

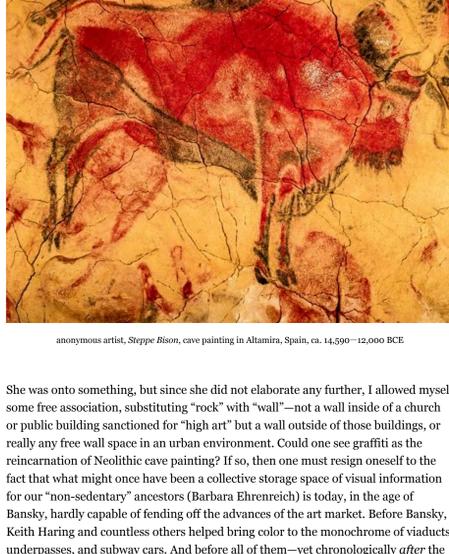
# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
10 March 2021

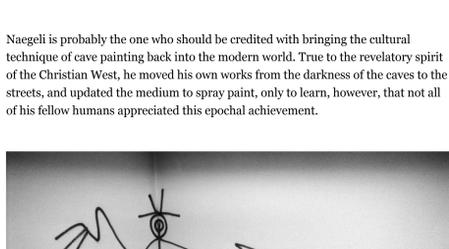
One of the two or three things floating about in my small pool of ideas to be recycled every so often in these *Abwechslungen / Distractions*—and otherwise—is my belief that many cultural techniques that at some point became obsolete later return as art. As the repurposing of cookie molds and textile stamps to make woodcuts discussed in my last missive has shown, such forms of medial appropriation are not new and have been taking place for centuries. Yet cookie baking is still going on and every couple of seasons stamped textiles are trying to make a comeback. My preferred example is therefore analog photography. There was a time when carrying a camera meant that you were either a photographer or a tourist. Today, anyone with an analog camera dangling around the neck is in all likelihood *not* a professional photographer but either a hipster or a nostalgic old fogey (and there is a profound connection between hipsterism and nostalgia) who is not just looking to catch some visual souvenirs but is rather making a statement about her or his artistic ambitions.

When I mentioned this credo to a new friend for the first time, a friend whose brilliance I very much admire, her response was, “It’s kind of true, but it took a *long time* for painting on rock to be cool again.”

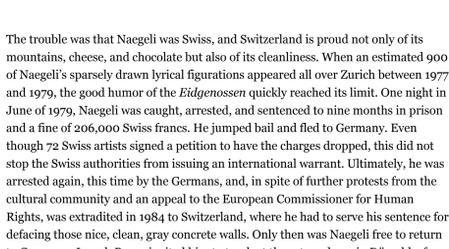


anonymous artist, *Steppe Bison*, cave painting in Altamira, Spain, ca. 14,500–12,000 BCE

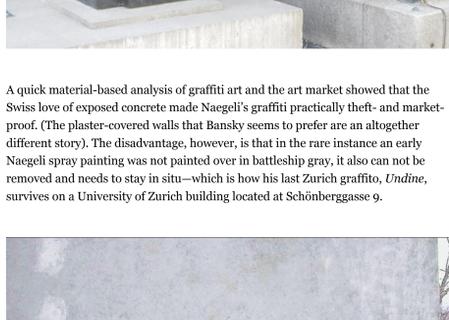
She was onto something, but since she did not elaborate any further, I allowed myself some free association, substituting “rock” with “wall”—not a wall inside of a church or public building sanctioned for “high art” but a wall outside of those buildings, or really any free wall space in an urban environment. Could one see graffiti as the reincarnation of Neolithic cave painting? If so, then one must resign oneself to the fact that what might once have been a collective storage space of visual information for our “non-sedentary” ancestors (Barbara Ehrenreich) is today, in the age of Banksy, hardly capable of fending off the advances of the art market. Before Banksy, Keith Haring and countless others helped bring color to the monochrome of viaducts, underpasses, and subway cars. And before all of them—yet chronologically *after* the cave painters—there was a man who was once described as “the most important street artist you’ve never heard of”: Harald Naegeli (b. 1939), aka “the sprayer of Zurich.”



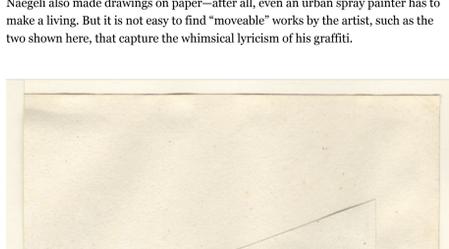
Naegeli is probably the one who should be credited with bringing the cultural technique of cave painting back into the modern world. True to the revelatory spirit of the Christian West, he moved his own works from the darkness of the caves to the streets, and updated the medium to spray paint, only to learn, however, that not all of his fellow humans appreciated this epochal achievement.



