

Sanja Ewald in conversation with Mirko Reisser

The Spray Can as an Attitude to Life between Illegal Action and Commercial Art: A Conversation on the Emergence of a Modern Graffiti Form with the Artist Mirko Reisser alias DAIM

Mirko Reisser belongs to the Hamburg graffiti generation of the 1980s and is considered one of the best-known graffiti artists worldwide. His style is characterised by the modern graffiti form of 'style writing', in which the self-selected pseudonym takes centre stage as lettering. In addition to his artistic activities, he has built and maintained a graffiti collection for over thirty-five years, which was initially biographically motivated by his own artistic activities. Thus, to this day, he has kept every sketch he has ever made and every photograph of every graffiti he has sprayed himself. In addition, there are photographs by other graffiti artists, publications, newspaper articles, magazines in which graffiti was mentioned, as well as materials from within the scene, such as sketchbooks or correspondence from artists. The collection focuses on the Hamburg area of the eighties and nineties.

Sanja Ewald works on Reisser's archive from a cultural studies perspective. In this interview, which was conducted exclusively for this volume, she shows how closely the archive and knowledge are interwoven with the person Mirko Reisser.

They talk about Reisser's own artist biography and the development of a lively Hamburg graffiti scene in the eighties and nineties, which produced numerous illegal and legal graffiti. They also discuss the understanding of the different conceptualisations of graffiti, the phenomenon of transience, and possibilities of preserving and storing graffiti.

First of all, I would be interested to know what exactly the modern graffiti form of writing entails. What elements can be included? What constitutes writing for you personally?

The so-called graffiti writing came to Europe in the early eighties through the hip-hop context of the subway-inspired graffiti from New York, and simply means that

one writes and does not work figuratively. In this graffiti form, characters are always just the decorative accessory; the essence of graffiti writing is always the writing; if this is missing, it is an unfinished picture for a graffiti writer. We also had character sprayers within the scene in the eighties and nineties, but they were only a very small part of the graffiti sprayers.



Fig. 1: Graffiti writing 'Rock da House' by MR. W, Stellingen, Hamburg, 1989; photograph © MRpro and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

A character can be anything?

Anything figurative. It can also be a landscape in the background or a forest, a mountain range or even houses. But, as a rule, they tend to be comic figures or photorealistic images.

Have different styles and contents developed within writing?

At the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, in the USA, there were first tags, the quickly written signatures. Since sprayers wanted to stand out more and

more from the countless tags that eventually appeared on the walls, these became increasingly complex but also larger through additional elements, such as curves, strokes, arrows or clouds, for example, by making the individual lines of the letters thicker and giving them an outline. This is how the large-format pieces slowly developed. And at some point, the so-called style writing developed. That was also what we did a lot of in the Hamburg scene in the eighties and nineties.



Fig. 2: Character 'CAC' by B-BASE, Hamburg, 1990; photograph © MRpro and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

What is the exact difference between graffiti writing and style writing?

While 'graffiti writing' simply means writing, the term 'style' refers to writing as a complex structure of letters. And, at the same time, 'style' is also the individual style. For me, the philosophy behind style writing has always been the idea that the name still forms the basis, but the letters of a style have to dance, that is, you want to get movement into the letters. This can be achieved in different ways. For example, the so-called wild styles appeared, really crass, wild font styles that are full of jags and lines and can look super aggressive. And, of course, there is also,



Fig. 3: Heavily tagged New York City Subway station, May 1973; U.S. National Archives photo no. 412-DA-5784; original caption: ‘Vandals Have Spray-Painted Messages on Walls of This Subway Station (116th Street)’; photograph by Erik Calonius, courtesy of the National Archives.

for example, the very curved bubble style, which is very clear and, thus, appears rather sweet, friendly and cheerful.

Do I understand correctly that style writing is no longer about readability and is much more about recognition and individualisation?

Exactly. Through this form of writing, the name suddenly becomes much more of an image than simply a written word. The requirement for me, and certainly for many others, was to spray one’s own style, which is one’s own name in a style that should be unmistakable, in order to gain recognition among one’s own community in turn. Thus, legibility was no longer a priority at all, especially not for outsiders.

