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UNDERSTANDING LOS ANGELES STREET ART:  
BETWEEN SOCIAL MOBILIZATION  
AND URBANITES AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

*Ever since Los Angeles was annexed to the rest of the United States in 1848, the city's publicists, better known as boosters, have fashioned a fantasized version of this newly acquired space that has impacted its very identity up until today. The dreamed Los Angeles was created in order to sell an ideal and, off course, land parcels. This mechanism was supported by a local neo-liberal government that chose to let the city's Chamber of Commerce decide which course to take. This article aims at showing the impact that the dreamed Los Angeles had on the effective urban area and its inhabitants, and how this fantasized dimension of the city became the cornerstone that enabled its unparalleled development. It also seeks out to investigate how social mobilization is adjusting to this new urban order that oscillates constantly between two sets of rules, one made of illusions, the other made of uncompromising truths. Angelenos are thus exploring new ways to regain some humanness in a territory that seems to apprehend its inhabitants merely as socio-economic statistics. Social mobilization in Los Angeles is thus forced to take into account this fictionalized habit and fictionalizing process of the city to produce new ways of escaping it in order to exist outside of it, in a reality that concurs with their everyday Los Angeles. One particular practice that has gradually benefited from more and more visibility in the city since the beginning of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century, is doing just that: Street Art. This highly visual and visible practice is becoming, in Los Angeles, a social enactment that tends to reconceptualize social values as well as socializing practices.*

*Keywords: Los Angeles - Street Art - Postmodernity - Thirdspace - Semiotic*

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ΚΑΤΑΝΟΩΝΤΑΣ ΤΗΝ ΤΕΧΝΗ ΤΟΥ ΔΡΟΜΟΥ ΣΤΟ  
ΛΟΣ ΑΝΤΖΕΛΕΣ: ΑΝΑΜΕΣΑ  
ΣΤΗΝ ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΗ ΚΙΝΗΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗ ΚΑΙ  
ΤΗΝ ΑΣΤΙΚΗ ΕΥΑΙΣΘΗΤΟΠΟΙΗΣΗ

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

*Από την προσάρτηση της Πόλης των Αγγέλων στις ΗΠΑ (1848), οι υπεύθυνοι δημοσίων σχέσεων της πόλης, γνωστοί ως boosters/προωθητές, σχεδίασαν μια φανταστική εκδοχή αυτού του νεοαποκτηθέντος χώρου που επηρεάζει την ίδια του την ταυτότητά του μέχρι σήμερα. Το ονειρευμένο Λος Άντζελες δημιουργήθηκε για να πουλήσει ένα ιδανικό και μαζί με αυτό βεβαίως και κομμάτια γης. Αυτός ο μηχανισμός υποστηρίχθηκε από μια νέο-φιλελεύθερη διακυβέρνηση που επέλεξε να αφήσει στο Εμπορικό Επιμελητήριο της πόλης να αποφασίσει ποιο δρόμο θα ακολουθήσει. Το άρθρο αυτό εξετάζει την επιρροή που είχε ο φανταστικός σχεδιασμός του Λος Άντζελες στην κατοίκηση του αστικού χώρου και πώς αυτή η φανταστική διάσταση της πόλης έγινε ο ακρογωνιαίος λίθος της ασυναγώνιστης ανάπτυξής της. Διερευνάται παράλληλα το πώς η κοινωνική κινητοποίηση προσαρμόζεται σε αυτόν τον νέο αστικό σχεδιασμό που ταλαντεύεται ανάμεσα σε δύο είδη κανόνων, έναν πρώτο που βασίζεται σε ουτοπίες και ένα δεύτερο που φτιάχνεται από ασυμβίβαστες αλήθειες. Οι Αντζελίνος πειραματίζονται με νέους τρόπους προκειμένου να ανακτήσουν την ανθρωπότητα της περιοχής που μοιάζει να αντιλαμβάνεται τον κατοίκους της κυρίως ως κοινωνικο-οικονομικά στατιστικά δεδομένα. Η κοινωνική κινητοποίηση στο Λος Άντζελες αναγκάζεται να προσμετρήσει αυτήν την συνήθεια μυθοπλασίας και τη μυθοπλαστική διαδικασία της πόλης προκειμένου να επινοήσει τρόπους διαφυγής από αυτές και να υπάρξει σε μια πραγματικότητα καθημερινότητας έξω, την οποία ωστόσο αυτές ανταγωνίζονται. Μία ειδικά πρακτική που ορατότητα από τις αρχές του 21<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα έχει επωφεληθεί και αποκτήσει είναι το να κάνεις τέχνη του δρόμου. Αυτή η έντονα οπτική και ορατή πρακτική έγινε για το ΛΑ κοινωνικός θεσμός που τείνει να επανομηματοδοτήσει κοινωνικές αξίες και πρακτικές κοινωνικότητας.*

*Λέξεις κλειδιά: Λος Άντζελες, τέχνη του δρόμου, μετανεωτερικότητα, τριτογενής χώρος, σημειωτική*

Los Angeles is one of the world's most dreamed about cities because of its extensive propensity to rely on oneiric conceptions, varying from instigating fantasies to generating an almost unstoppable desire, to shape its very form and social habits. Because the city was built upon an utopian ideal of what the modern city could be, it was first intended to be a realization of this ideal. However, because neo-liberal perspectives governed Los Angeles also from its very inception, the cityscape became increasingly disunited and gave birth to what some authors have called the fragmented city.<sup>1</sup> Following the urges of its different periods, Los Angeles was a chameleon that adapted its strategies to accommodate the wants and needs of the potential immigrants and investors, but these strategies were first and foremost based on images. Los Angeles' boosters campaign in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century (see Zimmerman, 2008) built an ideal around what the city could look like if people came and invested this brand new West. But in order to do so, the city needed to step away from the dominant Hispanic aesthetic in order to become truly American. Indeed, Los Angeles was founded in 1781 by a group of Spanish settlers, and when Mexico lost its northern territories as part of the Mexican-American war resolution, the city was already quite developed and was the commercial crossroads of Southern California. Los Angeles was not a blank space to be built upon when it was attached to the rest of the American territory but it was treated as such: aiming at trying to camouflage a Spanish heritage that was then a considerable obstacle for the city's investors.

