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On Tags and Conceptual Street Art

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[This is the last draft of the paper. Please only quote from the published version]

The starting point of this paper are two views: on the one hand, two general claims about street art – a broad art category encompassing works of spray painting as well as of yarn bombing, paste ups as well as sculptural interventions, tags as well as stickers, and so on – and, on the other hand, a much more specific view about certain tags produced, roughly, over the past twenty years (for the sake of simplicity, I shall describe them as ‘contemporary’ from now on).¹ The two general claims are, first, that all works of street art are subversive – in a sense that I shall clarify below – (see, e.g., Bacharach 2015; 2018; Chackal 2016; Baldini 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; Willard 2016), second, that works of street art are the result of acts of self-expression (Riggle 2016).² The specific view about certain contemporary tags is that they are artworks, although they are not presented, mainly, for appreciation of aesthetic properties grounded in their perceptual properties, because they are works of *conceptual* street art. The latter view hasn’t gained much attention, to my knowledge, but it is suggested in some discussions of contemporary street art (Lewisohn 2010; JAK 2012).

The key question of the paper concerns, however, not contemporary tags, but “very early tags” (VETs) – a term that I shall use to designate the extremely simple, unadorned tags which some scholars consider as the historical predecessors of the various practices that today we group under the category “street art” (see, e.g., Young 2014; Gastman et al. 2015): should we regard VETs as artworks? As we shall see, on the one hand, VETs writers tend to answer this question in the negative, since they stress that they didn’t cast themselves as artists and often identify the first tags that are artworks with the graphically elaborated tags that begun to be seen around New York City and Philadelphia just a few years after the appearance of the first tags. On the other hand, already in the early 1970s, artists and intellectuals such as Norman Mailer and Gordon Matta-Clark seemed to hold the view that it was appropriate to regard both VETs and later tags as art, although they didn’t defend this thesis with argument.

The view that some *contemporary* tags that are not presented, mainly, for appreciation of their aesthetic properties might be candidates for appreciation as works of conceptual art suggests a strategy for assessing the issue whether *VETs* are candidates for art appreciation: can we defend the claim that the extremely simple, unadorned VETs were presented for appreciation as works of conceptual street art? I shall argue that we have good reasons to hold this view.

The paper has four sections: in section (1), I introduce the view that key features of street art are its subversiveness and the fact that it is a form of self-expression; in section (2), I look deeper into the appreciation of certain contemporary tags as works of conceptual street art; in section (3), I explain what VETs are and I describe the two opposite stances about their art-character or lack thereof taken by their makers, on the one hand, and by Mailer and Matta-Clark, on the other hand; in section (4), I defend the view that VETs are works of conceptual street art.

1. Subversiveness and self-expression in street art

¹ Tags are monochrome signatures of a writer’s street name. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this concise definition to me (see also Cooper and Chalfant 1984: 27). In claiming that the category of street art also encompasses tags I side with, e.g., Baldini (2018: 9-10) and Rivasi (2018: 11-15) (see also footnote 5 below).

² For extra-philosophical discussion of the subversiveness of street art see, e.g., Ferrell (1996), Snyder (2009), and Young (2014).

It's 2021 and the setting is a European town. The underpass below the railway tracks has recently been repainted in gray. It sits in a heavily trafficked road, surrounded by unremarkable buildings. You drive through it almost every morning. One morning, you find its left wall partially covered by a paste up drawing of Godzilla. "Nice!" – you think – "Whoever did this overnight, has brought some life to this dull corner of town". Alternatively, if you're not a fan of street art, or are not favorably impressed by this particular paste up drawing, you might think something like: "Oh no! Why did someone take the liberty of ruining the underpass with this thing? It had just been repainted!". No matter your reaction to the paste up, its maker has succeeded in modifying your experience of the underpass: you cannot help but notice the Godzilla drawing. Moreover, both if you like it and if you don't, you see the drawing as the result of a rebellious act – you assume that it has to have been produced overnight, away from the eyes of the authorities, without consent.

The above is a description of a typical encounter with street art, which allows us to grasp a distinctive character of works belonging to this art category: the fact that they subvert established usage of public space. As Sondra Bacharach argues, street art must be "aconsensually produced [...] in a way that [...] constitutes an act of defiant activism designed to challenge (and change) the viewer's experience of his or her environment" (2015: 481), and, as Andrea Baldini puts it, works of street art are subversive because they "challenge norms and conventions regulating acceptable uses of public space" (2016: 188 – Baldini here refers to Irvine 2012 and Young 2014: 27). Norms and conventions regulating the usage of (recently repainted) underpasses in Europe usually don't prescribe that they can be covered in paste up drawings; the Godzilla paste up, then, is subversive because it goes against those norms and, in line with Bacharach's point, it is reasonable to claim that it so does in order to change our experience of the underpass. Part of the reason why we are *right* in considering the paste up a work of street art is that, thanks to its presence, the portion of public space occupied by the underpass undergoes a significant change, switching from dull to lively, or messy and garish, street environment – depending on how we aesthetically judge the work. If a small, framed portrait painting had been hung on one of the underpass' walls, without consent, by a painter aiming at self-advertisement, and if the painting had been such that it had not changed the look of the underpass significantly, then a foreign object would have been installed in the underpass, but no work of street art would have been produced.³

Baldini stresses that the attribution of subversive character to an object or event is highly context-dependent and that, in the case of works of street art, illegality is typically, although neither necessarily nor sufficiently, a property that grounds the attribution of subversiveness to the works (2018: 23-29; 31-33). Going back to our example, this means that it doesn't matter whether the Godzilla paste-up really was produced without consent from the relevant subjects or not; what matters is that, since non-commercial paste ups are usually regarded as subversive when installed in places such as underpasses in Europe, the paste up looks subversive to us. If the paste up had been illegally installed in an underpass in China, for instance, it would belong to a setting where this kind of interventions isn't typically perceived as subversive and, provided that we were well-versed in Chinese culture, it wouldn't look subversive to us (see Baldini 2018: 30-34).

