

THE REGIMES OF SIGNS

By Olly Beck

The obvious question with the work of James Jessop is how does a notorious graffiti artist (whose distinctive trident tag and 'Tek 33' signature that swathe the streets of North and East London where the artist lives and works) translate this side of himself into his painting? But if we ask this question we have already taken a wrong turn in understanding how Jessop operates. If you ask Jessop what motivates his prolific graffiti excursions he'll tell you that he does it for the buzz, that he has a passion for spraying up walls and trying not to get caught, and that he has a deep love of graffiti art circa 1980's New York. And if you ask him the same question about his painting you'll receive a similar answer, except this time he'll mention artists as diverse as Peter Paul Rubens, Vincent Van Gogh, and Tal R.

Jessop's practice as a painter and his relationship to graffiti can be understood in terms of 'approach' and not 'translation' from one practice to another. This approach or tactic, this line of attack when approaching the canvas, is one that embodies the energy of the act of graffiti; it's frenetic, free form, improvisational bombilation, or as the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would call it: *lines of flight*. Graffiti's power is its sense of resistance and rupture in the ever increasing corporate sterilization of urban landscapes. The aesthetic that graffiti takes from; that of mass culture, whether that be comics, film, television, magazines and advertising, is likewise Jessop's index for what kind of subject matter is allowed into his work. Jessop's use of the equipment and technique; the spray can as a brush, the modified paint pen, the calligraphic rhythms that you find in tagging, open up and inform his approach to painting

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of lines of flight can be understood as: '[...] movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture.' And these lines operate within, 'smooth space and striated space- nomad space and sedentary space.' (1) With graffiti we are constantly witnessing these shifting oppositions of nomadic temporary flows and the frequently stagnant stratifications of the capitalist urbane. The very act, this moment in which the arm, the wrist, the finger on the spray paint's trigger brings into motion this line of flight, and which from one point of view could be an act of territorial demarcation of marking ones ground, actually has the opposite effect, it re-humanises and opens up the fixed regime of signs and systems that society creates to organise and direct itself.

The art world is likewise constantly in a tussle with itself, constantly trying to find ways of freeing up its own systems which are always in relation to the historical and contemporary conditions with which it is working in relation to. In a world of signs and endless significations

where meaning whether that be political or personal (or both) can seem to be sinking into a deep dark labyrinth of lost meaning there appears to be a return to the subjective, a return to the self in the art world today which Jessop is very much part of. And this return to the self is unashamedly self-indulgent.

Jessop's indulgence is a penchant for gaudy B-movie imagery and sleazy paperback covers from the sixties juxtaposed with a sense of Bronx style tagging intervention. And Jessop unashamedly appropriates, steals, 'sprays up' in his work, bringing us up close to an old Modernism still flexing its muscles a hundred years on. Modernism as it is so-called is still in its youth, Post-Modernism a conceited premature attempt at breaking away from its forebear, a failed attempt at being aloof to the labyrinth. And so it is perhaps a question of Post Modern detachment and irony in tandem with Modernist self belief that makes Jessop's work so involved and involving. The 'raw power' of Jessop's work is its sense of auto-biography, its choice to be itself, to follow lines of flight, to indulge and divulge across so called simplistic genres... to follow moves and grooves, to obsess and be possessed in a world that increasingly wants to streamline itself into a boring white cubicle of yuppie-style illusionism. There is a 'regime of signs' and this artist slaloms himself through it...

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 3-4

The text is to be found on http://www.sartorialart.com/James_Statement.html