So, writing and image merge into a pictoriality and are perceived as a whole?

That is exactly what style writing is!



Fig. 4: Wild style by SATAN, Sternschanzenbunker, Hamburg, 1998; photograph © MRpro and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

Are the letterings made up of real letters or can they also be fictitious?

The Latin alphabet usually forms the basis and the regularities of the letters also have to be observed. But it is possible to build up a letter in such a complex way or to layer it and interweave it with other additional elements in such a way that the letter dissolves and is no longer recognisable.

But the letter still follows rules?

Yes, there are certain rules. Even if I as a sprayer, for example, totally blow up an A and make it complex by overlaying the letter and shooting a thousand arrows through it, an A can never look like an O, then the A wouldn't be an A anymore. To understand: I and other sprayers started out very simply with normal letters and became increasingly complex and abstract by layering a lot of elements on top of them. If you were to take all these elements away again, you would be able to recognise very clear letters again.

Is a name also chosen with the consideration of which letters appear?

My first name was CAZA, like the French comic artist. The name was rather difficult for me at the time, because it was made up of letters that I didn't like at all. For a while I actually drew different letters and thought about which individual letters I liked and which letters work well in combination and together make sense or a readable word. That's how the name DAIM developed.

Must a spray name always have a mixture of consonants and vowels so that it makes a readable name? Or can a pseudonym also be unpronounceable because it consists only of vowels, for example?

Of course, that also exists. But that's more typical for crews as an abbreviated name. And I also wanted to have a real name, because within the scene, we often address each other by our writer names. There are people in the scene who don't even know what my real name is.

Did you call each other by your sprayer names to protect yourselves? To maintain anonymity and prevent the real name from slipping out to someone?

Exactly, or to distinguish oneself or because the real name was uncool. I'm a bit ambivalent about it, because I never internalised my sprayer name DAIM so much that I really had the feeling that it was my own name. Today, I also call myself Mirko Reisser as an artist. But there were also writers who adopted their sprayer name in everyday life, even with their family.

How did you finally come up with your sprayer name DAIM?

I like the combination of letters, the shape that these letters form together. Especially in the variation with the i-dot, which always gives the lettering a bit of a pyramid shape. I write a lowercase 'i', although I write a capital D and A and M. The 'i' seems perfectly protected between the stable A and the stable M, which have a supporting function within the name. The D, on the other hand, threatens to roll forward, but is caught by the A and, at the same time, has enough room for its fat belly. And this combination of letters also has enough bearing surface to place it on the ground. With flying letters, this lettering does not work as well.

That's important to think about, because the style extremely changes whether it sits or flies. The different possibilities play a big role, especially in illegal spraying: do I want to make the graffiti big and monstrous and fill a lot of surface with my letters and have as little background as possible? Or do I, instead, want to have flying letters, which leaves a lot more possibilities for the background?



Fig. 5: Mirko Reisser's (DAIM) early graffiti 'The Departure', Hamburg, 1993; photograph © MRpro and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

Is this also a reason why people sometimes had several pseudonyms? To find themselves and first try out what works for them?

As a rule, most sprayers have several names. There were even the so-called ABC stylists, sprayers who could style through the entire ABC. They had their own style for each letter and could put it all together and just write a different name. That's totally cool! I've never styled through the whole ABC before.

Really? Not even for fun?

No. Maybe that's also untypical for the scene. But for me personally, it was always much more a self-portrait, these four letters, this style: DAIM - That's me. For other sprayers, this idea of a portrait perhaps was not so much in the foreground, they simply had a different motivation to style letters or develop their own style. My stuff has always been very constructed and also has a lot to do with image composition and tension. If you define your style more in terms of movement and form, then you're closer to the idea of calligraphy and also close to breakdancing and dancing. I have never been a dancer myself, but I think that when someone comes out of this dance tradition and then also discovers graffiti for themselves, you are physically involved in a completely different way.

Is it a technique that inscribes itself in the whole body and that you have to learn first? Like a sport or a dance?

