



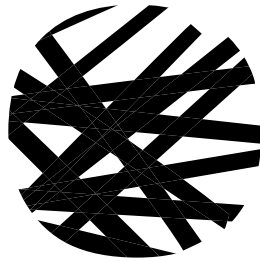
**SAUC**

Graffiti,  
**Street Art &**

**Urban Creativity  
Scientific Journal**

Changing times: Resilience  
Vol. 4 / N° 2

**Urbancreativity.org**



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**Street Art & Urban Creativity**  
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PROGRAMA DOUTORAL **HERITAS** – ESTUDOS DE PATRIMÓNIO [Ref.: PD/00297/2013]  
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SAUC Scientific Journal Editor

After Urban Creativity Lisbon activities (5,6 and 7 of July 2018) here is presented the 4th Volume of SAUC Journal, reaching other audiences and building an ongoing trajectory of recognition aimed to the highest standards, not only academic and or institutional, but above all production and practice-oriented. Engaging with a big heterogeneity of disciplines, focused on graffiti, street art as subjects of theorization and practice, towards the definition of an academic and professional disciplinary field of Urban Creativity. The 2018 activities thematic “about time” aimed the objective of problematizing the chronological constraints of street art, graffiti, and urban creativity in general. Reinforcing the idea of the atemporal, potentially interpreted as something indissociable of human nature, linking 30000 old archeological findings with today. If in the conference we used 3 venues, Main Auditorium, Lagoa Henriques of Fine Arts Faculty Auditoriums, and the Auditorium of Cascais Cultural Center, were more that 80 participants had the opportunity to share perspectives from more that 20 disciplinary fields, and 35 countries. Here in the 2018 edition of SAUC, Volume 4, with near 40 contributions distributed in 2 journal issues.

This issue 2, “Changing times: Resilience” gather contributions about Resilience and adaptability through institutionalization, formal aesthetic shift , Graffiti as a Palimpsest, Framing Poetical Expression, Poetic Objects in Public Space. Geographically framed approached as The “black-and-white mural” in Polytechnio in Athens, The Evolution of Street art and Graffiti in India, Shark Graffiti On Reunion Island Russia - Specifics of Periodization in Russian Street Art . Temporal overview looks upon: strategies for creating village identity symbols using street art tactics, The commodification of alternative cultural spaces, English Language Video Documentaries On Contemporary Graffiti And Street Art, A brief history of street art as a term up to 2000. And finally an article review of Glaser, K., 2017. Street Art and New Media. And the invited contribution of OPNI Group - Grupo OPNI graffiti and urban violence in present-day Brazil.

With contributions from Switzerland, Finland, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Poland, New Zealand, USA, Austria, UK, Russia, and Brazil.

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## Resilience and adaptability through institutionalization in graffiti art: A formal aesthetic shift

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### Abstract

The subject of this paper is the institutionalization of graffiti art. It examines the contextual and formal aesthetic shifts of graffiti within the urban space to graffiti art exhibited in art institutions. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of graffiti art within an institutional framework conducted by formal aesthetic shifts within the art works. Graffiti is always in the verge of the institution and seems challenging to integrate into the institutionalized framework. The significance and contextual change entering the white cube causes several effects such as neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. A formal aesthetic shift based within the art works will be demonstrated by five detailed analyses. Finally, further effects such as reduction and abstraction processes as well as aestheticization and autonomy of the art works will be observed.

**Keywords:** institutionalization, aestheticization, graffiti, graffiti art, white cube, institutions, neutralization, censorship, formal aesthetic shift, resilience, adaptability, urban references, tag, style writing, graffiti code, abstraction

### 1. Introduction and main objectives

The fascination for graffiti can be observed worldwide since its beginning. In the 1980s there were attempts to institutionalize the urban phenomenon. At the same time, institutions always had an ambivalent attitude towards the cryptic, rebellious and peculiar form of art from the very beginning. Nowadays this ambivalence is changing into a trend. Since 2006<sup>1</sup>, institutions have been able to deal with graffiti, street and urban art more intensively and with greater expertise, thus finding their way into museums. The transformation of this unique art form from the urban to the institutional space creates an interesting tension that has aroused a personal and academic interest.

The subject of this paper is the resilience and adaptability through institutionalization of graffiti art. It examines the contextual and formal aesthetic shifts of graffiti within the urban space to graffiti art exhibited in art institutions. Urban space is the natural habitat for traditional graffiti, whereas the sterile and institutional framework or white cube offers a place for contemplation of art and commercial sale. The distinction

between 'street' as the organic context of graffiti and 'institution' as its artificial context illustrates the art historical interest in the research subject. The tension between the 'outside' and 'inside' is intensified by its site specificity. Therefore, the following core thesis regarding the formal aesthetic shift arises: Through institutionalization and commercialization of graffiti art, a formal aesthetic change takes place. Thus a formal aesthetic shift in studio based and institutional works are obvious. Therefore, it should be asked how the aesthetic foundations of graffiti in their traditional environment of urban space differ and manifest in studio-based works created for institutional space? Are there tendencies on a formal aesthetic level that show the shift from the urban to the institutional context?

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of graffiti art within an institutional framework conducted by formal aesthetic shifts within the art works. By pointing out similarities between graffiti art and recognized art historical genres, this thesis of adaptability and resilience in and around institutional frameworks should be supported and finally contribute to the academic legitimacy of this art

genre. Since the change of graffiti from urban to institutional space is at the centre of the attention, the term 'graffiti' is to be used exclusively for lettering sprayed freehand with spray cans (mostly illegally) in the streets and in urban space. For forms of graffiti after entering art institutions and exhibition spaces, will be called 'graffiti art' according to the explanations of Joe Austin and Heike Derwanz (Austin, 2001: 193-195; Derwanz, 2013: 199-203). Regarding the use of the terms 'institutionalization' and 'white cube', it should be clarified that the terms are used in general to refer to the institutional framework.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 - Graffiti code: semiotics, rules and hierarchies

The boundaries between street art, graffiti and graffiti art are not clearly defined. Because this paper analyses only graffiti based art works, a short and preliminary distinction between graffiti and street art regarding the main concerns of this paper should be made. First of all, important contributions that have been devoted in particular to this border area should be pointed out, such as Gabbert, 2007: 15-17; Lewisohn, 2008: 15-23; Reinecke, 2007, 13-17; Waclawek, 2012: 112- 155. Furthermore, a difficulty in the distinction of graffiti and street art, is their coexistence and in some

cases their interaction as exemplified in figure 1. The main differences between graffiti and street art lie in their form, function and intention (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-23). On a formal level, graffiti means freehand lettering sprayed with spray cans or markers in the streets, subways and in the wider urban space. Graffiti is therefore based on words, letters, writing as well as its stylisation and typography. In other words, pieces in the field of graffiti are basically bound to *fonts* (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-23). Street art, on the other hand, serves a much freer and broader description, as Gabbert puts it, street art relies on characters, signs and symbols, whose visual language and imagery is illustrative, flexible, accessible and recognisable (Gabbert, 2007: 16). As a result, all those interventions in urban space that are bound to *figure* belong to street art. On a material level, the differences are just as clear. As the piece in figure 1 shows, graffiti writers only use spray cans or markers. Street artists use a much wider range of materials and techniques, such as, spray paint, stencils, posters, installations and many more.<sup>3</sup> Their formal distinction therefore leads to its different functions and intentions. While in graffiti the codes are difficult to decipher, they usually address a few insiders of the local graffiti scene or specific crews. Street Art, on the other hand, is very accessible and aims to connect with a large audience.



Fig. 1: D\*Face, *Dog Tag*, 2010, stencil and tags on wall, Ecuador.

Artist Faile explains this difference:

“Street art is more about interacting with the audience on the street and the people, the masses. Graffiti isn’t so much about connecting with the masses: It’s about connecting with different crews, it’s an internal language, it’s a secret language. Most graffiti you can’t even read, so it’s really contained within the culture that understands it and does it. Street Art is much more open it’s an open society.” (Lewisohn, 2008: 15).

Nevertheless, graffiti and street art have some common aspects, such as illegality, gaining fame, broad dissemination of their pieces or tags and thus their aim for recognition. Both art forms are integrated into their local context and space. Graffiti and street art pieces are often autonomously produced and financed, do not have a commercial aim and are freely accessible (Lewisohn, 2008: 15; Jaccard, 2012: 29 and Gabbert, 2007: 16).

“Graffiti writing is an activity completely reliant on the tag. Love it or loathe it, we have to accept that the tag is the core of graffiti, and a graffiti writer without a tag wouldn’t be a graffiti writer.” (Lewisohn, 2008: 21) The semiotics, rules and hierarchies of traditional graffiti as well as the fundamental aesthetic “codes” play an important role when analyzing studio based graffiti art works in the institutional space. The decoding of contemporary graffiti art is thus based on the verbal, visual and aesthetic principles and traditions that emerged in the streets of New York in the 1970s and 1980s. As the quotation above says, in the beginning was the tag. The tag is a cryptic, calligraphic and monochrome lettering that is considered the elementary form of all graffiti (Jaccard, 2012: 31; Lewisohn, 2008: 48; Waclawek, 2012: 14). *Tag*, *throw up*, *piece*, *master piece*, are just a few of many expressions for aesthetic codes which were created by the graffiti movement. Moreover, graffiti evoked not only unique and peculiar aesthetic fundamentals, but also its own rules and customs, such as the game for *fame* and foremost *train writing* (Jaccard, 2012: 31; Reinecke, 2007: 23). Gaining *fame* is strongly connected with graffiti hierarchies. In general, a *tag* or *piece* of another writer should not be sprayed over unless it is sprayed on a *hall of fame*<sup>4</sup>. If it does happen outside of a *hall of fame*, it is defined as a *crossing* and in most cases means an attack on a writer and therefore a hostility between

two or more crews (Zolle, 2009: 78-79; Macdonald, 2001: 204-215). Aesthetically and hierarchically speaking graffiti cannot be summed up in a couple of sentences. A profound research on the aesthetics, hierarchies and rules of graffiti can be found in Nancy Macdonald (2001) as well as Craig Castleman (1986).<sup>5</sup>

Graffiti codes are difficult to decode, which is why they usually only address a few insiders of the local graffiti scene or specific crews. “Graffiti doesn’t have any message for the general public. It’s for an elite group of people. If people want to understand it, they have to work hard to enter the language of graffiti. Public art is the opposite.” (Crew Against People, in: Lewisohn, 2011: 160). This short quote from the Prague artist collective *Crew Against People* (CAP) states an important issue in the nature of graffiti. Due to the inaccessibility of symbols and coded language, graffiti has no intention of reaching a large mass, which distinguishes it also from street and public art (Lewisohn, 2008: 15). Some of the main elements of graffiti include illegality, opposition to the system, inherent aesthetics as in *style writing* as well as context and site specificity (Stahl, 2002: 107-108). Based on these fundamental principles of graffiti, it seems almost impossible to think about the exhibition of graffiti art in art institutions.

In brief, traditional graffiti has developed its own terminology, which does not originate from “traditional” fine arts. The unique system of signs and symbols, regulations and hierarchies that graffiti developed, could mostly and only be decoded by insiders of graffiti culture. The peculiarity of its semiotics, regulations, hierarchies and goals makes accessibility, understanding, decoding and acceptance for outsiders very difficult. As demonstrated in this short section dedicated to graffiti in the streets, it becomes clear, that there are challenging and heavy connotations accompanying it. This illustrates the development of a certain tension when entering the institutional space, which will be presented in detail in the next section.

## 2. Institutional shift in graffiti art: From the streets to the white cube

Up to now graffiti was a subcultural practice with a systematic life of its own and a social context that distinguished itself from elite society (Katadzic, 2014: 68, Thornton, 1996: 162). In the 1970s and 1980s, a first attempt was made to decri-

minimalize graffiti and integrate it into galleries as art. Graffiti was considered a new trend in the art world from 1980-1983 (Waclawek, 2012: 58). Suter (1994: 148) describes the transition of graffiti into the institutionalized art world as *high-graffiti*. Julia Reinecke describes three attempts to establish graffiti in the art world. The first began in 1972, the second in 1980, the third attempt has lasted since 2000. Within the third attempt the term 'street art' has arisen and established itself as part of urban art (Reinecke, 2007: 26-29). The shift to the institutionalized art context brought up the problem of *street-credibility*. The basic concept of *street-credibility* is considered as authenticity characteristic for graffiti. Exhibiting in galleries was thus considered a *sell-out* in the 1980s (Katadzic, 2014: 69).

The introduction of graffiti into galleries and the commercial art market in the 1980s was therefore not only fundamental and important for the art movement's acceptance and legitimization, but also for the establishment of a target group (Derwanz, 2013: 195-234; Lewisohn, 2008: 138). This is accompanied by the change from graffiti as a subcultural practice of expression to a commercial art form. With the negatively connoted term *sell-out*, graffiti lost credibility within the scene and thus also respect for its hard-won distinction from the commercial system, but managed to catch up with the art market. Gradually, but successively, the transition of the graffiti phenomenon from 'outside' to 'inside' began, which to a certain extent led to the adaption towards the conventions of the institutional system of art (Derwanz, 2013: 208). The institutionalization of graffiti generated a re-evaluation of a former subcultural movement. Through the institutional shift graffiti was not only re-evaluated, but also recognized as an independent art genre (Austin, 2001: 193 and Derwanz, 2013: 199). This shift implied that the transition to the curated gallery space marked the end of traditional graffiti, which led to a terminological distinction. By entering the system of the art institution, graffiti had to be recognized as 'art' and consequently gained the label 'graffiti art' in order to be considered as an independent art genre (Austin, 2001: 193-195; Derwanz, 2013: 199-203). Thus 'graffiti' belonged on the street, but 'graffiti art' was exhibited in institutions (Austin, 2001: 199). Exhibitions in museums, the sale of graffiti art in galleries and its resale in auction houses did not only lead to a repositioning but ultimately to a re-evaluation and legitimization of the art movement (Bengtsen, 2014: 116; Danysz, 2016: 223 – 231). Most of these integrational results

are becoming visible today, when commercial companies are using graffiti and street art for marketing strategies or even private or state gentrification processes promise to increase urban development, as for instance the Wynwood Art District (Miami) demonstrates (Abarca, 2015:232).

### 3. Graffiti art in the white cube: Significance and effects

The institutional shift leads foremost to changes in the context, which is a central point of criticism and discussion, especially amongst relevant literature. The loss of context or the inseparable nature of object and context in graffiti must be critically questioned (Duncan, 2015: 129-137; Bengtsen, 2015: 220-233). Thus, in graffiti, the quality of a piece only comes out in the context directly connected to it (Duncan, 2015: 130). Its significance and effects will be discussed in this section.

By entering institutional space, the subversive values of graffiti art directly collide with the values of the established and elite art system (Duncan, 2015: 130; Derwanz, 2013: 207). This shift of graffiti and street art to a completely different and changed context means a loss of its original function in the public sphere. In its natural habitat graffiti is accessible to everyone, in the institutional framework it leads to the exclusion of different social views and thus the access remains only for the privileged class. Additionally, the context shift means not only a site-specific shift, but also a change in its before mentioned target group (Duncan, 2015: 129,135). Before graffiti was accessing only a hand full of people that were able to decode the inscriptions, whereas nowadays art collectors and connoisseurs reflect on the market value of a studio based graffiti artwork. The challenge to connect graffiti and the institution especially can be pinned on its ideological divergence. Graffiti which arose completely separate from the traditional and institutional art system, therefore developed its own urban ways of communication, its own qualitative standards of style and aesthetics (Duncan, 2015: 136; Lachmann, 1988: 242-243). Therefore, the implementation of graffiti into the institutional space seems very challenging and delicate.

Furthermore, exhibiting graffiti art in an institutional framework means the loss of its organic meaning or even censorship. That is why Lewisohn describes art institutions in relation to graffiti and street art as "sanctioning bodies" (Lewisohn, 2008: 134). Art institutions function as sanctioning bodies, because the original rebellious and dynamic

aura of urban art is lost through the contextual shift, institutionalization and academization (Duncan, 2015: 132; Lewisohn, 2008: 134 und Suter, 1994: 149). In urban space, graffiti or street art is essentially linked to their social and political context, which mostly reinforces their effect. When graffiti art is exhibited in a white cube, this contextual and socio-political meaning gets lost (Lewisohn, 2008: 135). Bengtsen's many important remarks regarding the exhibition *Art in the Streets*, which took place in The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2012, illustrate this problematic - between genuine 'anti-commercial' and exhibited or commercial art works, very well. Finally, the effects of the genuine 'anti-commercial' expression of an art piece might be perceived as 'authentic' but there is always a possibility of it being only staged or re-enacted for an exhibition, which Bengtsen refers to as "double bluff" (Bengtsen, 2014: 124-127).

Although the change from the streets to the institutions entailed substantial and considerable challenges, these should not only be viewed negatively. Through the increased attention and exhibition of graffiti and street art in art institutions, the art movement is finally gaining long awaited legitimacy, acceptance and appreciation of the general public as well as the established art institutions. Nevertheless, this upswing and acceptance obliterates this negative stigmatized graffiti, new target groups increase the number of visitors in museums and therefore exhibiting urban art offers a new marketing strategy to gain new audience in art institutions (Bengtsen, 2015: 221-223; Danysz, 2016: 223-231).

Furthermore, the main effects caused by the institutional shift shall be discussed. Firstly, there are the effects of neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. The art works exhibited in art institutions lack political and ethical connotations, which is why they mostly appear clinical, clumsy and misguided. Studio-based works appear as replications or representations of urban aesthetics, which do not necessarily emphasize the quality of a *writer*. Also, the quality of a piece only comes out in the context associated with it (Duncan, 2015: 130-133; Lewisohn, 2008: 127). According to Lewisohn, the institutional framework leads to the neutralization of urban art pieces because they have been legally painted. In illegal graffiti there is a "tangible conceptual aura," whereas in the institution this is not existent (Lewisohn, 2008: 127). Museums are considered as state institutions, therefore they are the mouthpieces of the state and imply a hierarchical

system of values that represents wealth and cultural heritage, which makes graffiti challenging to exhibit due to its ideological divergence towards traditional art (Lewisohn, 2008: 127).

This leads inevitably to the second effect of neutralization, which is censorship. When graffiti and street art collaborate within institutions, there are challenges for curators as well as artists, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings regarding motifs and intentions. Sometimes misunderstandings or different perspectives between artist, curator and institution lead to censorship. Bengtsen illustrates the censorship of Blu's mural at the exhibition *Art in the Streets* (2012) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. On December 9, 2010 the mural was removed before its completion and even before the opening of the exhibition. The piece was classified as very provocative and highly political, the content of which was not supported nor granted from the side of the museum and not even agreed between curator and artist (Bengtsen, 2014: 117-120).

Thirdly, there is a change of context when graffiti art works are exhibited in the white cube. The neutral white 'cell' means a loss of the political and social potential of an artwork and thus leads to a big challenge for artists to enable their art pieces to have an impact. In order to make art works in the white cube impact aesthetically and contextually the artists make use of urban references. Indeed, Bengtsen has observed the following: "urban artworks often incorporate thematic and aesthetic references - as well as references in a material level - to the street." (Bengtsen, 2014: 75-76). He assumes that artists use typical motifs, materials and aesthetic codes in order to reactivate the context of the streets in the white cube. These 'tropes' include references to rebellion, critical references to authorities and many others, which were extended by Patrick Nguyen.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the new exhibition context has considerable influence on the artists, their imagery and the creation of new works. In order to gain impact in the changed context of the institution, street artists make use of the discussed 'tropes' that refer to context tied to the streets, illegality and urban space. In this respect, art works from the graffiti art seem 'only' representations of urban space. References to street codes of a former subculture reactivate the viewer's memory of that passed rebellion against the establishment. This contributes to a tension in the white cube, which the audience often per-



ceives as fascinating and compelling.

Formal aesthetic shift and references in studio based works of graffiti art are analyzed in detail in section 4.

#### 4. Formal aesthetic analysis

The choice of the artists was based on the connection to traditional graffiti as well as its reference in their creative practice as well. Their roots in graffiti should be recognizable in their concepts, production aesthetics and content. However, the artists should differ in their career and fame. Therefore art pieces of the artists John 'Crash' Matos, John 'JonOne' Perello, MOSES & TAPS™, Tilt and Thierry Furger were selected. It is obvious that formal aesthetic examination of five series of artworks does not lead to a full representational result, nevertheless certain tendencies become evident through this initial analysis.

Through a traditional formal aesthetic analysis the influence of institutionalization of graffiti art will be demonstrated in its aesthetic essence. This means, by the deconstruction of the formal aesthetic and conceptual characteristics of an art work the shift from traditional graffiti to institutionalized

graffiti art can be determined. To legitimate graffiti art as an autonomous art movement within the art institutions at the end of each artist's analysis aesthetic connections to existing fine art will be found. Eventually the analyzed art works are going to be classified in existing fine art genres. Regarding the final interpretation, exegesis and meaning of the artworks presented the remarkable explanations and derivations in Cedar Lewisohn's book *Abstract Graffiti* (2011) were of great significance.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.1 - *The Color Swatches* (John 'Crash' Matos)

John 'Crash' Matos is a veteran of the graffiti movement, who sprayed on trains in the 1980s and was among the first writers to transfer his graffiti pieces onto canvas. Color explosions as well as the omnipresent icon of the eye are predominant features in Crash's series entitled *The Color Swatches*. The multicolored swatches imitate amplified sprayed tags or 'throw ups' on walls. The opaque yet transparent coloring and the layouts of the different patches enact a playful assimilation of tags and paint splats.

Regarding the three-divided composition of the art work *Silver Color Swatch* (Fig. 2), two characteristics which derive



Fig. 2: John 'Crash' Matos, *Silver Color Swatch*, 2017, spray paint on canvas, 122 x 76 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.

from traditional graffiti writing become apparent: the letters and the omnipresent eye. Taking a closer look at the individual letters in the art work, they appear similar to the typography of Marvel comic books. A comparison with a comic excerpt from Marvel Comics (Fig. 3) illustrates this similarity very well. As demonstrated in the comparison there are typographic references to comic traditions in Crash's pieces. Even Crash's pseudonym underlines this connection between him and the tradition of the comics, which writes out words of certain sounds. Further, it can be assumed that the predominant symbol of the eye is a reduction of the *characters* playing a role in 1980s graffiti. Looking back at older paintings of Crash, such as *Arcadia Revisited* (Fig. 4) from 1988, it becomes clear that *characters* constituted a larger part of the compositions, whereas today they have been reduced to the symbol of the eye. Last but not least there are the color swatches. The opaque yet transparent coloring, as well as the design of the various splashes, represents a playful and aesthetic approach to the street codes and their transience back in the 1980s. The powerful colored clouds or splashes imitate tags or throw ups on public walls in an abstracted manner. The characteristic of Crash's oeuvre, to mix and compose individual excerpts can be observed throughout his entire later body of work. Magda Danysz describes this peculiarity in Crash's imagery as "patchwork," which represents the reflection of the American pop art and advertising industry during the 1960s and 1970s (Danysz, 2016: S. 63).