Subsequently to this economic-based rhetoric, Los Angeles was not developed according to its own history, morphology or population, it was instead built by publicists and engineers according to people's desires. The image created to draw people to Los Angeles became the model to follow and this preconceived imagery is precisely what led to the very creation of the city when at the time, anywhere else in the world, it had been the other way around. Norman Klein observed and analyzed this phenomenon in his book *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*. He listed four different myths<sup>2</sup> that were created by the city's boosters, and these ideals propelled upon a pedestal before they were an

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1. The first author to coin this term describing Los Angeles was Robert Fogelson and his 1967 book *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles 1850-1930*.

2. Klein classified the city's promotional myths as follows: myth of the climate (1880s to 1930s), myth of the freeway metropolis (1936-49), myths of downtown renewal (1936-49), myth of the Pacific Byzantium (1980s-) (Klein, 1997, p. 29).

urban reality in the city. The city's investors and publicists relied on these heavily marketed images of the city to attract new people in this new(ly) found(ed) territory. It was expected that people would live according to the ideal that convinced them to move to Los Angeles. Klein explained that these promotional myths were "designed by chambers of commerce, city planning, the motor club, and so on; then discussed as self-evident in city council meetings, usually with gusto and active contradiction - half fact, half cloaking device, a collective imaginary shared by those who ran policy. Finally, each myth becomes dated when it no longer fits the market." (Klein, 1997, p. 29)

Urban planners and city officials remained uninvolved until the late 1930s and the start of the large-scaled work on the freeway system. They also stayed in the background for so long and let the city's investors create Los Angeles in the first place, that it also led to reactions which showed, from rather early on, that Los Angeles had been overrun by its image from the very start. L. Deming Tilton and George W. Robbins were one of the first to address this issue in *Los Angeles: Preface to a Master Plan* as they believed that "Los Angeles is not the city it could have been, because no agency was responsible in its earlier days for the production of the plans and specifications from which a truly great metropolitan center could have been built" (Deming and Robbins, 1941, p. 255).

This mechanism which implemented the preeminence of image was what led French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to see Los Angeles as the "parody of cities and urbanism" (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 103) and, even more so, as the core of hyperreality (see Baudrillard, 1989 and 1994). The city however, in all its realities, is falling short in trying to re-enact those idealistic fantasies that the Hollywood imagery is so keen on broadcasting throughout the United States and around the world. It also seems incapable of forging an identity capable of federating these many different spaces and people that are yet making the city what it is. Los Angeles is thus experienced in many different ways. On one hand there are those who are able to experience Los Angeles as it is dreamed on TV or cinema screens, mostly because they have the financial means to do so, while on the other there are those who have become imprisoned by this inescapable imagine-durban fantasy that accentuates drastically the many social contrasts anchored within the city.

One could yet identify a third category that would reinforce the power of the urban imagery and imaginary associated with Los Angeles: those who cannot afford to maintain such a costly envisioned lifestyle but who

are still willing to bathe in it, thereby perpetuating the illusion of the idealized American-way of life that Hollywood promotes daily. The overused opposition of *the haves and the have nots* has become obsolete since it does not take into account the totality of the socio-economical spectrum, which simultaneously reveals why many social policies implemented in Los Angeles fell short. They are continuously based on a Manichean system considering the ones at the bottom of the social ladder as the only focus of these policies when the people belonging to upper classes should also be included, not in terms of welfare benefits but in terms of social representation and imaginary. The South Central riots of 1992 crystallized this ever-growing gap between a fantasized Los Angeles of those who are abiding by its every principle, and the real Los Angeles of those who are trying to cope with them. The very meaning of rioting was redefined at that precise moment when the sensationalistic treatment of the event by the local and national news media both de-realized and disappropriated it from those who were trying to make a statement that largely exceeded the then-given reasons for the revolt. As explained by Darnell M. Hunt in *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots": Race, Seeing, and Resistance*, the main angle adopted by the news media solely linked the 1992 riots with the outcome of the Rodney King trial. In doing so, they were able to put aside the growing social unrest that brewed in South Los Angeles since the 1965 Watts riots, to focus only on angry mobs who wished to retaliate against what they believed to be an unfair decision. The meaning of the 1992 riots was thus largely toned down by the mass media narratives, showing how the two Los Angeles seemed to have reached a point of no return. Such artificially constructed images and ideals of the city that are more narrated than experienced, and fueled by the economic needs that evolved hand in hand with the uncontrollable growth of Los Angeles, also influenced largely the social practices of the city as well as its development pattern.

Yet image is not always polarizing in Los Angeles. Indeed, the one produced outside the studio system or the press, the one created by the Angelenos and placated in the streets for anyone to see is one in which intent is not depending on economic sustainability but on the space it emerges from. Street art in Los Angeles started long before the hip-hop craze of the 1990s or the government-funded public arts projects of the early 2000s. It is a practice that goes back to the city's origins, the same ones that promoters tried so hard to conceal. But how can street art compete with the urban imaginary produced by the dream factory that Los Angeles has become? What credit can be awarded to an art form that was considered for so long

as vandalism? What meaning can one perceive in such anodyne spontaneous practices and how the sudden visibility of street art in Los Angeles can be explained? Understanding the very condensed and very short history of this peculiar urban space is crucial when trying to analyze the local art scene that crystallized around both an eventful history and an unprecedented conception of space. The convergence lines of these two fundamental elements become particularly visible when dealing with street arts, especially with murals. Muralism is an artistic practice that is rooted at the core of the historical art scene of Los Angeles, and which has been established as a local institution with the Mural Preservation Ordinance passed in Los Angeles in September 2013 by Holly Wolcott. This political decision was the completion of several years of artistic militant activism led for the most part by the Murals Conservancy of Los Angeles (MCLA), an association created in 1987 and made of a coalition of artists, public art advocates, city and state officials, and restoration specialists which militates for the restoration of decaying pieces, while funding new projects and referencing them in an online database that, as of today, regroups more than 850 murals throughout the city of Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup>

