

Christian Hartard
Subversion Eats its Children
Notes during a walk
through the city of signs

(2009)

Laugh now, but one day we'll be in charge.
(Banksy)

1

Street Artists seem to believe in revolution. Hardly any publication, at any rate, which takes on board the basis-aesthetic illustration of the city sphere, can do without the mobilization of its vocabulary: Rebellion! Subversion! Civil disobedience! Resistance! Guerilla! Shouted from every nook and corner. Are the barricades burning yet? Can you see the beach underneath the cobble? Well, not quite yet. For now, they make do with attaching colorful stickers to lamp posts. But just you wait...

By the way, my father is also a believer in revolution. Somewhere in the far left of the chest of this retired civil servant beats a revolutionary's heart which makes him say comical things every once in a while: that it is about time (for instance) the bigwigs be tied to lamp poles already. my father, however, also believes in the revolutionary potential of his private orthography whose main characteristic is its consequential lower case writing style. The sticker sedimentations proliferating over the lighting facilities and illumination mediums of the city, on the other hand, he deems to be concrete evidence for a rapidly spreading vandalism.

Consequently, it is hard to reach an accord on the definition of revolution – or the adequate use of lamp poles, for that matter.

2

The fact that accord is so hard to come by is a signature of contemporary society. One might call this pluralization, one might take pleasure in the stimulating polymorphism of society or regret its puzzling complexity. Most of all, however, one can attest a gain in freedom, a freedom which Street Art, among others, owes its existence to: one may deviate, contradict, rub oneself raw over. And one can even hope for sympathy for illegal forms of expressing this difference – at least with that part of the audience which in it sees their own (actual or desired) difference to the normal, every-day, conventional depicted and justified. Whoever draws meaning from their own otherness, need not moan about the fact that others are different too, that the universal terms the past may remain intact but that behind the façade that which they were once supposed to denote and keep together has dissolved into individual fragments. Society, morals, truth, reality, the entire arsenal of former indivisibilities has since frayed under the centrifugal forces of modernism into disparate milieus and functional spheres of conflicting interests and world views, moral discrepancies and two-faced truths which are patched together after a fashion with the silken thread of a consensual terminology. Nevertheless, there is discomfort about this dissipation; there is a desire for unifying moments, for a connection of that which is falling apart, for an

Archimedean point from which this fragmented world may be comprehensible as a whole and unviolated. The notion that such a place must remain utopia, a non-place, does not hinder one in the search for the concrete thing: in the public space of our cities we hope to find it.

Because this is at the core of all death songs and resurrection hymns which conjure the urban sphere: that this is a place, or has been, or really should be, in which society can glimpse into their own faces as if in front of a mirror. Yes, better yet: a place in which it can be experienced as an ideal composition of all its heterogeneous elements. Such a harmony-drunk conception of the public sphere is, however, not only naïve but, more than that, dangerously totalitarian as it offers the dream of a cleansed social interface free of aberrations and free of contradiction as medicine against social disavowals. Somewhat more sober, albeit not without starry-eyed optimism, is the hope that the public sphere were to at least offer a truthful effigy of these disavowals: a kaleidoscope in which the sundries might appear juxtaposed but still jointly visible, in which the conflicts aren't hidden, but remain solvable through their evidence alone. Nevertheless, the idea of a public space which collects the dispersed in *one* place and visualizes it plainly, it presupposes that, indeed, *all* have access to this stage. Nothing would be peculated, not the beautiful nor the dingy, not the loud nor the quiet, not the well-liked nor the cranky. But what if even the minimal demand of a coexistent presence of the diverging is an illusion? If in the reality of the drifting-apart town society by no means encounters itself, not different on different, but only same on same because the public space has long been cut up into functional zones and separated into social monoculture because the unrepresentable, the objectionable, has been marginalized and abandoned?

Architecture and urban design are symbolic representations of the dynamics of power and impotence, imprints of social structures, orders, norms which are branded into the inmates of the symbolically over-formed town in a highly effective manner and, thus, as a reality perceived to be true. Whatever is not represented doesn't exist in their reality. So, when graffiti drawers, stencil sprayers, sticker attachers, cut-out gluers, open-air installers, guerilla gardeners, ad shredders, over-poster painters, and other Street Artists are driven by the mission to lodge themselves into the cracks of the city and to re-conquer dissident recesses of attention in the public space against the blind spots of consciousness – then, all their legacy as representatives could stand for everything that is discarded as urban throw-out. They can raise the assumption that there is a life beyond the functional gearing, beyond the architectonic cosmetics and economic battery of the urban space. The products of Street Art themselves would become symbols: hinting at that which is absent or, more precisely: the absence of that which is absent.