The trouble was that Naegeli was Swiss, and Switzerland is proud not only of its mountains, cheese, and chocolate but also of its cleanliness. When an estimated 900 of Naegeli’s sparsely drawn lyrical figurations appeared all over Zurich between 1977 and 1979, the good humor of the *Eidgenossen* quickly reached its limit. One night in June of 1979, Naegeli was caught, arrested, and sentenced to nine months in prison and a fine of 206,000 Swiss francs. He jumped bail and fled to Germany. Even though 72 Swiss artists signed a petition to have the charges dropped, this did not stop the Swiss authorities from issuing an international warrant. Ultimately, he was arrested again, this time by the Germans, and, in spite of further protests from the cultural community and an appeal to the European Commissioner for Human Rights, was extradited in 1984 to Switzerland, where he had to serve his sentence for defacing those nice, clean, gray concrete walls. Only then was Naegeli free to return to Germany. Joseph Beuys invited him to teach at the art academy in Düsseldorf, where Naegeli still lives today.

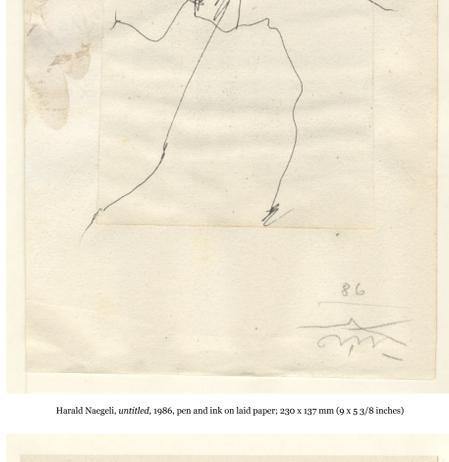


A quick material-based analysis of graffiti art and the art market showed that the Swiss love of exposed concrete made Naegeli’s graffiti practically theft- and market-proof. (The plaster-covered walls that Banksy seems to prefer are an altogether different story). The disadvantage, however, is that in the rare instance an early Naegeli spray painting was not painted over in battleship gray, it also can not be removed and needs to stay in situ—which is how his last Zurich graffiti, *Undine*, survives on a University of Zurich building located at Schönberggasse 9.

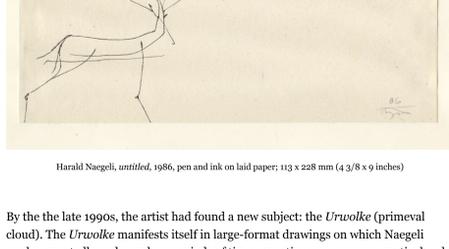


Harald Naegeli, *Undine*

Naegeli also made drawings on paper—after all, even an urban spray painter has to make a living. But it is not easy to find “moveable” works by the artist, such as the two shown here, that capture the whimsical lyricism of his graffiti.



Harald Naegeli, *untitled*, 1986, pen and ink on laid paper; 230 x 137 mm (9 x 5 3/8 inches)

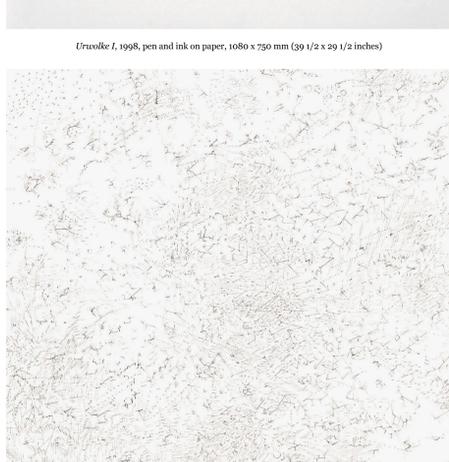


Harald Naegeli, *untitled*, 1986, pen and ink on laid paper; 113 x 228 mm (4 3/8 x 9 inches)

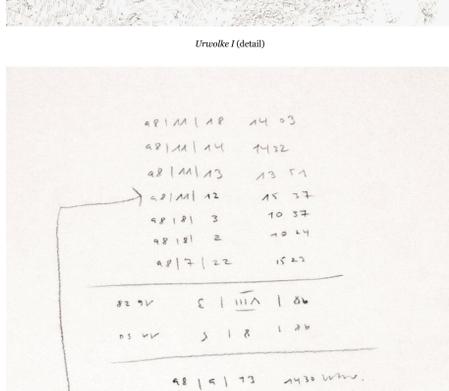
By the late 1990s, the artist had found a new subject: the *Urwolke* (primeval cloud). The *Urwolke* manifests itself in large-format drawings on which Naegeli works repeatedly and over long periods of time, sometimes many years, meticulously annotating every session on the verso of the sheets with the date and time.



*Urwolke I*, 1998, pen and ink on paper, 1080 x 750 mm (39 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches)



*Urwolke I* (detail)



verso of *Urwolke I* with annotations recording each work session between August and November 1998

This “processuality” of the work is of crucial importance to the artist since every pen-and-ink mark is understood as a record of a particle of time. The accumulation of those particles is therefore meant to create a synesthetic effect, a feeling of time and space. Naegeli’s hope is that the nonrepresentational quality of his drawings and their overall lightness are able to emanate a utopian happiness. While the *Urwolke* drawings are fixed (and annotated) on individual sheets, the artist ultimately sees them as elements of an ongoing, all-encompassing creative project that continues to occupy him to this day.

drawings by Harald Naegeli

