

# GIGO PROPAGANDA: FRAMING AND REFRAMING

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## ICONOCLASM

Iconoclasm is not a new phenomenon in the art world. At least since modern art was faced with the representational system of photography and had to struggle for survival, it has engaged in iconoclasm – a never ending story of expulsion, destruction, demystification, smashing, and elimination (Assheuer, 2002). The so called ‘Bilderwut’ (literally translated as ‘rage against images’), consequently, does not only come from outside of the art world but also comes from within it. The historical avant-garde can be seen as a prime example: whereas Kazimir Malevich declared the zero of art with his *Black Square*, Daniel Spoerri, for his part, used the *Mona Lisa* as an ironing surface. Lucio Fontana, in contrast, became famous for slashing his canvases and performance artist Timm Ulrichs committed an official murder of the aesthetic subject by painting over his own portrait (Assheuer, 2002). In 2002, the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, dedicated an entire exhibition to the phenomenon, titled *What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a World beyond Image Wars?* and co-curated by French sociologist Bruno Latour (Assheuer, 2002; ZKM, 2002). Needless to say, this history of iconoclasm and auto-iconoclasm has continued to the present day, enriched by many new chapters and side stories, raising complex questions about fundamental cultural, socio-political, and aesthetic issues.

Therefore, it is no surprise that in recent years, urban art<sup>1</sup> has also contributed to the rewriting or on-writing of this history, questioning the different forms of artistic functionalisation, socio-political instrumentalisation, and commercial exploitation of art. This became most evident in the case of Italian artist Blu, who blackened two of his iconic murals in Berlin-Kreuzberg in order to avoid artistic misappropriation (Henke, 2014). Another example is Banksy’s prank at Sotheby’s where he shredded his *Girl with Balloon* moments after being sold for \$1.4 million at auction (Johnston, 2018).

However, this article is not about the phenomenon of auto-iconoclasm or self-destruction in the proper sense of the word; instead, it addresses a particular art practice that is characterised by iconoclastic traits. This article focuses on Essen-based artist Gigo Propaganda, whose art practice is probably best described by the term ‘framing’ (Gigo, 2015).

This text follows a media-ethnographical approach and is mainly based on interviews I conducted in 2015 and 2019 with Gigo. It is my primary intent here to let the artist statements speak for themselves instead of directly subjecting them to a comprehensive and critical academic reflection. The images I show were provided by the artist and serve as an additional, visual source. Sometimes they are used as simple illustration of his work.

## FRAME(WORK)S<sup>2</sup>

Art has always been known for its framing function. But what happens if art does not only self-reflexively display its own framings, but lets them detonate in an art practical and ideological manner? Gigo tries to foster this undertaking. In order to do so, he uses other people’s works as an artistic play- and background and incorporates them into his own works. He works with visual material found in the streets – including graffiti pieces, tags, leftist and rightist phrases, fan slogans, childish love declarations, and adolescent writings (Figure 1).

By framing these finds with a semi-transparent overpainting<sup>3</sup>, Gigo converts them into his own works and makes them operable as a canvas. In Figure 2, for instance, we can see one of Gigo’s framings that uses tags and some rather rudimentary graffiti pieces as an artistic background. By conceptually framing these with white paint and by writing the German word ‘Liebe’ (‘love’) in capital letters – using colour-block, semi-transparent aesthetics which allows the underlying layers to shine through – he creates a new level of meaning. The piece is located in Essen, Germany.

Generally speaking, Gigo’s ambition is to trigger new associations and carry out reinterpretations (Gigo, 2015). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that he explicitly deals with the ‘content’ of his findings or that he reinterprets these explicitly, rather, he pays close attention to the context and sociopolitical framework in which these findings were produced. So, while his works are not expressly site-specific, they require painstaking observation and provide evidence of contextual social engagement.



Figure 1. Pieces and tags by various artists on a wall that Gigo Propaganda set out to frame. Essen, Germany, 2015.



Figure 2. 'Liebe' ('Love'). Gigo Propaganda. Essen, Germany, 2015.

