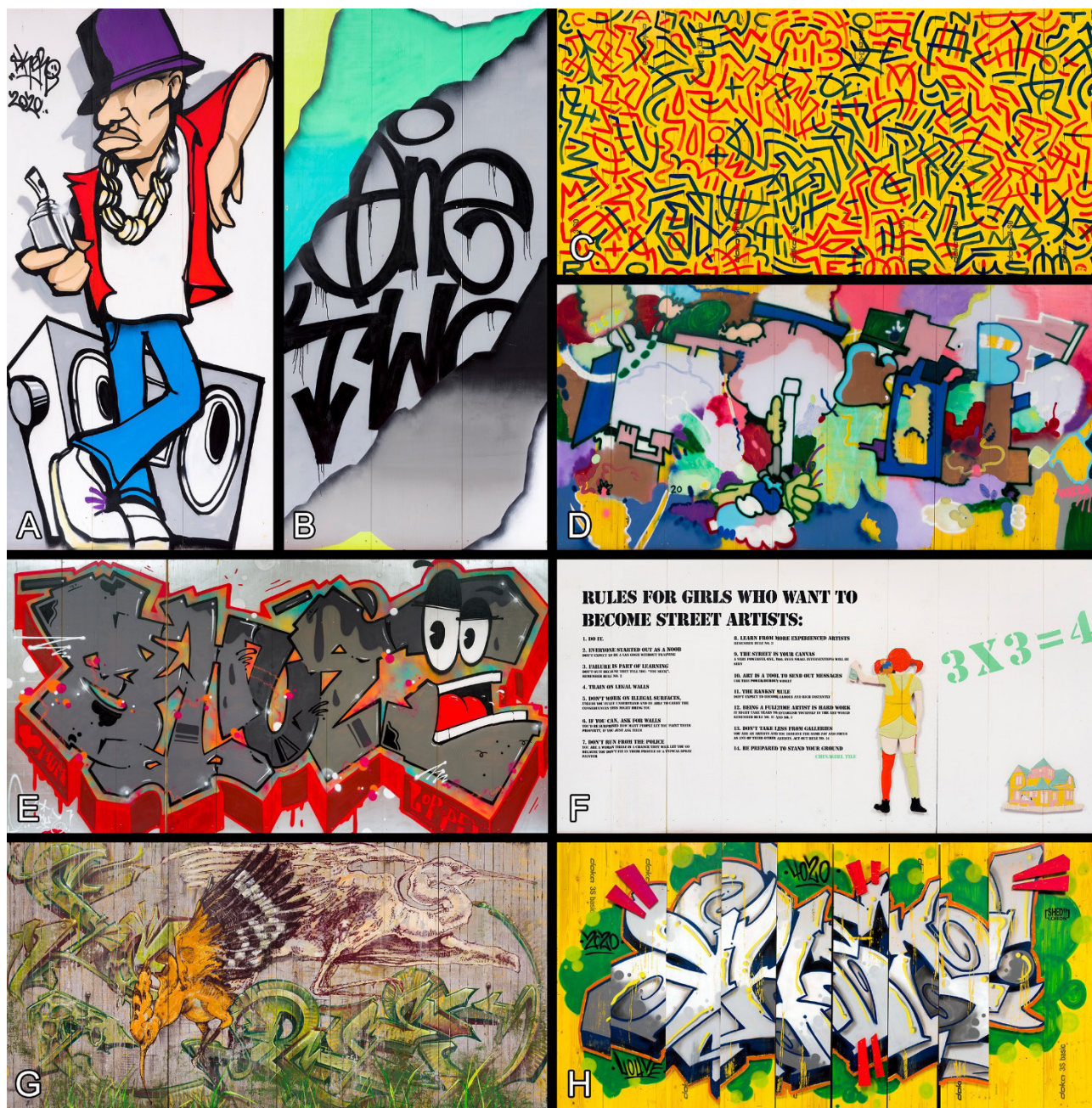


Figure 4. Murals produced for the exhibition, 2020, Nordico Stadtmuseum Linz. A. SKERO, B. ONETWO CREW, C. MAMUT&KRYOT, D. WALZE, E., SHUE77, F. CHINAGIRL TILE, G. VIDEO.SCKRE, H. SHED © Norbert Artner.