The second, distinctive character of works of street art illuminated by the underpass example is the fact that they are presented for appreciation as the result of acts of self-expression performed in the street (see Riggle 2016).⁴ We see the Godzilla drawing as conveying a pictorial content and manifesting aesthetic properties that someone set upon realizing by drawing the image, in order to satisfy their need for expressing themselves in the street through the means offered by visual art, as well as by the street itself. Contrast this with the following example: in the underpass, we encounter a well-designed poster conveying an extremely unsettling political message, which we recognize as the result of an illegal campaign conducted by some extremist organization. Although it is subversive, we

³ On street art and site-specific art see Riggle (2010: 252) and Caldarola (2020: chapters 3 and 5).

⁴ Here I lack the space to discuss Riggle's argument in support of this view, but it suffices to say that I agree with his conclusion that in order to qualify as street art a work needs to be presented for appreciation as the result of an act of self-expression.

don't see the poster as a work of street art. This, I suggest, is because, rather than seeing the poster as the result of an act of self-expression performed by a particular individual in the street, we focus on the fact that it is a public manifestation of the agenda of said organization.

2. The conceptual art character of certain contemporary tags

Sometimes, it's hard to distinguish between the results of mere acts of vandalism and works of street art. This is particularly evident in the case of tags.⁵ Over the past twenty years, for instance, the artist duo PERU ANA ANA PERU (PAAP) has produced a large number of bare tags, whose graphic qualities are utterly unremarkable, which can be found at many locations around the world.⁶ Similarly, another artist duo active since the early 2000s, Crew Against People (CAP), has produced some very simple tags, sometimes accompanied by basic drawings, at various locations in Eastern Europe.⁷ The tags by both artist duos are taken into consideration in discussions of contemporary street art (see Lewisohn 2010: 156-160; JAK 2012), instead of being regarded in the same manner as public restroom vandalism, even though they are not graphically elaborated, unlike plenty of tags that are visible around the world. Why? Let's first look at what the artists and their art-world interlocutors suggest.

PAAP claim:

Sometimes we feel like street art has become a regurgitation and a cliché of itself, and this is reinforced by the notion that there is very much a "street art" look with respect to the art work that belongs to the genre. Take a second and google "street art", and you'll begin to see the same types of images over and over again: stencils, screen prints, pseudo socio-political images, cartoon faces, anti-establishment manifestos, satires on global advertisement, numerous pop culture references from Elvis to god knows who, etc. It's like there is a grab bag of a limited number of methods and techniques that the street artist can choose from when thinking about throwing his or her hat into the ring, and they all pick and choose and then go for it, somewhat blindly. But *what we initially found so exciting about the whole street art thing was the notion that what it felt like was simply art that one puts in the public atmosphere as a declaration of not wanting to have to enter into the established paradigm or traditional avenues of presenting one's work to the public (the gallery system)*. So what was exciting was the sense of endlessness that "street art" offered, and how it felt like one could pretty much do anything as a form of art, so long as it lived in the street. In a sense, it seemed like all areas of art could be included inside "street art". Could fine art become street art? *Conceptual art?* Performance art? It seemed like the answer was yes. Any art could become street art, or public art, as long as it moved into the street, to the public. (JAK 2012: n.p., my italics).

PAAP present their work in the context of art making, and in particular of street art making. They contrast the clichéd imagery that they think is distinctive of much contemporary street art with the aspect of street art that initially made the genre attractive to them: the practice of making art in the street without negotiating with "the gallery system". Furthermore, they seem positive about the possibility of producing *conceptual* street art.

Let's now look at what CAP says about their tags: "The CAP works looked very simple because we tried to make something without style: really simple letters with some characters or objects. [...] it's really interesting to see what shape of letters the people who don't know any rules make. We like the old-school New York styles. We like Blade" (Lewisohn 2010: 157). Notice that this statement belongs to an interview between CAP and curator Cedar Lewisohn, which appears in Lewisohn (2010) in a chapter titled "Conceptualism". On introducing the chapter, Lewisohn writes:

⁵ As mentioned above (see footnote 1), in considering street art as encompassing tags, too, I side with Baldini (e.g., 2018: 9-10) and Rivasi (2018: 11-15) and take distance from the views of other theorists (e.g., Young 2014; Bacharach 2015: 483). In particular, I endorse Baldini's view that both graffiti (a category which includes tags) and other street-based artworks (such as stencils, works of yarn-bombing, and street sculptures) should be grouped under the category "street art" because they all appropriate urban space subversively. Still, from this claim it doesn't follow that *all* tags are works of street art, because it has not been established that all tags are artworks. As anticipated, in this paper I shall argue that both some particular contemporary tags and VETs are artworks, and therefore deserve to be included within the realm of street art.

⁶ For pictures see JAK (2012).

⁷ For pictures see <http://crewagainstopple.org/index.php?/project/cap-2005-2008/> (last accessed on March 1st 2021).

In conceptual art [...] the idea takes precedent over the finished object. This section includes works that are conscious of their own production, a type of conceptual graffiti: the production of the work is also the subject of the work. The deliberately naïve graffiti of the Prague-based CAP group, for example, is intended to parody old-school graffiti. The idea of graffiti is the subject of their painting, and the works exist as a critique of traditional graffiti values. (2010: 155).