The main difficulty with illegal spraying was that, as a sprayer, you worked directly on a wall, without any aids, so you could only spray for an arm's length at a time. So I had to practise that if I went out of my own field of vision, my arm would still always stay in the same position and I would carefully go along a little bit so that the line would stay straight. Only those who were really well practised could still walk while spraying. In addition, while spraying, you had to step back repeatedly and see if the proportions and the individual lines were right, which was especially difficult to see at night in the semi-darkness. This whole dynamic is also a certain kind of dance.

I would like to talk about the terminology of the term 'graffiti': What constitutes graffiti for you, where do you situate yourself conceptually and where do you demarcate yourself from other concepts?

Even though we in the first German sprayer scene did not question the term 'graffiti', but accepted it as a fixed term coming from the USA, I would still say that the terminology basically has to develop first and sometimes also has to be discussed controversially. For example, there were always sprayers, especially from the early beginnings in the USA, who rejected the term graffiti. There was a time when it was called 'aerosol art' or just 'writing' or 'style writing', not 'graffiti writing'. Later, in Germany, there was mainly the discussion between the different

styles. On the one hand, whether ‘graffiti writing’, or pure writing, is something different from figurative work. On the other hand, there is the distinction between graffiti and street art, which existed before American graffiti came over here, but which was taken up by many people outside the scene as ‘good graffiti’ or ‘beautiful graffiti’. Suddenly, we were all supposed to be street artists within the writing scene and that’s when we distanced ourselves as classic graffiti writers or as graffiti sprayers, and made it clear that street art has little connection with what we do. Nowadays, there is also the generic term urban art, which includes many different forms.



Fig. 6: Illegally sprayed trains by OFFER in Hamburg, c. 1994–1995; photograph © MRpro and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

Have you realised that in the external perception, graffiti is actually a rather old term?

Yes, I have. What is striking here is that the attributions of the different terms for different styles or categories always came from the outside. Within the scene, we didn’t feel the need to distinguish ourselves, because we didn’t feel before that

cave paintings or even classical graffiti in ancient Rome had anything to do with our art. Nevertheless, in the scene, we suddenly had to partly distance ourselves from newspaper articles and attributions, for example, when journalists wrote about our graffiti and targeted the Italian word *sgraffito* as the original word for graffiti. For us internally, it was always graffiti in the singular and graffiti in the plural. If someone said graffiti, they already outed themselves as someone from the outside.

Is there no direct consensus for you to say here: ‘I see that the term graffiti writing can be applied to both antiquity and my art, because writing is a similar act in each case and the name graffiti has a certain tradition’?

From today’s point of view, I think that when a political graffiti sprayer puts a complete slogan in the city or wants to convey a clear message, there are many more references to the historical, the ancient graffiti than to graffiti writing, which was really just about the idea of getting one’s name out into the city. I think it’s important to understand that I started to get interested in graffiti in adolescence, in the late eighties. I wanted to distance myself from everything at that time. I wanted to have something of my own, something special, to explicitly separate myself from my parents or from adults. Of course, within the scene, we were also aware of the books that were published in Germany from the nineties onwards by adults who researched graffiti, and we also realised that there was a connection to historical concepts. But we didn’t see ourselves in this tradition at all back then.

Would you also draw the conceptual distinction via age, via generations?

Yes, I would, and additionally via illegality, because the scene is still sustained by illegality today. Let’s say illegal graffiti was no longer there, then there would be a few artists out there painting colourful pictures in the urban space. But it wouldn’t be the same.

Nevertheless, the external perception has also shifted over the decades and graffiti has also gained recognition in the general public, hasn’t it?

Spraying developed quickly in Hamburg in the late eighties/early nineties, which is exactly when I started. Outsiders started to recognise graffiti and sometimes

commissioned work. That would not have been possible one or two years before. That led to a new development; suddenly you didn't just want to please your friends with your graffiti, but also outsiders, maybe to get a commission or simply to develop the perspective of seeing graffiti writing as art and as a profession.

Is it mainly the artistic perspective that has developed?

Yes, no one started spraying graffiti in the eighties and nineties because they saw themselves as artists; in the beginning there was no motivation to make art.

And do you feel that legality and illegality can be translated as financing and not financing artworks? Could both run parallel or did you also move a bit out of the scene as soon as you sprayed commercially?