Set in this contrasted urban space which generated a rather dense bibliography over the past 40 years, this article will focus mainly on the murals of Los Angeles and rely on theoretical tools that were thought out, inspired by and articulated around Los Angeles in order to outline the framework for a semiotic analysis of these street art practices in the city. It should be mentioned that the scientific approach adopted here echoes rather vividly with what Brooklyn College Emeritus and Murray Koppelman sociology professor Jerome Kruse argued in his article “An Argument for Seeing in Urban Social Science” a few years back. Sight as a key analytical element in urban social science has gained theoretical momentum over the past years and the paper written here inscribes itself in the continuity of what he discussed. While he positioned his essay “on the pre-post modern

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3. All murals were photographed and are accessible on the MCLA website: <http://www.muralconservancy.org/>. This website represents an invaluable source of photographs and information about L.A. murals with details about the artists, the locations, the years of creation and sometimes, about the context in which the artworks were developed. Paralleling my in-situ participant observation, the MCLA website enables its visitors to cruise through the city and discover its variety of murals. Since the website's creation, many others followed the same construction such as <http://www.detourla.com/street--public-art> (accessed 14 February 2017), or even the Google earth experience allowing the virtual wanderer to sweep through the cityscape and observe the surroundings of these artworks.

side” (Krase, 2012, p. 25) the attempt is to tie-in a similar approach with post-modern theoretical tools<sup>4</sup>.

Murals are at the intersection of both space and time, as they aim to represent something in tune with the location and moment into which they are inscribed. No matter if the mural was ordered by local institutions or was spontaneously made by an unknown artist, the intent behind the image can be deciphered and the meaning extracted by interweaving space, time and imagery. These artworks are made in public space to force people to engage in them, to engage *with* them, requiring a participatory observation even if the viewers are sometimes reluctant to do so. Let’s take Thomas Suriya’s mural entitled “Changes” as an example. Located on Yawl Street in Venice, between the Pacific ocean and Marina Del Rey, the 1984 mural is described on the MCLA website as such:

An elderly woman pulling a cart of groceries is the central image in this commentary on Venice’s continuing transformation as a community. Ahead of her, three young women in the modest swimming attire of an earlier era—perhaps figments of her memory—pose and wave in her direction. Behind her a roller skater approaches, not appearing to notice that they are about to collide. On the ground is a newspaper fragment announcing the eviction of local seniors from their homes<sup>5</sup>. (MCLA, 2017)

What was true back in 1984 with the eviction of local seniors is even truer now, as the socio-economic rift has widened since the 1980s. Benefiting from the adjacent marina crowded with expensive pleasure and sailing boats, the surrounding area’s real estate value soared to new heights in the 1990s, turning the once artistic hippie Venice into one of the most expansive neighborhoods in Los Angeles today. The mural’s meaning is thus twofold: on the one hand it informs of a historic socio-economic reality dating back from 1984. On the other, it denounces the capitalistic real estate market which turned the neighborhood into what it is today by centering the faceless elderly woman as the, now invisible, working-class of Venice.

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4. Krase further developed these notions in his book *Seeing Cities Change: Local Culture and Class*, and the analytical process which he engaged in in this monograph resonates particularly with the one I am here attached to: “Visual, spatial, semiotics allows one to see how ordinary people have the ability to create meaning by affecting the appearances of places and spaces. All one needs to do is to open one’s eyes and take a walk anywhere and everywhere. Even the most absurd, obnoxious, and/or patently false claims are nevertheless “authentic” even though they can be criticized and critiqued, analyzed, or of course “interpreted.”” (Krase, 2016, p. 25).

5. <http://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/changes>, accessed 14 February 2017.

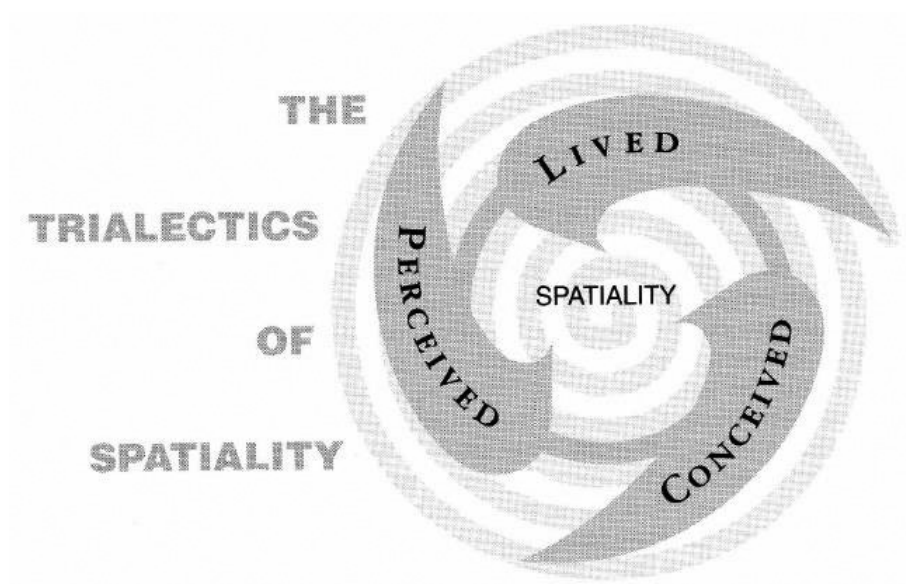




Thomas Suriya, *Changes*, 1984.<sup>6</sup>

Such strategies deployed by murals to communicate with and about locals and their everyday lives are surprisingly close to what Los Angeles-based geographer Edward Soja developed in his postmodern geographies. Indeed, this complicated and intricate relationship between the images and expectations of Los Angeles and their ever-fluctuating actuality is what led Soja to think of new ways to deal with, and analyze this megalopolis while taking into account the ongoing mental representations it keeps producing. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* was born from the UCLA urban planner's thinking process. He believed that the individual as well as the collective imaginary associated with a place both come into play when trying to make sense of it. Working in threes, Soja's thirdspace system is based on Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* and its grounding trinity of: perceived space, conceived space and lived space. As such, Soja in his reading of Lefebvre's three combining concepts, gives them momentum and uses them to create a dynamic dichotomy around the term of spatiality.

6. <http://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/changes>, accessed 14 February 2017.