Based on the above passages, it seems to me that the following hypothesis can be put forward: the reason why works like PAAP's and CAP's bare tags are discussed in art contexts is that those works qualify as conceptual street art. In particular, I shall argue that they are works of street art that convey and present for intellectual appreciation commentaries on street art, relying, in part, on the mechanism of exemplification.

The notion of exemplification has been analyzed by Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin in a number of writings (e.g., Goodman 1976; 1978; Elgin 2018). As Elgin explains

Exemplification is the referential relation by means of which a sample, example, or other exemplar refers to some of its properties [...] An exemplar highlights, displays or makes manifest some of its properties by both instantiating and referring to those properties. Indeed, it refers via its instantiation of those properties. A swatch of herringbone tweed can be used as a sample of herringbone tweed. It is an instance of the pattern that refers to that pattern, A swatch of seersucker, not being herringbone tweed, cannot serve as a sample of herringbone tweed. A sample does not exemplify all of its properties. It can highlight some of its properties only by marginalizing or downplaying others. In its standard use, a fabric sample does not exemplify its shape, age, or origin. Exemplification is selective. In different contexts, the same object can exemplify different properties. Although they are not exemplified in a tailor's shop, the size and shape of the tweed sample might be exemplified in a marketing seminar, where the focus is on what features make a commercial sample effective. (Elgin 2018: 29).

In this passage, Elgin develops on Goodman's remarks (1976: chapters 2 and 6) about exemplification being one of the five "symptoms of the aesthetic" (along with syntactic density, semantic density, relative repleteness, and multiple and complex reference). Interestingly, Goodman also argued that, for instance, abstract pictures exemplify some of their properties (1978: 65) and that exemplification can help us understand "the art status of the 'objet trouvé' and of so-called 'conceptual art'" (57). According to Goodman, all artworks are symbols, i.e., objects that stand for something else, and some artworks function as symbols thanks to their exemplificatory character: they stand for one (or more) of their properties. It is thanks to the mechanism of exemplification, Goodman suggests, that – under the appropriate circumstances – even *objet trouvé* (i.e., ready-mades) and conceptual works can be artworks.⁸

Let's now look at the properties some of PAAP's and CAP's works exemplify and at the views they convey by relying, in part, on exemplification. PAAP's tags, I submit, exemplify the property of looking like the VETs by, e.g., the "TAKI 183" writer.⁹ CAP's tags, on the other hand, exemplify the property of looking like the early, slightly embellished, tags produced, for instance, by the "BLADE" writer.¹⁰ My claims are grounded in the statements offered by both PAAP and CAP, as well as by Lewisohn, which I have mentioned above. PAAP express a longing for a time prior to when street art became "a regurgitation and a cliché of itself", so it seems reasonable to think that their bare tags are meant to remind the viewer of VETs – the historical ancestors of street art, which were stylistically rough, but fresh – by exemplifying the property of looking like them. Based on their statements, it can be claimed that PAAP's VETs-reminding tags are meant to contrast with the highly refined, but often formulaic character of many successful contemporary works of street art, and thereby to draw attention to the lack of edge in contemporary street art (which includes their own work, that consists, after all, in a quotation of VETs), as opposed to early street art. CAP explicitly mention works by Blade as a source of inspiration, and Lewisohn suggests that their work is a parody of "traditional

⁸ On exemplification in conceptual art see also Young (2001: chapter 5) and Caldarola (2020: chapter 4; 2021).

⁹ For pictures see <https://www.taki183.net/> (last accessed on March 1st 2021).

¹⁰ For images of early tags by the "BLADE" writer see <https://www.spraydaily.com/kings-of-trains-1971-1984-the-rise-of-graffiti-writing-2-from-new-york-to-europe-1-6/> (last accessed on March 1st 2021).

graffiti”, so it makes sense to claim that their tags exemplify the property of looking like Blade’s tags, thereby ironically reminding the public of traditional, old-style graffiti.

Let us now consider the issue of the appreciation of PAAP’s and CAP’s tags. As I have claimed, those tags qualify as works of conceptual street art. As Julian Dodd (2016) argues, “conceptual art” is a broad art genre, encompassing works in many art forms (sculpture, music, graphic art, etc.). What those works have in common is that they are presented for intellectual appreciation of the views they are used to convey and of how they manage to convey those views, rather than for aesthetic appreciation of their perceptual properties. I submit that we have reason to claim that PAAP’s and CAP’s tags belong to this art category. Not only, like some works of conceptual art considered, e.g., by Goodman (1976) and Young (2001: chapter 5), they exploit the mechanism of exemplification, but their key goal is to present certain views for intellectual appreciation, i.e., ironic commentaries, on contemporary and traditional street art, respectively. One might observe that PAAP’s and CAP’s tags possess, nevertheless, at least one aesthetic property: simplicity.¹¹ This might be true, but it doesn’t change the substance of my argument. As Wesley Cray (2014: 240-241; 243) explains, works of conceptual art might present aesthetic properties grounded in their perceptual properties, but the presence of those aesthetic properties is always secondary to the goal of conveying certain views, which are the true appreciative focuses of the works; this, I believe, is true also in the case of PAAP’s and CAP’s tags: these works are not presented for appreciation of their sober appearance, but they are presented for appreciation of the views on street art that they convey by exploiting, among other things, their sober appearance (respectively, the view that early street art was better art, and the view that traditional graffiti values are laughable).