2. Hidden Town—The City within the City. Or: Depends on Where You Put the Focus.

The public has a right to art. The public needs art, and it is the responsibility of a “self-proclaimed artist” to realise the public needs art, and not to make bourgeois art for the few and ignore the masses. Art is for everybody.

KEITH HARING

2.1. Who does the City belong to?

We live in a time where we are permanently exposed to a barrage of stimuli emanating from the consumer world. Capitalistically motivated structures dominate this world. Our gaze is at the beck and call of economic and political concupiscence. In an urban environment, there are ads wherever we look, blatantly clamouring for us to shell out. Bargain competes with bargain in one shop window after another. Discounts, special offers, and markdowns slog it out. A garish wall of price labels in the glaring light of halogen spotlights. Most of us have become used to this by now. To tuning out and following the prescribed path in a stupor. To being needy. To shopping. The urban centre pulsates ever faster. We are meant to go ever further, faster, higher. Soon all vacant spaces will be occupied. But who is to decide to what extent urban residential and working spaces may be exploited? How can we make use of public space and are we allowed to do so? How can you shield yourself against the messages and the temptations to which you cannot help being exposed? What is this curated inundation with infor-

mation doing to us? Are there still spaces where individuals can express themselves? What needs to be accepted as given? What is preordained? What is still permitted? Who does the City belong to? All those questions have been part of the research process for the exhibition “Graffiti & Bananas” (which took place from 04/09/2020 to 21/03/2021. But while observing the City, this process suddenly was interrupted by the pandemic regulations and thereby somehow changed the point of view on the show’s topics.

2.2. Explore the City

March 2020. A virus had everyday life in its grip. Questions of self-determination and permission, injunctions, restrictions and sanctions imposed by law were given a new presence and significance. We found ourselves suddenly ejected from a structure we were familiar with, from a life on autopilot. The government’s restrictions as a remedy for a dystopian pandemic world produced a cityscape that was temporary, alternative, utopian perhaps, and certainly hitherto unknown. Car-free streets. Unfrequented eateries. Sidestepped by hectic everyday life. Seemingly business as usual, but minus the people. All of a sudden, it seemed the City had lost some of its function, streets had been emptied like an abandoned fun fair. ‘Linz’s pulsating artery had fallen silent. The market criers had disappeared, as had the acoustic bombardment in the shops, the traffic noise, the bustle, the flashing lights of the shop windows, the stench of the car



Figure 5. Sticker and Graffiti in Linz, Urfrahanermarkt-Gelände, 2020 © Klaudia Kreslehner.



Figure 6. Sticker and Graffiti in Linz, 2020 © Klaudia Kreslehner

exhaust fumes and the oppressive mixture of food odours, smoke, scent, and sweat. A new urban emptiness had begun to spread, shouldering aside the consumer 'society's *horror vacui*, the dread of emptiness, that was formerly one of its characteristics. Distraction was no longer the order of the day. This was the time when the protective blinkers of selective perception could be removed so that people discovered pure space as such at their own pace.^{it}

An unusually pacified atmosphere and the entire decelerated environment made it possible for people to adopt a new perspective and discover their City afresh. Take up a new viewpoint. Focus was possible. Quiet versus distraction. The City morphed into a museum. The exhibition waiting to be discovered outside is still there for the taking, despite the traffic being back to pre-pandemic levels, despite the hectic pulse of everyday life. It has many faces: shaped mainly by business and politics clamouring for attention, by decisions—partly excellent, partly disastrous—made by urban planners, property owners, restaurateurs, and shop owners. And by people who dispose of their chewing gum on the pavement and stuff their fag ends into crevices in the wall—and by those who scribble protestations of love or hatred on walls and park benches. Time also leaves its detritus everywhere: exhaust fumes disfigure facades, wind and weather leave their imprint on surfaces. What was new grows old. And what was old is given a new lease of life. A

timeline in perpetual flux. Add to this painted and sprayed pictures, messages, and all kinds of decals and stickers: provocative, streetwise, hilarious, critical, ironical, silly, attractive, and repugnant. Evaluation, as always, is in the eye of the beholder in line with the context of the times. Art for some, for others disfigurement and wilful property damage. Nuisance, added value, part of urban identity.