*Fig. 1: The trialectics of spatiality (Soja, 1996, p. 74)*

In this “trialectics of spatiality”, Lefebvre’s terms are linked to one another equally and in doing so, each component becomes essential in understanding spatiality. Soja’s Thirdspace system follows the same logic, and he associates First-, Second- and Thirdspace to one of these three components. To begin with, Soja defines “Firstspace” as an equivalent to Lefebvre’s perceived space which is, according to his postmodern approach of geography, “a material and materialized “physical” spatiality that is directly comprehended in empirically measurable configurations: in the absolute and relative locations of things and activities, sites and situations; in patterns of distribution, designs, and differentiation of a multitude of materialized phenomena across spaces and places” (Soja, 1996, p. 74). Each element fitting within Firstspace can be precisely accounted for, mapped and quantified: relying on strong scientific epistemologies to reinforce the perception of geography as a formal science of space. Soja admits that Firstspace epistemologies have produced a great amount of spatial knowledge. Yet, in failing to take into account “non-spatial explanations of material spatial configurations,” (op.cit., p. 78) they are, in the end, limited as they do not tackle historical or societal issues.

Following Soja’s trialectical logic, Secondspace is derived from Lefebvre’s conceived space and the epistemologies stemming from it are, according to Soja, much more focused on concepts rather than observations.

Thus, it implies that spatial knowledge is first and foremost produced through “discursively devised representations of space, through the spatial workings of the mind.” (op.cit., p. 79)

In its purest form, Secondspace is entirely ideational, made up of projections into empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies. This does not mean that there is no material reality, no Firstspace, but rather that the knowledge of this material reality is comprehended essentially through thought, as *res cogito*, literally “thought things.” In so empowering the mind, explanation becomes more reflexive, subjective, introspective, philosophical, and individualized. Secondspace is the interpretive locale of the creative artist and artful architect, visually or literally re-presenting the world in the image of their subjective imaginaries; the utopian urbanist seeking social and spatial justice through the application of better ideas, good intentions and improved social learning. (op.cit., p. 79)

The spatial object of the First- and Secondspace epistemologies is the same, but its analysis and processing are radically different. This clear-cut opposition between perceived and conceived spaces, Firstspace and Secondspace, is what triggered the rise of the third party. But the discrepancies between the two terms turned out to be, to a certain extent, misleading since, according to Soja, what differentiated them so clearly at first has “become increasingly blurred” because of the “intermixing of positivist, structuralist, poststructuralist, existential, phenomenological, and hermeneutic ideas and methods.” (op.cit., p. 78) But for Lefebvre as well as for Soja, this epistemological flux led to the mistaken impression that this binary system had reached a level of achievement, which is precisely where the illusion lies<sup>7</sup>. In many instances, Lefebvre argued that more than merging with one another, which would have created new combining epistemologies to apprehend spatiality, it seemed that the conceived space took over the perceived space, as if mental representations, definitions and productions of space “explained the material and social worlds better than precise empirical descriptions.” (op.cit., p. 80) Subsequently Soja also notices a collapse of Firstspace into Secondspace, resulting in a single false trans-

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7. “Buried beneath these oscillations, however, has been a presumption of epistemological completeness that channels the accumulation of spatial knowledge into two main streams or some selective combination of both. Little room is left for a lateral glance beyond the long-established parameters and perimeters that map the overlapping terrains of Firstspace and Secondspace.” (op.cit., p. 78).

parent spatial epistemology in which the very concept of space itself ended up losing completely its ties with historicity and sociality (op.cit., p. 80). This gradual distancing from these two affiliated notions resulted in a disequilibrium that ultimately led spatial epistemologies to normative sequencing that failed to take into account the specific context in which spatiality actually fits in<sup>8</sup>. As a reminder, Soja opened his reflection on Thirdspace on the “tralectics of being”, reasserting the inextricable link between spatiality, historicity and sociality:

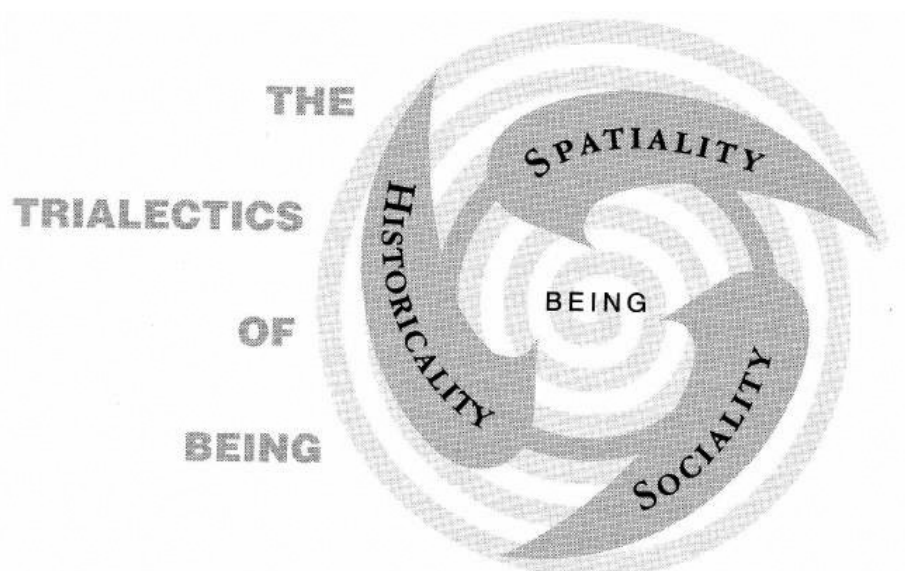


Fig. 2: *The trialectics of being* (op.cit., p. 71)

Thirdspace, associated with the last of Lefebvre’s partition, the lived space, emerges as a means to dissipate this illusion by introducing a third dimension, equal to the other two and that transforms the original binary dynamic into a circular one. Moreover, by introducing a third item, the gradual confusion binding First- and Secondspace with one another disappears, turning them back into two distinctive epistemological fields. Soja further argues that this last piece is also inducing a sort of disequilibrium within the trialectics of spatiality since Lefebvre, as well as Soja, tends to favor largely this last item in a very understandable way. Thirdspace is thus not the last piece of the puzzle but a movement destroying the ex-