Finally, let us consider why we should categorize PAAP’s and CAP’s bare tags as works of conceptual *street* art, rather than just as works of conceptual art. In the first place, like works of street art, they are subversive of established usage of public space and are meant to modify our experience of public space thanks to their subversiveness. That they subvert established usage of public space depends on the fact that, even though tags have been circulating for about sixty years now, it is still not a shared norm concerning the usage of public space that it can be used to inscribe one’s nickname around at one’s will. The reason why they are meant to modify our experience of public space thanks to their subversiveness is that by manifesting the presence of their makers, they make us aware of their presence in the public space and promote a critical look at the agents that are usually represented in public space. In the second place, like works of street art, they are forms of self-expression performed by their makers. PAAP’s works express their makers’ critical stance towards both the gallery system and cliched street art. CAP’s works express their makers’ criticism of traditional graffiti values.

3. VETs: what they are and how they were received

In this section, I shall shift the focus of my analysis towards the VETs quoted by PAAP with their tags. It is likely that the first VETs were produced in 1967, in New York City, by the, as of today, anonymous “JULIO 204” writer (Calderón 2015a: 56), and in Philadelphia, by the “CORNBREAD” writer (Gastman 2015a: 228). Both the “CORNBREAD” and the “JULIO 204” tags were utterly simple and unadorned, consisting in inscriptions of those nicknames in basic block letters. Those tags were visible at various locations around Manhattan and Philadelphia. As Trina Calderón explains, “JULIO 204 was the catalyst for the writers from Washington Heights. GREG 69 saw it happen: ‘I believe the first graffiti [was] JULIO 204. He is etched in my mind and he definitely hit those lamp poles first. And then Big PHIL, he was next. And then we just kind of tagged along, me and Little PHIL tagged along and started doing it too. And then TAKI’” (2015a: 56). All the writers mentioned by the “GREG 69” writer, including himself, tagged with simple and unadorned block letters, just like the “JULIO 204” and “CORNBREAD” writers. The “TAKI 183” writer distinguished himself because, starting around 1968, he began producing a great quantity of tags around most of New York City neighborhoods, to the point that the *New York Times* dedicated an article to his tags in 1971

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

(2015a: 58-65). The “CORNBREAD” writer in Philadelphia was similarly prolific (Gastman 2015a: 228-233).

My goal, here, is not to offer a precise map of the phenomenon of VETs – in the late 1960s, several other writers followed in the footsteps of the writers of “JULIO 204”, “TAKI 183” and “CORNBREAD” –, but rather to identify what distinguishes VETs from forms of wall writing that were practiced in the 1960s and earlier, on the one hand, and from those tags that I shall call “later early tags”, on the other hand (see below).

Wall writing might be as ancient as writing itself. Two aspects, however, immediately distinguish VETs from several other forms of wall writing that preceded them: the fact that they are inscriptions of nicknames, rather than, say, of political or religious messages, and the fact that virtually indistinguishable tokens of each particular tag were produced systematically, in unprecedented amounts – unlike pedestrian graffiti of the kind “Joe was here” or “Joe loves Jane”, which were already visible in the United States at the time very early tags begun to appear (Gastman & Neelon 2015: 20-23). There are two kinds of wall writings, however, that it is *prima facie* difficult to distinguish from VETs. The first is the “Kilroy was here” inscription, which is a sort of nickname, too (see below), and which was extremely widespread not only in the United States, but also in Europe and Asia, since it was customary for Second World War American soldiers to inscribe it in public spaces wherever they found themselves during the conflict.¹² The second are gang tags, which also were bare, unadorned inscriptions of names – albeit gang names – and which were produced in the early 1960s, often in the same New York and Philadelphia neighborhoods where, a few years later, the writers of “JULIO 204”, “TAKI”, and “CORNBREAD” started their tagging practices (see e.g. Calderón 2015a: 56; Gastman 2015a: 228).

What significantly distinguishes VETs from the “Kilroy was here” inscription, I believe, are two, related, aspects: first, while each tag is an inscription of the nickname of a particular individual, “Kilroy” was a single nickname adopted by a vast number of individuals, who all shared the experience of serving in the U.S. Army. Second, while soldiers used “Kilroy was here” to convey the message that members of the U.S. Army, as opposed to a particular individual, had been in a certain place, the writers of VETs inscribed their nicknames to signal their presence in the street *qua particular individuals*. For instance, the “TAKI 183” writer claims: “After I saw his [the “JULIO 204” writer’s] name up there, I felt I’d like to get my name up everywhere too, *try to be somebody*” (Calderón 2015a: 56, my italics); the “PHIL T GREEK” writer says: “We wanted to just get our name there to be known” (58); and the “SJK 171” writer states: “We wanted to be known, that’s why we wrote our names [...] I wanted to be advertised and I wanted people to see it [...] I wouldn’t be selling anything but I was advertising” (Gastman & Pape 2015a: 118, 126).

As for gang tags, Calderón explains that, in 1960s New York, “Local gangs like the Savage Nomads started writing their name around town and adorned fancy homemade jackets with their logos” (2015a: 56) – and the same happened in other American cities, such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia. It seems, then, that local gang tags, like the inscription “Kilroy was here”, and unlike VETs, manifested the presence of a *specific group of people* in a certain place, rather than the presence of a particular individual – the “KOOL KEV No. 1” writer, for instance, claims: “We were individuals, while in the gang writing, they were doing it as a group” (Gastman 2015b: 314). However, not only gang tags were produced in the same New York and Philadelphia neighborhoods where VETs first emerged, but some of the very early writers were also gang members.¹³ This might ground the hypothesis that, despite the difference in content stressed above, writers of gang tags and of VETs shared their motives and mentality and that no other elements of distinction between those two forms

¹² For the story of how this particular inscription originated see Neelon (2015).

