

XO000X

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gestalten

introduction

XOOOOX is a synonym for works on the street and a pseudonym for works in exhibition spaces, including galleries. The two types of locations dictate the structure of this volume: the first part, "street," shows his pieces from 2003 to 2011, while in the second part exhibitions are laid out in chronological order, beginning in 2008.

XOOOOX, incidentally, is a palindrome, a name that can be read the same from back to front as front to back. The use of capital letters results in an aesthetic symmetry, a category that has been considered an ideal of beauty ever since the Renaissance, for it follows mathematically calculable rules. The graphic design of the signature is also significant in terms of content, for the contemporary ideal of beauty is a recurring subject in XOOOOX's works. As graphemes, the X's and O's are also often featured in the works themselves, and at the same time they make up a signature. This approach to the name of the artist, like XOOOOX himself, comes from graffiti culture. Yet XOOOOX's first love was classical modernism, which thrilled him to such an extent that he began painting. Picasso in particular served as a key figure. Looking at Picasso's powerful black brushstrokes and refracted geometrical forms of analytical cubism, and the strong black outlines used in his later phases as well, it is not far from the outline or wild style in graffiti, seen in formal-aesthetic terms. The link between art and the street in XOOOOX's work is clearly established through graffiti and skateboarding: the intense engagement with graphic design combined with free movement in urban space.

Street works by XOOOOX have been documented since 2003. The first phase consisted of paste-ups. Towards this end, cutouts from fashion magazines were selected and applied to urban walls with an extra-strong wallpaper adhesive. The examples collected in the first chapter show young women with fashionable clothing, staged attractively in modeling poses. Added to this are X's and O's in different sizes, the letters of the XOOOOX signature. They refer to the anonymous author and take on a life of their own as graphic elements, like speech balloons in cartoons. In the form of the cutout, which is typical of street art in the first decade of the new millennium, figures are extracted from the backdrop as can be done using the "mask" function in graphic design programs: this makes it possible for the collages to engage with the architectural forms of the city. The models look out of window openings, or sit or stand in window frames and house entrances. The urban surfaces used for this contrast with the impeccable surfaces of the glossy magazines, for they are often dingy, aged material like rusty doors or unrenovated old buildings.

In 2005, XOOOOX began working with stencils, since sprayed motifs are more permanent than paper collages that can be easily torn off or pasted over. For the stencils, motifs are selected—here, too, models from magazines—edited on the computer, and printed out in life-size. The figures are subsequently applied to sturdy cardboard—or more recently to polypropylene—and then cut out. The stencils created in this fashion are placed on walls, sprayed, and then removed, leaving behind figures and letters.

This technique was first used by the military and revolutionary movements, for it makes it possible to convey a message quickly, cheaply, and impressively. Instead of battle slogans, XOOOOX decided to use logos and figures from the world of fashion. For example, the artist's signature replaces the brand names of famous fashion houses, like Chanel or Hermès, in a parody of their famous logos. This results in a new visual unity that appears alongside tags on building façades, an ironic take on brand fetishism. This play with the world of fashion can also be observed among the sprayed figures, which similarly to the earlier paste-ups consist of O's, X's, and representations of young women.

The colorfulness of the collages gave way to an aesthetic that is reminiscent of photographs. Black contours and silhouettes are placed directly on the surfaces and appear like negatives in the urban visual space. The young women are all thinking or saying "XOOOOX." The characters of the signature float above their heads. In this way, a narrative moment results, and the graphemes become an artificial language. With their pose and fashionable outfits, the figures are still reminiscent of the glamorous world of fashion, but due to the black negative shapes they seem rather like cool, sexy hipsters who populate the city on their own. What remains is a certain attitude, and its attractiveness, which challenges our visual habits. For, just as had been true of the earlier paste-ups, the sprayed women who suddenly appear on the corners of buildings, façades, or bus stops, are in so doing able to suspend the purely functional purpose of the architecture. The fusion of figure and urban space seduces the beholder to dream or grin. The latter probably occurred frequently with the pug series, in which a dog also thinks "XOOOOX" and initially appears near to the ground, like real four-legged creatures. Like the female figures, he stands for a trend, for the pug recently underwent a renaissance as an urban accessory, at least in post-2000 Berlin.

The motivation to work on the street has its roots in graffiti culture, where the goal is to achieve fame, becoming visible in urban space, while at the same time remaining anonymous. For street art, locations are sought out that on the one hand make it possible to work without being disturbed, while at the same time offering a framework for a small urban story: for example, a blind window with figures looking out. Equally attractive as urban canvases are neighborhoods with a certain flair—forms of urbanity that reflect the figures of XOOOOX. This results in a mutual impact with multiple refractions. The sprayed figures in particular are reminiscent of fashionable hipsters, who themselves set trends and at the same time are the recipients of the newest fashions. XOOOOX uses forms that demand attention by an attractiveness tested in advertising and on the runway. The figures become ambivalent due to their placement on usually neglected structures. The more glamorous they are, the more we notice their surroundings. Peeling plaster walls, washed out brick, or surfaces with tags and graffiti contrast with the lovely surfaces of the models, slowly becoming visible and referring to an urban life beyond the world of fashion magazines.

In 2008, XOOOOX's first exhibition "Molotov High Heels" was held at Circleculture Gallery in Berlin. The move towards interior space was made with new works that refer to the street. Familiar here are the beautiful girls, the pugs, and the logos, but now they appear on supports that were found in the urban space and are used in their raw state. The materials refer to the reality of urban life with its grime and its transience. Displayed on these materials, objects with a conceptual character emerge, such as *Beauty Will Come* (2008). This work is like a picture, but suspends the rules of the pictorial. The frame consists of rusty metal, and its original function can only be guessed at. On rusty springs a square former rag from the studio is stretched like a canvas. But there is no picture on the fabric, but writing—the title of the work. Until modernism, a picture was supposed to fulfill the aesthetic concept of beauty. After the break with this tradition, XOOOOX promises that beauty will one day return, if only in our minds.

The next exhibition, "Opening Soon" (2009), also held at Circleculture, featured visual objects that by now can be conceived as two parallel series: the black framed picture systems of *Cosmos*, and *Ghosts*, which featured models sprayed onto rusted copper. In *Cosmos*, black-and-white photographs and collages are arranged within a classical black frame. The pictures are usually found pieces, like old index cards or photocopies from books bought at the flea market, that have subsequently been treated by the artist. For the collages, representations of outer space or the earth have been exchanged with cutout figures and combined, a technique reminiscent of Dadaist and surrealist collages. With their ambivalent black-and-white aesthetic, the *Ghosts* (Spiegelberger Stiftung Edition), first shown as a series in the exhibition "OH OH OK OK" at Stilwerk Hamburg in 2010, recall pop art and comics. The young women already encountered on the street here appear on treated copper plates. Like worn urban surfaces, this agitated backdrop is preferred by XOOOOX. The last exhibition at Circleculture Gallery, titled "Pilgrim, Baby!" used various media to explore the notion of wandering in urban space. This included photographs taken and objects found during the spot search.

XOOOOX's most recent works again feature fashion models. What remains in their depiction is the form of the sprayed stencil on visual supports of various material that are accidentally found in urban space. As in the copper plates, the background is highly agitated due to the paint smears: the previously clear contours of the figures are now dissolved. The main colors used by XOOOOX, black and white, take on an autonomy between the medium and the reproduced fashion photograph, and provoke the beholder's desire to see. Our desire, coded by advertising and the fashion world, is refracted by the schematic appearances of the young women. Beauty will come: XOOOOX invites us to look for it. Enjoy!