8. “Even more significantly, also lost in the transparency of space are its fundamental historicity and sociality, any real sense of how these cognitive imageries are themselves socially produced and implicated in the relations between space, power, and knowledge.” (op.cit., p. 80).

isting puzzle. It is in the initial duality of First- and Secondspace and in which they fail to take into account that Thirdspace finds its purpose. As Soja explains, Thirdspace is not yet another epistemology to try to read-just the First- and Secondspace shortcomings. Thirdspace is a means to deconstruct and reconstruct endlessly the First- and Secondspace duality depending on the actual object one intends to study, its specificities and singularities. Soja calls this intellectual dynamic “thirthing-as-Othering” (op.cit., p. 81) whose role is clearly defined:

Such thirthing is designed not just to critique Firstspace and Secondspace modes of thought, but also to reinvigorate their approaches to spatial knowledge with new possibilities heretofore unthought of inside the traditional spatial disciplines. [...] The starting-point for this strategic re-opening and rethinking of new possibilities is the provocative shift back from epistemology to ontology and specifically to the ontological trialectic of Spatiality-Historicity-Sociality. [...] Such ontological restructuring, at least for the present moment, re-centers knowledge formation first around the long-submerged and subordinated spatiality of existential being and becoming, and then in the spatialization of historicity and sociality in theory-formation, empirical analysis, critical enquiry, and social practice. (op.cit., p. 81-82)

Thirdspace instills an ontological movement within a trialectics composed of two epistemological approaches, enabling an ongoing modulation between the two, interrogating them endlessly according to the historicality-spatiality-sociality trialectic of any given object. In considering Thirdspace as such, Soja literally applies Lefebvre’s notion of the lived space as it encompasses two complimentary sides. On the one hand, Thirdspace, in reinvigorating the spatial discourse, becomes the jolt that deconstructs the binary opposition and induces a new dialog between First- and Secondspace, and on the other, it clearly relies on the integration of the social and historical factors as the unmatched links that fuse both time and space in urban landscapes. The human dimension thus becomes unavoidable, as historicality and sociality of any given space can only be accessed through people and their experience of the places they inhabit. The population is the tangible receptacle of both perceived and conceived spatiality, yet the subjectivity imbued by the very places they survey in their everyday lives becomes the integral third part of the spatiality trialectics. This Thirdspace, this lived space, serves as a reminder that spatiality is itself part of the larger “trialectics of being,” the exact same way that L.A. murals are here to remind the

city's inhabitants that they do not live in a blank history-less space. Street art is used as a spatial tool to remind Angelenos that they are not utterly disconnected from one another, a self-sufficient and individualistic feeling that is encouraged daily by the city's worship of individual cars.

Through Thirdspace, the two trialectics designed by Soja cannot be taken separately. With this ontological shift, he is importing into the spatial discourse the missing components that made modern geographical analysis fall short. He deems them too restrictive and somewhat dehumanized, but in doing so, he also complicates the nature and scope of their interactions drastically. This construction in threes, however, opens some analytical possibilities, providing an intellectual dynamic that can be applied to any space in the world. Couldn't we then continue Soja's trialectical model and think of other trialectics based on the inhabitants and their relationship to a space that is not like any other, because it is, first and foremost, theirs? The notion of belonging, of being accustomed to a particular space does give an expertise quality to those who embrace it everyday. Furthermore, the historical construction of a place and how memory is perceptible in it also inform how the lived space is conceived for those who are actually living in it. Imagining a trialectics dealing with Los Angeles and its inhabitants could be seen as the convergence of Soja's trialectics with Baudrillard's postmodern take on the megalopolis as the city of illusion and simulacra:



*Fig. 3 The Angelenos Trialectics*

Because the very conception and construction of Los Angeles have taken into account the ever-expanding role of image, it cannot be ignored when trying to apprehend its inhabitants and how they integrated this dimension in their relationship with this peculiar urban space. Obsessed with image or denied any sort of pictorial representation, the dynamics emerging from such a trialectics seem rather close to Soja's Thirdspace system. On the one hand, the illusioned are embracing a lifestyle that is overtly advertised without even questioning it. They are the same inhabitants that are keen on cutting themselves off from the rest of the city in the numerous gated communities of Los Angeles. Basking in a fear promoted daily in the city's sensationalist news media, they would rather ostracize themselves from the rest of the urban grid than try to go and see for themselves how life unfolds in South Central or Skid Row. On the other hand, the disillusioned are angry at a system that keeps them at a safe distance, denying them the possibility to enjoy a lifestyle they can witness up close but cannot afford. If the 1965 Watts riots of Los Angeles are usually linked with the civil rights movement, the 1992 South Central riots crystallized this growing racial gap and rage. The African-American community attempted to burst the illusion of their invisibility in the city, reminding everyone and the world that they were there and living in conditions very different from the widely shared imaginary of the land of glamour and sunshine. Unfortunately, how the events were simultaneously appropriated by the news media perverted the intended goal of this violent explosion. The illusion endured and was maintained in spite of these events that media temporality successfully erased from the collective imaginary (see Hunt, 1997).

We thus find ourselves in the same binary opposition evoked earlier by Soja between First and Secondspace with the illusioned and the disillusioned. But like Thirdspace, there could be a third category to put an end to this Manichean antagonism: the delusioned. They are somewhat aware of the scam, but they are willingly trying to fit the requirements needed to play a sort of make-believe, giving them the temporary illusion to be part of a lifestyle that, ultimately, they won't be able to maintain. This third category is also what gives momentum to this trialectics since the delusioned borrow characteristics from the other two but they also provide a transitory category for both illusioned and disillusioned. Indeed, the illusioned can have some moments of lucidity and realize that these ideals are all preemptive and senseless while the disillusioned can allow themselves moments of relief when they grow tired of being angry against a system that constantly tries to enroll them in while simultaneously trying to muffle

their concern and critiques. Hence this trialectics is not so much trying to categorize Angelenos, but to identify attitudes of the population towards the exponential use of image in urban planning and its structuring social role, especially in Los Angeles where these processes first came to be.