¹³ For instance, the “JOE 182” and “STITCH 1” writers were members of the Savage Nomads New York gang (Rowland 2015: 76-81; Pape & Calderón 2015: 104), the “HENRY 161” writer was a member of the Young Galaxies New York gang (Gastman & Pape 2015b: 94-99), the “ROCKY 184” writer was a member of the Hellafied Sisters New York female gang (Pape & Calderón 2015: 104), and the “SUGAR BEAR” writer was a member of the 21st and Norris Philadelphia gang (Calderón 2015b: 292-313).

of writing can be found. This view, however, should be rejected, based on the information gathered from VETs writers. Namely, many of them stress that they tagged walls, in part, to distance themselves from the gangs, and this is true also of writers who were at the same time gang members.¹⁴ As Gastman and Pape write: “Writing and gang life were best kept separate, as their purposes were different: Gangs were about territory and turf, and writing was about going beyond one’s neighborhood.” (2015b: 94). As the “CORNBREAD” writer puts it: “Gangs only wrote on walls in their turf as a way to identify their turf. They weren’t writing to establish a reputation. I was the first person to write my name for the sole purpose of establishing a reputation” (Gastman 2015a: 230). Finally, reviewing the story of 1960s/80s New York gangs, Pape suggests: “By 1974 kids in the ghettos preferred to be associated with the hip-hop movement or graffiti, not the gang life, and the flying cut-sleeve look from the early 70s came to a close. Gangs in New York surged yet again as the crack epidemic arose in the mid-1980s, but these gangs were about money first and turf second [as opposed to the previous ones]” (2015: 206). It seems, then, that, albeit at the origin of both gang writing and VETs there probably is the desire of marking one’s turf (be it the gang’s or the individual writer’s, see, e.g., Calderón 2015e: 176), gang members and VETs writers conveyed different messages with their wall writings: gang writing manifested the power of a gang over a certain territory, and implied a threat to those who disrespected the gang, since gangs were notoriously dangerous and vindictive, while VETs writing manifested the presence of particular individuals in particular places, and didn’t imply a threat to anybody, since VETs writers were not associated, qua tag writers, to violent behavior.

As we have seen, VETs writers claim that they produced tags driven by the desire of establishing a reputation for themselves. Some of them, in particular, explain that they felt the need to get recognized by fellow citizens, who would otherwise neglect the existence of people living in the “ghetto” – the “KOOL KLEPTO KID” writer, for instance, claims that his writing “[...] was also a cry. We came from the hood, so to speak. The ghetto, rat- and roach-infested areas, and we went out and put our names out to say, ‘We’re here.’ And people started seeing that we were here” (Rowland 2015b: 238). And the “JOE COOL” writer states: “Wall writing is simply your man’s primitive instinct used to get recognized by the dim light of society” (Gastman 2015d: 269).

Some VETs writers explicitly claim that their practice had little to do with art making. The “JAG” writer, for instance, recalls: “When we started it was three to five guys who started the whole thing. It was JULIO, TAKI, myself, BUZZ, and another guy that I can’t think of his name right now. It turned into an art form because good artists started doing it. We were nowhere near artists; none of us could draw matchstick men. We just did it to mark our territories. [...] I started drawing a flower as decoration. Then the real artists took over” (Gastman 2015e: 74). Similarly, the “PHIL T GREEK” writer explains: “I was not an artist. I didn’t consider myself an artist. I was just a tagger marking my name on public property, but an artist I was not. Art is what you see now in graffiti; it has become art. [...] It’s colorful. It’s bright. It’s real creative.” (Calderón 2015a: 71). Those claims suggest that tagging became an art when it became more graphically refined. Namely, starting from the early

¹⁴ For instance, the “JEC*” writer claims: “To avoid the gangs, I became a writer” (Gastman & Pape 2015a: 116); the “BLOCK” writer claims: “There were a lot of gangs in Philly in the neighborhood. You really couldn’t do things freely in the neighborhood like other people. I guess writing on the walls and getting away with it showed some significance, some individuality” (Calderón 2015c: 270); the “DR. HANK” writer claims: “We were trying to get away from the gang activity” (Gastman 2015c: 274); the “CONE” writer claims: “In that era there was a lot of gangs. We didn’t want to be in that part of that stuff that was going on in the city. We wanted to be about the fun part of the graffiti scene.” (Calderón 2015d: 325). Moreover, the “JOE 182” writer claims: “I started writing before I became a Nomad [a member of the Savage Nomads gang]. It was two separate things. I kept my gang life and my graffiti life apart. There were people who didn’t even know I was doing graffiti. Savage Joe of the Nomads was one thing; JOE 182, that was another thing. I didn’t even write Savage Nomads. I didn’t want to mix it together. They were my two separate lives” (Rowland 2015a: 80). Similarly, the “HENRY 161” writer and member of the Young Galaxies gang claims: “The graffiti for me was an escape from the hard life of living in the gangs or being violent, because I grew up in a violent home. [...] For me it was an escape. Graffiti was entertaining for me. When I used to see a clean wall and had a marker on me, that was like, ‘Wow, man. I’m going to put my work in.’ I would go and just start writing my name. I would forget the streets; I would forget everything and my mind was just focused on the graffiti” (Gastman & Pape 2015b: 99).