Even the attempts at removing graffiti and stickers left a record: the differences in colour in the patches on facades that have been repainted or touched up, the residue of glue that decals affixed to junction boxes and garbage bins have been left behind. Replies to messages in the form of edits (spelling mistakes), comments (affirmative or corrective of the original message) or overpaintings (presumably with a diametrically opposed statement). This generates dialogues, groupings, verbal sparring, jokes, questions, and pictures attesting to the mood in the City. Boundaries are drawn and are tolerated or pointedly ignored. Top dogs defend what they consider their domain and seek to outcompete newcomers. It's worth paying close attention to. As in a hidden picture puzzle, you may discover the City within the City. Never before seen details become visible. It is all human-made; the intention behind it is as individual as are the inhabitants themselves. A participative show. The crew of designers and artists is made up of invitees and those who have empowered themselves.

3. Graffiti in Linz

Curating an exhibition about Graffiti in Linz means: doing the work. Starting the research about this town's graffiti history made it clear that there is no written book or paper about this specific topic published. This exhibition had thus to start with building a base: looking through archival stocks, even police archives, flipping through old newspapers, interviewing private collectors and—most importantly—talking to those who had been part of the very early graffiti community in Upper Austria. Thanks to them, it was possible to give an overview of the forty years of graffiti history of Linz.

Officially, Linz has eight venues¹ where graffiti may legally be sprayed today. Five of them are in underpasses: two in the eastern part of Urfahr and three at the 'City's southern periphery. In the Donaupark, a wall has been put up specifically for this purpose, complete with seating. In the central residential area between Kaisergasse, Lüftenegger- and Honauerstraße, the back sides of garages have been cleared for sprayers. Clearly visible from the banks of the Danube in Alt-Urfahr West, the arguably longest wall is to be found below the Römerberg tunnel.

Attempts in the 1990s to hedge in illegal graffiti ultimately led to a resolution to make walls within the urban context accessible for sprayers. The first attempts in this direction on the part of the sprayer community date back to the late 1980s. A 'boy's handwritten letter addressed to the 'City's mayor with an attached map of Linz complete with proposed venues attests to attempts to provide officially approved surfaces for 'Austria's up-and-coming graffiti generation. The political establishment reacted to this with different voices, not all sympathetic. Some came out in support of youth culture, and others worried about the disfiguration of the urban environment and an uncontrolled surge in graffiti. Upper Austrian urban environments, such as those in Linz and Steyr, had come into contact with graffiti relatively early on. This may partly be due to the proximity to Munich, considered one of 'Europe's premier 'graffiti 'cities'. This is why a deeply entrenched scene developed here, whose harder core has survived to this day.

The first legal graffiti in Linz on the bunker at the Andreas-Hofer Square date to 1990. They proved highly controversial among the 'City's political actors. In addition, an event that occurred here twice in the 1990s was quite unique: the *Stay Original Jam*, organised in and around the Neues Rathaus by 'Linz's Socialist Youth. This was a meeting point for the scene that proved attractive far beyond Upper Austria's borders for renowned artists in the fields of breakdance and graffiti: they sprayed specimens of their art onto custom-built walls while the *breakers* demonstrated their skills in the street. Inevitably, painting did not remain confined to legitimate surfaces, much to the annoyance of the neighbouring property holders. This was one of the reasons why the event only took place twice.

It has presumably always been the case that graffiti cause a certain polarisation. In Linz and other cities, there are self-proclaimed urban cleaners, who feel that the City is being disfigured by illegal graffiti. An elderly lady makes a point of regularly picking stickers from junction boxes in and near Dametzstraße, where she lives. She has set her sights, particularly on some local football-fanclub stickers. Another Linzer has set himself the goal to make his neighbourhood graffiti-free by the time he retires. He draws motivation, as do many others, from the *Broken-Windows* theory by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (1982), which claims that any problems that go unattended in a given environment lead to other problems, eventually paving the road for crime. Guided by his initiative and research, he has become quite an expert in the field. He is regularly asked for advice on cleaning sensitive surfaces, like those on police cars. A Linz cleaning company, relying on his expertise, has specialised in removing graffiti and offers the impregnation of surfaces, making it easy to remove graffiti. Watchful Linzer's document, comment, and report graffiti. The 'City's website, www.schauauf.linz.at, receives a steady stream of relevant information. Others put the colourful surfaces to good use: photo shootings are staged in front of decorative graffiti and feature in marketing campaigns. There are even graffiti that end up as wallpaper in the conference rooms of corporations. The male or female creators of these graffiti do not stand to benefit financially from the adoption of their works. Public space and the artists' anonymity make it difficult to press legal claims for royalties. Artists and pho-

1 - The website www.spraycity.at lists all *legal walls* in Austria.