The impact that the imagined Los Angeles had on the effective Los Angeles urban area and its inhabitants was potent because it was the imagined city that created the city. The image-ined Los Angeles was there from the very start and this fantasized dimension of the city became the cornerstone that enabled its unparalleled development. In such a gigantic megalopolis, these considerations tend to go unnoticed because of the size and organization of the cityscape, but also because Los Angeles became the home of the film industry which impacted the rest of the United States and of the world like no other. The cinematographic industry fuelled as well as projected to the rest of the country values and ideals that became representative of a model American way of life. This model, in turn, also largely influenced the televised industry in terms of tone and content, all revolving around the same enduring notion, that of the city's image. Because of the idealistic sense provided by Los Angeles, this particular city space logically became the manufacture of idealistic bodies, behaviors, social interactions and socio-economic conditions, no matter how disconnected from reality they might be. The sped-up time in the media served as a way of minimizing or at least restricting the meaning and implications of the 1992 South Central riots, but the city structure itself is one of concealment and hiding. Many authors<sup>9</sup> agree that the city's exponential horizontal development led to an open-sky urban prison whose dimensions and overall structure serve a double purpose: first to put the circumscribed areas to good use in order to hide efficiently the undesirables, making them virtually invisible; and second, to provide a sense of suffocation and imprisonment for the populations trapped in the middle of the urban sprawl, where they are compressed from each side by an endless urban landscape.

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9. Robert Fogelson focused on the city's early conception and how it led to a fragmented metropolis (Fogelson, 1993), Mike Davis evoked the prison-like surveillance of the city in his essay "Beyond *Blade Runner*" (Davis, 1999), the edited volume of Deepak N. Sawhney *Unmasking L.A.: Third Worlds and the City* attempts at unveiling the city's socio-urban strategies which led to the creation of an imperceptible third world at the heart of Los Angeles (Sawhney, 2002), and French author Stéphane Degoutin focused for his part on the impact of Los Angeles' idealized collective imaginary in his book *Willing Prisoners of the American Dream* (Degoutin, 2006). Edward Soja also discussed this carceral dimension of the city in his chapter "The Carceral Archipelago: Governing Space in the Postmetropolis" in his book *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000).



Yet street art, and more particularly muralism, seems to make them visible, as if crystallizing all three components of the Angelenostrialectics in an attempt to federate a labyrinthine territory known by its inhabitants for its inherent socio-economic as well as cultural fractures. Because of its modest origins, but first and foremost because of its expanding practice, street art can be considered as a local social mobilization seeking adjustments in this singular urban order that oscillates constantly between two sets of rules, one made of illusions, the other made of uncompromising truths. Through art, Angelenos are thus exploring new ways to try and reclaim some humanness in a territory that seems to apprehend its population only through socio-economic statistics. The very status of these murals and graffiti and also of their authors already hints towards the social shifts they attempt to trigger. First seen as nuisances or acts of vandalism, many street art pieces are now protected by law in the Los Angeles region and some even came to be publicly celebrated in the early 2010s, along with the city's newly discovered artistic grandeur. Having suffered in the omnipotent shadow of Hollywood, Los Angeles has ever since been associated, for the rest of the United States, with a reputation as an intellectual black-hole or cultural wasteland (see Timberg and Gioia, 2003).<sup>10</sup> The very vibrant and very much alive literary and artistic scene of the city became much more apparent with the help of the Internet. The Getty Foundation in Los Angeles has also been pivotal in centralizing an Angeleno artistic archive that largely superseded the void it was supposed to represent.

The 2006 exhibit "Los Angeles 1955-1985" organized at the Centre Pompidou in Paris started an international recognition of Los Angeles as a legitimate artistic center of the United States that could rival with its eternal sister city, New York. The exhibit's curator, Catherine Grenier, assembled a very eclectic content that revealed the city's artistic diversity from photography to architecture, sculpture to performance art, and paintings to murals. This outside and marginal artistic practice found its way to the museum but it did not reflect the socio-historic background these pieces echo, focusing instead on the graphic quality of the works. But this exhibit started a much more general local awareness of the city's artistic scene thanks to this European validation.

The Getty Foundation capitalized on this momentum and organized in 2011-2012 the first Pacific Standard Time cycle of exhibit over the course

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10. The very cover of Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia's book *The Misread City* features three photographs by Steven Dewell including one showing a very hip-hop-like graffiti and another showing a car parked with an "Art Sale" sign on its side.

of seven months. As if imbued by the city's gigantism, the cycle was composed of sixty-eight major museum exhibitions but also succeeded in mobilizing more than seventy private galleries to follow the exhibits' themes and rhythm. With such a high number of exhibitions, it was not surprising to find street art presented more precisely. It was represented in themed exhibits such in "Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980" with photographs of the Los Angeles Street Graphics Committee (Jones, 2011, p. 302) or through a focus on artists such as SengaNengudi who is photographed supervising a mural made by African-American children in Watts (Jones, 2011, p. 301). Many references and photographs of murals were also presented in the exhibitions "Mex/L.A.: Mexican Modernism(s) in Los Angeles 1930-1985<sup>11</sup>" and "Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement<sup>12</sup>". The intent expressed in the title of the exhibit is inextricable from spatiality; it's about redefining the very topology of the city, of mapping another Los Angeles. But the artistic practice itself was also the focus of an exhibit orchestrated by American and Angeleno artist Sandra de la Loza at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art entitled "Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza" whose presentation reads as follows:

Sandra de la Loza, founder of the Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History, presents a visual 'mashup' by sampling obscure and forgotten details in murals produced during the 1970s. Taking the role of a performative archivist, she extracts, slices, and blows up archival material to create a multi-media light and sound installation that provides a constantly shifting glance of Chicano muralism. Through a video piece, she opens the material and conceptual bounds in which we see and understand the mural by shifting the viewers gaze from the foreground to the background, moving from the figure to the non-figurative, and understanding the mural as a catalyst for a social practice. Drawing upon archival and interview sources, the installation investigates L.A. Urbanism, the Light and Space Movement, and countercultural aesthetics.<sup>13</sup>

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11. <http://past.pacificstandardtime.org/exhibitions%3Fid=mex-la-mexican-modernism-s-in-los-angeles-1930-1985.html>, accessed 25 February 2016.