They would be, if you like, abstract symbols in their purest form: placeholders, namely, for that which was made invisible in the public space.

3

Each city is a book. As across the lines of a text does our glance wander or do our feet walk. The houses and walls of the city, its streets and squares, the wide expanses, the hidden backyards, the ornament of lamps, advertisement columns, traffic lights, neon signs: all of these are letters, words, sentences, which want to be read. Among them are exclamation marks like the glass palaces of the banks and insurance companies which have outstripped the churches and town halls of old. Question marks mix among them: a construction trench, fallow land, housing estates of the satellite towns – what was there in the past, where does it continue, where will it cross to? Between dashes – a bench in the park, spacing greens, a bridge from here to there. Forward, backward, sideways, one stutters along main clauses and auxiliary clauses, stumbles over omissions and insertions. One protocols the laconic announcements of a red

light or the whine of billboards, the gruffly No of a fence as much as the friendly summons of the shopping malls (that, because the gentle force of their glittering squeaky clean interior keeps the unwanted away as it is, can very well do without fences). To move about city means: being part of a story which is assembled from a myriad of symbols; from mediums of social reality which, depending on the critical distance of the reader, manifests itself either openly behind its symbolic copy or remains concealed illegibly. But who tells the story? And would we write our own stories into the text of the city, those insignificant episodes, meaningful only to us, those small private adventures?

We have to arrange ourselves in this city of symbols in order to make it habitable. Every day, we seek to make this space meaningful to us by using it according to our needs (or by evading it), by dressing it with subjective memories (or by forgetting it), by perceiving its symbols as important (or by ignoring them as unimportant). Maybe we even succeed in discovering those spots in which the finished product of the urban design can be outsmarted: the beaten track one draws off that path, the skateboard which glides over handrails and concrete ramps. Such a personalization of the urban world of symbols is, admittedly, constricted to close boundaries through a rigid definition of function and factual practicability of the constructed environment. Is the alternative interpretation of already existing signs still possible in principle, does the alternative production of new signs fail throughout in the light of administrative, legal, and not last financial barriers. Therefore, Street Art is left to search for the crazes in the symbolically sealed armors, to settle in the footnotes and between the lines of the urban text. Their self-authorization strategy is, thus: parasitic: if the potential of an own production of symbols is limited, one can still plunder the armory of one's opponent. With just that "splintered, tactile and tinkering creativity," which Michel de Certeau recommends in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Street Art poaches in the already existing mediums: the house fronts, firewalls, transformer boxes, phone booths, garbage cans, billboards, traffic furnishings. It perceives itself as a blind passenger who audaciously uses the commercialized and functionalized city surface for its semiotic freeloading; who, "with the ingenuity of the weak to benefit from the strong" (de Certeau), scents the loopholes in this thicket of meaning through which one can smuggle unorthodox, alienating, unexpected variants of the social. And not without schadenfreude do the gatecrashers annotate that their spoofed host will have to pay the bill for his own subversion. The promise of this sabotage is a school of seeing: an instigation of the self-determined use of the space and its codes, a waiting for moments in which behind the disciplining power of alleged necessities flares up another reality as something possible.

Is this revolution already? Maybe we should rather speak of romanticism.

4

"When I use a word," says Humpty Dumpty, the egg on the wall, to little Alice, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." – "The question is," interjects Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." – "The question is," says Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

Even in Wonderland do questions of meaning turn out to be questions of power. That this is different in the real world, one may doubt with good reason; and perhaps one then has to admit that, despite all friendly attempts in foisting a poetic counter-communication on the one-way communication of the public sphere, the symbolic language of the cities has essentially remained the same that Jean Baudrillard called the "speech without response." The weights might be distributed too unevenly as that the urban display may, indeed, be re-coded by the homeopathic infiltrations of Street Art. One can wallpaper the dreariness of reality as one wants: a wall remains a wall. Neither sordid shopping malls nor vulgar billboards change their meaning through the

subversive bricolage, and the intimidating gesture of investor architecture become no more inviting as the dismal satellite towns become bearable or the freeway shamrocks become green. Not even the anger over all this can necessarily find its outlet; because the masses hurry past the Street Art products with the ever same baffled-apatetic lack of interest with which they put with the ugliness of the daily routine insofar as they don't count the scribbles and sticking to belong to this ugliness). That the well-intentioned counter-signs threaten to drift into a subcultural self-gratification event is not only to be attributed to their marginality. It also has to do with the hardly terminable inanity of each self-authorized flagging of symbols in the public sphere: that an alleged privatization of the urbane can only be countered with the privatization by other means. What is meant to be a critical externalization is elsewhere perceived as a visual expropriation: that which claims to be a contribution to emancipation, is understood as an act of patronization. And one notes that the feigned signs for the excluded itself inheres an excluding mechanism of distinction: namely a narcissistic marking of territory which is meant to draw the boundary between the elitist network of the hepcats and the army of uncomprehending Philistines. The credibility trap snaps automatically. In the end, it is surprisingly not the functional-economic corsets of the city which become the aim of general scorn; it is rather the semiotic maneuvers of misappropriation against which the audience reflexively comes to the defense of exactly those social conventions which the aesthetic activists stepped up the demask.