Summarizing, it can be assumed that letters as well as *characters* only appear in a reduced version. Accompanied by the legacy of old school graffiti Crash developed compositions, while traversing several abstraction processes. Lettering, writing and *tagging* became color swatches. Writing nowadays constitutes only a small part of his art works. Full feminine faces from his earlier paintings in the 1980s and 1990s were shortened to one essential icon - the eye. In particular, the reference to the comic tradition in Crash's stylization of letters and swatches or bubbles becomes obvious. Even his mostly commissioned *murals* as the one designed in Zurich (Fig. 5) in 2017 demonstrate already known symbols such as: the eye-icon, letters and imitated paint splashes. The formal structure of the mural shows compositional similarities in comparison with the series of works (Fig. 2).

Regarding categorization of the series *The Color Swatches*, the stylization of his letters and icons conveys a nostalgia

not only for old school graffiti, but also for the advertising industry of the 1960s. The imitation of elements such as comics, advertising and pop art give his works a certain 'retro look'. Following Lewisohn's remarks, the thick outlines, graphic elements, symbols or icons found in Crash's art works as well as the reference to comic tradition could be classified as *retro pop* (Lewisohn, 2011: S. 77).

#### 4.2 - 24/7 (John 'JonOne' Perello)

John 'JonOne' Perello was born in the United States. There he achieved a worldwide breakthrough when he moved to Paris and, due to his expressionistic abstract style, he is often said to be Jackson Pollock of graffiti art. The painting 24/7 (Fig. 6) looks like a complex pattern of lines, which appears abstract and expressionistic. On a closer look at least two layers are recognizable. The lower layer contains a cryptic pattern applied in different colors, the upper layer demonstrates white and wild squiggles enriched by spontaneous multicolored spots. However, the cryptic pattern can be decoded as writing. A characteristic of Jon One's oeuvre is that he writes his *tag* "JONONE," sometimes in variations as in "JONONE ROCK," repetitively. Eventually this regular repetition of his *tag* develops into an abstract pattern. Additional symbols from traditional graffiti, more precisely from wild style, such as star or arrow symbols, can be deciphered (Waclawek, 2012: 46). The writing is no longer carrying a verbal message nor it has a functional use. Writing shifts to a cryptic-abstract pattern and is thus "only" a means of aesthetic expression. Nevertheless, the image convinces through its visual character, gesture of the writing and the power of expression.

Looking back at JonOne's oeuvre, it seems as if an interest and tendency towards abstraction has already been developed since the beginning of his artistic career. On canvases and in institutional spaces he mainly works with the repetition of his *tag*, as a *mural* at the Pera Museum in Istanbul shows (Fig. 7). The wall of the museum itself thus replaces the canvas and presents this infinity of tags that dissolve in its obsessive repetition and results as a structured, abstract and colorful web.

As a tendency to abstraction and a detachment of writing from its original function has been demonstrated, the similarities to abstract expressionism and action painting should now be examined through a brief comparison with Jackson Pollock's *Alchemy* (Fig. 8).

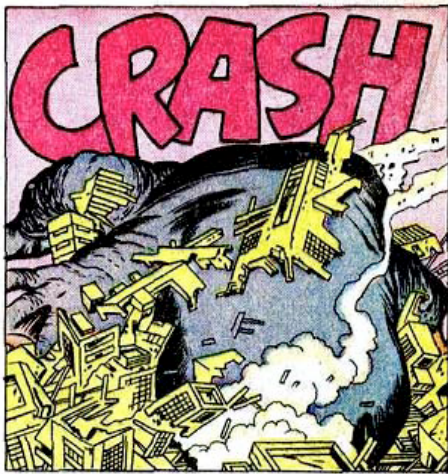


Fig. 3: Jack Kirby, *CRASH. Giganto Falling into waterfront buildings*, 1961, Excerpt of Marvel Comic „Fantastic Four“.



Fig. 4: John ‚Crash‘ Matos, *Arcadia Revisited*, 1988, spray paint on canvas, 245 x 173 cm, Collection Veranneman-Stiftung, Kruishoutern.



Fig. 5: John ‚Crash‘ Matos, ohne Titel, *mural*, 2017, Zürich.



Fig. 6: John ‚JonOne‘ Perello, *24/7*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 98 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



A braid of lines constitutes the multi-layered nature of the two works. The effect of both works is expressive, energetic, wild and dynamic. Yet, some differences, apart from the choice of colors, can be clearly identified. The painting *Alchemy* demonstrates, that the colors have been swung in the air first while the canvas was laid on the ground. This working practice cannot be demonstrated in JonOne's *24/7*. The systematic brush strokes or the direction of the writing layers in *24/7* show that most of it has been painted directly on the canvas. This means that JonOne writes his *tags* on the canvas and does not swing the paint in the air. This probably marks the greatest difference between JonOne's approach and that of action painting. It also becomes apparent that the structure of the painting *24/7* is clearly influenced by the writing direction, whereas in *Alchemy* the lines and color spots seem more uncontrolled and unintentional. Following that, it can be suggested that JonOne uses an alternate form of action painting. The canvas may be hanged on the wall first and then it is finished by laying it on the floor.<sup>8</sup> Summing up, the writing forms a structural basis for JonOne's art works and are visually closely related to abstract expressionism. While lettering has lost its original function, every single line of the letter gains autonomy. In contrast to the traditional abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, JonOne came to apply this technique from a completely different context. Contextually speaking, there is nothing in common, also because JonOne is an autodidact and had no fine art education. Through the obsessively repetitive writing of his *tag*, his roots in graffiti are still evident.

According to Hinz (2011) single lines are fundamental to letters and writing. Writing made it possible to fix language by means of an abstract system of signs. Writing gives a visual result similar to drawing, except writing is non-representational. However, the typeface, especially the single letter, has an aesthetics that can be thus described as linear (Hinz, 2011: 9). Following his aesthetic approach, it seems quite interesting when decoding JonOne's art work. The higher the number of repetitive *tags* on JonOne's canvases, the more abstract the paintings appear. The system of signs in writing therefore mutates into an abstract and repetitive web of infinite lines. Thus, the visual character of the writing undergoes a process of abstraction to the point where font is no longer recognizable. Lewisohn also observes this process: "Another prominent technique employed in the works in this section is the use of repetitive tagging to create an abstract

image." (Lewisohn, 2011: 105). Due to formal aesthetic similarities to abstract expressionism, and following Lewisohn, the work *24/7* of JonOne could be classified as *abstract expressionism*.

#### 4.3 - *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™ IX* (MOSES & TAPS™)

MOSES & TAPS™ are the avant-garde misfits of the graffiti scene. Meanwhile their fame has crossed the borders of Germany up to an international level. With their creative concepts they try to break the unwritten rules and hierarchies of graffiti. MOSES & TAPS™ certainly redefined graffiti for themselves and developed their own values of aesthetics. The piece of series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™ IX* (Fig. 9) appears as polygons of different lengths. First of all, an abstract geometric interwoven figure painted with different colors, structures and techniques appears. All outlines of the figure are black and thick. Black shadows indicate a certain three-dimensionality of the figure portrayed. The title of the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* derives from the abstract, look-alike letters, which are merely a representation of graffiti writing. An aesthetic proximity to graffiti is suggested, because the intricate figure reflects fragments of the style writing.

In the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* abstract and graffiti look-alike writing as well as flashy colors are part of the visual language. The look-alike letters evoke aesthetic proximity to graffiti, although there are only abstract and interwoven shapes. As known from traditional graffiti writing, portraying a name or a clear message is an imperative. Unfortunately, in case of *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* there is neither sense in the formal elements nor a possible content to decode. Nevertheless, the viewer is forced to find a logical meaning and usually finds it through his or her very own imagination. The title *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* therefore reveals the concept behind the artworks in form of an abstract, non-readable and senseless piece, that reflects the clichés of traditional graffiti writing and deceives the beholder at the same time. The concept of freedom, which is very important to MOSES & TAPS™, is translated not only in the "meaningless" content but also to the shape of the canvases itself. In *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* an unsubstantial deception creates the compulsion to over interpretation. The aesthetics of style writing are only used as a conceptual tool. The conceptual controversy regarding traditional graffiti is pinnacle in their artwork. Finally, the representation of graffiti aesthetics without any content moves to the center of attention.

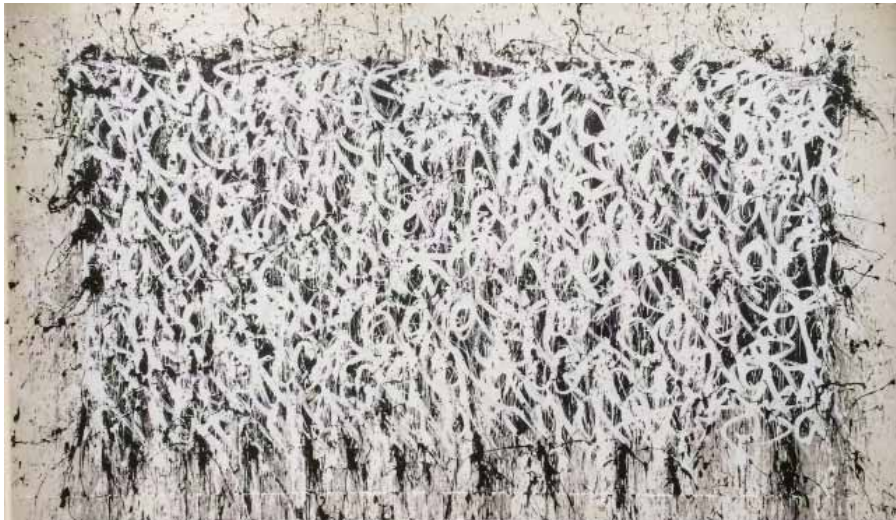


Fig. 7: John 'JonOne' Perello, *Untitled*, 2014, spraypaint, marker and acrylic on a wall, Pera Museum, Istanbul.



Fig. 8: Jackson Pollock, *Alchemy*, 1976, oil, aluminum, alkyd enamel paint with sand, pebbles, fibers, and wood on commercially printed fabric, 114.6 x 221.3 cm, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.



Fig. 9: MOSES & TAPS™, *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI IX*, 2017, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 152 x 170 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



Fig. 10: MOSES & TAPS™, *piece*, date unknown, (Source: image archive Galerie Droste).

If a piece of the artists on a train (Fig. 10) is compared to the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup>, great similarities can be observed. Also, in this case different interwoven and colored forms can be seen. The shapes appear close to the ones in the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup>. It is questionable whether it is only differently arranged forms and colors or the word “Taps” can be read from the piece. This comparison between urban and institutional space shows that the concept of imitation of graffiti aesthetics is remarkably similar or even identical in the artistic practice of MOSES & TAPS<sup>TM</sup>. A comparison between institutional and graffiti pieces by MOSES & TAPS<sup>TM</sup> reveal that their concepts and formal aesthetics are quite similar. This does not mean that they do not adapt their works to the context of the white cube.<sup>9</sup>

It seems almost effortless and extremely aesthetic how MOSES & TAPS<sup>TM</sup> question the rigid codes of the former subculture. As a matter of fact, graffiti aesthetics are the main part of their artistic practice and concept. Indeed, the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup> is very conceptual and highly critical, as it questions the graffiti system and its perception in the social system. The analysis of the series reveals multiple similarities to conceptual art. Firstly, the artists pursue a precise goal even before the formal realization of the art works. They plan how the art work should be perceived in advance. Secondly, the formal aesthetics and its creation are themselves the subject matter of the art work. The deliberate reference to the typical aesthetics of graffiti itself becomes the main theme and content of the work. A kind of re-enactment or parody of the principles of traditional graffiti writing takes place. Therefore, and following the argumentation in Lewisohn (2011: 155) the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI*<sup>TM</sup> of MOSES & TAPS<sup>TM</sup> could be classified as *conceptual art*.

#### 4.4 - *Just Clouds* (Thierry Furger)

Since 2007 Thierry Furger has been researching the transience and aesthetics of illegal *tags* and *pieces*. During his research on the ephemeral phenomenon, the series *Buffed Paintings* developed. As an artist and observer of society, Furger explores the aesthetic forms of graffiti culture. The series *Just Clouds* (Fig. 11) is an abstracted evolution of the original series *Buffed Paintings*. In *Just Clouds* there are white backgrounds, and on top of that cloud-like round shapes are placed. To some extent, wipe marks and drips running over are recognizable. As shown in the comparative illustration (Fig. 12) of the *Buffed Paintings* series, an aluminium plate with a partially cleaned piece can be recognized.

As the title of the series suggests, Furger's main artistic concern is the *buff*.<sup>10</sup>

During Furger's long-term observations of the aesthetics of graffiti the cleaning traces inspired Furger's own formal aesthetic characteristics. Furger's artistic practice is explained as following. First, he sprays *tags*, *throw up* and *pieces* on metal or aluminium boards. Afterwards, they are cleaned or painted over by the artist using the same graffiti-killers as the official train staff. As he himself is creating his own *buff*, he is able to control and steer the effects of transience. Depending on the surface material and color applied, different compositions of color clouds, wipe marks, drips and swings appear as a result of spontaneous chemical reactions. Therefore, he creates pieces that are contrasting and challenging the usual high gloss look of art pieces exhibited in the white cube. Furger deliberately dispenses the representation of lettering, calligraphy, style or its decorative aesthetics but portrays an abstract representation of the aesthetics of speed and transience.

The explained working procedure was used also for the *Just Clouds* series. In addition, he does not even tag the plates anymore, instead he only applies splashes of colour, that he buffs and wipes to cloud-like figures. In other words, abstraction and reduction means changing the writing to a dash of color. Perhaps the change in the title is an indication of the abstracted reduction in Furger's concept. Finally, the concept of the series *Just Clouds* originates in the speed of graffiti buff and consequently in transience. It demonstrates abstract and reduced representation and imitation of ephemerality in graffiti. The series *Just Clouds* and *Buffed Paintings* show that Furger's artistic concept pays homage to urban aesthetics. Indeed, the proximity to the urban space is recognizable comparing Furgers series to a random buff encountered in a train station near Lisbon (Fig. 13). In addition to the elaborate arguments above, a reduction and great abstraction can be observed in the series *Just Clouds*.

To conclude with a possible categorization of Furger's creative practice, Lewisohn's explanations are once again helpful: “Likewise, the artists in this section take their inspiration from a primitive, ‘uncultured’ style of creativity.” (Lewisohn 2011: 165). The gesture of the streets and the primitive aesthetics of the urban space and transience are clearly visible. The





Fig. 11: Thierry Furger, *Just Clouds 1–3*, 2017, ink and acetone on aluminium, 130 x 92.3 cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



Fig. 12: Thierry Furger, *Going Over*, 2010, spray paint ink and acetone on aluminium, 128 x 268.5 cm, (Source: image archive Thierry Furger).



Fig. 13: Photo archive of the author, *buff* at the trainstation in Carcavelos, Lisbon, 2017.



inspiration for his artistic practice is also based on his own observations, reflections and experiences within the urban space. Furger's series *Just Clouds* could thus be classified as *raw* or *gestural abstract expressionism* (Lewisohn, 2011: 105 and 165).<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.5 - BA 13/17 (Tilt)

Tilt is a French artist who belongs to the second graffiti generation of France. With numerous interventions and installations in urban space, he has already caught a lot of attention. He is currently working on a new concept that is focusing on the destructive and raw aesthetics of graffiti. The piece *BA 13/17* (Fig. 14) appears as abstract representations of lines, drips, shapes and colors applied on a plaster board. On a closer look, fragments of writing can be detected. The different structures and textures indicate that markers, spray paint and other varnishes were applied on plaster board. It is also noticeable that scratches have been made even before the application of color. A phallic symbol with the inscription "ZOB"<sup>12</sup> is carved into the plaster board surface of *BA 13/17*. Some of the lines are edgy and twisted, which show similarities to *tags*. Others are curved and dynamic thus they appear as fragments of a *throw up*. However, there are no clear letters, words or verbal messages. Due to the materiality of the pieces they eventually appear like replicas of wall fragments.

While interpreting the plaster board series of Tilt the carvings and primitive elements are reminiscent of Paris' carvings in Brassai's photographs. Traces of human existence are scratched into the surface. In order to portray the rough and "unaesthetic" gesture of urbanity Tilt uses wild and illegible tags and deliberate drips as a formal aesthetic tool. The complexity of the fragments of *throw ups* and *tags* show the transience of urban space. By this practice the artist re-enacts and refers to the complexity and ephemerality of graffiti in urban space on a plaster surface. This reference to the transience of the streets and urban space becomes obvious, when a random street corner with illegal *tags* and *throw ups* is compared (Fig. 15).

When this series is exhibited in the institutional framework the pieces appear confusing and contradictory, which often stimulates reflection in the viewer. Urban semiotics are actively perceived, but cannot be decoded verbally or contextually. On the one hand, the *BA* series critically questions and

pinnacles the challenge of the institutionalization of graffiti, on the other hand, by hanging a re-enacted wall fragment in an exhibition space, a sacralisation of graffiti occurs. Tilt's strategy of imitating urban aesthetics is not only noticeable in the series *BA 13/17*, but also in other works by the artist exposed in the institutional space. In *Minibus* (Fig. 16) exhibited at the Pera Museum, an entire bus body was bombed with *tags*, *throw ups* and *pieces* and subsequently hanged to a museum wall. His compositions thus represent the transient and ephemeral gesture of the streets. Finally, integrating Tilt's series into an art historical context, the approaches of art brut appear suitable. As observed in the pieces *BA 13/15* and *BA 13/17*, Jean Dubuffet's creative practice was already permeated by the gesture of urban space. The interest that connects Tilt with Dubuffet is the pure expression of the human being, regardless of its origin (Lewisohn, 2011: 165).

Art is inspired by primitive, non-cultural or unaffiliated tradition, as is the case by graffiti. Graffiti which is socially seen as "lay" or amateur art but nevertheless is exhibited in institutions thus shows similarities to art brut or 'raw' art. Just as in art brut, graffiti artists are mostly self-taught. Reduced, abstract and decontextualized shapes from the urban field are portrayed as inner and creative reflection of the urban space. The series is about an aesthetic concept that has strong tendencies of an expressionist and raw gesture. Tilt's works seem closely related to art brut and abstract expressionism. The ephemeral layers, such as complexity and transience, as well as visual references and codes evoke memories of the urban space. Through the reproduction of the pure expression of graffiti, Tilt's works appear naive and primitive. Due to the interpretations developed in this section Tilt's series *BA* could thus be classified within the category of *raw* or *gestural abstract expressionism* (Lewisohn, 2011: 101, 165).

#### 5. A formal aesthetic shift towards the institution or resilience of graffiti art?

The results of the art work analyses, interpretations and tendencies between institutionalized art genres are summarized in figure 17. In general, several changes have been observed on a formal aesthetic level, which were demonstrated individually for each artist. The elaborated tendencies summarized to central processes. In this regard Bengtsen's explanations of "tropes," which can be found especially in street art, are also applicable on graffiti art. Aesthetic, material, thematic or



Fig. 14: Tilt, *BA 13 17*, 2016, mixed media on plaster board, 100 x 70cm, Kolly Gallery, Zürich.



Fig. 15: Photo archive of the author, mere layers of tags and throw ups, Lisbon, 2016.



Fig. 16: Tilt, *Minibus*, 2014, Installation, Pera Museum, Istanbul.

content-related references are made in artworks to maintain the connection to urbanity when exhibited in an institutional framework (Bengtson, 2014: 75-82). Applied on the analysed works, this means: In the painting *Silver Color Swatches* the silver surface becomes a substitute for the train surface. JonOne works with *tags* as an aesthetic reference and visual code to portray the expression of the street on his canvases. In the series *IMAGE OF GRAFFITI™* by MOSES&TAPS™ the aesthetic reference of traditional style writing is central. The series *Just Clouds* from Furger portrays the aesthetic reference to graffiti buffs. Additionally, the aluminium panels constitute a strong material reference. Tilt's works are also filled with aesthetic references to urban space. These include primitive scratches and *tags* as contextual reference, the plaster base as well as the use of spray cans and markers as a material reference.

Regarding the institutionalization discussed in section 3, further formal aesthetic changes can be observed. Reduction, abstraction and aestheticization as well as neutralization processes can further be observed. As a result of the institutional and contextual shift studio-based graffiti art works gain autonomy. The mechanisms of resilience and formal aesthetic tendencies towards the institution in graffiti art will be explained in the following two sections.

### 5.1 - Tendencies of reduction and abstraction

Letters belong to an abstract system of signs. Through the linear structure of a letter, therefore the basic element of abstraction is inherent to it (Hinz, 2011: 9.). This leads to the assumption that abstraction processes in graffiti art are quite obvious and were demonstrated analysing the artworks. This means, uncontextualized fragments of different graffiti typographies result in new abstract and multi-layered representations. Former *tags*, *throw ups* and even *buffs* are abstracted and reduced to aesthetic splashes, swatches or pale clouds of different shades. Furthermore, repetitive writing of *tags* and letters, results in abstract patterns and patterns of lines with a captivating expression. Additionally, a reduction of graffiti aesthetics to an abstract representation of "meaningless" figures and structures, which do not contain any verbal or content-related message, was observed.

The semiotics of urban space has thus lost context and significance in the institution, which gives them a neutralized appearance. Verbal codes and decorative stylistic devices

from the graffiti tradition are no longer used because of their systematic, hierarchical and content-related function, but to create new creative concepts evoking complex interpretations that can only be decoded while contemplating in the institutional framework. Thus a detachment of the writing is demonstrated in the analysed works. Finally, former *tags*, *throw ups* and *pieces* are reduced to abstract geometric forms, expressive patterns or textures which reflect and represent the aesthetics of the urban space.

### 5.2 - Aestheticization and autonomy in graffiti art works

The process of aestheticization is observed within the chosen working materials and the form of presentation of the analysed art works. The former walls of an abandoned house became canvases or custom made aluminium panels. The surfaces or backgrounds of the artworks often imitate textures of urban space, such as walls or trains. The former spray can is substituted by brushes. Also, spray paint is supplemented by the use of acrylic or even oil paint. The form of presentation of the exhibited objects changes accordingly to its context and soon adapts to the traditional framework of art institutions. Through the process of aestheticization and institutionalization a certain distance from the object to the viewer is built up. Furthermore, the contextual shift and dissociation between art and audience demonstrates, while exhibited art pieces are not allowed to be touched, whereas graffiti in the streets is unprotected from external influences (Lewisohn, 2008: 127).

The topos of the white cube in the institutional framework additionally reinforces the effects of neutralization and aestheticization illustrated in section 3. On the one hand the works lose their site specific, political and ethical connotations (Duncan, 2015: 132; Lewisohn, 2008: 127, 134 and Suter, 1994: 149); on the other hand, the artists are freed from the rules and hierarchies of the street and can fully concentrate on the creative process and the independent new message of their art. The art pieces themselves are no longer personal acts of vandalism, but now appear as autonomous art works. Graffiti was born in the streets. Its essence lies in contextuality and ephemerality. In the streets graffiti is connected to vandalism, graffiti and system critique is obvious in urban space. In institutional space, however, graffiti art is exhibited for contemplation, criticism and to be sold.