1970s, the season of bare writing in block letters gave way to the beginning of the first phase of the still ongoing season of embellished writing – i.e., *wildstyle* writing, which Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant define as “a complicated construction of interlocking letters” (1984: 27) – and of tags exhibited in art contexts – the phase of “later early tags”. The “BAMA” writer claims: “I think the switch [towards art making] came when the style thing came in, and that’s when the competition started. That was around 1970.” (Gastman & Pape 2015c: 168). About his highly refined lettering style, as well as the similarly refined style of his friends the “LEWIS” and the “JOE COOL” writers, the “BLOCK” writer claims: “We were into the artistic aspects of writing on the walls. We weren’t just writing on the walls, we had the artistic edge. We prided ourselves on a certain graffiti-artist style. We almost reinvented the alphabet in graffiti” (Calderón 2015c: 270). Note that works such as those by the “LEWIS”, the “JOE COOL” and the “BLOCK” writer are tags (i.e., monochrome signatures of a writer’s street name), as opposed to *throw-ups* (i.e., signatures presenting an outline filled with monochrome painting of a different color – see Cooper and Chalfant 1984: 27), *pieces* (i.e., large, complex, and colorful graffiti paintings – see Whitford 2016: 1) and *burners* (i.e., the most elaborated kind of pieces – see Cooper and Chalfant 1984: 27; Whitford 2016: 1). They are, however, tags that are significantly more graphically complex and embellished than those produced by, e.g., the “TAKI” and the “CORNBREAD” writers. Thus, while VETs makers produced simple, unadorned tags, and didn’t conceive of themselves as artists, the makers of later early tags produced graphically elaborated “wildstyle” tags and conceived of themselves as artists.

Another switch happened when, in 1972, the student and activist Hugo Martinez founded United Graffiti Artists, a graffiti artists collective which first promoted graffiti as an art around New York galleries (see Pape 2015: 208-223). To Gastman and Pape’s question “Do you think Hugo Martinez and UGA changed graffiti?” the “HENRY 161” writer replies: “They changed it because they were spreading a new art that we developed, and they were spreading it around all over the city and all of a sudden you started to see graffiti in a more artistic way. [...] Now they started to put more artistic art [sic!] into the names. Like bubble names and bubble letters. We weren’t doing that.” (Gastman & Pape 2015b: 99; the “CO-CO 144” writer expresses a similar opinion in Gastman & Pape 2015d: 150).

According to the view emerging from the statements by VETs writers and writers of later early tags, then, VETs weren’t artworks, and wall writing became an art when writers started to pay more attention to graphic embellishment (by producing both wildstyle tags and throw-ups and pieces) and, concomitantly, were “discovered” by the official art world. The core assumptions grounding this view are that the artistic element that VETs lacked had to do with the graphical complexity of the lettering and that, when tags are artworks, they are works of graphic art. Note that this claim doesn’t entail the view that VETs were entirely deprived of aesthetic properties: they certainly displayed the aesthetic property of simplicity. My point is, however, that early tags writers don’t seem to hold the view that VETs qualify as works of graphic art in virtue of the fact that they displayed the aesthetic property of simplicity, while the seem to hold the view that later early tags (as well as more complex throw-ups and pieces) qualify as works of graphic art in virtue of the fact that they are graphically elaborate.

That many tags are works of graphic art perfectly makes sense. But is this the only way for tags to be artworks? Already at the beginning of the tag writing movement, the writer Norman Mailer and the artist Gordon Matta-Clark seemed not to subscribe to this view, since they regarded as art both VETs and later early tags, for reasons that, as we shall see, have to do only in part with their graphical aspects. In 1973, Matta-Clark documented both VETs and later early tags with his own artwork, photographing them in black-and-white and then hand-coloring the printed photographs. Jane Crawford, Matta-Clark’s widow, explains: “When he [Gordon Matta-Clark] saw the kids tagging the trains and the walls, he immediately thought, ‘This is the people’s art revolution [...] These kids are proclaiming their place in the world, even though they lived on 181st Street. They mattered, and here’s their art’.” (Leopold 2015: 188). In 1974, Mailer put forward a similar view about both VETs and later early tags in his essay, *The faith of graffiti* (Mailer 1974). In particular, he highlighted the resemblance between tags and the logos used in advertising (5), suggested that, even though in all likelihood unwittingly, tag writers advanced the formal research of modernist painters

(17-18) and, like Matta-Clark, argued that tag writers were motivated by the desire of escaping the ghetto and addressing the wider world (31). Relatedly, Mailer suggested that the writing of large tags manifested that writers were telling themselves a sort of escapist self-narrative: “If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real – as if we have come from other places than the name, and lived in other lives” (31). In light of the discussion of later early tags conducted above and of Matta-Clark’s and Mailer’s claims, we can conclude that *later early tags* were conceived as works of graphic art by their makers and that they were about proclaiming one’s place in the world. What about *VETs*, however? As we have seen, their makers didn’t claim they were artworks. Moreover, none of Matta-Clark’s and Mailer’s claims amounts to an argument in support of the claim that they were artworks. Proclaiming one’s place in the world isn’t a sufficient condition for art making and the same is true of bearing vague resemblances to advertisements or modernist paintings. Should we conclude, then, that *VETs* writers are right about the non-artistic character of their work and regard as art only later early tags, contra what Matta-Clark and Mailer seem to suggest?

4. *VETs* as conceptual street art

My hypothesis is that to answer the above question it is helpful to look back at my previous discussion of the subversive and self-expressive character of street art, and of certain contemporary tags as works of conceptual street art. Works of street art, as we have seen, are intrinsically subversive, not necessarily because they break the law, but because they subvert established usage of public space. In particular, their goal is, in part, to change our perception of public space, in virtue of the fact that they subvert its usage. Furthermore, as I have explained above, works of street art are presented as the result of acts of self-expression. As for contemporary conceptual tags, I have argued that they are works of street art which convey, in part by relying on exemplification, ironic commentaries on street art, and that they present those commentaries for intellectual appreciation. In what follows, I shall put forward the view that *VETs*, too, are works of conceptual street art.