12. <http://past.pacificstandardtime.org/exhibitions%3Fid=mapping-another-l-a-the-chicano-art-movement.html>, accessed 25 February 2016.

13. <http://past.pacificstandardtime.org/exhibitions%3Fid=mural-remix-sandra-de-la-loza.html>, accessed 25 February 2016. For more information about the artist see her website: <http://www.hijadela.net/>

The different notions surrounding the mural artistic object in this text echo those Dana Cuff discussed in *The Provisional City* and what Norman M. Klein dealt with in *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*. The city's murals as a whole, not only the Chicano ones, are visible traces of a past the city so endearingly tries to avoid. What is new becomes the prime focus and what is past or damaged becomes obsolete<sup>14</sup>. This obsession with the future and what's to come gave way to academic book titles such as *Looking for Los Angeles*, *The Next Los Angeles* or *Rethinking Los Angeles*, all denoting clearly the proactive focus of the megalopolis, which became almost inherent to its very nature. Yet the pieces of public art that are left in the open to view somewhat derail this ongoing narrative. Sometimes they appear a little decrepit, with graffiti or posters glued on top of them, yet they are still perceivable and most strikingly in Los Angeles, they make time visible. Outside of political or aesthetic concerns, the fundamental aspect of street art in Los Angeles is that it puts time into perspectives, not forwards, but backwards.

With time, the very peculiar urban configuration of Los Angeles created an impressive open space for artistic public displays. It started first with advertising signs that were integrated within the architecture of businesses such as the 1926 bowler hat-shaped building for the Brown Derby restaurant. Rayner Banham in *Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies*, noted that in these early instances of Angeleno marketing strategies, "the building and the symbol are one and the same thing" and he further argued that many other Angeleno buildings also made use of this symbolic architectural strategy "where a single idea has been made dominant over everything else." (Banham, 2009, pp. 94-95) Because the megalopolis was developed horizontally with low buildings aligned in broad avenues, public space became prone to symbolic displays to catch the eye of the drivers. People drive in Los Angeles more than they walk and as such, the open urban space becomes the best of canvas on which to stick up images and messages that, because of this very configuration, called for monumentalism. In an ironic turn of events, murals, deeply rooted in Mexican culture, became the best means of expression in an urban landscape that thrived upon the continuous denial of its Hispanic origins. Through the use of this public artistic practice, time also becomes visible as it reflects a resurgent past.

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14. William David Estrada gives an example of this urban logic oscillating between fantasized restoration and economic interests in his book *The Los Angeles Plaza* which revolves around the establishment of Los Angeles' pueblo as a historic landmark.

French photographer J.R. developed a similar discourse when he displayed on some of the city's buildings huge photographic portraits of old Angelenos, which he later published in *The Wrinkles of the City: Los Angeles*.<sup>15</sup> Each chapter is dedicated to a local person he photographed and the one of Louise Berrebi is fittingly entitled "Wrinkles Never Lie" (J.R. 2011, p. 16) that highlights on its own the inherent problematic it brings about in Los Angeles. If wrinkles never lie, how then can the illusion be maintained? The spontaneous public display of social malcontent expressed through public art is associated with African-Americans and Hispanics because they are suffering in the shadows of the city of illusion. They thus created images to counteract images, and slogans to counteract slogans.

First seen as a space of expression that they were denied, the walls on which graffiti artists wrote their protests became the one way for them to be heard and considered in a city that tries its hardest to mask its problems and hide its undesirables. Usually associated with the hip-hop movement, which is also rooted in Los Angeles and thus to the African-American community, the practice itself came from the Mexican community who was the first to bring it to the city walls. African-American artists later integrated this pictorial public practice with the hip-hop culture and the graffiti it inspired. The Pacific Standard Time, in putting the Los Angeles Street Graphics Committee to the forefront showed this common cultural root of the two communities, which saw Mexicans and African-Americans collaborating on many mural projects in the 1970s. The two later diverged with the rise of hip-hop culture and words became more prominent in African-American graphs when Chicano murals remained focused mostly on images. Jean Baudrillard integrated and quoted in his essay "Forget Foucault" a graffito he saw in Watts, Los Angeles, as an illustration of the illusion principle: "When Jesus arose from the dead, he became a Zombie" (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 57). Even if no graphic image is present, the image it implies is fully articulated and highly political given the fact that the philosopher saw it in the African-American neighborhood where the first major race riot in Los Angeles occurred in 1965.

This highly political tone is associated to the artistic practice of muralism, which is deeply rooted in the Mexican culture. In Mexico, muralism finds its roots in the Olmec civilization, which used it as a means to transmit the people's history through images. Natives kept it very much alive

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15. More information can be found on the artist's official website: <http://www.jr-art.net/fr/projets/the-wrinkles-of-the-city-los-angeles>.

even during the Hispanic colonization era. Eventually, this practice ended up influencing the Spanish artists as well. First apolitical in the early XIX<sup>th</sup> century, muralism was mostly linked with religious themes and Christianity. Juan Cordero was one of the very first to create murals that were centered on philosophical themes, outside any religious concerns. How then not to think of Los Angeles' Mexican past when dealing with the street art practice? How not to wonder about the enduring practice of muralism in Los Angeles and what the practice itself represents in social, historical and spatial terms?

The political dimension now strongly associated with muralism appeared in Mexico in the 1920s. It addressed the many issues that the country was encountering under the post Mexican Revolution government that lasted from 1910 until 1920. One of the muralist movement founders, David Alfaro Siqueiros, immigrated to Los Angeles in the early 1930s. In 1932 he created a mural entitled "América Tropical" which was "dedicated to the local Mexican-American community, representing a Native American impaled on a double crucifix of the Church and imperialism."<sup>16</sup> The controversy resulting from its anti-capitalist theme led to the artist's expulsion from the United States and the whitewashing of the mural almost immediately. But the mural has recently been restored by the Getty Conservation Institute in association with the City of Los Angeles and is now accessible to the public. The space of expression later became a space of representation. Because the Chicano immigrants were largely underappreciated and undervalued, they used this space to remind themselves and subsequent generations of their roots, their history, and their struggles.