If you first gained respect within the scene illegally and then sprayed legally and earned money with it, then you were still respected. But if you started as a legal commission painter and never worked illegally, then you had no respect in the scene. And personally, I've always thought you don't really understand graffiti if you haven't also sprayed illegally. A spray can alone doesn't make you a graffiti sprayer. The nice thing for me was always that everything went in parallel. I always really enjoyed the fact that I could spray illegally or legally, huge but also extremely small, during the day and at night. I could draw in my black books or on paper or spray on walls and other surfaces.

What do you think motivates people to write graffiti then and now? What motivated you back then?

I still find this question fascinating today. I think it's about the basic need to step out of the anonymity of a big city and become visible. But also about doing something completely unknown, something very special and new. That's why I personally can't understand how people can still get involved with graffiti today. In my case, I started listening to hip-hop music in the mid-eighties, which was very closely related to graffiti. And that's also how I made my first pencil sketch, which I then transferred to cardboard with sharpies and in paint. But it was also clear to me that these were only preliminary stages that weren't worth much and that only the sprayed graffiti was the finished work. And then, in the summer of

1989, when I was sitting in my room with two friends, we spontaneously decided to grab some spray cans from my parents' basement and just spray some graffiti outside on the nearest electricity box. In the middle of the day. It was a whole new world for me and since that moment I have never taken the spray can out of my hand again.

To stay with this concept of value, which I find really beautiful: what is the value of graffiti in urban space? How does graffiti change the space itself? Does it have some kind of aesthetic strategy for you?

Looking back, I think it's a pity that my own horizon as a young person was very limited. From the graffiti photos from the eighties and nineties, you can see today that within the scene, we didn't see graffiti in a larger context at all. We were only ever concerned with spraying our own image and photographing that, without considering the context of the place.



Fig. 7: Mirko Reisser (below, right side) with sprayer friends, Kewen, Cedric (Björn Warns), Mac and EloOne (Ole Warns), Hamburg, 1990; courtesy of Andreas Müller © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

Does this mean you didn't notice the surroundings and the space itself?

It was a bit of an absolute ego act. That also fits in with the fact that the scene was so dominated by boys. Graffiti was a great way to show what you can do, to fight and compete. I always experienced it as a very positive way of measuring myself, even if I was always competing with friends.

Did you see any interaction directly in the space through graffiti? Did graffiti writings have a direct relation to each other, a kind of communication?

From the mid-nineties onwards, concept walls appeared, on which several sprayers painted a picture together and not just styles that were added next to each other. But there was also stress within the scene and graffiti was crossed out (German: 'gecrossed'), that is, overwritten by someone else, and then there was a reaction and someone crossed out in return. This led to direct interactions on the wall, superimposed layers, some of which can still be found today.

It seems like it was also about conquering space or the wall. Were there territorial boundaries or did you feel free to write wherever you wanted?

It was always a conquest of space! It wasn't about painting a beautiful picture, but about leaving your name and occupying spaces... That's how, as a teenager, I got to know my city in an incredibly intense way. Especially because I constantly travelled and walked along all the railway lines in this city, not only to leave my name, but also to be the first to see and photograph the latest graffiti. I couldn't look that up on any map. And, of course, I also looked to see where there were cool or brand-new spots. Sometimes I didn't know how to get to the area that I saw from the train and had to find out how to get to it illegally via the railway grounds in order to quickly take a photo before the next suburban train came and someone called security. That means I had to spend a lot of time and energy to get to this area first.

The procedure you are now describing requires local knowledge. Did you also travel to other cities?

Yes, I travelled a lot to Munich, Frankfurt or Switzerland, for example, and had my contacts there. Especially the graffiti sprayers from the eighties built a big

national network. There are crazy stories about how sprayers recognised each other mainly by their appearance: many who listened to hip-hop wore wide laces in thick trainers and a hoodie. Nobody else wore that. And so people could talk to each other and ask, ‘Yo, do you spray too?’ That’s how friendships were formed that still exist today.

Are there places where different graffiti writers immortalize themselves across national borders? Some kind of place of pilgrimage.