The core elements of graffiti and graffiti art could not be more different. In institutional space, the art work represents

Evaluation of the analysis and categorization

	material/technique	formal aesthetic analysis	stylistic elementsc	ategorizationa	ffiliation
<b>Color Swatches</b> <b>John ,Crash' Matos</b>	freehand spray technique, spraypaint on canvas	graphic composition, thick outlines, single stylized letters, symbol of the eye, bubble-like shapes, colored areas, juxtaposition	pop art, comic tradition, icons, logo, advertising, commercialization 1960 years, retro look,	retro pop	graffiti art
<b>24/7</b> <b>John JonOne Perello</b>	acrylic on canvas, brush, marker	thick and fine brushstrokes, cryptic patterns, unreadable font, <i>tag</i> , drips, wildstyle, signature, multi-layered, dynamic style, star / arrow symbols, improvised spots of color, repetition of the tag or name, structure, mesh, net, process of dissolving the font, abstraction	abstract expressionism, action painting, improvisation, abstraction, expression of the personal inner world	abstract expressionism	graffiti art
<b>IOG</b> <b>MOSES&amp;TAPS™</b>	spray paint and acrylic on canvas	thick outlines, single simply stylized look a like-letter structures, image, representation, staging, message-less, aesthetics, reduction, stylewriting, stylweriting, mannerism	graffiti as subject conceptual art, representational art, mannerism, new staging, parody	conceptual art	graffiti art
<b>JC</b> <b>Thierry Furger</b>	ink and acetone on aluminium	<i>buff</i> , <i>drips</i> , cloud-like shapes, graffiti aesthetic, wipe marks, opaque, pastel, discreet, intuitive, random, unintentional, process of dissolving from the script, process of dissolving from the verbal message	transitoriness in graffiti, abstraction, aw art, gestureal art, minimal art, representational art, conceptual art, abstract expressionism	raw abstract expressionism	graffiti art
<b>BA</b> <b>Tilt</b>	mixed media	fetishism, <i>scratchiti</i> , multi-layeredness, scribblings, <i>tags</i> , bubble style, drips, throw up, anti-aesthetics, outsider, primitivity, art brut, gesture of street/urbanity, conceptual, contextless, naive, mise-en-scène, process of dissolving verbal message	primitivism, outsider art, art brut, raw art, gesture, representational art, conceptual art, folk art, abstract expressionism	raw abstract expressionism	graffiti art

Fig. 17: Evaluation and summary of the formal aesthetic analysis.

itself without interacting with its environment anymore. Therefore, works of graffiti art are autonomous and no longer context-dependent. The entry of graffiti into the institutional framework is not only visible on a formal aesthetic level, but also on a functional level, which offers the works freedom and autonomy in their interpretations.

## 6. Conclusion

“Graffiti art is neither ‘simply graffiti’ nor ‘simply art’, but a new kind of visual cultural production that exceeds both categories” (Austin, 2010: 33). The quote by Austin reflects the complex transition of graffiti art. The creative expressions of this art form have developed themselves since the 1980s, so that they are no longer regarded as simple ‘graffiti’ in urban space, at the same time they are still not fully accepted in the institutional framework. Graffiti is always on the verge of the institution and seems difficult to integrate into the institutionalized framework.

The institutionalization and exhibition of graffiti art in the white cube has brought profound changes. The significance and contextual change has caused several effects such as neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. A formal aesthetic shift based on the art works was demonstrated by several detailed analyses. Further effects such as reduction and abstraction processes as well as aestheticization and autonomy of the art works were observed.

But if the demonstrated tendencies in the formal aesthetic are highly associable to fine arts, what makes graffiti art unique? How do studio-based art works, which merely are representations of urban space, differ from traditional art when even similar genres are used? What makes graffiti art stand out when it no longer has a site-specific connotation? Finally, does this art form even belong in the institutions or should it be practiced where it originates - the streets?

These critical questions lead to a potential of advanced research. Therefore and concluding, an investigation of suitable exhibition formats and contextual frameworks for graffiti art would be insightful and would lead to a greater understanding on how to represent and honour such a unique art form.

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## Notes

1. According to Bengtsen (2014: 112) Banksy's solo exhibition *Barely Legal*, 2006 held in Los Angeles marks a milestone regarding the integration of graffiti, street and urban art in the established art world. Also Derwanz (2013, S. 288) reports a similar turning points in her summary of central exhibitions and festivals of graffiti, street and urban art.
2. Unless otherwise noted they are used according to Bengtsen's descriptions (Bengtsen, 2015: 220).
3. On the different techniques and types of street art, see Gabbert, 2007: 25-45 and Reinecke, 2007: 41-98.
4. *Hall of Fame* describes walls for legal graffiti spraying given by the city or state.
5. Macdonald, 2001: 151-163 and Castleman, 1986: 18-51.
6. Further illustrating examples of the so-called "tropes" can be found in: Bengtsen, 2014: 75-82. Central motifs from Nguyen's observations are: Instruments of war and terrorism, references to graffiti and street art, iconography, company logos and marketing motifs, references to old masters as well as references to cartoon and pop culture. The email from Nguyen to Bengtsen, with the detailed observations can be found in Bengtsen, 2014: 76
7. In his book *Abstract Graffiti* (2011) Lewisohn tries to find aesthetic connections between graffiti and existing fine art genres. His explanations were very helpful to classify the analysed works in this paper.
8. This assumption is based on a video excerpt, in: Fabien Castanier Gallery 2014, URL (1:34 and 2:40 min).
9. Studio-based art works by MOSES & TAPS™ usually fit on a wall of a flat regarding their size and material.
10. From 1977 to 1989, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York took very strict measures against graffiti and train writing. The buff has eliminated 20 years of train writing culture, in a very short time (Gastman/Rowland/Sattler, 2006: 60).
11. Based on the two art genres, *raw art* and *abstract expressionism* discussed in Lewisohn, this own composition emerged (Lewisohn, 2011: 105, 165).
12. The word ZOB means 'penis' in informal French language.



# Graffiti as a Palimpsest

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## Abstract

Graffiti can be viewed as stories about embodied identities of the self and others which can be shared in intersubjective discourse, visual communication of varying content and motives, and utilizing specific technology and mediums. Graffiti's palimpsestuous nature, in its physical and symbolic forms of layering information, is present in production and perceiving graffiti. A creator and a reader of graffiti are both palimpsesting the work, acting as narrators of their own mental sheets. The concept of graffiti as a palimpsest can be exemplified for example in graffiti art where the interpretation of a work of art depends on the properties of the work, the perceiver and the social and institutional agreements. How graffiti are interpreted is informed by perceiving individuals' characters, such as knowledge and skills, as well as the cultural and sociohistorical context where these individuals are immersed and act.

**Keywords:** Palimpsest, narratives, embodiment, art experience, cultural cognition, cognitive science

## 1. Introduction

We can see the presence of written walls in tandem with drawings and paintings all around the globe (Lewisohn, 2008; Ross, 2016a; Wacławek, 2011). The existence of wall markings stretches from the prehistoric (Nash, 2010) to ancient (Baird and Taylor, 2016) to the contemporary present. Their styles vary from simple, crude scribbles to elaborated versions of refined typography in conjunction with complex pictorial images. In their elementary essence, graffiti can be seen as forms of visual communication (Brighenti, 2010; Wacławek, 2011). They utilize such technology as spray paints and markers, and use different surfaces found in city spaces as their medium (Tolonen, 2016). Graffiti has spread worldwide via magazines, books, photographs, movies, the internet (Ross, 2016a), television and travel, thus enabling the transculturation of graffiti and other urban art images (Valjakka, 2016).

The term graffiti and its different forms were defined as “wild signs” (Oliver and Neal, 2010, p. 1), as visual expression of writers' signatures with a distinct vocabulary (Wacławek, 2011), as special types of writing and picture making of urban journals entailing social and physical practices (Avramidis and Tsilimpoudini, 2017), as “highly nuanced, subtle form

of communication” (Young, 2005, pp. 64-65), as ornamental artefacts in a larger architectural canon (Schacter, 2016), and as urban art (Austin, 2010; Valjakka, 2016) or folk art (Ferrell, 2017).

This paper aims to explain how graffiti can be approached as a palimpsest as well as a result of palimpsesting. More specifically this paper focuses on the research questions of how the term and concept of palimpsest can be elaborated and utilized further when explaining production, perceptions and judgements of graffiti. Graffiti as a palimpsest can be studied as both a physical artefact but also as a mental phenomenon and a process, where a person reads, reinterprets and rewrites graffiti, palimpsesting it layer by layer. Analyzing graffiti via the concept of a palimpsest helps discover graffiti's underlying foils, as well as its externalized output as an overwrite.

The paper starts with the concept of a palimpsest, the act of palimpsesting, and how those are related to graffiti (section 2). An example of graffiti art as a palimpsest is pondered in section 2.1. Next, the discussion will present how graffiti palimpsests can be seen as mental narratives (section 3), then as an embodied palimpsest combining physical and mental actions (section 4). Section 5 concludes that graffiti palimpsests are results of layering physical and

mental content, where graffiti palimpsesting involves both individual, cultural and historical aspects, creating different inferential outputs.

## 2. Graffiti as a palimpsest

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines the term palimpsest as a “writing material (such as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased” or as “something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface.” The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) describes palimpsest as “a very old text or document in which writing has been removed and covered or replaced by new writing” and as a “formal something such as a work of art that has many levels of meaning, types of style, etc. that build on each other.” In sum, palimpsest can be understood as an overwriting on a cleansed writing surface where previous texts are still partially visible under new writings, where layers beneath its apparent surface create versatile levels of different meanings (Knox, 2012; Lundström, 2007). As Sarah Dillon (2007) explains, palimpsest is also an involuted phenomenon where texts that otherwise do not relate to each other are mixing and elaborately intertwining, interrupting and inhabiting each other as the older text is resurfacing.

Concepts of a palimpsest and palimpsesting can be used to investigate the process and experiential content of creating, perceiving and interpreting different phenomena, such as art. Marie-Sofie Lundström (2007) uses the concept of a palimpsest and the act of palimpsesting to describe how the creation of works of art is influenced by different factors, resulting in layered images of imitations, sketches and fixed details that can be seen as palimpsests, incorporating the past knowledge, experiences and the individual creativity into a novel artistic presentation about a common theme. Lundström (2007) proposes that these works made by artists can be seen as representative souvenirs of both external views and individual experiences where the latter are entailed in the artist's own history and life experiences. By creating a representation of some space and time, the artist also distances the work from its perceiver and brings about something that is not present, something that is alien and strange. This is done by exaggerating an artist's experiences of culture, filtering and presenting that something through her own translation. At the same time the artist creates a story of her own history, her own narrative of meanings (Lundström, 2017).

Sarah Dillon (2007) inspected the usage of the term palimpsest in different contexts. In the palimpsest of a mind, palimpsest is part of several “occurring fantasies” (p. 6), where the writer of a palimpsest returns to the same topic over and over again, thus keeping the theme of her fantasy alive. When palimpsest is connected to a concept of a crypt, a vault under a church, the term combines simultaneous closeness and distance, an allegorical relationship. Palimpsest can be seen as a text that can be used to investigate the relations and differences between reading and writing classical and modern detective stories. It can be used in connection with the concept of intertextuality when the concept is reviewed by using the terms of palimpsest textuality. Palimpsests, just as sexual identities, must be kept constantly rewritten in order to stay vibrant and usable thorough changing times. The charm of a palimpsest is also in its power to exemplify a mystery, resurrection, and the excitement which is born of discovery (Dillon, 2007). It is easy to relate these descriptions to graffiti as reoccurring and repeating name-writing, keeping the phantasy imago of the writer alive and at the same time renewing it via individual creativity; making it close and distant at the same time, translating the cryptical mysteries of the graffiti subculture involuted with individual and shared identities, as graffiti writers exemplify these into visual souvenirs of life.

Creating graffiti as palimpsests, palimpsesting, can happen in a concrete, physical sense of the term as the remains of previous paint and ink stratify between the foils of dirt, detergents, paint strippers, and the peeling off by natural deterioration caused by weathering. All this is covered by overlapping newer drawings, paintings, stickers, posters and flyers. Examples of such physical palimpsests can be found practically in any legal and illegal graffiti writing spots. Writing for example a tag, a throw-up or another piece over an existing graffiti can be seen as palimpsesting. Illustrations of layered graffiti can be found for example in Jonna Tolonen's (2016) visual research about illegal graffiti in Madrid, as well as in Anna Wacławek's (2011) examination of graffiti writers' works and how these are practiced worldwide.

According to Schacter (2008), the erasure of a previous graffiti image can motivate graffiti writers to produce even more images with more innovative and imaginative styles. Hence, this removal and rewriting of graffiti can be seen as a part of a creative palimpsesting process, which itself results in a yet another palimpsest. As the graffiti writers overwrite previous images with their own products, writers create palimpsests

where the underlying surfaces and old, weathered images are entailed and even essential in the creation of a new image (Schacter, 2008). This new layer too will later be covered with yet another image, leaving the previous graffiti echo in the background, either partly visible underneath the new image, in people's memories, or in some cases as a recording such as digital image or a written description.

Graffiti can be seen as physical representations of mental palimpsests which entail their writers' and reader's interpretations of the atmosphere of that area, time and space, reflecting the fluctuating identities of the city and its inhabitants, the zeitgeist of the post-modern era, the culture that the person is immersed in, and the sociocultural knowledge that the person has learned throughout her lifetime. For example, in Finnish graffiti writer / artist Trama's work "Zinku" (Trama, 2008) which can be seen almost as a photorealistic illustration of a building wall where layers of paint and buffing (a slang term for removal of graffiti) with chemical detergents have produced a new kind of visual surface. In EGS's work titled "1985 March 1st" (EGS, 2016) the artist has sprayed black ink over a found, Russian language newspaper to create a novel combination of these elements, a palimpsest of multiple temporal and cultural stories, thus creating new possibilities for different interpretations via visible and invisible layers. The World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti (Schacter, 2013) lists sites and works of street artists and graffiti writers from all around the world, displaying examples of graffiti palimpsests, from such artists as Ron English (Schacter, 2013, p. 40) and Turbo (Schacter, 2013, pp. 180-181) to sites from Sao Paolo (Schacter, 2013, p. 113) to Berlin (Schacter, 2013, p. 206) and from Barcelona (Schacter, 2013, p. 298) to Tokyo (Schacter, 2013, p. 388). Those illustrations also bring forth the distinctive nature of graffiti palimpsest – works of individuals are conjoined or concurrent deliberately or by chance in the same surface, creating a larger visual totality, a shared palimpsest, that can be read in detail or as a whole.

The idea of understanding graffiti as a palimpsest can be further elaborated by focusing on how the concept of a palimpsest is present in case of graffiti art. In order to define what can be seen as graffiti art palimpsest, however, we must first address briefly what is meant by "graffiti." Typically, graffiti is defined as illegally written or painted, aesthetically stylized words and images of its maker's name as a pseudonym, a tag, using marker pens, spray paint or etching and where the name can be accompanied by a character that often draws

its theme from popular culture (Avramidis and Tsilimpoudini, 2017; Ross, 2016b). Depending on the definition though, also stencils and stickers placed on different city surfaces can be counted as graffiti (Tolonen, 2016), although more often these forms along with posters, paste-ups and mix of all the former are categorized as examples of street art, not graffiti (Avramidis and Tsilimpoudini, 2017; Ross, 2016b). In this paper, graffiti may be understood in the stricter sense, but the same idea of a palimpsest can be applied to many forms of street art, as well.

Nowadays there are more and more legal graffiti writing spots available for graffiti writers, for example several in Helsinki, Finland (see for example Supafly, 2018). These legal spots provide places where graffiti writers can focus on developing their technical and artistic skills and expressions. To some, legal spots are seen as stripping off the excitement and almost anarchistic nature of producing graffiti, thus making legal graffiti not "real" graffiti (Ross, 2016a). This notion emphasizes the other side of graffiti; it is also a controversial act (Ross, 2016a) and an ephemeral and embodied performance (Bowen, 2010; 2013; Neef, 2007) which challenges the norms of the society. As graffiti enables activism through and by art it can be called a form of activism, "a critical process that destabilises everyday urban interactions and practices" (Mekdjian, 2017, p. 1).

Whereas others might see graffiti as aesthetic products and highly developed forms of visual culture and contemporary art, graffiti can also evoke negative feelings such as disgust or repulsion (McAuliffe and Iveson, 2011; Young, 2005, 2017). Due to the illicit nature of graffiti, instead of art it is often judged as vandalism, ugly or associated with dirt and moral deterioration (Kimvall, 2014; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Sliwa and Cairns, 2007), creating somewhat conflicting but nevertheless coexisting discursive practices (Kimvall, 2014; Sliwa and Cairns, 2007). However, when seeing graffiti as form of activism, illegality can be seen as essential part of graffiti as an artistic intervention, displaying themes as solidarity as well as empowering the city dwellers (Mekdjian, 2017).

### 1.1 Graffiti art as a palimpsest

As noted earlier, art is a form of palimpsest (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), therefore, we can investigate the concept of graffiti palimpsest by taking graffiti art as an example. So, what is graffiti art? Laypeople who are non-experts regarding visual graffiti culture and even art-historians might be familiar

with works of artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat (Dempsey, 2003; Kimvall, 2014) or Banksy and Blek le Rat (Merrill, 2015) who could be described more as street artists or graffiti inspired artists (Kimvall, 2014). But the expert inside a subcultural graffiti scene might nominate quite different actors as authentic graffiti artists naming such artists as Taki 183, Seen, Lee, Lady Pink or Blade (Kimvall, 2014). As Jakob Kimvall (2014) notes, the art-historical narratives about graffiti art have so far been quite scarce and often somewhat contradicting. Fortunately, more information is constantly made available with a growing number of publications focusing on explaining graffiti and street art with vast display of artists and art works (see for example Lewisohn, 2008; Schacter, 2013; Waclawek, 2011), events and art exhibitions, academic seminars, conferences and panels and many other kinds of events.

According to Amy Dempsey (2003), contemporary graffiti is part of the postmodern art historical era often directly commenting on societal and political questions (Dempsey, 2003). According to Austin (2010), graffiti art has its roots in the development of modern art from the early 20th century: dadaism, post-dadaism, pop art and pluralistic art forms from the 1970s. In this spirit, graffiti can be seen as collages of visual material from everyday life (Austin, 2010). In turn, those material pieces can be seen as layers beneath the visible surface of a graffiti palimpsest. Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) suggests that postmodern artists have reacted to modernism's alienation and distancing design by trying to create a new connection to it, to confiscate and reclaim estranged architectonic spaces by making them materially present (Pallasmaa, 1996). Also, graffiti artists can be seen criticizing the alienation and estrangement they feel in modern cities, finding new ways of participating in the urban life and reclaiming their environments (Schacter, 2008) as well as creating counteractive responses to aesthetic standards of modernism (Lamazares, 2017).

Not all graffiti should be considered as art, though. It would be better to say that graffiti, at least some of it, can hold the potential to become works of art through intersubjective experiences and current or later discourse, resultant from individual and socially shared palimpsesting. It is a question of shared experiences and social agreement based on both the work's properties, perceivers' personal features and understanding, as well as the sociocultural and historical discourse where a work of art is separated from a mere product.

For example, according to Denis Dutton (2009), humans have universal "art instinct" for making, assessing and experiencing an object and its properties as a work of art. A work of art needs to present, for example, demonstrated technical skills, recognizable styles including novel and surprising elements, and individual expressions. They have to be challenging intellectually, inducing direct pleasure and imaginative, artistic experience wherein intellectual challenges are then solved (Dutton, 2009).

Philosopher John Dewey (2005) saw art experience as a subjective result of interaction with artwork and its perceiver. Sari Kuuva (2007) explains the experience of art as a cognitive apperception process proceeding through restructuring, reflection and construction, generating a mental representation that is colored by our personal experiences, memories, preceding conceptual knowledge and emotions. As Gadamer (1977) saw, art has its own language which can be understood by using hermeneutical reflections, where things are brought to consciousness by self-understanding as well as understanding of history, thus making it possible to take a more objective stance to a person's thinking, comprehend her own prejudices and learn (Gadamer, 1977). Palimpsesting too can be explained as a process of having certain presuppositions that work as a baseline for further decoding of the perceived information. The information is self-reflected and reconstructed in the mind, generating novel reconstructions, which then might add to, alter or overwrite the preceding presumptions. In case of graffiti art, the palimpsest (either physical or mental) including an understanding of graffiti subculture and its norms and artistic language are processed together with an individual's previous information and self-understanding during the palimpsesting. The differences in these can lead to different interpretations and outputs, different kinds of palimpsests.

Martin Heidegger (1996) writes about how in order a work becomes art it requires that the work has been created and has a creator, but it also needs to be fostered by people and the community. This fostering reveals and organizes the truth, *aletheia*, often translated as "the unconcealedness of beings" (Cazeaux, 2011, p. 718) that is born within an ongoing dispute between revealing and hiding of something existing (Heidegger, 1996). In this sense, fostering can be seen as active social palimpsesting that keeps graffiti art alive, unconcealing something relevant to the graffiti subculture and the graffiti art world. Further, fostering

works of art requires knowledge and will to expose oneself to the openness and the truth of the work, allowing people to not only experience the art, but to "belong in the truth" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 71) that happens in the work of art. Interestingly, the ability to expose oneself to art can be linked to a special personality trait: openness to experience, which according to some psychological research seems to be essential to creativity, positive engagement in arts and aesthetic appreciation, especially in abstract art (Fayn and Silvia, 2015).

In addition, according to Heidegger (1996), expertise in art makes it possible to enjoy and explain even more detailed nuances of a work's character and quality. Findings from neuroaesthetic research support this notion, as the art experience and how art is assessed, judged and felt emotionally has found to be affected also by expertise in the arts and art history, especially in the case of modern, non-representative art (Fayn and Silvia, 2015; Kuuva, 2007; Leder et al., 2004; Pihko et al., 2011). However, experts do not always provide objectively truthful or correct inferences. Expertise can also result in biased judgements, for example due to used heuristics or expert's over-confidence (Kahneman and Klein, 2009; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Thus, when discussing graffiti and creating new palimpsested narratives it is important to acknowledge the possibility of bias and to allow critical consideration of alternative explanations and to reveal hidden layers, whether the topic was about art, legality, politics, motivation or other topics.

According to Immanuel Kant (1790/2016), aesthetic judgement related to an artwork is always subjective and only the experience of "beauty" is free from other kinds of judgements. Indeed, art can evoke special emotions such as beauty, pleasantness, interest and surprise, and even negative emotions such as anger and disgust (Fayn and Silvia, 2015). These kinds of emotions are often described in graffiti and street art related discussions too (Dickens, 2008; Halsey & Young, 2008; Taylor, 2012; Young, 2005). However, in contrast to Kant's (1790/2016) proposal that experience of aesthetic beauty is free from learned concepts such as attitudes, Gartus and Leder (2014) suggest that attitudes towards the artistic style can influence how people evaluate graffiti art. Thus, in case of graffiti these layers of beautiful or other art exited thoughts and emotions might be adduced or stay concealed on purpose or unintendingly because of the attitudes of who is doing the palimpsesting.

Context plays an important role in the cognitive and

emotional appraisals of art (Brieber et al., 2014; Gartus and Leder, 2014; Gartus et al., 2015; Gerger et al., 2014; Van Dongen et al., 2016). Similarly, in case of graffiti, the context where graffiti is placed can affect the emotional reactions of its perceiver (Gartus and Leder, 2014) and in the recognition of something as graffiti art (Gartus et al., 2015). However, the context alone does not explain what is seen as graffiti art but this seems to depend on the individual's personal interest in graffiti (Gartus et al., 2015). Bloch (2016) emphasizes the importance of location and context in graffiti related assessments because, according to Bloch (2016) especially in case of controversial subcultures "how one frames and narrates their activity and larger role as a participant in a given community changes depending on the location where the story is told" (p. 4). Thus, what is included in a graffiti palimpsest depends heavily on the context.