## LETTERING

Gigo does not write his name, nor does he sign his works in the way that a lot of other graffiti artists and taggers do, but he does work with letters and writing. In his opinion, 'written letters are the top-level league of art production' (Gigo, 2019). Gigo (2019) asserts that he chooses 'his letters and words' rather spontaneously, but that these are often linked to the location they are situated in. Besides, the precise choice of words is also influenced by the mood of the moment, a personal history, a memory, or a single situation – but this mostly remains hidden from the observer (Gigo, 2019). For instance, in his piece in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Gigo wrote a poem-like phrase which read 'Please open up your mind' (Figures 3 & 4)<sup>4</sup>. Gigo was born in Mostar, from which he was forced to flee as the city repeatedly came under siege during the Bosnian War, which was waged in the 1990s. On the one hand, the poetic phrase can be perceived as a personal artistic approach to coping with the past, on the other hand, it can also be seen as a friendly, open appeal addressed to the general public.

Due to the fact that the single letters were spread over a rather large surface<sup>5</sup>, the recipients possibly didn't get the whole message. It always depends on where people find themselves and start reading. If they are located somewhere else or start reading in a different order, another meaning arises [...] which, in a way, is welcome too. (Gigo, 2019)

## BREAKING THE RULES

Especially from the point of view of New York graffiti culture, Gigo's art practice appears provocative, given that the destruction or overpainting of other people's tags and pieces is considered as a gross violation of the internal graffiti codex (Hinz, 2015). This means that within the world of graffiti, iconoclasm is usually not welcome or normally accepted without comment. However, as pointed out earlier, Gigo does not fully destroy other people's works, rather, he functionalises them for his own purposes: 'I play with the colours of other writers', Gigo states.

In my opinion, this has nothing to do with destruction. If one wants to look at it that way, one could possibly understand it as some kind of confrontation. It's cheeky, but it's not rude. And it addresses the intelligence of its authors. Actually, they should have fun observing the further development of their works. Beyond that, it's in the nature of graffiti and part of the development of style worldwide. If I, personally, see something good, I don't care what was underneath. I have no intention of harming or offending people, but we all know that some kind of battle is always part of the game, don't we? (Gigo, 2019)

This means that, from the artist's point of view, the aforementioned functionalisation has nothing to do with an iconoclastic attack. Rather, he considers his art practice as a kind of confrontation – a conceptual colour play that provokes further discussion and debate.

## A FRESH BREEZE

By means of his framings, Gigo creates 'pictorial writings' that connect painting to lettering, image to text, and day to night<sup>6</sup>, and lets all these collide with each other. However, the important thing here is that the different layers, visual languages, and styles do not blur or mutually dissolve into each other. Rather, their special aesthetic lies in their independence and visual autonomy. By almost falling into one, their differences become visible, creating a composition of expressive tension (Glaser, 2015).

This is quite an innovative approach, whose originality is manifested both in the content and on the formal level.<sup>7</sup> Art historian Harald Hinz, for example, sees in Gigo's framings a new form of muralism which gives a fresh and unexpected impetus to the ordinary, stagnating graffiti aesthetic. Against this backdrop, Hinz criticises the continuous, partly unreflected transferring and copying of rusty artistic structures, and calls for a visual breakup within the complacent graffiti movement. In his opinion, this would make a decisive contribution towards pushing new forms of visual dialogue (Hinz, 2015).

And Hinz may be right, as the artist himself holds a similar view. Indeed, Gigo also calls his framings 'graffiti imitations'. 'In a way, they are an attempt to be graffiti', he explains (Gigo, 2015). His aim is to put emphasis on the loss of content within the graffiti world, the disappearance of unique characteristics, as well as the inflationary use of legal walls and the term graffiti in general. As Gigo (2015) points out:

When graffiti from Germany and Europe respectively went to the art spaces, a lot of writers decided to meet or adapt to the requirements of these spaces. The so called lettering was neglected and sometimes frowned upon by the artistically ambitious writers. For the other writers, the search for unique characteristics required sacrifices and clear demarcations. The forms became more abstract and unique while suffering a loss of content.

He continues:

Personally, the alternative that I found in the ill style is endless. Still, this makes it all the more disappointing that, years ago, this field was left to an armada of weekend-hobby-superstyle-heroes that ruin and over-aestheticise our cities as part of questionable legalisation campaigns and under the encouragement of the general public. (Gigo, 2015)



Figure 3. Tags on a wall that Gigo Propaganda decided to frame. Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013.



Figure 4. Detail of 'Please open up your mind'. Gigo Propaganda. Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013.

