

What spontaneous communication means to me / what I want to preserve or dismiss

Matthijs Wentink 17-06-2011

Before I entered the Urban Body studio I did not know a lot about the world of spontaneous communication. I had seen graffiti and tagging around me, but I did not know the history and story behind it. When I moved through cities I did not notice the fresco's present and it was the fresco removal workshop that opened my eyes for the writings on the wall. The studio gave me a crash course into graffiti and now, when I move through a city I see the fresco's everywhere, it is like someone has opened my eyes to see what was already there.

On the one hand I see tagging as a sign of vandalism and especially as a sign of decay. When I was 'exploring' I found that places in the Netherlands that have tags are often places that are expecting change, or places that are not doing so well on a social level. These places try to express their uncertain futures and do this by showing marks on their skin, the wall. Most of the time the tags had no meaning, they were expressions of a youngster marking his territory by spraying his name on the wall. In the same way a dog marks his territory by peeing everywhere. But the presence of writings alone are signals of the uncertain situation of a place and sometimes the writings even have a message inside them. They try to tell stories about the social uncertainties or the expected change or they try to provoke visitors, to let them think differently about the situation or to undertake action.

Because of these social messages that are found in spontaneous communication everywhere, I think it is important to preserve them. The preservation of the writings will not affect the future of the world, it will not contribute in the discussions the writings are trying to provoke and the influence will probably be minimal. But, from a documentation point of view, it is very interesting to look at this volatile piece of history. At a certain moment in time, someone was expressing himself; he or she was contributing in a social discussion. That the means of this person were limited, that the person only had a pen and a piece of wall to express himself with, does not mean that the message is of no importance and should not be heard. By preserving and researching these messages we get an (important) insight into the opinion and maybe even lives of the people that lived in a certain subculture, beneath the skin of the normal society.

The Poortgebouw, the place where the fresco removal workshop took place is a very interesting and important building in Dutch (sub)culture, because it houses one of the last squatting societies in The Netherlands. For more than 30 years now, the building is providing a home to the Rotterdam squatting community, from where they organize events and practice their cultural beliefs. But at the moment the workshop is taking place, the squatting society is under huge social pressure and their existence is uncertain, because of a law change that prohibits squatting in The Netherlands. These are for the squatting movement exciting times, provides all the ingredients needed for interesting frescos; social uncertainty and upcoming change.

We found two frescos with interesting messages describing these uncertainties and changes. The first fresco displayed a dinosaur with the text "never forget" and the second fresco displayed the text "instinct of survival". Both writings are directly connected with the 'attacks' on squatting society, saying: We are still here, fighting for our culture, do not forget us! Both tags symbolize the existence of squatting culture in the Poortgebouw and they symbolize the power that people have to fight for the future of their cultural beliefs. And maybe in ten years, when the Poortgebouw has been turned into an office building, the only physical evidence of this struggle for survival are the two tags we removed from the wall. I think that is a beautiful thing.