But what, actually, if observed in light, do the symbolic occupations of Street Art expose? Possibly to start with: themselves. What becomes immediately apparent is their undoubtedly good sense for fresh design, for the catchy phrase, the surprising wit, the clever idea. These are inestimable qualities, but only such that one might expect from forever young creative directors who equip their offices with football tables and cappuccino makers and suffer from their first heart attack at 35. Especially the stylistic proximity of the elaborate *post-graffiti* to the picture-worlds of lifestyle magazines and advertisement agencies is rather irritating. Is this not a tad too stylish, smooth, cool, or cheerful – as if there was something to laugh about? Is this still authentic dissidence – or is it already countercultural wellness? Of all things it is maybe those jaded, awkward products of the scene that neither display a reasonably decent visual effect nor get a passable slogan on which the righteous scorn toward the urban domestication apparatuses can be felt. And maybe it should be about just that: leaving symbols, that are *not* accepted and are *not* meant to be sensible; traces that can *not* be consumed as a smart layout or simply be dissolved into a message; hackwork which in the intolerability of their form balk at the sublimating annexation; symbols which, because they so ostensibly do not denote anything, are open enough to indeed absorb new meanings and are recognizable as indicators of social exclusion. This, namely, is the dilemma of an urban and social criticism with the spray tin: that each attempt to fill archaic, reference-free signs with meaning or aesthetics turns resistant symbols of absence into functional requisites. *The work on the message*, thus, leads to easily digestible phrase-mongering which merely adds more paroles to the information explosion of the public sphere: one is against war and for peace, against deportation and for the release of Mumia Abu-Jamal, against nuclear power and for the right to a cultivated purple haze – and promptly informs mankind of this. *The work on the form*, on the other hand, leads to the establishment of the arts: a star like Banksy is then no longer required to (as he was only a few years ago) secretively smuggle his works into museums; instead, the originals go – after a short quarantine in the subversive flow heater – over the counters at Christie's or Bonham's for five or six figure of British Pound sums, while the less moneyed fans are peddled with reproductions in the form of coffee table books. After all, this is still more honest than, say, the self-extraction of Street Art gurus like Zevs or Blu, who coated the town sphere of Wuppertal in the summer of 2006 with their works in a cloak-and-dagger operation – invited, financed, planned and lead on a safety line by the PR people of an Austrian caffeinated soda corporation.

Nonconformism is venal and sells well. But how does one escape a system that can imbibe even dissent as *radical chic*? You might run and sidestep by inventing a new kind of urban decoration every year: one tiles open-air mosaics, one uses pressure washers to till dazzlingly white logos into the dirt of the facades, one builds miniature dioramas of toy figures into the corners of the city. But this quickly turns into a Race between *Hare and Hedgehog*¹, in which the unruliness of Street Art plays itself out and its commercial ancillary executors await a lucky stiff. Just because the aesthetic means of the “semiological guerilla” (Umberto Eco) are, at times, very close to the design, there is hardly an instrument in the alternative toolbox anymore that itself could be misappropriated economically and mixed under the symbols of the public sphere with borrowed street credibility. Thus, the dissident gesture turns into a sales-promoting flavor enhancer and the artist then becomes the useful idiot of an advertising industry which he provides with ideas, free of charge. The victims of this theft, on the other side, must not lament this hostile takeover, as the re-installment of foreign elements of their own discourses is exactly their tactics. Their subversion, meanwhile, ends tragically: as an affirmative appendix of just that reality which, at one time, they had wanted to undermine.

All the sadder all the more beautiful, all the more useless and all the more important, that everywhere, day in and day out, so many diehard hopefuls try to prove the possibility of the contrary. It is a pretty damn fine line on which they balance – like Humpty Dumpty, the egg on the wall.

But even that, as is well-known, falls down.

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¹ A German tale, similar to the Hare and the Tortoise, in which the hedgehog outsmarts the hare by having his wife wait on the other side of the field – giving the impression the hedgehog is faster than the hare.