Culture can be understood as an all penetrating lens through which we interpret our world, think and act (Oyserman, 2017; Richerson and Boyd, 2005). It is information that contains such mentally preserved concepts as thought, knowledge, beliefs, values, skills and attitudes (Richerson and Boyd, 2005). Culture works through a set of psychological mechanisms which guide and affect people's behavior, experiences, inferences and understanding of cross-cultural meanings (Tooby and Cosmides, 2005). The cultural information is transferred by forms of social transformation such as learning and imitating (Richerson and Boyd, 2005; Whiten, 2017), creating something as a "social mind" (Whiten, 2017, p. 148). As graffiti writers share the same surfaces, imitating, altering and renewing the overlying images as part of a social activity in interaction with other writers and the public, the act of palimpsesting can be seen as a shared process where resulting palimpsests are representing both their individual and shared minds of graffiti subculture members, offering for varying, expanding, complementary or conflicting interpretations for both the writers and the perceivers of graffiti.

Art's identity and meaning are gained in socially constructed art traditions, histories and institutions, as in any organized social human practices (Dutton, 2009). What works are categorized and included in graffiti art is not a static concept, but it is continuously negotiated and transformed in an ongoing discourse with individuals, communities and institutes (Kimvall, 2014). The art world, a concept introduced originally by Arthur Danto (1964), means that in order to understand and identify an object as art, the perceiver

must master “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (Danto, 1964, p. 580). “Art world” is a construction that revolves around art, but similarly, any other organized interest group could be seen creating their own “worlds,” which could be called for example “graffiti world,” “political world,” “architectonic world,” “information technology world,” “legal world,” and so on. In explaining graffiti, from the perspective of these different worlds, participants from different fields create their own palimpsests based on their apperceptions, fusing cultural beliefs and historical community norms; thereby, investigating graffiti mysteries with their own thinking tools, creating their own explanatory stories which might strengthen and make sense of their own viewpoints and identities. These result in palimpsests, comments that can add to, conflict with or overwrite existing views.

For example, Arroyo Moliner et al. (2015) notes how the content of graffiti discourse depends often on the interests of the stakeholder and can be discussed for example as a threat and safety issue by graffiti prevention authorities, as vandalism by law enforcement and as a tool for communication with youth by social workers. Jakob Kimvall (2014) recognized four approaches to graffiti in Swedish public discourse from early 1970’s to end of the 1990’s: combating, domestication, subcultural and considering approach, displaying even contradictory views towards graffiti between agents with different backgrounds, attitudes and beliefs (Kimvall, 2014). Also, as the case of “The Reichstag Graffiti book” by Chmielewska (2008) illustrates how different agents create their own palimpsests, drawing from different memories and subjective histories which can then change what graffiti represents to each. These notions bring us to the topic of the following section, the nature of graffiti palimpsests as different mental narratives.

### **3. Graffiti as narrative mental palimpsests**

Graffiti can be seen as palimpsests that are construed of unique but interrelating visual narratives. Dan McAdams (1988, 2017) has researched the meaning of narratives in human personality psychology. According to McAdams (1988, 2017), people create internal and developing stories of their lives to construct a sense of continuity including “who they were in the past, who they are today, and who they eventually hope to become in the future” (McAdams, 2017, p. 33) to define their identities and give their lives meaning and purpose. Life stories seem to have their characteristic

content of agency, including power and achievements, and communion, and a sense of connection to other people which is seen, for example, in love and belonging (McAdams, 1988, 2017). Autonomy, sense of competence accomplished through learned expertise and innate talents, relatedness to others and social contexts are all important for a person’s intrinsic motivation and well-being as universal human needs (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kaufman and Duckworth, 2015).

Life stories are psychosocial constructions, shifting roles and multiple coexisting narratives that are edited and reinterpreted in interaction with other people. They are building blocks for a person’s identity, autobiographies which develop and change as the individual authors mature, influenced of and in continuity with the evolvement of the surrounding society’s cultural master narratives (McAdams, 2017). Graffiti too can be seen as their producers’ stories, visualized narratives of their travels through life. These narratives are modified and retold as visual palimpsests, where they form layers of their creators’ personality, life experiences and the surrounding society and culture. Graffiti brings forth and strengthens their creators’ as well as their interpreters’ identities, agency and connection to other people as alternating stories in varying contexts, in reflection with their personal experiences and specific contexts, such as graffiti culture. Graffiti writers can see their own works “simultaneously valuable and worthless, art and vandalism, indicative of ownership of the environment and challenging property rights” (Sliwa et al., 2007, p. 80). However, these separate seemingly contradicting narratives can co-exist in graffiti writers’ lives regardless of the tension caused (Hedegaard, 2014; Sliwa et al., 2007) illustrating the ambivalence and complexity of humans’ different life stories (Sliwa et al., 2007).

Arroyo Moliner et al. (2015) and Campos (2012) suggest for many graffiti writers graffiti is a life-style, even an addiction. However, the incentives to do graffiti and participate in graffiti subculture vary. For example, different cultural backgrounds can cause different motivations to do graffiti (Hedegaard, 2014; Valjakka, 2016). Many of those reasons seem to relate to some common, reoccurring themes which can be seen in psychological life narratives (McAdams, 1988, 2017), in self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and in universal characteristics of the art instinct (Dutton, 2009).

Graffiti can play an important role in the development and presence of persons’ individual and collective identity during their lifetimes (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Campos, 2012; Schacter, 2008; Taylor, 2012). Also, peer acknowledgement,

respect, social status and a membership in tribal like communities with peer activities and practices seem to be important factors for graffiti engagement (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Hedegaard, 2014; Malinen, 2011; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016; Terpstra, 2006; Valle and Weiss, 2010). Writing graffiti can act as a medium for aesthetically creative expression, allowing learning, competitiveness and achievements in personal artistic skills (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Hedegaard, 2014; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Valle and Weiss, 2010). Graffiti writing can evoke positive emotions such as pleasure, enjoyment and excitement (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2015; Campos, 2012; Rowe and Hutton, 2012; Schachter, 2008). Some graffiti writers see graffiti as a tool to embellish the environment, but only a few seem to be in to it for the sake of danger and to damage something (Rowe and Hutton, 2012). However, even in those cases that might otherwise include high negative risks, the writer's experienced self-determination, intrinsic motivation and experience of flow (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) might outweigh negative impacts of the often otherwise detrimental activity of producing illicit graffiti (Engeser and Schiepe-Tiska, 2012; Rheinberg, 2008).

Different life narratives can be seen as different layers in a graffiti palimpsest. Graffiti as urban palimpsests (Schacter, 2008; Shep, 2015) can speak "volumes about history, identity, cultural memory, desire, nostalgia, and erasure" (Shep, 2015, p. 209). According to Knox (2012), everyday landscapes carry layers of symbolic meanings. They echo and recreate the core values of their communities and in that way work as important, essential tools for social regulation (Knox, 2012). The creation and omission of graffiti generate temporal, shifting images into these everyday landscapes, communicating meanings as a form of social interaction (Schacter, 2008), at the same time competing with the other visual signage in cities (Shep, 2015). The surface where the image exists or has existed becomes the base layer for the palimpsest, a base for removed and new writings, offering possibilities for not overwriting but also for continuous reinterpretations and experiences for the reader, as new people and communities create new mental palimpsests based on their own stances. As Schacter (2008) stated: "the graffiti walls are [...] frequently renovated, as different writers compete and collaborate on the public canvas. In this way the walls can be perceived as a form of ongoing dialogue, a continual artistic discussion and public forum"

(Schacter, 2008, p. 48). Thus, these surfaces become sites for negotiating public and private city spaces (Shep, 2015) as well as spaces for learning about others' identities and interactions (Bowen, 2010).

To Pan (2016), palimpsests are also spatial memories which "include architectural visibility, narratives on space, visual images, artistic works, and practices in everyday life" (p. 32). Spatial memories are "simultaneous processes in which the production of memory narratives parallels the production of space in terms of its existence, appearance, use, and function" (Pan, 2016, p. 32). The spatial memory that a graffiti palimpsest can hold can be illustrated with Neef's (2007) story of the Berlin Wall graffiti, where she proposes that despite that physical material might be demolished and the actual piece disappears, the memory of the graffiti can still leave a trace that echoes in the background of people's memories, "taking the shape of new discourses and new 'museum's talks' on the dialectic split of the double exposures of 'in/visibilities'" (Neef, 2007, pp. 430-431). Thus, graffiti palimpsests can be seen as stories that cumulate and affirm the subcultural identities and values of the graffiti writers, as well as alter and renew the physical and mental space where they are located, impacting as artefacts in the present as well as spatial memories from the past.

#### 4. Graffiti as embodied palimpsests

Producing graffiti is a physical act, where the movements of body and the content of mind are embodied into a unified, gestural happening, executing a person's agency (Noland, 2009). As Rowe and Hutton (2012) propose: "graffiti is understood by writers as an engaging physical event, something that happens and is corporeal" (Rowe and Hutton, 2012, p. 81). As humans, we move in our environments, handling and altering objects, making plans and decisions by using symbols, receiving information from the world and organizing it to solve problems (MacLachlan, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2009), as enactive beings (Noë, 2004). We use our bodies to anchor ourselves to the world and interact with it, we perceive objects through bodily sensory systems and manipulate those objects by our bodily actions (MacLachlan, 2004). By doing this, we gain a sense of agency, a feeling of being in control of our own bodies and environment, also affecting our bodily self-consciousness (Kannape and Blanke, 2012).

Ferrell (2017) proposes that graffiti are results of performative actions that require planning and aesthetic skills, as well



as, mastering body movements. Graffiti writers' gestural performatives result in rich kinesthetic experience (Noland, 2009). These experiences are enriched further "with the physical challenge of producing complex artistic forms in difficult circumstances" (Rowe and Hutton, 2012, p. 81), provoking such emotions as pleasure and enjoyment (Rowe and Hutton, 2012). In addition to the individual properties of the actor, Noland (2009) suggests that the corporeal performance of writing graffiti embodies culture and its bodily practices, expressing and reinforcing the acculturation through behavior as learned gestures.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2008) noted: "rather than a mind and a body, man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things" (p. 67). Human consciousness and body together create a "mindful body" (MacLachlan, 2004, p. 171) where our mental processes are embodied (Rowlands, 2010). Embodiments of our mental contents and the self can be projected in a person's appearance, communication, gestures or actions or extended also in other objects (MacLachlan, 2004). As noted by Rafael Schachter (2008), the interviewed graffiti writers in his research considered graffiti images "to be a corporeal element of the artist themselves, an objectified and material constituent of their producer" (p. 38). It is those projections of their makers' embodied mental contents that are included in graffiti palimpsests.

Graffiti as an embodied palimpsest involves not only the act of producing graffiti but also perceiving it as an embodied experience. As Tracey Bowen (2010) explains: "Reading graffiti is embodied within the performance of bearing witness to another's existence as well as reading texts that present information through visual codes within the ever-changing contexts where they are found" (p. 85). To understand the bodily performance of others we must be able to reflect it with our own bodily experiences, which in case of graffiti and its specialized physical forms of execution might be challenging to many.

Graffiti are physical artefacts, objects that are perceived by their readers. Objects are seen in terms of what they afford, what is their content and how they can be used (Gibson, 1986; Saariluoma, 2004). Every object is perceived in its context, perceived through a person's previous information and concepts in apperception process, and creating a subjective, meaningful mental representation (Saariluoma, 2004, 2010). However, as Bowen (2010) suggests, graffiti

should be understood not just as meaningful images but also as marks of physical performance. Therefore, understanding graffiti also requires physical and haptic exploration from its readers, an embodied experience where readers interact with the artists, works, and cultural communities of artists. For this, readers are using their known conventions, codes, discovery and rethinking as basis of understanding (Bowen, 2010). Thus, palimpsestuous reading of graffiti is both a physical and a mental event, or better to say, an event in a unified entity of the embodied mind.

According to Schachter (2008), graffiti can be seen as internal messages externalized in a physical object, as embodied manifestations of its maker's personhood and agency in images all around the city. These manifestations can be seen as palimpsests which merge the surface with the output of the maker's mental and bodily activities, resulting in a graffiti image with its perceivable and imagined properties. As Brighenti (2010) explains, when graffiti are created by bodily actions in a physical environment, placing one's embodied expressions on surfaces and walls of the cities, they are also creating boundaries and territories. This way graffiti are also ways of mapping oneself to the space and others with visible traces, "interventions that define a type of social interaction at a distance" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 323). These territorial inscriptions are constantly changing, erased and rewritten in rhythmic body-mind actions (Dickens, 2008) creating additional mini-territories (Andron, 2017). In these territories, in their different contexts, graffiti fosters a possibility for creative alterations and confiscation of the city spaces (Dickens, 2008) as people are palimpsesting their environment by the actions of their embodied minds.

## 5. Conclusions

Graffiti can be described as a palimpsest that is built on layers of hidden and revealed physical and mental content. In their physical forms, graffiti palimpsests are layered writings and images on city surfaces, partly or completely overwriting the underlying canvas and its previous images. This way graffiti palimpsest spreads through the different cityscapes, creating territorial, ephemeral, changing images as mysterious souvenirs from their makers. Even after their partly or full disappearance, graffiti and the identities they embody can stay as part of the place's atmosphere in memoirs of both graffiti writers, city dwellers and other spectators.

Graffiti as a palimpsest can be examined also from another,

more philosophical aspect, as a process and a result of mental palimpsesting. This can be illustrated with the examples of creating and assessing graffiti art. Graffiti as mental palimpsests can be seen construed of narrative life stories, self-reflection and rebuilding, resulting into creative outputs where the cumulated information gained during individual and shared life journeys are combined in overwrites reflecting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and motives of the palimpsesting individuals. These creative pieces as art can act as interventions in the society and city, thus making graffiti a form of activism. Further, when the individual palimpsests are conjoined into a network of parallel, sometimes conflicting palimpsests, they can create a socially shared palimpsest, reflecting their cultural master narratives and social agreements. For example, in case of graffiti art, the individual palimpsesting can result in an experience or inference of that work being art, but in the end it is the intersubjective, shared agreement, the shared palimpsest of the sociocultural community that agrees and fosters what is conceived as art in that specific historical time period and context.

Graffiti is also an embodied palimpsest, conjoining the actions of the embodied mind into a participative performance, for both the graffiti producers and graffiti readers. Writing graffiti is a physical act where the bodily movements illustrate the writers' agency, as the writers are materializing their mental manifestations into graffiti works. In turn, perceiving graffiti and being able to read its content require not only knowledge and interest, but also active engagement in its interpretation at a corporeal level. This interaction with the writer and the graffiti image allows an embodied experience in the perceiver of graffiti.

Individual and shared versions of explanations for the truths of the world are discovered and rewritten via physical and mental graffiti palimpsests. Palimpsesting happens in interaction between different actors and agent, combining individual mental and physical properties, as well as, the sociocultural and historical context where the participants are acting. As a result, new layers of information are cumulating over the previous layers via learning, recalling, reconstructing and reforming, but where the past agonists keep influencing to the outcomes in the present. These palimpsest might reveal something from the history, strengthen or challenge the story of the current, and discover new opportunities for the future. Seeing graffiti as physical and mental palimpsests enables new perspectives for understanding incentives and

rewards, behaviours and interpretations related to graffiti. It can also help to understand the underlying reasons for how people from different backgrounds, knowledge and context, from graffiti writers, city dwellers, institutions and organisations, but also to researchers and other interest groups, assess graffiti in so different ways.

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## Framing Poetical Expression in Urban Art: Graffiti, Performance and Poetic Objects in Public Space

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### Abstract

This study aims to revisit some hermeneutical aspects which are essential for a theoretical approach to the interrelated notions of the poetic and poeticity in public space. I will use examples of ephemeral poetic forms such as graffiti or performance, but also some examples of poetic objects from linguistic fields such as English, Portuguese, Spanish and German. These reflections on a theoretical and methodological framework for poetry and translation in public space can be subsumed under the key concept of transit-translation. I will associate four poetic expressions from four related cultural areas, with non-lyric discourse in visual, verbo-visual and performance poetry, in public space. They will be distributed along four thematic lines which I consider crucial to the current description of the phenomenon: the intermedial-intermaterial transition, the transfer from the poetic-political to the commercial, the poetic-political multimedia project, and the conflict between the poetic and the public. Drawing from different theoretical backgrounds (Heidegger, Benjamin, Rancière, Badiou, Bhabha, Butler and Spivak), I propose that these forms of non-lyric poetry might represent the advent of a new public sphere, which is no longer exclusively formed by an idealistic, romantic tradition, but rather characterised by a hermeneutic ambiguity which suggests a reconfiguration of the subject and of poetic subjectivity.

This study has been carried out with the framework of the research project, "Contemporary Poetry and Politics: Research on Contemporary Relations between Cultural Production and Sociopolitical Context" (POEPOLIT, FFI2016-77584-P, 2016-2019, Ministry of Economy and Competitively, Government of Spain) and the Strategic Programme UID/ELT/00500/2013 of the FCT, Portugal. The text has been translated from Spanish by Feidhlim Hanrahan.

**Keywords:** Poetic, poeticity, public space, translation, Banksy, Augusto de Campos, ±MaisMenos±, Camilla Watson, Helmut Seethaler.

Notions of what is considered the poetic have undergone fundamental changes since the era of Romanticism. Poetry's supposed essence has been questioned by the multiplicity of hybridized forms and an increasing commercialization of poetic production, while access to poetry and public performance has been democratized. These developments have taken place in a public sphere which, similar to information and knowledge societies, has been subject to profound, and often intrinsically political, changes.

In hermeneutical terms, how can one approach the poetic and poeticity in public space, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western societies that are conditioned by so many rapid changes? And how does one relate the (political and social) interventionist nature of much poetic expression to a current notion of

poetry in this public space? In order to gather elements for a hermeneutical framework that may provide an explanation to these questions, we must firstly revisit the concepts of the poetic and poeticity in contemporary public space.

Here I am especially interested in poetic expression which seeks to intervene in the social and political reality of Western societies, whether in a material, urban context (graffiti, performance, etc.) or in a virtual environment (blogs, social networks, etc.). The majority of these poetic expressions are often characterised by varying degrees of transmediality, and specifically by a word-image fusion, which is increasingly prolonged and diverse in a virtual context, and may even have a global reach. This diversification and medial hybridization of poetry and public spaces calls into question the

distinction between *communicative actions* and *dramaturgical actions*, as outlined in much of Jürgen Habermas's work (cf. e.g. 2005). To date, Habermas's theories remain the most referenced in terms of questions related to public space, despite having been developed in a pre-digital period.

However, one can hardly argue that there is a clear separation between a public space where political or literary opinions are exchanged, and another public space as a site of self-representation. For example, in the case of street art, performance or installation, they are usually accompanied by texts of a poetic nature. It is a complex debate, but perhaps one could describe this increasingly global and even 'glocal' public sphere as a space of permanent encounter and debate of 'narrative' versions of the organisation of global society from the perspective of different contexts of experience and life-knowledge (cf. Marramao, 2004). Seen in this way, poetic expression as a 'narrative' in a current globalised public context would have a representative dimension that is not limited to a rational communicative action, or an ideological strategy, or a subjective self-vindication; and neither would it serve to equate cultural relativism with ethical relativism.

The Poetic expressions in the public space under discussion here, do not wish to be hostages to an enlightened rationalism or a relativist postmodernism. They can also be related to what emerges from Karen Gregory's update of a well-know 1970s feminist slogan: "The Personal Is Public Is Political" (2014). A significant part of the poetic expression present in street art or poetic action in public space, involves illustrating the need for a renewed critical reassessment of the way our daily lives depend on structural constraints, be they political, economic, or systemic. The three interdependent areas of the personal (or subjective), the public, and the political can be considered fundamental to the analysis of this poetic expression and its generic transgressions, in contemporary Western public space.

In this context, this study aims to revisit some hermeneutical aspects which are essential for a theoretical approach to the interrelated notions of the poetic and poeticity in public space. I will use examples of ephemeral poetic forms such as graffiti or performance, but also some examples of poetic objects. The selection criteria were based on a desire to combine both internationally known and less well-known figures, and on an attempt to cover different

linguistic fields such as English, Portuguese, Spanish and German. It seeks to demonstrate the significance of the urban, transmedial and political characteristics of graffiti and installations (Banksy, ±MaisMenos±, Camilla Watson and Batania Neorrabioso), and also the characteristics of poetic objects (Augusto de Campos and Helmut Seethaler).

In order to systemise some of their common aspects, I will firstly set out a theoretical framework, related to the following three areas, which I believe are essential for structuring an analysis of current poetic expression: (1) the concept of non-lyric poetry in an ontological context, (2) the hermeneutics of poetry as translation, and (3) the relationship between public space and poetry as translation. I will explain the key concept of transit-translation and subsequently provide examples of poetic expression from four current observable dynamics: the intermedial-intermaterial transition, the transfer of the poetic-political to the commercial, the poetic-political project, and the conflict between the poetic and the public.

## 1 - Non-lyric Poetry

The concept of non-lyric poetry is not just an *ex negative* definition of poetic expression which no longer fits the Romantic lyric tradition. Rather, it aims at subverting the identification between poetry and lyric which, in the Romantic-Hegelian tradition, was linked to experiential introspection, to an idea of truth or reality that ignored its fictional condition, or to a form of individual communication through the reception of printed poems. Since then, artistic production has become increasingly marked by alterity and difference, creating heuristic and methodological openings. Nowadays, poetic subjects and subjectivities often perform alternative models which re-examine authorship and authority, as well as orality or the semantics of bodies. Poetic work has become characterized by dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony or by multiple kinds of hybridization where textual language is no longer indispensable. A transversality between poetry and social or political action, which tries to avoid being conditioned by past paradigms is gaining importance, as well as trans-generic, trans-artistic or trans-medial aspects. Therefore, a non-lyric perspective that emphasizes the character of disintegration of poetic work, questioning its coherence, communicability or even translatability, becomes interesting for an updated conceptualization of poetic production, inter-

vention and reception.

The non-lyric is a theoretical tool to describe and analyse the complexity and variety of discourses which condition a large portion of current poetic production, be they formal, aesthetic, medial, theoretical, or ideological.

Our case deals especially with the interrelated notions of subject or subjectivity, of space, and of the public sphere. There have been several studies of the way in which current non-lyric discourses represent a change in intrinsic subjectivity, and “a willingness towards reception” (Casas, 2015: 7). Their results indicate that there is a new subjectification and mental reality which is related to a conception of art as an event within a very specific space.