## NO COMPROMISE

Legal walls, painted during daytime and most likely on commission or in the course of graffiti events and street art festivals, are a welcome target to serve as background for Gigo's framings. Figure 5 shows a legally painted wall in Essen that got framed by Gigo, resulting in the word 'Kampf' ('battle' or 'struggle'). The additional writing in black at the top says 'Kein Writer ist illegal' ('No writer is illegal'). On the one hand, this writing makes reference to the popular nationwide network 'kein Mensch ist illegal'<sup>8</sup> ('No one is illegal'), that stands up for foreigners without a resident permit and migrants subjected to the threat of deportation.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, this text could also be interpreted as a form of implicit criticism of the strong increase of legally painted walls in general.

However, legal walls represent a fundamentally different 'backdrop' to that occupied by halls of fame. In 2012/2013 Gigo began to (over)paint the halls of fame in Essen and Bochum (Figure 6) and in consequence, some writers became very upset. But, as Gigo makes clear, his actions were not meant to attack a whole collective of writers. Rather, his critique was directed towards the hall of fame's inherent structures and frameworks which, in turn, are man-made, as Gigo explains:

There are people responsible for that [...] Kids and young people are used to getting money from the youth welfare office, but if you look closely, you will see that these funds are being used by middle-class thirty-something year-olds to finance their own pieces. That's a huge mess. (Gigo, 2019).

Gigo's controversial intervention attracted significant attention and did have some consequences: he got into trouble, was verbally attacked, and was faced with unpleasant emails and social exclusion (Gigo, 2019). As he explained in the interview (2019), he subsequently tried to resolve this conflict by means of a filmic approach, but this proved unsuccessful.

Against this background, Gigo's art practice can by no means be seen as a deframing, but rather as an explicit reframing. His art practice opens up critical reflections on today's image production and exposes what people perceive as the graffiti trend – a phenomenon that is spreading all over our cities and that objectifies itself on numerous international gallery walls (Glaser, 2015). Consequently, Gigo's framings do not accentuate a border; although frames are generally known for doing that. On the contrary, they put emphasis on a mandatory shift, conquest, or readjustment of antiquated borders and self-imposed artistic limitations. Gigo uses the practice of framing as a self-reflexive, artistic method to explore the limits of image production, and forces art to question its own rules and framings (Glaser, 2015). In doing so, he makes use of a visual imagery that refuses any purely decorative style, and, most probably, won't find its way into popular culture. His framings remind us what graffiti is – or at least once was – all about. Gigo provocatively confronts art with its own self-image.

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All photographs ©Gigo Propaganda.

- 1 I use this as an umbrella term to address visual phenomena from both the street art and the graffiti world. For further contextualisation and differentiation see also Abarca, Bengtson, Blanché, Derwanz, Glaser, Stahl, and others
- 2 This term is used here to illustrate the general concept of Gigo's art practice knowing that the terms 'frame' and 'framing' have a long history and are applied in a lot of different contexts and disciplines – think for example of Erving Goffman's famous *Frame Analysis* (1974). However, there will be no further discussion on the concept of 'framing' at this point.
- 3 Additionally, Gigo sometimes also uses a small outline.
- 4 Note that Figure 4 shows only a part of the piece. Unfortunately, a picture of the whole piece was unavailable prior to this number going to print.
- 5 In this respect, Gigo found inspiration in a special kind of Japanese poetry that applies similar patterns.
- 6 I here primarily refer to the confrontation between legal walls – painted during daytime and on commission, e.g. in the course of graffiti events or street art festivals – and Gigo's framings that are often painted illegally.
- 7 Banksy did something similar years earlier (2008), but in a more pictorial way, see for instance Banksy Leopard or Banksy NY.
- 8 <http://www.kein-mensch-ist-illegal.org/> (Accessed December 15, 2019).
- 9 In this context it is important to note that one of the artists that got 'crossed' was Alone from Teheran, who got expelled from Iran because of his graffiti practice and received asylum in Germany.

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Figure 5. 'Kampf' ('battle' or 'struggle'). Gigo Propaganda. Essen, Germany, 2013.



Figure 6. 'Wenn du sprichst dann wird es HELL' ('When you speak it gets BRIGHT'). Gigo Propaganda. Hall of Fame, Bochum, Germany, 2013.