Figure 7. *Skulpturenpark* in Donaulände, a.k.a. *forum metall*, 2020 © Klaudia Kreslehner.

tographers who use this urban narrative for their needs and base new work and entire picture archives on them include Anton Kehrer, a Linz artist and photographer who has been documenting the development of the graffiti scene in the noughties, producing a comprehensive narrative. Together with other images in the exhibition, his photographs built the base of the current inventory of Linz graffiti.

Squares and monuments in the centre are preferred locations for the placement of messages. For the *Skulpturenpark* in Donaulände, a.k.a. *forum metall*, this means that it undergoes a permanent change. Communication takes place under the cover of anonymity. The recipient is the public. Everyone may feel targeted yet is free to ignore it. Topical political events that are underreported in the media and therefore remain under the general radar—or are sometimes deliberately suppressed—are brought to the public's attention in highly frequented locations. A case in point is demonstrations of solidarity with *Grup Yorum*, a Turkish band, known for their political songwriting, who is the victim of political persecution in their home country. Obituaries of two band members who died after a hunger strike in the spring of 2020 were affixed in various places.²

Freedom of opinion and questions of heteronomy and

autonomy are significantly gaining in importance also in Austria, especially in view of the pandemic and how it has been dealt with in the media and politics. It became clear very quickly how fragile our legally defined and socially accepted possibilities and our freedom is. Resistance against the COVID regime and the restrictions imposed by the government has become visible. Protests both against ex-US President Donald Trump and against local politicians put an appearance in the hidden picture puzzle of our streets. Sexist, racist, national socialist, paedophile and homophobic slogans, and catchphrases that seek to glorify violence appear side by side with calls for justice, gender equality, fairness, feminism, freedom, peace, love, and calls to save the climate. Scrawled swastikas are often crossed out immediately, overpainted or removed, while symbols that are not in breach of criminal law are often tolerated for longer timespans. In this league, you will find drawings of hearts, CCTV cameras, bombs and submachine guns, or a roll of toilet paper at the end of a rainbow. Slogans include 'Ausländer raus' [Foreigners out], 'Nazis raus' und 'Alles wird gut' [Everything will be o.k.]. A.C.A.B., which means All Cops Are Bastards—a widespread abbreviation for which 1312 serves as an alternative code. Right and left. Black and white. Fan communities of football clubs pay tribute to the glory and prestige of 'their' club by populating public space with their initials. It is obvious that the supporters of Linz's Athletik Sportklub (LASK) and the FC Blau Weiß (formerly Stahlstadt Klub VÖEST) are trying to deny each other supremacy

2 - In the Donaupark, someone scrawled 'Freiheit für Mustafa Kocak' in April 2020 on the sculpture *Evolution* (by Helmut Gsöllpointner, 1987). Mustafa was a political prisoner in Turkey, went on hunger strike to demand a renewal of proceedings and died in Istanbul on the 297th day of his hunger strike in April 2020.

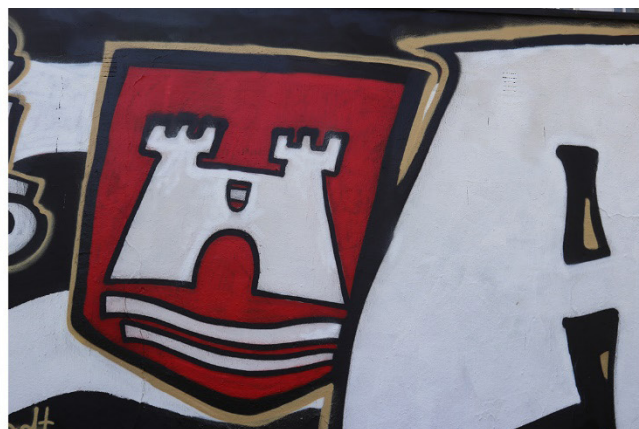


Figure 8. ASK, legal wall, 2020 © Klaudia Kreslehner.

on the City's walls. As a consequence, the walls of our City provide an impressively varied picture.