In order to paradigmatically illustrate a non-lyric poetic expression, which initially even dispensed with textual language, I will analyse a lesser-known graffito by the artist and activist Banksy. This graffito, most likely from a London neighbourhood, shows a zebra crossing coming down a wall and travelling over an abandoned car (see Image 1). A photograph of the event subsequently appeared in the book *Existencilism* (2002), together with a comment that is both poetic and political: “Painting something that defies the law of the land is good. Painting something that defies the law of the land and defies the law of gravity at the same time is

really good.” The initial artistic event was a poetic intervention in a significant material space in a run-down urban environment, in the objects themselves and in their usual order, where the interpretation of these spatiotemporal parameters was fundamental. This constellation of aspects evokes some ontological questions about art, which can be summarised by drawing from Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), in order to highlight how the public urban context, from the street or from mobility, leads to a “nearness of the work” that can take us “suddenly somewhere else than where we usually care to be” (2006: 19).

Here the event of poetic intervention is characterised by proximity, abruptness, and the transformation of place and of what is known. Banksy as author vanishes before the subjectivity of the receivers, whether the initial passer-by depicted in the photograph, or the subsequent public who observe the 2002 exhibition or its printed catalogue. The zebra crossing graffito simultaneously represents a public order utopia and heterotopia (cf. Foucault, 1984). The graffito’s irregular line reinforces its transfiguring intention. It crosses and subordinates yet another heterotopia, that of the automobile, here representing the utopia of almost unlimited mobility. Moreover, the car symbolises an ideology and a technology that have conditioned the freedom of movement in public space, which are themselves called into question by

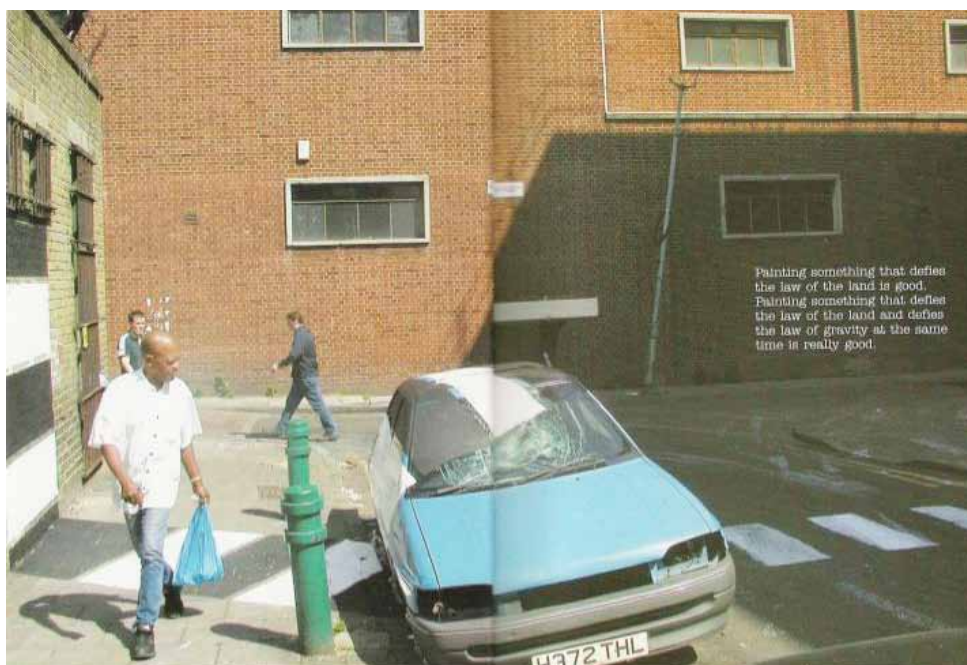


Fig. 1 - Banksy [censored graffito] (2014)

the car's broken and abandoned state. Without yet wishing to deal with definitions of the poetic and poeticity (*cf. infra.*), this type of artistic expression also suggests, "a relationship which is basically political, founder of a new subject space" (Casas, 2015: 102), in which "poetry and place are solidly linked" (103). Returning to Heidegger, we could understand these non-lyric poetic expressions in a literal public space as a work of art, in which "the truth of beings (*des Seien-den*) has set itself to work (*sich ins Werk gesetzt*). 'To set,' in German '*setzen*,' says here: to bring to stand" (2006: 20).

The zebra crossing graffito, the very instance of its performance, starts as a being (*Seiendes*) which through photography quickly loses its aura (see Benjamin 1939) and becomes a *fait accompli*, which in turn triggers a series of critical questions that contribute to the transformation of the given being. Its relation to the original is comparable to literary translation's fundamental dilemma: part of the original is conserved, while it ends up being transformed.

From this perspective, Heidegger's idea of philosophy as interpretation and ontology as temporal interpretation, in the sense of *energeia* and event, can be adapted to the analysis of non-lyric poetic expression, "as public (or political) art/poetry" (Casas, 2015:100). These poetic forms not only interpret temporal ontological circumstances, but also translate discourses and ideological values, "as the event is *made discourse*" (Casas 2015: 104-105). In the case of Banksy's graffiti, the event has several spatiotemporal, material and epistemological layers and moments: The moment or context when it was first produced, when the first passers-by noticed it, when the photographer took the photograph, its subsequent exhibition before the observing public, another type of 'passer-by', the book and its readership, and finally its digital circulation. These are different instances and types of implemented discourse and transit-translation (*cf. infra*), that occur in distinct public spaces, yet have common poetic characteristics: the search for another "truth" – the idea and critical reflection that stems from a poetic action – where "truth only happens in such a way that she institutes herself in the strife and play-space that opens itself through truth herself" (Heidegger 2006: 44).

The producing and receiving subjects which appear at each spatiotemporal layer in the poetic expression of Banksy's action, suggest that the subject, according to Alain Badiou, is always a local dimension of a truth process, in

which one could say that the poetic event occurs at the subject's choosing: "Poetry is [...] an action of which one can only know whether it has taken place inasmuch as one bets upon its truth" (2005: 192).

## 2 - Towards a Hermeneutics of Poetry as Translation

The event, the decentralisation and the instability of the non-lyric suggest a different conception of the poetic phenomenon and of its production and reception aesthetics which I now wish to relate to the hermeneutical idea of poetry as translation. It is therefore important that I briefly define my adapted concept of translation which is derived from the intersection of neuroscience and philosophy.

In the early 1990s Daniel Dennett suggested the idea of the Self or personality as a "benign user illusion" (1992: 311), and proposed a concept of human consciousness using an analogy of text edition, the "Multiple Drafts Model" (1992: 111). According to this model, the many "narrative fragments" that are "edited" in different places in the brain are in competition, without a single coordinator that would lead to a "final" or "published" version. If Dennett's "narrative fragments" represent provisional drafts of a supposed perceived reality, textual or visual translations can also work with descriptive outlines based on the convention of a "real exterior original," within a continuous translation process. This dynamic between the "benign user illusion" of an original creation, and that of a reality in which everything is recycled and rewritten, establishes a translational relativity that questions essentialisms and foundationalisms. If we wish to write the "history" of the creative and translational consciousness of subjects and their subjectivity, it would have to be through a critique of multiple translational processes, by observing creation/translation as a movement of continuous transposition, or in the words of Walter Benjamin, a "continuum of transformations" (261). Ultimately, the experience of this continuum functions as a dialectic of change and stability, of distance and closeness, which eventually becomes detached from its subject. In relation to the artistic event, Badiou describes "the becoming formal of something, which was not", a process which opens "a new possibility of formalization" (2005). According to Badiou, this "disobjectification of presence" (2004: 238)



happens mainly through poetic operations and experiences which strive to “gain access to an ontological affirmation that does not set itself out as the apprehension of an object” (236). One could also say that during the creative/translation act, we part from our language, our culture, or our (supposedly original) reality, in order to cross over to a position which Homi K. Bhabha has tied to the idea of “Third Space.” So, a reading of texts, as well as practically any perception of phenomena would be an event within such a transition, or translation, zone.

In our example of the graffito and its photographic reproduction, Banksy has placed the accidental passer-by in a third space in a highly visual and material way: between the translation of a supposed reality, in pursuit of systematisation (the dislocated, distorted zebra crossing) and the required reception/interpretation from the interpreting passer-by (the various observing public). Although the idea of order, the zebra crossing, is maintained within the change to what is considered common and real, i.e. gravity and movement, it no longer has the same function, and the relationship with the objects on display is no longer the same. Therefore, this notion of translation and poetry both represent a critique of and resistance to an essentialist conceptualisation of perception, language, discourse and image; and ultimately, to the demand for objectivity in traditional philosophy or that an ontological statement needs to apprehend an object.

The question of the poetic and poeticity which I intend to relate to this expanded notion of translation, starts with the relationship between certain fundamental dualities of modern Western thought, which Arturo Leyte (2013) has analysed from a hermeneutic perspective: signifier-signified (Saussure), unconscious-conscious (Freud) and consciousness-content (Husserl). Leyte has identified two ways of interpreting the transitions which typically occur between the opposing parts of these dualities. One way would be “hermeneutics as a general theory of interpretation which naturally implies a general translatability”, while the other would be the hermeneutics of untranslatability, from which “transition itself proves to be inaccessible, [...] unexhibitable” (Leyte, 2013: 225). I suggest comparing the first approach with what is usually called the poetic, while relating the second, fundamentally untranslatable and inexplorable approach to poeticity. Following this model, we could construct a hypothetical statement “this is poetry,” which can be

used in a given context to identify a conception of the poetic. The link (“is”) between the two elements (S is P; with S=this and P=poetry) is characterised by an asymmetrical structural ambiguity (referring to S and referring to P), whose sides are so different that identity is thereby impeded. Thus, a statement like “this is poetry” reveals itself as structurally false, because S can never become P (cf. 228). We could also say that the poetic phenomenon must not be confused with its signifier. The “this” would be the poetic phenomenon’s designating act, which carries the poeticity and is already part of the transit itself: the translation process between the thing, what is considered real, or the poetic phenomenon on the one hand, and on the other, the constructed norm or genre. With regard to non-lyric poetry, this transit-translation is to a large degree, recurring. The “this,” the thing, the very poetic phenomenon “strives to appear, but is unable to completely do so” (229), as with any translation, it can only approach the original, without ever completely corresponding to it. However, the (“original,” “poetic”) phenomenon and its translation usually share some type of language, be it verbal or visual, which is in itself the result of a transit. In ontological (and still essentialist) terms, Heidegger linked language and poetry as follows:

Language itself is *Dichtung* [poetry] in the essential sense. Now however, because language is that happening in which being (*Seiendes*) first discloses itself for man as being (*Seiendes*), therefore poetry, *Dichtung* in the restricted sense, is the most original *Dichtung* in the essential sense. Language is *Dichtung* not because it is primordial poetry, but rather poetry *ereignet* [takes place] itself in language because language keeps-in-trust the original essence of *Dichtung*. (2006: 57)

I propose to relate Heidegger’s concept of the “original essence of *Dichtung*” with the aforementioned unexhibitable transit which I have equated to poeticity. Far from being able to encompass all this proposal’s implications, I only wish to indicate the possible (critical, dialectical) reading of Heidegger’s concept by drawing from Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of translation and his concept of “pure language.” In “The Translator’s Task,” Benjamin uses “pure language” as a constant of translatability, that is to say, the ability of the “original” (the poetic in this case) to adapt to other contexts and be translated throughout the ages.



Fig. 2 - Anonymous [Foto by Dimitri dF, Montevideo 2006]

In this pure language — which no longer signifies or expresses anything but rather, as the expressionless and creative word that is the intended object of every language — all communication, all meaning, and all intention arrive at a level where they are destined to be extinguished. And it is in fact on the basis of them that freedom in translation acquires a new and higher justification. (1997: 162-163)

This last level is a precondition of the translation process, and indeed the poetic process if one associates language with the original essence of *Dichtung*.

But this need not be understood in metaphysical or foundational terms when related to poeticity.

One could also say that Banksy's graffiti, by the mere fact of being an intervention/declaration of poetic intent, includes a search for poeticity, for something new, albeit ultimately untranslatable and unexhibitable. Naturally, and by its own non-lyric character, this declaration occurs while already aware that at the deepest level, all meaning, and all intention fade away, prioritising the outside, disorder and instability. Yet it is precisely this double bind which opens up a third space that guarantees the translational action and the artistic intervention its poetic freedom. If an "original" confers a different material dimension from the source language, culture or art; the transit-translation to another language, culture or art will also bring about another change which is not located in any of the implicated languages, cultures or art forms, but rather in a space between them.

Each transit-translation leads to a more complex situation of an increasingly Babelic nature, as is evident from the succession of reproductions of Banksy's action: Here a graffiti, which represents a translation or transfiguration of

a given present, becomes a photograph, which leads to an exhibition, a book publication and finally digitalisation which circulates online. Thus, throughout the translation, "true transit has no way back, [...] because every time it advances, something has changed" (Leyte, 2013: 229), either in respect of the language, the meaning or its synchronic or diachronic context. Though there is also something unique, the thing, the poetic phenomenon in its synchronic moment, which "delimits and causes the transit" (*ibid.*), especially when it occurs "in a literal (the town square) or a figurative (the internet) public space" (Casas, 2015: 103).

We can illustrate this with another of Banksy's works (See Image 2) which the Clacton-on-Sea city council removed following a complaint which misinterpreted it as racist. This occurrence clearly shows how hermeneutics can understand both general translatability and misunderstanding (Leyte, 2013: 225). This case also reminds us of the hermeneutic interpretation of the thing's move to its predicate, clearly showing the ambiguity of the transit. In the hypothetical proposal mentioned earlier, "This is Poetry," the 'is' would be bidirectional: "It is neither this nor the other, nor the identity between one and the other, it is pure difference. The transit is the difference" (231). In other words, poetic creation is also translation, subject to casual spatiotemporal conditions, at the moment of both production and reception. This condition of transit as difference shows how poetic subjectivity eventually settles in an "in-between" space (*cf.* Bhabha *infra*), which is particularly relevant to works of art of political significance or, as Rancière puts it:

The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relation between the visible, the sayable and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an awareness of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. (2013: 59)

The reactions that led to the removal of Banksy's graffiti exemplify how this resistance to meaning operates in public space.

### 3 - Public Space and Poetry as Translation

Poetic transit-translation involves a series of layers or levels which affect its temporal condition. If we interpreted it diachronically, we would only access its logical-grammatical value. Although returning again to Heidegger, the hermeneutical perspective rivals the synchronic perspective, since "the true past has no way back" (Leyte, 2013: 230), unlike the diachronic perspective, it cannot be repeated.



Fig. 2 - Anonymous [Foto by Dimitri dF, Montevideo 2006]

Here, the poetic event marks and defines the present, while the past is only apparently original, and is simultaneously occurring as a past that can never fully reveal itself. In another graffiti example (Image 3), the statement from Magritte's well-known original work is still present, influenced by Freudian psychology in that the representation is not the thing, the phenomenon, but something else. Here, it remains only as an ultimately inexorable substratum that tries to but does not fully appear because in this case it relates to, or rather it is subordinated to, the denunciation of supposedly intrinsic brand values. The material culture in question here is present both as a (linguistic) sign and a poetic image. Graffiti as poetic expression eventually becomes a transforming vehicle for contemporary material culture and its aestheti-

cized technical production. If we consider poetic expression as a process of intervention in public space, such as the search for another "truth"; the objects and tools that are used also become politicised, as well as its sensitive context, despite being initially incompatible. The process can be illustrated through Badiou's comparison of his idea of truth with aesthetics (initially explained by drawing from politics), where "the concept of forcing, on the ontological level, and the concept of compatibility, on the phenomenological level, already deal with the relation between truth and the situation in which truth is operative" (2013: 109-110). The Graffiti in image 3 is an example of a situation where the search for another "truth" eventually becomes operative. Tension arises between traditional meanings, transforming the habits of perception; this transit-translation shows how a merely ontological experience of poetic experience is practically impossible. The transit-translation that causes this poetic phenomenon is ephemeral, but also philosophical, and above all, public and political. This allows us to elicit different concepts of public space and of poetic transit-translation that converge from critical theory, postmodern or postcolonial perspectives.

In *Knowledge and Human Interest*, Jürgen Habermas has taken a socio-psychological approach to the issue of public space as a place of translation processes. Drawing on the Freudian model of self-reflection as translation from the unconscious to the conscious, Habermas argues that this situation would entail transparency of the subject and of society in general.

Thus from a psychoanalytic perspective this transparency would be an essential condition of public space. This can be compared to the relationship between the poetic action of a political graffiti, and its public audience. However, the creator of the graffiti in image 3 is not revealed to us. This could indicate that self-reflection as translation, through the image of a person who re-appropriates previously alienating contents in modern society, is not always as dialectical as Habermas's model. Neither is it so exclusively fixed within a culture or nation state's political space, although in this case we know the graffiti comes from Montevideo, Uruguay.

The concept of public space from postmodern and postcolonial perspectives is different. In a historical postmodern space, the subject is deprived of its status when one questions the values of universal logic, uniform identity, metanarratives, and even universal emancipation. Conse-

atrocaducapacaustiduplielastifeliferofugahistoriloqualubrimendimultipliorganiperiodiplastipubliapareciproustisagasimplitenaveloveravivaunivora  
 cidade  
 city  
 cité

Fig. 4 - Augusto de Campos, “cidadecitycité” (1963)

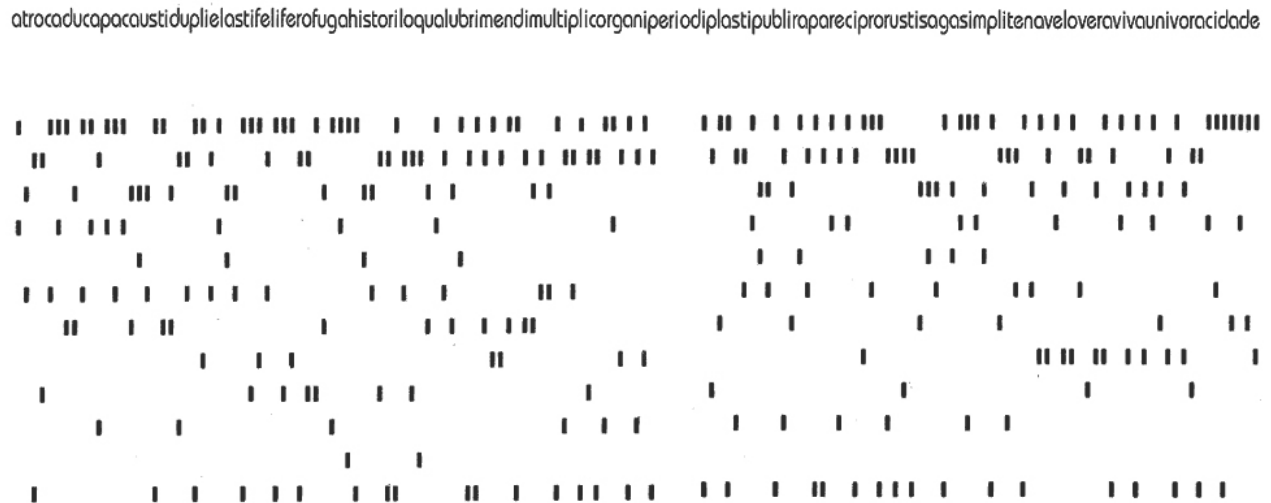


Fig.5 - Augusto de Campos “cidadecitycité”, digital transcreation by Erthos A. de Souza (1975)

quently, public space gradually loses its status as an exclusive place for socio-political change. Even the concept of socio-political change gives way to the idea of cultural subversion as a response to the challenges of hegemonic globalisation, which is also central to postcolonial theory. According to Homi K. Bhabha, subversive cultural translation takes place in a hybrid, transgressive, third space, with the help of processes which dilute Western modernity's binary conceptualisations and politics: It is precisely “the ‘in-ter’ — the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space— that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.” (1994: 38-39). This “in-between space” is the basis for articulating cultural differences and where the colonised subject “takes place” (58). Here, negotiation and translation appear to be the sole means of socio-political change, and can be directly related to the case of alternative poetic-political expressions in public space:

[...] the specific value of a politics of cultural production [...] gives depth to the language of social criticism and extends the domain of ‘politics’ in a direction that will not be entirely dominated by the forces of economic or social control. Forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional cultural practices. (20)

These political practices, and indeed the poetic practices as seen in image 3, also call to mind Rancière's “double effect” between political significance and sensitive impact (2013: 59), which he considered to be characteristic of political art. Yet this effect could also be extended to theory itself, whose poetic-political role should not be underestimated. Given the need to construct a political discourse and an activism



Fig. 6 - Augusto de Campos, "cidadecitycité", installation by Julio Plaza at the São Paulo Biennial (1987)

against cultural domination, Bhabha called for a "translation of theory" (1994:27), Rancière followed with an attempt to show the poetic nature of theoretical statements, and how this subverts the limits and hierarchies of discourse (2013: 61). In any case, the notion of cultural translation has proved to be useful for discussing many current poetic forms, from graffiti to performative variants which contest institutionalised aesthetics, and which could be seen as colonisers since, "cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy, and in that very act, demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation within minority positions" (Bhabha, 1994: 228).

The arrival of these and other hybrid, postmodern and postcolonial conditions, has deprived public space of its politically autonomous status, and its independent character (cf Buden 2003). It could be said that culture itself has become

the principal site of political change. As protest is not only confined to the street, social networks and media have become essential, and this required a previous cultural change. The classic notion of public space has also been devoured by the culturalisation of the information and knowledge society. Judith Butler (1996) has argued that current social changes are transgressive, and are no longer a dialectical process, as Habermas has maintained. These changes take place within a mediation process of continuous social and cultural transgressions through democratic negotiations, hence cultural translations and their respective interpretation dilemmas. It is precisely these cultural translations that are capable of highlighting alterity, which set the necessary limits to rules and their universal aspiration.

Almost a decade earlier Gayatri Spivak (1987) justified a strategic use of essentialism



as a reaction to the continued practice of essentialist identity and identification politics (people, nation, etc.) that disregarded the nature of fiction and construction. The idea was of a translation between two incompatible languages: between postmodern anti-essentialist language, and the language of institutionalised political practice, notionally outdated but still prevailing. In the cultural context of nation states which still function as the foundation of geopolitical order, Boris Buden argues that the “only possible way of a communication between them is a kind of translation,” and that there is still “a need for the old political agency of the public space as a site of translation between, let’s say, an actual act of cultural subversion and old-fashioned power politics” (2003).

These reflections on a theoretical and methodological framework for poetry and translation in public space can be subsumed under the aforementioned key concept of transit-translation. In the following examples, I will associate four poetic expressions from four related cultural areas, with non-lyric discourse in visual, verbo-visual and performance poetry, in public space. They will be distributed along four thematic lines which I consider crucial to the current description of the phenomenon: (A) the intermedial-intermaterial transition, (B) the transfer from the poetic-political to the commercial, (C) the poetic-political multimedia project, and (D) the conflict between the poetic and the public.



Fig. 7 - Augusto de Campos / Cid Campos,  
“Poesia é Risco” (1995)

## (A) Intermedial-Intermaterial Transition

Brazilian Concrete poetry has undergone a number of important intermedial and intermaterial transformations over the past decades. Published in 1963, Augusto de Campos’s poem, “cidadecitycité” (Image 4), is already a classic, and thereby serves as a paradigmatic model of the relationship between poetry, translation, and public space in recent history. It consists of a list of words that characterise the modern city (and public space in the classic sense) without the suffix “-cidade” (city). This only appears at the end of the text, together with its respective translations in English and French, global languages linked to historical notions of the urban. The meaning of the prefix “atro-” is revealed only at the end of the text when it can be read as “atrocidade” (atrocities), thus gaining a dimension of urban criticism. Consequently, there is a recurring transit, over and back, between the predicates themselves, and between the predicates and the concept of *city*.