Let’s begin by considering some resemblances between *VETs* – as they were presented when they came into existence – and works of street art and conceptual art. In the first place, like works of street art, *VETs* subverted established usage of public space. The subversiveness of *VETs* didn’t so much lie in the fact that they were illegal: at the very beginning they didn’t even cause much of a stir – as the “SNAKE 1” writer claims, “Most of the writing we did was during the day. It wasn’t so strict back then. You did it in broad daylight, right in front of people. People didn’t really pay mind to it or think it was going to become something big. [...] Then it got outta hand” (Gastman 2015f: 114-115); moreover, some writers claim that at the time they didn’t really think about the fact that their actions were illegal (see e.g. Gastman and Pape 2015d: 146; Gastman 2015g: 187; Gastman 2015b: 314). The subversiveness of *VETs*, then, lay rather in the fact that they subverted established rules of expression in the street: wall writing was for individuals engaging in sporadic acts of vandalism (such as the writers of pedestrian graffiti of the kind “Joe was here” or “Joe loves Jane”), for gang members, for soldiers, and for political and religious activists, but not for individuals who just inscribed their nicknames systematically, in great amounts, around metropolises like New York or Philadelphia. The writers of *VETs* subverted this social norm regulating the usage of public space.

In the second place, like works of street art, *VETs* were presented as resulting from acts of self-expression performed in the street: as we have seen in the previous section, they were a new, creative way (alternative to gang membership) to signal one’s presence in the world, for youth that felt marginalized.

In the third place, like some works of conceptual art, *VETs* exploited the mechanism of exemplification. In particular, they exemplified their property of subverting established usage of public space. Writers produced great amounts of tags, big tags, and tags inscribed in places that were difficult and/or dangerous to reach – for instance, the “CORNBREAD” writer famously tagged an airplane carrying the Jackson Five while it had just landed at Philadelphia International Airport (Gastman 2015a: 233). Such strategies highlighted the subversive character of the tags, manifesting the writers’ usage of the tags as samples of subversive artifacts. The reason why very early writers used their tags to exemplify their subversive character, I submit, is that they wanted to draw the public’s

attention towards the fact that marginalized youth was seeking recognition from society. That the above was their goal emerges from both the VETs writers' statements and the critical statements analyzed in the previous section. It remains to explain how the exemplification of subversive character allowed for drawing attention towards this fact. My view is that the quantity, diffusion, and, in some cases, extreme location of the tags naturally prompted in the public the thought that the tags were not the result of mere acts of vandalism and raised the question: why did someone make a significant effort and, occasionally, take a great risk, to challenge established rules of street usage and write this? Basic knowledge of the context where VETs first appeared easily suggested an answer, as confirmed by both Mailer's and Matta-Clark's reflections: because they wanted to be noticed by society at large – a society that usually didn't seem to care about them. Note, however, that we should refrain from embracing Mailer's and Matta-Clark's view that all tags were a cry for recognition from "ghetto" youth: as Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon write, the writers of VETs, such as the "TAKI 183" writer and his friends, "were for the greater part not living in hovels" (2015: 20), and only some VETs writers identified as "ghetto" youth. The writing of VETs was a cry for recognition by "working class young people" (20) who felt unrecognized by society at large, although they weren't necessarily very poor and/or living under perilous conditions.

In the fourth place, I submit that, like conceptual artists, VETs writers presented their tags for intellectual appreciation: as I have explained above, the tags were meant to be noticed by the public at large, and they were meant to arouse the thought that they were a cry for recognition from youth that felt marginalized. Thus, I claim that the view that marginalized youth was reacting, symbolically, to its marginalization, by writing on walls, was presented by writers for intellectual appreciation through the production of tags. True, VETs also possessed at least one aesthetic property, namely simplicity, but we don't have elements to claim that VETs writers saw it as the most salient feature of their tags. As we have seen, they describe their tags mainly as an instrument for making society at large acknowledge their presence in the world, rather than as an instrument for making it appreciate their mastery of marker writing. One goal, of course, does not exclude the other but, in light of the above discussion of VETs, claiming that VET's possession of the aesthetic property of simplicity was instrumental to the VETs writers' primary goal of using their tags to make society at large acknowledge their presence in the world, thereby appreciating the intellectual content of VETs, seems the most appropriate interpretation: VETs manifested a cry for recognition, and their graphical simplicity accentuated what really mattered about them, i.e., the fact that they resulted from subversive gestures of *self-expression*, because it made the writers' nicknames more easily readable. The simple writing in block letters made it impossible to miss the fact that those who were expressing themselves in the street and were demanding recognition were, e.g., the "TAKI" writer, or the "CORNBREAD" writer, and also reinforced the view conveyed by the works, i.e., that what mattered was that the writers told the world that they existed, and nothing else. Both Cray (2014) and Dodd (2016) argue that works of conceptual art are presented for appreciation of both the views they convey and *how* they manage to convey those views: this applies to VETs too, which could be appreciated not just for the subversive message they conveyed, but also for how, through a graphical artifact with a subdued look, they nevertheless managed to convey a powerful idea. Thus, like some conceptual artworks and, in particular, like the works of conceptual street art discussed in section 2 above, VETs possessed aesthetic properties that, however, were secondary to the goal of conveying a certain message, which was presented as the true appreciative focus of those works.

Given the resemblances I have highlighted, should we conclude that VETs were works of conceptual street art? Admittedly, notwithstanding the resemblances, this conclusion would be highly counterintuitive. To begin with, writers didn't even know what conceptual art was – not only they were young people without an art background, but it is also true that works of conceptual art, as well as the very expression "conceptual art", began to circulate among artists and intellectuals only in the 1960s, around the same years when VETs first emerged. Similar remarks apply to the notion of "street art", which, to my knowledge, only became widespread in the early 2000s. In the second place, as we have seen above, the writers of VETs stress that they were not interested in making art.