In the early years, there were certain places: for example, Stalingrad in Paris or the flea market halls in Munich, which then became really important halls of fame, that also got around in the scene. You had to go there. Nowadays, there are many such spaces all over the world. For example, Venice Beach in Los Angeles in the middle of the beach, with palm trees and the sea behind it. That’s a spot where sprayers line up. But you spray a picture there, take a photo and five minutes later the next sprayer is standing on the wall and sprays over your picture again. So, it’s just about being there and having a photo of your painting on that wall.

Another question would be about urban space versus interior space. Would you say that modern graffiti or style writing can also work indoors?

For me personally, it has always been about conquering space and discovering new spaces through graffiti. The moment I make something on site, I enter that space and that space doesn’t have to be an outdoor space or an urban space. It can also be a museum space, which for me is also a public space that needs to be conquered. That was absolutely part of it for me as an artist. But I also started spraying canvases at an early age and had my first gallery exhibition in 1991, and I was also part of a large museum exhibition at the Altona Museum in 1991. That’s how I’ve always transported my graffiti into interior spaces.

What is the difference for you between working on a canvas and working in a room?

The format of the canvas is, of course, very limited and can be transported at will without having any real reference to the room in which it hangs. But when I spray

directly onto walls, I exploit the dimensionality of the space, because then I'm not just designing the wall, but the whole room. Of course, a wall work is temporary and, therefore, unique, because the graffiti disappears irretrievably after the exhibition period. Nevertheless, such a work always remains closely connected to the space for me, since it was explicitly planned and realised for this one space and cannot exist for any other space.



Fig. 8: An example of a space completely designed by DAIM: a view of the work 'Coming out of Hopfenburg' from the exhibition *Taking Over* at Borchardt Gallery, Hamburg, 2021; photograph courtesy of Galerie Borchardt © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this image. Further permission may be required from the rights holder.

The theme of non-repeatability and the irretrievable is really an important and interesting point.

Yes, and although I only ever write my name and have a very strong repetition in my subject matter, it is still different from a musician or dancer who repeats a certain song or dance over and over again. But I paint each picture uniquely only for this one room.

This brings us to the last topic and the outlook on the storage and transience of graffiti. What meaning does the knowledge of past graffiti have for you? How do you store your own work?

I don't even want to imagine where the graffiti scene would be today without the two New York photographers Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant. Then graffiti probably wouldn't even have developed around the globe. Photos are important to preserve graffiti, but also to make graffiti transportable and bring it to the world. Since I grew up with photography through my grandpa and my father, I have always felt the need to take photos as well. On the one hand, to document my own work, but also as a source of inspiration for what others have done.

Were you or you as a scene always aware of the transience of graffiti?

Yes, my generation was aware of the ephemeral nature of graffiti, because in my early years in 1989/90, graffiti was already persecuted so harshly that sprayed trains in particular were quickly cleaned up. But we also had a few legal spots, for example, on the gymnasium of the Altona grammar school; there we sometimes painted over our own pictures every month because there wasn't that much space. We also took photographs of these legal graffiti for storage and as proof for other sprayers, because graffiti like that meant hard work and you were proud of your work.

Was the storage always through photography and you kept that for yourself?

Yes, I always photographed everything of mine and my crew mates, but also everything else I saw in the urban space that I liked, even in other cities.

As a last question, I would like to have a prediction, also in view of the digital age, for storage.

Personally, I tend to focus my collection on the initial period of the 1980s and 1990s, which is the analogue era. It's important to sift through materials and archive them because quite a lot has already gone. It's a lot of work, but it's important. I have negatives that are forty years old and they look like they did on the first day, even though they haven't been taken care of much. But, of course,

over the course of thirty-five years, I've also had different data that I've had to store and different steps of digitisation. I always have to keep up with technology: in the very beginning, storage was on 3.5" floppy disks with 1.44 MB of space, then came ZIP disks with 100 MB of space, then the CD-ROM, DVD-ROM and Blue Ray. Today, I have everything on hard drives, backed up several times in different locations and protected against burglary and fire. And at some point, I also added digital photography, which now has a relatively good quality even with mobile phones. With the surplus of data, the biggest challenge nowadays is to contain the mass and ask: what should be archived – and what can be forgotten?