In 1975 the poem’s text was adapted to digital language by Erthos de Souza (image 5), and in 1987 it was transformed again, not only intermedially, but also intermaterially. In the São Paulo biennial, Julio Plaza displayed the words of the poem on one of the exhibition buildings (image 6), while inside, Cid Campos used the poem in a performance, accompanied by a photo-light installation. During the exhibition, the consubstantiation of this poem with the city became direct and material. As a modern, urban epigraph, its poeticity points at layers of signification beyond the mere poetic inscription on a public building.

The text-poem transited to an object-poem or an installation-poem, since applying it to a building façade highlighted the materiality and colour of its signs. The installation-poem or poetic object was not a mere ornament, but rather a designation of the thing, the modern mega-city, which was omnipresent throughout the exhibition. It is as if the poem itself were saying “This is the city,” establishing a transit-translation between its signs, their meanings, the materiality of its signs, and the surrounding urban materiality. That moment denoted a carrier phenomenon for a poeticity which was now part of the transit itself and of the translation movement between what is considered real, poetic and political (the ‘concrete’ poetic perception of the city) and prefabricated norms and ideas (the institutionalised concepts of city,

urbanity, etc.)

The enacted transit-translation affects the language itself, since the final words acquire both a noun value and a suffix value in their respective languages, thereby enabling both interlinguistic and intralinguistic transpositions. In each of the languages the poetic phenomenon simultaneously designates and translates the city, though it fails to completely appear. The aforementioned, materialised transits prevent it from fully corresponding with the thing. The image of instability, exteriority and disorder is thus reinforced, the very opposite of what a city is supposed to be. However, the (non-lyric) evocation of its untranslatable and unexhibitable content includes a search for poeticity, and this double bind between the city's designation and deconstruction enables an in-between space which makes future artistic translations of the same poetic material possible. This is clearly demonstrated by the intermedial and intermaterial transformations that this poem has undergone over time. One of these transformations has been transposing it to a video-poem or 'clip-poema' as it is called in Brazil. Shortly after that, Augusto de Campos's musical adaptation together with Cid Campos (Image 7) became part of a CD, and later part of a performance which was presented between 1995 and 2003 in Brazil and internationally, while later living on in the digital realm.

Yet, it could be argued that its status as a poetic-political event was at its clearest in the São Paulo Biennial installation, and more diluted in its subsequent hybridizations. With each transit-translation, the poetic condition became more complex and moved further away from the urban material body. With each step forward, something had changed and there was no way back: the language, the meaning, the media, and the respective context had evolved. But in each poetic event, there was something unique and untranslatable, namely the poetic phenomenon in its precise synchronic moment as an event in a real or virtual public space, which in itself was the result of a transition. The countless transformations this poem has experienced, from 1960s concrete poetry to the digital era, show the ambiguity of the transit-translation and its bidirectionality, in a very paradigmatic way. An identity between poetic expression and the city did not occur at any of the poem's evolutionary moments: from the text-poem, to its computerised transcreation, to its installation, and performance, to its musical-performance adaptation, to its web circulation. The transit remained as

difference, as a third space where the poetic was subject to chance production and reception conditions that would not neutralise its political message.

## (B) **Transit from a poetic-political event to a commercial event.**

Naturally, there are countless examples of the commercialisation of poetic action in public space, in many varying degrees. The work of the aforementioned Banksy is one of the most prominent and complex examples. However, I would prefer to focus now on a less globalised poetic example that nonetheless represents a variation of paradigmatic commercialisation, without authorial intent or request, and which derives from a political graffito.

Political paintings and graffiti had marked Portugal's urban landscape in the years following the 1974 Revolution. The onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economic crisis saw their proliferation and diversification, making Lisbon one of the most important spaces internationally for street artists. A noteworthy painting from this second wave is an anonymous graffito which shows a likeness of Fernando José Salgueiro Maia, one of the revolution's most emblematic captains (Image 8). In the current climate marked by controversial Troika imposed austerity and excessive European Union control, poverty has rapidly increased, coinciding with a significant loss in Portuguese national sovereignty. Evoking the revolutionary significance of this now legendary figure was a clear and subversive demand for a second revolution. Ironically, or indeed cynically, photographs of the graffiti appeared on sale on a microstock agency website almost simultaneously. The appropriation and commercialisation of this artistic action's poetic-political discourse illustrates how the hermeneutics of the transit-translation process encompass not only translatability and misunderstanding, but also the intentional abuse at reception level, even more so when we see it was taken by a certain P. V. Martins, from the same country affected by the crisis and the accompanying misery (Image 9).

In addition, the commercial appropriation of poetic expression also shows how it can lose its independent na-



Fig. 8 - Anonymous, [Salgueiro Maia], foto by B. Baltrusch (Almada, 2013)



Fig. 9 - anonymous, [Salgueiro Maia], foto by P. V. Martins (Lisboa, 2012)  
For sale at colourbox.com



ture in a public space, and how this public space can simultaneously be deprived of its autonomous political status. The initial “double effect” between political significance and sensory impact became neutralised through the reification of poetic expression. This example of transition to the commercial fits Rancière’s definition for “aesthetic art” in a very practical way if we link his idea of aesthetics to our aforementioned definition of the poetic and poeticity:

There is a metapolitics of aesthetics which frames the possibilities of art. Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfil its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy. (2002: 151)

Martins’ appropriation of the original graffiti can be related to Rancière’s *dissensus*, conceived as a political dynamics that can open up new possibilities beyond the consensual and normative, which has been invested in the commercialised event and its virtual circulation. Thus, the graffiti’s potential to destabilise, which included a new subjectivity and a new reality project, has been truncated by the ambiguity of transit-translation’s hermeneutic freedom and the difficulty in controlling it.

### (C) The Poetic-Political Multimedia Project

A very different form of attempting to control this ambiguity can be found in another phenomenon in current poetic expression in public space which can be characterised as a poetic-political multimedia project. The increasing technological possibilities of the digital age have led to a proliferation of this kind of poetic-political action. As I will briefly outline in the following three examples, here I understand these projects as enduring works of a certain poetological consistency, which fit into a solid, reasoned, theoretical and social framework.

The first example is the Portuguese artist and designer,

Miguel Januário, known professionally as  $\pm$ MaisMenos $\pm$  (“more or less”), who offers a comprehensive project in methodological and media terms. His work brings together graffiti, performance, visual art, video, and object art, among other elements. Januário has been active in Portuguese public space for almost a decade, and now some of his objects can be found in exhibitions, museums and even the art market. He began with a graphic design proposal which linked the expression “more or less” to certain Portuguese character stereotypes, and the country’s current economic and political crisis. He subsequently defined his activity as an intervention project which aims to reflect on the models of political, social and economic organisation in Western society, intentionally seeking a simplified, programmatic expression through oppositions such as more/less, positive/negative, or white/black. A Portuguese/English bilingual artistic project grew from this, which moved between performance and graffiti, employing neologisms such as *quotaction* or *streetment*. In a controversial performance during the European Capital of Culture 2012 programme in Guimarães, Januário dramatised the stabbing of a statue of Portugal’s founding king, and organised the symbolic burial of the country itself.

All these activities have been documented in film and photograph on the Internet. His website also includes what he calls *objections*, a hybrid of graffiti and street installation. They operate both online and in physical space, subverting emblematic consumerist values, and Portuguese cultural values, such as the national anthem or the famous revolutionary song, “Grândola, Vila Morena.” As a poetic-political project with a planned strategy in the public sphere,  $\pm$ MaisMenos $\pm$  is a model of an anti-system political message that does not exclude the commercial dimension. It is professionally produced, like a commercial brand, combining graffiti and artistic action with the digital world and the circuit of institutionalised exhibitions. In conferences and TEDx Talks, Januário has reflected on the problem of preserving the poetic-political impetus of his actions when faced with the need to earn an income from his artistic work.

Another example of a poetic-political project is that of the Spanish poet and graffiti artist, Batania Neorrabioso, whose interventionist and artistic work also takes place in the public space. His minimalist poetic graffiti show a predilection for precise, direct and sometimes aggressive language, always



Image 10: Camilla Watson, [neighbour of the Beco das Farinhas, Lisbon], foto by B. Baltrusch (2011)

characterised by a pronounced metaphoricity. Based in Madrid, where he prefers to graffiti public buildings, this poetic activist has self-published two books (2012, 2014) with poems and images of graffiti-poems, which range from socio-political and philosophical reflection to love poetry. He gains exposure through social media (blogs, Twitter and Facebook), where he has published quite an extensive oeuvre.

He survives on very limited resources, and apart from the poetic-political project, his is a lifetime project where life and art overlap. His poetic project is thus based on a certain idea of life as art, and of the reciprocal transit-translation between both. This can be linked, from a diachronic perspective, to aspects of avant-garde, mainly from early modernism (e.g. Fluxus) and up to the present day. There is no doubt that poetic projects like those from  $\pm$ MaisMenos $\pm$  and Batania Neorrabioso form part of a current universal phenomenon.

A third example comes from a public, urban space in Lisbon during the last decade, which has focused on visuality and social, but also political action. In 2009, the English photographer Camilla Watson began printing photographic portraits of the residents of the traditional, historic, Lisbon neighbourhood of Mouraria, directly onto the exterior walls of their houses.

They were chosen by the neighbourhood residents themselves, and the idea was to show how the subjects fuse with the place. Mouraria is one of Lisbon's oldest and most traditional neighbourhoods; in historical and even essentialist terms, one could call it an "original" public, urban space. Watson's project contains various intermaterial and intermedial features, as well as a socio-political facet which sought to honour Mouraria's senior citizens and their lifestyle. There was also an intervention of the material and discursive space itself; an intermedial-intermaterial transit in the photographs of the residents applied to their material homes.

Beco das Farinhas, one of the neighbourhood's main streets, sees a daily flow of tourists walking up to Lisbon's São Jorge Castle. The photographs printed on the walls have themselves been photographed countless times, thereby creating a transit-translation in which the project has gone beyond the limits of its initial proposal. Even more so if we consider that the prints have occasionally been covered by Lisbon's ubiquitous graffiti (and vice versa), leading to a coexistence which often includes political messages. For example, the graffiti in Image 11 says, "It is time to start

thinking for you[rself]" and someone has corrected it to read, "...for rage." The result is a continuous dialogue between the "original" project and other poetic-political expression, a translation in a synchronic temporality where the transit is always irreversible: from person to portrait, to space and other interventions in this space, together with the overlapping of art and life, and to socio-political and museulisation, among others. There is also the physical aspect, where residents, houses, photographs, graffiti, and the public observer converge, and whose temporal, poetic presence can be read and described according to Jon Clay's definition of performance as, "a sensational and temporal unfolding of a poem in conjunction with a self and body of a reader" (2010: 61). Thus, the poetic expression of these photographs encrusted in walls and interwoven with graffiti surpasses the initial action's intention. Individual corporeality is added to the body "of an actualized poem, that exists only in this conjunction and that is a movement of a poem in performance" (61).

#### (D) **Conflict Between Poetic Intervention and Public Space.**

Obviously, there have been certain conflictive moments in the majority of the examples mentioned, political as well as legal or ethical, given that they are inscribed directly onto urban material. I shall illustrate this with one final example of a long-term poetic project from the Austrian poet Helmuth Seethaler, who goes by the name "Zettelpoet" in German, which roughly means "note poet" or "post-it poet." In keeping with his belief that art should be omnipresent in public space, since 1974 Seethaler has stuck or posted hundreds of thousands of small notes containing poems or aphorisms on posts, trees, in metro stations and other public spaces in Vienna. He designated these as "collectable poems," and published a selection of them in 1995.<sup>1</sup>

Seethaler received more than 2,000 official complaints over the course of more than three decades, almost all of which were dismissed. However, 2010 saw his highly contested conviction for serious material damage, which was eventually overturned. Yet this episode did not mark the

1 - In recent years, his activity has been documented online <<http://www.hoffnung.at/hoffnung/indexneu.html>>, <<http://helmuth-seethaler.jimdo.com/>> y <<https://www.facebook.com/wiener.zetteldichter>> [Accessed 06/05/2015].

end of Seethaler's poetic activism, rather it led to a public debate on the relationship between artistic freedom, public space and civil and criminal law. Given Seethaler's limited income and life-long dedication to this task, this case is characteristic of the poetic-political project and the overlapping of life and art, through the ongoing conflict between the poetic and the institutionalised norms of artistic expression and performance in public space.

## Conclusion

In all these examples of contemporary poetic expression, as presented from a transit-translation perspective,<sup>2</sup> we can see moments of return of the excluded, of empowerment, and of emancipation of the subject. Of most interest have been the phenomena which, despite contradictions and ambiguities, search for a renewed public space and new ways of becoming poetic-political occurrences that can be converted into discourse. This occurrence, or event, according to Badiou, implies always "the formal promotion of a domain that had been considered extraneous to art" (2013: 68-69).

Moreover, the choice of current poetic expression intended to focus on the aspect of the event where the enunciating subject loses its centrality. The very notion of the event prevails over that of the language and the poetic action. Whether as a process of truth (Badiou) or *dissensus* (Rancière), it works as an intervention in significant material spaces, in the things themselves and in their usual order. Even if the analysis of each case has not always been sufficiently complete, this is apparent from the medial and material transitions, from the relationships between the commercial and the poetic-political, and from the strategically planned poetic projects, each in conflict with the public sphere to varying degrees. All of them feature a search for poeticity and a non-lyric poetic (socio-political) translation in the public space, from either the perspective of hermeneuti-

2 - Taking into account the ephemeral nature of the majority of the examples, it should be noted that some important questions have not been addressed because of lack of space (such as affixing, temporality or institutionalisation, and their respective systemic impacts). Also pending address is the complexity of material documentation (recording, collecting etc.) versus immaterial documentation (in cultural memory etc.) and the back and forth between production, realisation and reception and their respective hermeneutical implications.

cal transition or cultural translation.

For these reasons, the concept of transit-translation has been useful in the context of an ontological search for a fresh spatiotemporal interpretation. The basically non-lyric character implies a double bind between a new proposal for poeticity, and the realisation that intent and meaning will have to be abandoned at some point, thereby requiring a constant repetition of the translation process. Here, translation meets poetry in their shared role of criticism and resistance to essentialist and authoritarian conceptualisations of discourse and symbols; or as Bhabha articulated, "It is by placing the violence of the poetic sign within the threat of political violation that we can understand the powers of language" (1994: 60). In public space, this poetic creation and intervention as translation, plays with the traditional politics of power by continuing to use its forms and symbols, but eventually converting it into an act of cultural subversion, which opens up alternative spaces to poetic freedom. It is an idea of constant change which in turn creates an up-to-date, differential stability.

If the poetic can be restricted to questions and contexts of reception, poeticity refers to the poetic's discursive and normativising field, and the excluded, untranslatable and inexplorable in their respective historical present. According to Benjamin, works of art are both evidence of the philosophy of history, and expressions of metaphysical, political and economic tendencies of their time (cf. 1991: VI, 117 and 219). In all these examples of poetic action or poetic events, translations of traditions and their opposition to power and knowledge structures, reveal a desire to resignify the real, through practices characterised by intertextuality and indeterminacy. Their place is neither inside nor totally outside the system, rather in a new, constantly transfiguring in-between space.

Repeating the symbols, signs and production techniques of graffiti, performance or poetic action establishes differentiating facets when practiced in specific contexts. They aspire not only to an artistic-cultural translation, but often to very specific social translations, namely processes that are inseparable from political thought.<sup>3</sup> Their performa-

3 - Cf. also Bhabha: "The subaltern or metonymic are neither empty nor full, neither part nor whole. Their compensatory and vicarious processes of signification are a spur to social translation,

tive nature provides a backdrop for cultural and epistemological differences, and also the inherent problem of representation. This relates to Benjamin's idea of a translation as a preliminary way of dealing with the "foreignness of languages to each other" (1997: 157).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps these forms of non-lyric poetry might even represent the advent of a new public sphere, to the effect that their new forms and practices could now be, "something else which does not concern *us*" (Casas 2012: 3) as subjects exclusively shaped by an idealistic, romantic tradition. To a certain degree, in some of these poetic expressions, such as Banksy's graffito discussed earlier, we could even deduce a poetic dimension which is disassociating itself from a uniquely human, central, foundational value – although this may seem epistemologically impossible.<sup>5</sup> One such non-anthropocentric notion of the poetic – that of a universal poetry, without immediate affiliation to a subject or individualised subjective – could locate itself in a new public sphere where one is no longer exclusively Western or formed by an idealistic, romantic tradition. Or where, as Rancière contemplates, "the whole history of art forms and of the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art could be staged as the clash of these two formulae: a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art" (2002: 10). Analogous to Benjamin's "pure language," we could speak of the poetic as an echo of something unattainable which only survives through constant transfigurations and transpositions that are indispensable to fostering an always primary and fundamental becoming. This could also apply in a political sense though it would be a hermeneutic ambiguity which suggests a reconfiguration of the subject and of poetic subjectivity.

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the production of something else besides which is not only the cut or gap of the subject but also the intercut across social sites and disciplines. This hybridity initiates the project of political thinking by continually facing it with the strategic and the contingent, with the countervailing thought of its own 'unthought'" (1994: 64).

4 - Cf. also Bhabha, 1994: 227.

5 - Because according to our Western logic, without 'human' reception, who or what would (re)construct 'the poetic'? However, there are other indigenous epistemologies, as described e.g. by the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2009) that are contrary to our Western logic. They understand culture, despite its plurality, as something universal (inherent also to the animal world), and nature (body, matter) as the individual par excellence.

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## The “black-and-white mural” in Polytechneio : Meaning-making, Materiality, and Heritagization Of Contemporary Street Art in Athens

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### Abstract

The campus of the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens has been a significant cornerstone in the socio-political landscape of the city. Within the history of modern Greece, Polytechneio is regarded as a symbol of resistance against the Greek military dictatorship (junta) in 1973. In March 2015 and during times of austerity politics, the west façades of the Polytechneio were covered by a “black-and-white mural” (Tziouvas 2017: 45). This paper examines how and why this black-and-white mural has been discussed often controversially from different kinds of recipients, leading to an ardent public debate within Greek society from a cross disciplinary point of view: 1) semiotics, 2) design, and 3) cultural studies. For our analysis, we use data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data sources include photographic documentation of the field. Secondary data sources include photographic material and newspaper articles circulated online, as well as, relevant academic literature. First, we examine how this mural was integrated into the constructions and intersubjective experiences of public space from the perspective of semiotization of space. Second, we discuss the practicalities involved for the fulfilment of this mural from the perspective of design-scope. And third, we advance the discussion around the issues of cultural preservation and heritagization of street art and graffiti. Our goal in this paper is to avoid binary interpretations, and instead, to induce in an intermediary way the significance of public dialogue, which this mural achieved to trigger.

**Keywords:** semiotics, design, cultural studies, Athens crisis, street art

## 1. Introduction

In Greece, as in other countries of the world, street art, graffiti, and urban art as expressive and worldwide phenomena are often used as different types of urban creativity (an umbrella term), encompassing several types of art in urban space either under legal assignment or not. As a number of studies have shown (namely Avramidis, 2015; Bengtsen, 2014; Blanché, 2015; Chmielewska, 2008; MacDowall, 2006; Pangalos, 2014; Philipps, 2015), the notions of graffiti, street art, post-graffiti, and urban art are heavily cross labelled and interpretatively rich with authors from different disciplines approaching such concepts in different ways.<sup>1</sup> In other words, such complex and meaningful phenomena of human sociocultural consciousness have been discussed for quite a long time, often controversially by various disciplines – namely anthropology, architecture, art history, criminology, design, internet ethnography, political and cultural studies, social media and urban ethnography, and most recently (cognitive) semiotics. In fact, this proves the strong inter-trans-cross-multidisciplinary nature of the scholarly field of these art movements (Ross et al., 2017) and the necessity for more street art and graffiti research beyond the crossovers. This paper traces the exemplary case of a “black-and-white mural” (Tziovas, 2017: 45) in Polytechnic School of Athens from a synergistically oriented approach: 1) semiotics, 2)

design, and 3) cultural studies. To this extent, the notions of graffiti and street art are used interchangeably throughout the text.

Although, the scope of this study does not allow for a detailed description of the crisis and times of austerity in detail, nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind, at least to some extent, the socio-political and cultural context, where the crisis-related street art started emerging. The Athenian walls, as an urban socio-political magazine in the context of crisis and intense socio-political upheavals, suggest that the socio-political changeover, financial crisis, and austerity measures are considered common themes to the encrypted messages of street artworks and interventions displayed in the centre of Athens (Stampoulidis, 2016).

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, we outline the socio-political background of Polytechnic School. On this basis, we argue that the building of Polytechnic School is regarded as a symbol of the Athens Polytechnic uprising against the Greek military dictatorship (1963-1974) due to its historical burden. Section 3 describes the method and empirical material from primary and secondary sources. In section 4 we analyze our case study, which leads us to the discussion in section 5, where we formulate some concluding considerations.



Figure 1 Artwork in Polytechnio. Photography George Fiorakis © in March 2015,

Web Page: <https://www.inexarchia.gr/story/local/rotisame-gnomes-gia-terastio-gkrafiti-sto-polytehneio-vandalismos-i-kraygi-aganaktisis>

## 2. The contemporary art in Polytechneio and its historical past

The campus of the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens (henceforth *Polytechneio*) located in the specific area of Exarchia district which was constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1862-1876) and designed by the Greek architect Lysandros Kaftantzoglou (1811-1885) has been a significant cornerstone in the socio-political landscape of the city.<sup>2</sup> Within the history of modern Greece, Polytechneio is regarded as a symbol of the Athens Polytechnic uprising against the Greek military dictatorship, *junta* (1963-1974).<sup>3</sup> Polytechneio ever since has been characterized as a “political topos of Hellenism” (Leontis, 2016) which is a historically charged building with various kinds of political ideas and ideals of the renowned Greek past such as freedom and democracy. The surrounding walls, marbles, and even windows of the Polytechneio have functioned as an *unsanctioned canvas* for various kinds of street art and graffiti practices encompassing socio-political messages and artistic interventions. In other words, as Schacter (2014) would have said, the area would have been seen as a 17<sup>th</sup> century Parisian café for artists in millennial Athens.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, we discuss an exemplary case of political action and controversial potential of graffiti. In March 2015, the west façades of the Polytechneio were covered by a large scale black-and-white mural, which can partake in the tradition of abstract expressionism with its vague content, painted in black and white patterns. Thus, it may confirm that the lack of content and its ambiguous interpretations give the piece a timeless artistic merit (Figure 1).

More explicitly, this empirical paper focuses on the role of contemporary street art and graffiti within the Athenian urban social milieu. It examines *how* and *why* this black-and-white mural, as being our empirical illustration, has been discussed often irreconcilably from different kinds of recipients, leading to a public debate between local and international street art practitioners and graffiti writers, public and research authorities, communication media, and Greek public opinion. In order to unpack this issue, we advance the discussion about street art and graffiti through a combination of several approaches by focusing on the levels of preparation, implementation, and erasure of this black-and-white mural.