However, claiming that a certain object is an artwork of a certain kind, even when we know that its makers didn't explicitly manifest the intention of making art, or didn't possess the notion of that art kind (or of art itself), is acceptable in art discourse, under certain conditions. As Dom Lopes (2014: 200-202) and Michel Xhignesse (2020a; 2020b) argue, if we have reason to claim that a certain subject had the intention of producing an object with certain features, although s/he didn't possess the notion that an object with those features belongs to a certain category, then it would nevertheless be correct to claim that the object s/he produced belongs to that category, and to attribute to him/her the *indirect intention* of producing an object in that category (for previous explorations of this view, see Levinson 1979; 1989). Arguably, medieval cathedral-builders didn't possess the notion of "architectural artwork", but they produced buildings possessing all the key features of architectural artworks, which is why we can attribute to them the indirect intention of producing architectural artworks. Analogously, Marcel Duchamp didn't possess the notion of "conceptual art", but he produced works, such as *Fountain* (1917), that later on came to be seen as possessing all the key features of conceptual artworks, which is why we can attribute to him the indirect intention of producing works of conceptual art (see Lopes 2014: 191-192; 202). Something similar, I suggest, applies to the writers of VETs: they didn't possess the notions of "conceptual art" and of "street art", but they produced objects that possess the key features of both conceptual art and street art, so we can attribute to them the indirect intention of producing works of conceptual street art, even if they claim they were not making art. In other words, it might be that VETs writers didn't realize their *direct* intention of not making art, while they realized their *indirect* intention of making conceptual street art.

Let's look into my proposal in some more detail. VETs, like other forms of wall writing, were works in the graphical medium. Just like being a work in a pictorial medium does not entail being a pictorial *artwork*, being a work in the graphical medium does not entail being a graphical *artwork*. As we have seen, at the time of their production, VETs did not appear to be artworks to their makers. However, after some decades, we find ourselves in the position to see that VETs pioneered two art genres: both street art and conceptual art. In the 1970s, the practice of appreciating artworks produced in the street for their subversive and self-expressive character gradually emerged, as testified by both Matta-Clark's and Mailer's views and, later, the notion of "street art" was introduced into the art jargon to refer to the objects of appreciation of such practice. At that same time, the practice of appreciating certain objects, produced in an art context, for the ideas they conveyed and how they conveyed them, begun to emerge too, and the notion of "conceptual art" was introduced into the art jargon to refer to the objects of appreciation of such practice (initially identified, mainly, as the works produced by members of the Conceptual Art movement, see Schellekens and Goldie 2007: ix-xiii).¹⁵ Today, both appreciative practices are well-consolidated and this allows us to understand that VETs were not only works of street art, because of their subversive and self-expressive character, but also works of conceptual art, since they privileged intellectual appreciation of the ideas they conveyed over aesthetic appreciation of the aesthetic properties emerging from their perceptual properties. In particular, while, arguably, they were the very first works to pioneer street art, they were not the first works to pioneer conceptual art (*Fountain*, for one thing, certainly preceded them), but they emerged at a time when the appreciative practice of conceptual art had not yet consolidated. Matta-Clark and Mailer, then, were right in considering VETs artworks, although they did not spell out accurately the reasons that justify holding this view.

To conclude, I shall address two reservations that my proposal might raise. In the first place, one might wonder whether my view can do justice to later early tags, as well as to all the other works of street art that, despite not being works of conceptual art, because they are clearly intended, primarily, for aesthetic appreciation, nevertheless seem to articulate some view. In particular, it seems appropriate to claim, following Mailer and Matta-Clark, that later early tags, just like VETs, conveyed the view that their makers mattered, although society had forgotten about them. I believe my view has the required explanatory power. As Cray (2014: 243-244) argues, both traditional art (such as

¹⁵ On the gradual emergence of appreciative practices specific to certain art categories, often based on arbitrary and historically contingent facts, see Xhignesse (2020a), who develops on Lopes (2014).

later early tags) and conceptual art (such as VETs) run along two axes: the conceptual one and the physical one. Appreciation of a work of traditional art, however, puts much weight on the physical axis (i.e., on the aesthetic properties of the work), and less weight on the conceptual axis (i.e., on the idea the work conveys), while for conceptual art things go the other way around. Appreciating a later early tag, then, is largely a matter of appreciating its aesthetic properties, but also, in part, a matter of appreciating the view it conveys. Appreciating a VET, on the other hand, is largely a matter of appreciating the idea it conveys, while appreciation of its aesthetic properties is subordinated to the appreciation of the idea, as I have argued above.

In the second place, one might find perplexing the claim that works belonging to the genre of street art, which is usually understood as firmly opposed to established art institutions, also belong to a genre – conceptual art – which is typically associated with art institutions, since its roots are typically traced back to the Conceptual Art movement and to Duchamp’s pioneering work, and its newest manifestations are found in the work of many artists with solid links to the contemporary artworld.¹⁶ I believe, however, that one should distinguish between the issue of which art forms and genres grow in opposition to art institutions and which grow inside them, and the issue of which art form and genres a certain artwork belongs to. Although it is *unusual* to produce conceptual *street* art, since the conceptual genre is usually practiced within art institutions, while street art is opposed to art institutions, this does not imply that it cannot happen. Assessing whether an artwork belongs to the genre of conceptual art consists in understanding whether it was intended (directly or indirectly) for appreciation within the appreciative practice specific to conceptual art – which, as I have claimed, focuses on the ideas conveyed by certain objects and on how those ideas are conveyed by said objects – , while it does not consist in understanding whether the work was produced within a context where conceptual art is usually produced. That the institutional context prevailed, historically, as the context of presentation for conceptual art does not constitute a reason not to claim that VETs were works that pioneered the genre of conceptual art, as well as that of street art.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

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