What is also notable today is the sudden public recognition and credit given to these pieces of art that the museum is now taking on tour<sup>17</sup>. These spontaneous and unplanned embellishments gave value to houses, buildings, and even neighborhoods that were originally considered as ghettos. The involvement of the Los Angeles city government should also be not-

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16. <http://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/am%C3%A9rica-tropical>, , accessed 22 July 2015.

17. It is also worth mentioning the Los Angeles ArtWalk project that started in 2004 among a few galleries in Gallery row located in Downtown Los Angeles. Many people considered Downtown L.A. as being a ghetto of its own, full of undesirables and unsafe to go to. The initiative was to draw people in and in doing so, forcing them out of their cars and to do something that Angelenos are not so much accustomed to: walking. Art became the pretext for people to actually come and see a neighborhood for themselves. More information can be accessed on the association's website: <http://downtownartwalk.org/> accessed 25 February 2016.

ed since the city employed many mural artists to produce public embellishments in train or metro stations of the region as well as many public buildings, thus grounding (and branding) this artistic practice as a local specificity. As of late, city officials have been trying to distance the city from its most famous neighborhood in order to promote other local talents, which up until now, had never really found any significant echo. Through street art practices, this unwanted population was able to make a visible statement that was largely valued through official organizations such as the renowned Getty Museum Foundation or the MCLA. Many artists are Hispanics and African-Americans. Some other eminent local muralists, however, do not identify as part of any particular community such as Kent Twitchell who produced several famous murals in the city. This artist is known for his realistic takes and depicts people, famous or unknown, for example his *Steve McQueen Monument*<sup>18</sup> or his mural *6 LA Artists*<sup>19</sup> depicting six of his colleagues and friends who graduated like he did from the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles. What is interesting in Twitchell's work is how he reasserts balance in humanity by depicting in very similar traits a Hollywood legend, Jesus, local unknown artists, local famous artists (Lita Albuquerque or Ed Ruscha), and even anonymous people. All are put on the same pedestal, without any hierarchy. All are worthy of being seen.

Street art becomes the privileged vector for the locals to express themselves and to finally be heard outside the limiting imaginary of Hollywood. But, it is also a privileged vector for analyzing the city's social, cultural and political evolution. Even when considering the recently publicized "Alley Project" of Los Angeles gallery owner Jason Ostro, street art also informs about the city.<sup>20</sup> Many artists came by to create their own small mural in the back alleys around the second half of Beverly Boulevard as it descends into downtown Los Angeles. Even though all these art pieces are not necessarily made by local artists, they still say something about the space where they were drawn through the inhabitants' reactions to it. The project changed the very morphology and occupation of the neighborhood's back alleys. It could be argued that the very status of street art also

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18. <http://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/steve-mcqueen-monument>, accessed 22 July 2015.

19. <http://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/6-la-artists>, accessed 22 July 2015.

20. <http://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/this-los-angeles-neighborhood-just-got-brighter-with-colorful-murals-627799619641> accessed 25 February 2016, and <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-alley-project-beverly-murals-gabba-gallery-20150910.htmlstory.html>. accessed 25 February 2016

needs to be taken into account according to these effects. It is not the images drawn on the walls that are the most relevant, but what they represent in the space in which they are inscribed. Tim Ingold in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, argues that when the drawing tells something more than its image, its very classification within the visual arts could be revised: “Despite its conventional classification among the visual arts, drawing is closer to music and dance than it is to, say, painting or photography.” (Ingold, 2013, p. 127) Artist John Berger goes even further as he interrogates the very act of drawing: “Could we not think of drawings as eddies on the surface of the stream of time? The drawing that tells is not an image, nor is it the expression of an image; it is the trace of a gesture.” (Berger, 2005, p. 124) This statement echoes deeper when dealing with street art. Just like Thirdspace, it introduces a movement within the urban space, it is the “trace of a gesture” that translates its momentum to the people coming into contact with them, but to what end? Could we then imagine a trialectics articulated around the role undertaken by street art in a city such as Los Angeles?



Fig. 4: The L.A. Street Art Trialectics

These artists, by projecting their ideas, their visions, their art on and in the city itself are relying on a local population that is accustomed to the power and significance of image. They are sometimes creating illusions

of their own with trompe-l'oeil techniques that can be seen as a moment of arrest for the illusioned. They force attention on a spectacular piece in order to make visible what is underneath – bursting the Angelenos' bubbles even for a moment and trying to realign the city's competing realities. They can also be seen as peaceful elements since they are not relying on violent or crude imagery. Rather, they are appeasing the troubled minds of the disillusioned, showing them an alternate way of owning their turf and subsequently, their existence. These works do not function as a call to arms even when they depict guns. They work as denouncing public ads, making the case for those who are not listened to. In showing at such scales misery or poverty, those suffering from it might find solace in the fact that those who are not listening or who are not acknowledging them will not be able to ignore their very existence. And if no such solace is achieved, these disenfranchised will find comfort in murals depicting a common struggle, history or aspirations. Finally, they can be seen as inspiring for the disillusioned, the category in between, granting them full access to the many levels of interpretation underlying any image. In this way they are passing on the torch that will empower them with a knowledge that will finally enable them to glimpse the whys and the wherefores of Los Angeles.

If anything, the street arts of Los Angeles are soon going to fall under even stronger scrutiny and be put front and center in the upcoming exhibition cycle of the Pacific Standard Time initiative. The next project is in 2017-2018 and is entitled "LA/LA"<sup>21</sup>, letters standing for Los Angeles/Latin America. The many murals of the city are only beginning to be shown in order to let them show a side of the city that has long been left aside. Not so distant from Soja's concept of Thirdspace, UCLA geography professor emeritus Nicholas J. Entrikindiscussed how narrative and geographical synthesis would lead to a better understanding of place. He posits local narratives and local urban morphology as sides to navigate in between. The same purpose can be found in Los Angeles street art quite literally since it engraves local historical, social or spatial narratives on the cityscape itself. Street art becomes a shortcut to better apprehend Los Angeles as it is and thus puts into motion Entrikin's position: "To understand place requires that we have access to both an objective and a subjective reality. [...] Place is best viewed from points in between." (Entrikin, 1991, p. 5).

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21. More information about the project can be accessed through the initiative website: <http://pacificstandardtime.org/> accessed 25 February 2016.



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