## 3. Method and research material

This paper draws methodologically on the researchers’ own empirical material. For our analysis, we use data from primary and secondary sources. This section describes our data gathering tools, which are: 1) photographic documentation of the field and 2) photographic data and articles from online web blogs, newspapers, free press magazines circulated online, as well as a number of academic literature articles. More specifically, the pictures were taken by the authors in two different periods: 1) in March 2015, when the artwork was released on the walls of the Polytechneio, and 2) almost three years after its erasure in the winter 2017/spring 2018, in order to compare the walls outside the Polytechneio presently. Based on fieldwork conducted in Athens in the winter 2017/spring 2018, the Polytechnic walls were fully covered by small tags or bigger pieces of graffiti, and not by a big-scale coherent entity of one piece as occurred in March 2015 (see Section 4). This is a confirmation based on the photographic testimony, which could lead us to consider the Polytechnic façades as legal or open graffiti walls (see Footnote 4). We then documented other artworks nearby which presumably could belong to the same graffiti crew.<sup>5</sup> These assumptions were driven by the similarities between the black and white patterns of the pieces (Figure 2, an instantiation from Patisision Street in central Athens).



Figure 2 Black and white patterns in Patisision Street. Photography Tina Bitouni © in January 2018.

Additionally, a number of pictures associated with the mural in Polytechnio were found in online web archives. We also collected articles from online web blogs and forums, and newspapers free press magazines which show the diversity of the opinions. This would lead us to next where we discuss both press and academic literature review. A number of articles in online web blogs and newspapers debated the specific case of the black-and-white mural in Polytechnio often controversially. Here, we review the main axes of this online discussion because the discussion affords a spherical view of the phenomenon. There are several people, who characterized the mural as an action that involved deliberate destruction and damage to public and private property including the well-known Greek painter Alekos Fassianos in his interview at the *in.gr* web portal. In addition, the rector of the National Metsovian Polytechnic, at that time, Ioannis Golias, also defined graffiti as an act of vandalism. On the other hand, the defenders of the mural in Polytechnio paid their attention mostly to technical characteristics, quality and style. The Athenian street artist, *N\_Grams*, noted that the artwork on the façades of the Polytechnio is a mural of epic dimensions and not a graffiti, a large-scale intervention in a historic building. Last but not least, the response of the Greek street artist, *Fikos*, is equally interesting, by spelling out the significance of the artistic style of the black-and-white mural in Polytechnio which obeyed rules of composition and occupied the entire wall, which might mean that there should be an artistic and non-vandalistic mind behind its execution.

Moving forward to the academic literature, a number of recent studies from different fields (i.e., Greek philology, art history, visual and cultural studies) have recently considered the dynamic symbolisms of this black-and-white mural for the history of Greece and its contemporary street art and graffiti scene. More concretely, Leontis (2016) focuses on the site-specificity, socio-political and contextual surroundings of the mural in Polytechnio by discussing political narratives inscribed on the Polytechnio's walls with encapsulated values of the mural's meaning-bearing. In subsequence, both Drakopoulou (2017) and Leontis (2016) advocate the significance of the pictorial material and how this was elaborated in accordance with the building's architecture and peculiarities (as referred to neoclassical "looking") by taking into account the architectural topography of the site itself. Altogether, both have pinpointed the conflictual

discourse that was raised from both media and state agencies that mainly interpreted the mural as an act of vandalism and decided its urgent removal (Drakopoulou, 2017; Leontis, 2016). Lastly, Tsilimpounidi (2017) and Tziouvas (2017) comment upon the fact that the large scale black-and-white mural in Polytechnio could presumably be seen as critique of the catastrophic consequences of crisis and austerity to the Greek educational system and in particular to Greek universities and campuses. But, another task remains to be accomplished: to process and analyse the information gathered about our empirical illustration from our perspective.

#### **4. Analysis from the perspective of semiotics, design, and cultural studies**

##### **4.1. The black-and-white mural as a place-making urban assemblage**

After reviewing the relevant pieces from media press and academic literature, it is now time to discuss the black-and-white mural as a place-making urban assemblage.<sup>6</sup> In terms of the walls' symbolic importance, the notion of urban assemblage (Farias, 2010) is quite relevant from the perspective of not only the materiality of the Polytechnio's façades, but mainly, from the perspective of their intangible and symbolic significance. In this section, we explore the ways that the contextual location of graffiti making in Polytechnio made it an urban spatial practice. Therefore, we must turn to urban and spatial semiotics in order to discuss the mural in Polytechnio as a semiotic device. The French philosopher and sociologist Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) clearly states (as cited in Zieleniec, 2016) that the graffiti paintings and wall writings are often to be considered as symptoms and/or signifiers of conflicts and/or hard times in a city.

The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become 'savage' and by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls (ibid: 10).

With this in mind, graffiti may be considered an instantiation of a return to the city as a living creative work of art, always in the process of being written/painted and/or rewritten/repainted. In this way, the mural we studied may provide



diverse ways of interacting and communicating within the city. This may stand not just for those, who actively wrote or painted the walls, but also for those, who in an intersubjective and active way engaged themselves by reading and interpreting it. In fact, this could explain what Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) argues by saying that what allows society as a collective organism to exist and to function is the cooperative work between senders (graffiti writers) and recipients (graffiti interpreters) (as cited in Zieleniec, 2016). In other words, the mural in Polytechneio may be considered as a *space of representation* in Lefebvre's sense, meaning that its immaterial symbolic meanings make it a space which is to be socially experienced. More precisely, within the city of Athens, the Polytechneio mural was substantially transformed to a common ground, where people with shared concerns and experiences engendered themselves in order to communicate conflicting ideas and messages addressing its "spatial dialectics" (Schmid, 2012: 45), something that it is clearly proven by the media and academic discussion in Section 3.

To this extent, studying the black-and-white mural as a

place-making urban assemblage from a semiotic perspective requires us to turn to *intersubjectivity* which is understood as the sharing of experiential content such as feelings, perceptions, and thoughts among a number of subjects (Zlatev et al., 2008). In this case the shared experience about the mural in Polytechneio which was being communicated and circulated through various sociocultural channels may be approached as the human capacity for intersubjectivity. In other words, by taking into account our empirical case study, it could be explained as the way people, who either painted (graffiti artists) or interpreted (graffiti interpreters, including both state authorities and society at large) the mural in Polytechneio, were presumably aware of the experiences of Others through the schema of subject-world interactions and social engagement (see e.g. Zlatev et al., 2008 for extensive reviews in intersubjectivity). On the basis of this argument, we could clarify that for cultural artefacts, such as the mural in Polytechneio, there could be one extra layer of intersubjectivity - that is to say the potential for dialogue and/or action that the mural itself invited recipients by taking into consideration the *subjects* involved (artists-interpreters). To summarize, we have in this section discussed the



Figure 3 Artwork in Polytechneio. Photography George Fiorakis © in March 2015,

Web Page: <https://www.inexarchia.gr/story/local/rotisame-gnomes-gia-terastio-gkrafiti-sto-polytehneio-vandalismos-i-kraygi-aganaktisis>

immaterial symbolic significance of graffiti along with its intersubjective nuances. More precisely, the intense public debate that followed the mural creation unveiled the spatial and urban dynamics of graffiti as a means of public expression and democratization. Nevertheless, in relation to the present purposes, we argue that the mural in Polytechnio, as an embodied act of settling the Greek urban space, managed to create new ways of utilizing the Polytechnio's façades for diverse aesthetic meanings and cultural and political messages. This gave rise to alternative, often contradictory, discourses among subjects which encouraged an ardent public debate and active intersubjective participation in the everyday urban life of the Greek lived experienced milieu.

#### 4.2. Graffiti art or pre-designed mural?

Is the artwork in Polytechnio graffiti or a mural, and to what extent? This question may be partially answered if we turn to design-scope. The walls of the historic building were painted from the ground up to the entablatures in black and white patterns. This invited diametrically opposed interpretations, since it was perceived either as a contemporary work of art or as a vile act of vandalism (Section 3).

At this point, from the perspective of design, it should be noted that this action was not under legitimate assignment by a private or public sector, which creates awe for the speed in which the project was executed in relation to its size and other technical requirements. Looking at the pictures of the black-and-white mural in Polytechnio one could only wonder how a group of people managed to perform something so big and coherent in such a short period of time illegally (Figure 3). While exact data have not yet been released, it may be safe to assume that the people who were involved in this intervention numbered two or more working for at least three or more days.

As a result, reasonable questions arise through the prism of design about project preparation, implementation of a draft sketch (if it existed), organization of the time, execution methods, guidelines and requirements. The artwork in Polytechnio is described either as graffiti or as a mural. In an effort to clarify and relate these concepts, it is necessary to emphasize that both graffiti and mural art are processes governed by specific methodology and technical features,



Figure 4 Artwork in Polytechnio. Photography George Fiorakis © in March 2015,

Web Page: <https://www.kar.org.gr/2015/03/10/ρωτήσαμε-γνώμες-για-το-τεράστιο-γκραφ/>

elements that may judge what is graffiti and what is mural. Graffiti writers, as supported by Lewisohn (2008) do not want to be called artists, but on the contrary, many of them prefer to be called vandals, giving graffiti the definition of “anti-art” with the characterization of solipsistic practice. The fact that graffiti serves no other purpose than its own existence supports this case (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-19). The discourse on the purpose and meaning of graffiti and street art (mural-making for example), the use of specific techniques, tools and methodologies for each one, but also whether they are separate or related art forms, is vast and, at times, confusing. In fact, it's one of the grey areas within the academic literature. What we might note is that, in most parts of the world, graffiti art is produced mainly illegally, and production is devoted to the transmission of an individual or a crew name to the urban landscape, having as a basic tool the spray can and presenting a kind of egotistic character, as it has been aforementioned. On the other hand, street art, in most cases, is a practice made by the use of various tools, presenting many different forms and techniques, and can be made either illegally or falling within the legal framework (as a commissioned practice). However, we must make clear that this distinction between these two forms of artistic practices is heavily simplified, and also context-dependent serving the needs and goals of this paper.

Therefore, our approach may be explained by the fact that the bordures of the Doric entablatures and the marble signs with the street names remained seemingly untouched and deliberately uncovered (Figure 4). On the other hand, as we have highlighted throughout the text, it is difficult to trace a clear line in-between; and that is not our present concern either.

More concretely, the artwork in Polytechnio has been painted with a brush and roller. Also, it is quite possible, almost undeniable, that for the creation of the highest parts they used sticks on which the brush or roller was attached. This fact may be indicated by the distinguishing trace that the paint leaves on the wall, sometimes thinner and sometimes thicker, as well as by the black and white blending, which can only happen using roller and brush and not aerosol spray can (Figure 4). Even if we do not know if there was a draft sketch followed by the executors, we can assume that the length of their arms and roll sticks and their bodily movements were the main, and perhaps the only guidelines,

for the realization of the artwork. These guidelines could be traced on the “canvas” of the Polytechnio. Golden et al. (2002) and Verel (2015) argue that in the realization of murals, the local community as well as the inhabitants' desires play an important role for the artists' selection before, during, and after the end of any intervention project. In other words, even if an artist ought to work freely and spontaneously, sometimes social rules and constraints in the form of design methodology allow for better communication and understanding between the stakeholders.

Nonetheless, the artwork in Polytechnio was certainly uncommon in many respects. Graffiti-ists usually employ special characters and symbols that can be understood only by members of other graffiti communities or subcultures, involving the spread of their tag into the urban landscape.<sup>7</sup> In the artwork in Polytechnio, no legible or illegible signature (tag) seems to exist, which makes the process and final outcome even more different from the existing graffiti practices. We can only assume that it is the particular style and black-and-white patterns employed by the artists that makes their crew recognisable when their work spreads into the urban landscape. As a consequence, the executors behind the black-and-white mural in Polytechnio might have followed the solipsistic graffiti-making practice combined with a pre-planned time schedule and equipment organization which are often used by large-scale mural artists. In that sense, we argue that this artwork managed to apply in practice the grey zone of delimitations between street art and graffiti.

#### 4.3 The frameworks of cultural heritage and the question of the heritagization of street art

This section discusses our empirical case study from the perspective of cultural studies and heritage. According to a Greek law, this neoclassical edifice is included in the list of recent monuments built after 1830.<sup>8</sup> However, throughout the entire city of Athens, vandalism and graffiti writing on such monuments is a very common phenomenon especially during the periods of intense socio-political upheavals. The immediate reaction against the mural, especially enhanced by mainstream media, stood in contradiction not only with the previous plight of the wall, but also with its aftermath condition, after the mural's erasure (Figure 5).





Figure 5 Polytechnio at present.

Photography Tina Bitouni © in December 2017.

This asserts for the state of oblivion that the building has suffered and that both opponents and supporters of the mural referred to. In this state of oblivion, “an object is no longer noticed, and its meaning is no longer present or important for the society” (Gamboni, 1997). But, this time, the black-and-white mural, as a conspicuous and ambiguous visual utterance and as an artistic defiance drew everyone’s attention.

The surged debate was structured according to the fundamental contestation between vandalism and iconoclasm. The oscillation between vandalism, as an action involving deliberate destruction and/or damage to public and/or private property, and iconoclasm, as an action of attacking established values and practices, relies upon the eyes of the beholder. Therefore, due to the difficult of tracing a clear line, we approach the mural in Polytechnio as both and neither of the two. More concretely, our standpoint, here,

is that this mural may constitute a consummate example of the notion of *Iconoclasm*, as coined by Latour and Weibel (2002).

*Iconoclasm* is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking and what the motivations for what appears as a clear project of destruction are. *Iconoclasm*, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive (ibid: 16).

The notion of *Iconoclasm* encapsulates the triggering of the intense public debate due to the mural, which widened the gap between its opponents and supporters. Its removal was accompanied by no more than a dozen of supporters of the mural, mainly middle-aged women, members of the leftish self-organized theatre *EMPROS*. Like a reminiscent of the conflict between the iconoclasts and iconophiles in byzantine times, the supporters of the mural were protesting its removal and they had shaped a human chain encircling most part of the wall, hindering the process of erasure (Figure 6). In this unsettling and conflicting environment, we engage the concepts of heritage disinheritance and of ephemerality for a better elaboration of this case.

The recent establishment of street art as one of the most popular cultural movements of our era amounts to a growing institutionalization of this form of art. Academic interest, the inconceivably rising street art market, the implementation of street artworks in museums, and their process of heritagization testifies to the above statement. While some graffiti pieces are laying in unexpected nooks of the boulevard and left to be worn out by the rain or damaged by the wind, there are others which stand in the white cube carefully preserved or even guarded. In the mural’s case in Polytechnio, would it be possible to think about graffiti as heritage upon the already pre-existing heritage site of the neoclassical monument built in 1871? If we are willing to accept the heritagization process of the street art world, how many layers of heritage could be applied and remain meaningful and consistent? A patchwork of many different competitive narratives would indicate that there cannot or should not be only one collective identity. Instead, the friction between a popular, local collective identity and a public

collective memory is what describes best the spirit of the surrounding environment of the Exarchia district, including the Polytechnio building.

The empirical case of this mural resonates a dissonance between the heritage status of the neoclassical monument and the street art scene in Athens. According to Graham et al. (2000: 24) “the lack of agreement is intrinsic to the very nature of heritage.” The students and youth who have been the main and daily users of the university building are appropriating the Wall and deciding a different fate for it than the one initially designed by the authorities. Therefore, in this case appears to be a “deliberate self-inheritance, whereby, to varying degrees, a population challenges or denies its own heritage as changing circumstances destroy its relevance or utility” (Graham et al., 2000: 34). The recent painting over of a large scale monument immediately put forward the contestation between the myth of ancient Greece as the cradle of western civilisation, represented in the neoclassical design, and the present reality of wretchedness caused by the levelling wave of crisis, imprinted in the abandonment of the curation of the building due to the lack of finances.

Therefore, we argue that unlike the content of the mural itself, the act of conservation of the mural would have rendered the

piece as a street artwork vicarious of the Greek crisis. The conservation could have happened only outside institutional frameworks, relied only on grassroots curation, since so far there is no municipal systematic interest in the street art scene in Athens (Chatzidakis, 2016). However, the conservation of the mural does not equate to its plain remaining. In the latter case, the mural would be left exposed to all kinds of interaction, weather and time wear. With either the remaining or the conservation of the mural, an action of maintenance would advocate the uncomfortable ascertainment that the debt crisis is an irreversible part of the recent Greek history. The Doric entablatures and neoclassical design imply the renowned past of the ancient Greek civilisation, while the black and white features of the contemporary mural connote an uncertain indiscernible future. This mural constituted an excellent sample of hybridisation not only between high art and popular culture but also between a distant renowned and memorable past and a repelling poor present. Be it for its indecipherable dark content or for the withering of the neoclassical building, the remaining of the mural participates in the collective narrative of the contemporary Greek identity and represents the unglamorous conditions of debt and decay.



Figure 6 Human chain during the process of the artwork's erasure. Photography Unknown in March 2015,

Web Page: <http://www.athensmagazine.gr/article/weird/171837-ayth-einai-h-diamartyria-epos-kata-ths-afaireshs-toy-gkrafiti-sto-polytexneio-photos>

However, in order to avoid any misunderstanding of our being supportive for the conservation of the mural, it is important to highlight the notion of *ephemerality*. The ephemeral nature of an artwork in public space is perceived as contradictory to the potential heritagization process. Holtorf (2006: 108) supports the argument that the “destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage, but part of its very substance [...] if heritage is said to contribute to people’s identities, the loss of heritage can contribute to people’s identities even more.” Based on this, we fairly believe that Holtorf’s affirmation can be applied both on heritage monuments and artworks in public space. Independently of the aesthetic pleasure and beyond the discourse of its artistic merit, interventions in “publicly accessible spaces” (Bengtson, 2018: 125) can sometimes be seen as pure vandalistic practices, and sometimes as precursors of street art.<sup>9</sup> Thus, our intermediary approach leads us to consider them as instantiations that balance between two ends of the spectrum “vandalism - art” in accordance with the people’s interaction and social engagement with the urban environment.

## 5. Discussion and concluding remarks

In Greece, street art and graffiti aesthetic expressions usually constitute practices of protest and artfulness across the country by people of different ages working either under legal assignment or illegally. Although a number of previous studies have discussed the large scale black-and-white mural in Polytechnio, this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first case study which considers this specific artwork from a cross disciplinary point of departure between semiotics, design, and cultural studies.

The street art world of Athens is regarded as the cultural bearer of the daily experience of the years of austerity. Therefore, it can illuminate many socio-political and cultural displacements which occurred. However, we believe that it is methodologically misusing to attribute an overly political burden to every instantiation of art in “publicly accessible spaces” (Bengtson, 2018: 125), which has been created in Athens during the years of crisis (from 2008 onwards). In other words, we rather say that street art may not be always crisis-related. Without knowing the explicit intentions and motivations of the artists themselves, the only implied reason that would allow us to conclude that this artwork should be classified as crisis-related street artwork is the date of its production (March 2015). Therefore, it may be an oversimplification to describe every street artwork

located in Athens as crisis-related based only on the date of its production.

Regarding the mural’s instant erasure, we argue that this mural still carries a historical dimension due to the debate it triggered and the media attention it managed to attract (Section 3). However, the question still remains, if it would be possible to consider the artwork in Polytechnio as one more contributions to the intangible heritage based on the definition of intangible heritage provided by the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This definition encloses among others “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills [...] and cultural spaces that are constantly recreated by groups in response to their environment and history, whilst providing a sense of identity and continuity” (UNESCO 2003, 2).

In general, the impact of street art and graffiti lies in their ability to depict the invisible protagonists of everyday life in the city. We have argued, then, that the empirical case of this mural, as an act of artistic defiance, sheds light to the ability of street art and graffiti to encapsulate living cultures with historical value and significance, and to contribute challengingly into the contestation between the past and the future, and into the debate about collective memory and preservation ethics.

To summarize, the precedent discussion has manifested that the artwork in Polytechnio balances between the notions of graffiti and mural. It was certainly not created under legal code. If this were the case, this paper would refer to a totally different (fictional) scenario, where state initiatives would contact the artists proposing them to redesign the façades of the historic building of the Polytechnio. However, the spontaneous and independent expression of street art and graffiti’s artfulness as being imprinted in the case of the black-and-white mural in Polytechnio continues until today to motivate further discussions about its “spatial dialectics.” In fact, this might have been the intention of the Polytechnio’s executors; to (re-)create social bonds within society, to prompt constant dialogue about street art and graffiti, to encourage people’s thoughts about how public space is being used and last, but not least, to engage people with the everyday environment in a participatory, intersubjective, and critical way.

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### Endnotes

1 - Taking into consideration the cross disciplinary nature of the present paper - notably from semiotics, design, and cultural studies - we do not suggest a definitive and deterministic division of all these notions. Rather, the terms of street art and graffiti are used interchangeably throughout the text, although we are aware of the long discussions about these definitional issues in the academic literature.

2 - Exarchia is geographically located very close to the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens. It is a renowned neighbourhood of Athens for its libertarian character and resistance against state repression by many autonomous and/or anarchist groups, who choose this neighbourhood as a place of residence, work and social activity, but also notorious for its degraded urban landscape.

3 - On November 17th, 1973, the Greek army evacuated the occupation of the Polytechnic building by using a tank, which crashed the rail gate of the campus, causing the death of numerous people. This fact pointed to the beginning of the end of the most

recent Greek military dictatorship and it is annually commemorated until today.

4 - In Greece, there is no major anti-graffiti policy. Consequently, there are no officially declared legal or open graffiti walls (a practice applied to many other cities of the world - European or not). However, given the frequency of painting, the multitude of artists and versatile verbo-pictorial outcomes, it could be assumed that the Polytechnic façades could constitute the “open” graffiti walls of Athens, not officially declared though. As for our case study, the artwork in Polytechnio is estimated that it took three days for its completion and less than a week for its total removal, marking an unprecedented phenomenon for the zero anti-graffiti policy in Athens.

5 - Without the artists' signature, we cannot confirm the identity of the creator(s). Nevertheless, the places, where the other artworks have been found are: (1) Patisson Street, which is one of the major streets in central Athens, (2) Agia Irini square in the historical centre of Athens, (3) Dafni, Chaidari, which is an inner suburb of Athens and (4) Koumoundourou Street, which is close to Omonia square in central Athens. The first instantiation from Patisson Street (Figure 2) is an exterior wall of an abandoned building, which is located just a few blocks away from Polytechnio. This mural still exists until today and it is being treated with care by the pedestrians and residents, and thus, it remains uncovered by posters and/or tagging.

6 - Assemblage as an “alternative ontology for the city” (Fariás, 2010: 13).

7 - The creators of the mural in Polytechnio had no aspirations to become known, following at the same time the dominant, but implicit rule of anonymity in graffiti *subculture*. The definition and meaning of subculture, as it is given by Hebdige (1979: 2-3) includes the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups “[...] the meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force”. The meaning-makings within graffiti subculture could be an interesting case study from the perspective of cultural semiotics.

8 - [https://norwinst.w.uib.no/files/2017/03/Antiquities-Law-of-Greece\\_3028en.pdf](https://norwinst.w.uib.no/files/2017/03/Antiquities-Law-of-Greece_3028en.pdf) (retrieved 2018/04/03).

9 - “It should be noted that the term ‘public space’ [...] is taken to include so-called ‘publicly accessible spaces’, which is to say spaces that appear to be public but there are in fact privately owned” (Bengtson, 2018: 125).