Unlike regions where graffiti and/or wall painting have a long tradition, there are relatively few large-scale murals in Austrian cities. It may well be that the size of a city and the degree of its urbanity are a factor in the spread of graffiti. Vienna has come in for much more colour in recent years. Street Art focussed exhibitions and festivals³ have contributed to the expansion of legal surfaces, and the City now boasts artistically valuable murals. The graffiti scene, which is generally considered highly committed and networked, is attracting more and more attention in Linz. For some artists who joined the graffiti scene right at the start, graffiti was simply part of a youth culture that reflected their age at the time; for others, it became a way of life or part of their calling. First commissions were not long in coming; as things stand now, quite a few artists can make a living from commissions. Motives and styles are becoming more and more varied. Graffiti on indoor and outdoor surfaces have long ceased to be only a youthful test of courage. It has matured into an art form. Leaving behind its origins in the streets, it has now firmly established itself in the market. Businesses, caterers and even hospitals in Linz make use of it in their interior design. What you get is a mixture of illegal tags and

3 - The best known examples in Vienna since 2013/14 are: CASH, CANS & CANDY, curated by Katrin-Sophie Batz (formerly Dworczak), since 2014, CALLE LIBRE, curated by Jakob Kattner, since 2018, HANDS OFF THE WALL the feminist Street Art Festival curated by CHINAGIRL TILE. 2019 TAKE OVER at the Wien Museum, curated by Christine Koblitiz and Karina Karadensky.

pieces with legal Street Art and commissioned works in the urban landscape. Since 2012, *Mural Harbor*, an outdoor gallery in Linz's port, has been putting well-known national and international graffiti artists on display on its 135 hectares. Boat tours open up an impressive vista on this unique venue. The Tabakfabrik was twice made the stage of a graffiti meeting, organised by Erich Willner aka SHED and the *Schule des Ungehorsams*, whose results were put on display on walls that are not part of the listed building. Admission was free. (Unfortunately, most of these walls have now been demolished.) In the city centre, the number of murals is gradually edging upwards. Most walls of the building used by the cultural association KAPU are already covered with graffiti by LUSH SUX, OMEGA WORLD ORDER, Michael Hacker Illustration & KRYOT. (First deliberations and efforts to redesign the facade of the building facing Kapuzinerstraße date back to the 1990s. In 2021, this project was realised with works by VIDEO.SCKRE and ONE TWO CREW.) The arguably largest inner-city mural is located not far from KAPU in Lessingstraße: a large surface above the Römerberg tunnel is covered with the work of VIDEO.SCKRE (an artist duo consisting of the Linz artist VIDEO ONER and her partner SCKRE27= and Via Donau's measuring point has been refurbished by NDZW. (The pseudonym NDZW is used by a Polish-born illustrator and Street Art artist, who is active mainly in Vienna. The previously mouse grey measuring point in Linz's Obere Donaulände, not far from the Nibelungenbrücke, was given a colourful makeover in 2019 on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of hy-



Figure 8. Nibelungenbrücke, Linz, 2020 © Klaudia Kreslehner.

drography.) It is likely that other Street Art projects will be realised in the near future in the steel city. A glance at Linz and other European cities goes to show that wall design has become part of urban identity in this country as well. Graffiti as an expression of individual concerns and social trends, issues, and moods has claimed its rightful place. It keeps on changing and evolving. It is exciting and it keeps on giving us things to discover. This is done best during a stroll across the City. Change the focus, away from shop windows and billboards, in the direction of occasionally hidden messages, codes and images, as if you were on an expedition. Then what becomes visible, emerging like a miniature parallel world, is the City within the City.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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- Kelling, G. L., & Wilson, J. Q. (1982). Broken Windows: The police and neighborhood safety. *The Atlantic* (March), 29–38.