## Strategies for creating village identity symbols using street art tactics: Staro Zhelezare, Bulgaria

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### Abstract

Over the last few years, various projects in the village of Staro Zhelezare have been undertaken aiming to involve and collaborate with the residents in order to directly improve the quality of social life and the image of the depressed neighbourhood. The purpose of the paper is to examine how different strategies of specific bottom-up activities in a public space address various problems in such a small community. Following the Fourth Street Art Festival in Staro Zhelezare, it is clear that the project has proved to be a considerable success in developing a strong visual identity that has helped to shape the image of the village and introduced resilience features. This paper addresses the problem of how to increase awareness of the inexpensive yet relatively accessible possibilities and potential of public spaces in small, economically depressed localities.

**Keywords:** village Street Art, village resilience, Staro Zhelezare, community engagement, identity, village avant-garde.

### 1. Introduction

The experience of Staro Zhelezare, Village of Art, illustrates how public art can enhance the character and identity of a village, which is very important for the improvement of its quality of life. The analysis sheds light on the significance of the quality of spatial and visual environments within the public sphere. Public artworks should be treated as landmarks for social interaction and cultural awareness which reflect liveability and identity. Consequently, public art can add value to places in Staro Zhelezare that attract social interaction and tourism. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the elements of the creative city, first conceived of by Australian David Yencken, in the village realm, and thus urban creativity in a small community. It also examines annual strategies of the Staro Zhelezare Street Art Festival. According to human geography and urbanism, any dynamic city is a balance of density, diversity and complexity. However, it is less clear how this reflects in a village. Due to Staro Zhelezare's smaller size and community, the village is a more specific environment with limited possibilities. Due to its depressed historical and economic background, resilience features seem quite remote and therefore an abstract achievement.

### 2. Historical and geographical context

In order to understand why street art finds a place in Staro Zhelezare and how it changes the image of the village, it is necessary to consider the historical, geographical and economic background to see the transformation of the village identity. Staro Zhelezare lies in the upper part of the Thracian Plain where the first Neolithic settlements were created at the turn of the 4th and 5th millennium BC. Since then, these areas have been continuously inhabited resulting in a multitude of cultural layers, each of which has left its mark on the local heritage. From the sixth to the first century BC these were areas inhabited by Thracians.

One of the main village symbols is at the entrance to the village, a Thracian cromlech - a stone circle which served as an astronomical observatory. Despite its importance, it is poorly preserved and in a tragic state due to a lack of finances for its maintenance and conservation. Notwithstanding, the primary and most visible trace left by Thracian culture is the specific type of architecture present until today. Due to the lack of stone building material, from the earliest times houses were built here from adobe - mud bricks dried in the sun - and a material still used today for most of the village buildings.



The specific residential layout also comes from Thracian times in which the houses are built with windows facing the gardens which creates a kind of patio, but without windows on the street side. All plots are fenced off with high, long walls, which are especially important to increase the safety of the residents. The effect of this approach and the continuation of this tradition helps maintain the specific, unique atmosphere of the village, which features long street corridors, with walls extending along all the streets. A few years ago, the artists noticed that they were perfect, huge surfaces waiting to be covered with paintings.

Between the first century BC and the fourth century AD, the village thrived under Roman citizens. Ten kilometres from Staro Zhelezare lies the village of Hissarya, which was the favourite city and balneological centre of Romans due to the abundance of healing springs and extremely sunny weather with a moderate climate throughout the year. There is not much data from the Byzantine and Bulgarian period. From the fourteenth century, Bulgaria fell under Turkish rule for five centuries. Staro Zhelezare was inhabited by Bulgarians at that time while just next to it there was a village where the Mohammedan Bulgarians lived for a few centuries.

Following the Russian-aided liberation in 1878, the residents of Staro Zhelezare took an active part in the Balkan War as well as the First and Second World Wars. The current identity of the village is strongly connected with the revolutionary movement of partisans against the fascist regime during WWII. Eight of them were killed, and became the village heroes known throughout the country, among them the youngest, Ivanka Pashkulova. Since that time the village has been known as the village of revolutionaries, and these activists' genes are still strong today.

The biggest growth took place after WWII up to the 70s during the Communist regime. The 70s saw the beginning of the global process of mass emigrations to the cities accompanied by a falling birth-rate. During the Communist era there were around 3000 inhabitants (now only about 300), massive growth and development took place driving progress and modernisation of different spheres of social life. The model of contemporary primary schooling was built and education flourished on the highest level while a stadium, kindergarten, swimming pool, big commercial shops in the central square, a pub, a restaurant, the chitalishte Todor Pashkulov cultural centre, and clubs for youth and seniors were all built. Thanks to a modern dairy farm and modern

agricultural methods, Staro Zhelezare became a model for other villages in the country thus attracting many official visits of the communist leader of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, as well as other international guests. One of the crucial moments for the village's collective memories are the visits of Indira Ghandi and Fidel Castro in the 70s. Since that time, the agriculture society has been called the "Bulgarian-Cuban Friendship."

Regarding the name of the village – Staro Zhelezare means Old Iron village, but until 1934 it was called Демирджилери (Demirdzhileri), which means also Old Iron in Turkish. Before that it had the name Kovachite – Blacksmiths. The village was on the commercial route (Druma) from Pazardzhik to Sofia and was the main point for shoeing horses. Consequently, the blacksmith tradition is also important, one which was continued by the Gypsy population.

The geographical impact on the village identity is also crucial as it lies in the middle of the Thracian Valley far from the sea side. The mountains are seen on the horizon but are not close enough to offer alpine benefits. Mineral waters and attractive wineries are also within ten kilometres, but not in the village which has only one potable mineral water spring. The Thracian cromlech lies in ruins ruling out any kind of use similar to the English Stonehenge. Not even a restaurant remains today leaving only three simple grocery stores, a pub, an ethnographic house and a cultural centre which only operates as a library. Nothing remains to attract tourists or to keep the youth from leaving. So the current economic and social situation is disastrous, but prosperity is not something unknown to the villagers. Most of them remember prosperous times, remember their engagement in social activism and still cultivate it in different kinds of activities in an extremely admirable way.

### 3 Piriankov and the Polish element

Staro Zhelezare Street Art Village was created as the effect of an annual summer Street Art Festival. The key element in the organization of the Festival and its strategy is the international emphasis - Polish-Bulgarian. Namely, the village of murals is the brainchild of my husband, Ventsislav Piriankov, and me including Poles and students of the Ventzi Drawing School in Poznań. Ventzi was born in Bulgaria and in the early 90s he spent a year studying at the Art Academy in Sofia before moving to the Polish city of Poznan, where he continued his studies at the Poznan Art Academy. It was



there that he went on to create a private art school that trains young artists. So Staro Zhelezare project is created with significant Polish participation. The festival hosts students of Piriankovs' Ventzi School of Drawing who are also students of the University of the Arts of Poznan. They spend their time in Staro Zhelezare at the Piriankov Art Center, where Ventzi's grandparents' cottage is transformed into an art house. In fact, this is the kind of art collective of best friends, including my husband, our students, and me.

The Bulgarians, especially the inhabitants of the village Staro Zhelezare are very much aware that the project would not exist without the Polish element.

Even Ventzi Piriankov is called Polak (Bulgarian for Polish). Each summer the village is full of Polish speech thanks to the young Polish students who transform the landscape. They also leave their self-portraits on the village walls along with those of many Polish heroes as a sign of this cultural presence. The Polish influence drastically changes the collection of local memories.



Figure 1 Artists at work



Figure 2 Artists at work and having fun with the beloved granny Stephana.

#### 4. Story collection and social engagement. Glimpses of Resilience

##### 4.1 Village of personalities

Unexpectedly Staro Zhelezare has become one of the most attractive places in central Bulgaria. Why do visitors love it so much? Probably because in this little corner of the world, art is not just for the few. In recent years, the production of outdoor artworks has strikingly transformed the atmosphere of the place. Prior to the transformation, everything was associated with a decaying village: deserted, filled with sadness, boredom, pessimism, and greyness. It is interesting to compare the photographs of the village taken before the appearance of the street art paintings and now. The impression is unambiguous. Although the paintings are mostly black and white, the village has taken on a new colour.

Such snapshots also show that many homes have whitewashed and renovated their fences, with the purpose of having murals on them. The paintings are mostly placed on fences and are therefore much lower than those found in other street art villages or cities. This gives a completely different effect which is unique in the world.

The images are usually life-sized, which makes a natural impression, as if there were many people on the streets who are standing and chatting or simply sitting on benches. When you reach Staro Zhelezare now after passing through other emptying villages along the way, there suddenly arises the illusion that it is a village full of life as if there were at least two or three times more inhabitants than in reality. An interesting effect also occurs when walking around the village as one suddenly passes a grandma or grandpa whom we have just seen somewhere along the way on the wall, or earlier in the pictures in the media.

Ordinary people became unexpectedly known, recognizable heroes. Some faces are very characteristic such as Kolo or Ivan and are even treated as the village's lucky charms. A specific kind of village archive is being created, a record in the common memory, which is particularly important in the context of a village that is ageing and disappearing in front of our eyes. I remember how shocking it was for us to learn that one of our favourite heroes had died. Uncle Rangel who used to sit in front of his house every day in the same argyle sweater that he was painted in. We realized at that moment that this situation would inevitably be repeated, and that



Figure 3 Staro Zhelezare murals and a shepherd

after some time the paintings would become something like archival photos from the past, a testimony of what was, a history of memory. The murals depict the present only as long as the artists are working, after which time they become part of the past.

Apart from the inhabitants of the village, people anonymous to the world, there are also icons known worldwide. Regardless of whether they are liked or disliked, what is crucial is that the politicians, stars and celebrities are chosen by the householders. An interesting context arises with

questions concerning recognition, fame, whose personality is more or less important, why and for whom. For instance, many of the residents of the village are not familiar with the faces of world-famous politicians; for them a recognizable hero is a buddy from the neighbouring street.

Yet another situation is the depiction of the important and humble, known and unknown, seated side by side as equals just chatting. It looks prosaic, so close to some possible reality, but we know perfectly well that it is completely impossible, even surreal. Grandma Velika will never sit on a bench with Queen Elizabeth, or Ivan with Barack Obama.



Figure 4 Grandpa Rangel chose to be depicted alongside Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov. She was known for her passion for promoting Bulgarian arts and culture. He himself unfortunately died in autumn 2016. Before his death you could see him exactly as he appears in this photo sitting every day in this sweater next to his portrait.



Figure 5 As Baba Velika is to be found every afternoon, sitting on the bench and having a chat with her neighbour. This time with Queen Elizabeth.





Figure 6 Sabka explaining the times during Todor Zhivkov's rule.

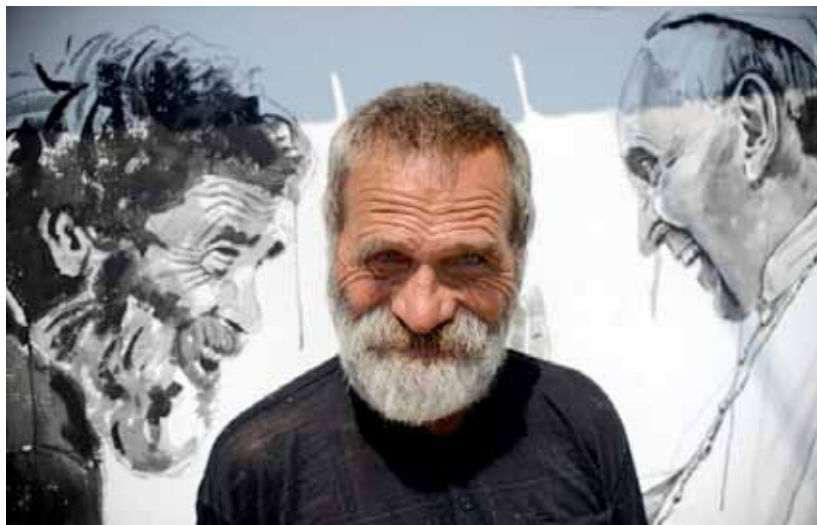


Figure 7 Nikolay explains that Pope Francis is the wisest person in the village



Figure 8 Bay Ivan, Barack Obama - Obama, he is actually my cousin. I would invite him for a beer.

In a symbolic and metaphoric way, the village changed from the hermetic and local into a sort of global village centre of personalities. Referring to Czech master of animation Jan Svankmajer, fiction is something that exists for sure. This kind of art aims to make the imagined real, because it is in fact so possible. Reality is turned upside down, turned to absurd, showing that it could be the other way around, that art has no boundaries.

#### 4.2. Story collection, social engagement

Portraying known and unknown people is not just making portraits. The aim is to try and unite a fragmented village. We write stories of the place on its own walls thereby creating its history. It is important that we listen to the community around the walls before painting, asking questions about the geographic area and context, in order to make sure that the murals are organic with the village. Additionally, we are trying

to show people that it is easy to bring about change. A simple gesture, such as painting a wall, shows the impact that a single person can have on the village landscape. Hopefully this would inspire residents and help them understand that the village belongs to them and they are responsible for it. Such artistic actions improve the image of depressed neighbourhoods.

The murals are usually placed in some context connected with the house owner and their individual story along with features of everyday life, something that is undoubtedly related to the resident's identity. For example, Kancho is known for breeding cows, so besides him talking with Angela Merkel and his wife Ivanka talking with Emmanuel Macron, there is also Donald Trump talking with a cow, and above all of them there are sudzhucite hanging – a special



Figure 9 Kancho, the owner of the house, takes care of his cows every day. He is famous in the village for producing milk and making extremely delicious local sausages - sudzhucite. Donald Trump is chatting with one of Kancho's cows; Kancho is explaining something to Angela Merkel; Ivanka, Kancho's wife, is talking with Emmanuel Macron.

kind of local sausages produced by Kancho and Ivanka. The preparation of the project involved talking with the couple for two days, over wine and dinner, taking photos of their lives, of their cows, all the while listening to their stories and learning about their attitude toward politics, economics and life. As it happened with the rest of the house owners, Kancho renovated the wall before painting so that the mural can last longer and is not damaged by the falling plaster.

The central place in the village is taken by the most important scene, the most symbolic for local identity, and it is placed on the wall of the church where Indira Gandhi with Fidel Castro are now painted. They visited the village in the 70s. Whenever we spoke to people, they would talk so passionately about this past, this special moment, so we decided to paint these

figures to create the sense of nostalgia and positivity the people living there feel for it. It kind of recreates the sense of culture that used to exist. It is one of the most nostalgic memories in locals' minds as some of them remember it well. There is even one granny who gave them flowers. Pride combines with nostalgia accordingly.

As Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 33) suggests, collective memories are "selective, socially constructed, contained spatiality – a society memory is reconstruction of the past." Including the aforementioned features, Staro Zhelezare's outdoor paintings turn into objects that activate shared memories. People revealed their particular stories regarding the past directly to those who were engaged in creating the painting, thus opening a space for artistic interpretation in the revival of the past. What makes this project experimental is



Figure 10 Mural on the facade of the local church shows Indira Gandhi and Fidel Castro. In 1968 the village was visited by the Indian prime minister, and in 1972 the legendary Fidel Castro also paid a visit to Staro Zhelezare.



that the stories which were initially just told to the artists did not remain as a mere passive archive. Instead we managed to expand the background memory and make existing ones visible by adding new memories, photographs and our own artistic impressions. Collecting stories and making them public is both widespread and popular nowadays and often showcased in the contemporary art world mainly through digital platforms. The project based in Staro Zhelezare could be used as a model to highlight this new approach to story collection.

#### 4.3. Tradition transformation. A step towards resilience

“Heritage is that complex of man’s works in which a community recognizes its particular and specific values and with which it identifies. Identification and specification of heritage is therefore a process related to the choice of values” (The Charter of Krakow 2000).

The Piriankov Art House, bequeathed to Ventzi Piriankov by his grandparents, has been renovated, adapted and transformed into a summer base for artists as well as a contemporary art centre. As other properties in the village, it is surrounded by a big fence and the house opens into the enclosed yard which is filled with the artists’ works. All the surfaces are covered with different kinds of portraits as well as with plenty of aphorisms and quotes coined by the painters themselves as well as their favourite ones from other authors, mainly artists. The focal point can be found on the house, as soon as you enter the yard, where there is the inscription “Tradition is not to be copied, tradition is to be created.”

In the beginning it was really difficult to explain to the locals, that we had no intention to copy tradition. Street art uses its environment as an essential tool to create meaning. Whether



Figure 11 Grannies in front of the inscription “Tradition is not to be copied, tradition is to be created”



Figure 12 Photo of Pavel taken one afternoon, to be painted on the wall the next day.



Figure 13 Mike Tyson and the homeowner's friend Pavel, both of whom love pigeons. Pavel is a big fan of Mike Tyson, whose first fight was when he was ten, the same day some boy killed his beloved pigeon.

materially or contextually, it derives its meaning from the urban space it occupies. Some villagers could not understand that we would not be painting scenes taken directly from ethnographic museums such as girls in traditional folklore clothes surrounded with grapes or picking up roses in the company of Orpheus, let alone heroes' portraits from history textbooks. It was not easy for them to understand that they themselves are the actual and authentic heroes for us, and that our plan was to paint their portraits from the photos we took of them.

The next step for the residents was the realization that they are participating in the birth of a new tradition as the paintings in the village become part of their new community identity, thus transforming the village heritage. Before the appearance of the street art, the village was the place of Thracian Stonehenge, mineral water to drink, and partisans. Yet today it is mainly the street art village created by a strong community engagement which fosters village regeneration

through street art. All the murals were created through community involvement in which citizens, entrepreneurs, and artists co-created and took co-ownership of the works, thus building long-lasting and reciprocal social engagement. Furthermore, the village is now able to attract more and more visitors. We can observe in practice how this kind of community art strategy is a strong and effective tool to inject life into an abandoned space. It is only recently that resilience has been enriched with cultural understandings. Cultural resilience "has emerged to refer to this continuity of a co-constituted set of long-term relationships between the cultural identity of a people and the set of social-ecological relationships within which this identity was founded" (Rotarangi and Stephenson, 2014).

The murals clearly improve the attractiveness and image of the village, although there is so much work to guarantee murals' resilience and overcome their vulnerabilities.



Figure 14 Grannie Sabka and Todora hanging their dreams on the installation



Figure 15 Nikolay hanging his dreams on the installation



### 5. Street art festival editions. Tactics, strategies for creation

The first artistic experience in Staro Zhelezare happened in 2013 when we spent our first summertime there and held an exhibition of our paintings on our property. We were pleasantly surprised by how well it was attended. In summer 2014 we went bigger with the first festival, with our artist friends from Poland and Bulgaria and the subject was "LOST MEMORIES, FOUND DREAMS." We directed our activity mainly outdoors and we engaged locals by staging a variety of performances in the village through installations. These wonderful activities were filled with real emotions and nostalgia and reached deeply into people's memories and dreams. It was at this time that we started to uncover and collect their memories. The idea was not to simply observe people and our projects, but to listen, engage, and to give them a field to create something belonging to them. Local people became the artists by writing their dreams down on small pieces of paper and hanging them on strings to create an ephemeral installation fluttering in the wind.

There was also the project "I could live in London" referring to the dream of attaining a better life through emigration, in which almost everybody had a photo taken of themselves holding a sign with the name of an English person with whom their personality somehow identified.

All the buildings in the village were transformed into London equivalents, by putting new signs on their photos – the church tower became the Big Ben, the Culture House was changed to Buckingham Palace, and the House of Tradition into the National Gallery.

What is stereotypical becomes surrealistic here and what is ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Referring to my favourite filmmaker Jan Svankmajer, reality is not sacred nor profane, it is something magical. People walk and sit, just to find the sense of the world and their existence. In each banal thing something mysterious can be noticed.



Figure16.1.2.3 Iliya as John Lennon, Diana as Agatha Christie, Ali as Gordon Ramsey



Figure 17 The way to London



Figure 18 Village inhabitants at the photo exhibition showing images from the everyday life of the village and its heroes.





Figure 19 Photo exhibition showing images from the everyday life of the village and its heroes.



Figure 20 Village inhabitants at the photo exhibition showing images from the everyday life of the village and its heroes.

One of the crucial attractions was the exhibition of a photo reportage made up of shots taken in the village over two years which captured the everyday life of the local community. This caused an unexpected emotional response as the locals could not take their eyes off the photos. And it was also a powerful signal telling us the direction we should take the following summer: to focus on the locals directly by creating an outdoor gallery featuring them as the heroes.

Thus the next chapter began. Summer 2015 was the first year of the Street Art Festival under the name “Village of

Personalities / Art for social change.” For the first time we invited ten young artists from Poland who were students of our drawing school in Poznan. It was a well organised team prepared ahead of time in Poland for the project. Almost every day throughout July, the young people were present in the village streets, painting, talking with villagers about the projects, taking photos, spending long evenings chatting and listening to local stories. The reaction from the villagers was fantastic and they expressed their gratitude and helped in every possible way. The area of the village is quite big, but the result was quite visible. It was undoubtedly the beginning of Staro Zhelezare’s new era.





Figure 21 Grandpa Lazar coming back home with his sheep, accompanied by Theresa May. Grandma Velika is waiting for them.



Figure 22 All of Bay Ivan's and Baba Delia's children and grandchildren are abroad in America and Italy. They miss them a lot, but now they can feel a bit of their presence when they sit with them in front of their house. Bay Ivan is pictured driving his tractor, as he does every day, this time with Donald Trump and two Polish art students.

In 2016, we repeated the experience and invited a new Polish team to paint more murals in the village. Meanwhile Staro Zhelezare became famous in Bulgaria, but our biggest surprise was the interest from The New York Times, whose reporter personally visited the place and wrote an article.

In 2017, we decided to add something else. We already knew about the revolutionary tradition of the village and had witnessed many times the activities and initiatives of local grannies who can't sit idle for one day. Besides gathering and singing folklore songs including going a few times a year to some festivals, they gather in places such as the local pub on different holidays where they play football,

pretend to be some rock music group, dress up and do incredible performances. So we decided to use their talent and enthusiasm to promote further engagement. Following the revolutionary traditions of the Staro Zhelezare village, we focused on a utopian and avant-garde project to create a centre of modernity and openness in art. This is why the slogan of this edition was "OPEN VILLAGE / VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE." At the beginning of the 20th century there were local partisans who wanted to change the fate of the inhabitants. Over a century later, in times of peace and prosperity, but also in times when villages are gradually disappearing and dying, we artists decided to give impetus to revive life and give an impulse for a beautiful future, an impulse for an unlimited RURAL FUTURISM!!!



Figure 23 Demonstration aiming to turn the village into the forefront of the avant-garde.



Figure 24 Demonstration aiming to turn the village into the forefront of the avant-garde.

In 2017, the main idea and purpose was mural painting but we also concentrated on happenings and revolutionary DEMONSTRATIONS. When entering Staro Zhelezare, one could read the propaganda slogans displayed around our art camp. THE REAL AVANT-GARDE IS BORN IN THE VILLAGE! THE VILLAGE IS THE SOURCE OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS! ALL ARTISTS TO THE VILLAGE! IN THE CITY MAN EXPLOITS MAN, BUT IN THE VILLAGE IT'S JUST THE OPPOSITE! It was a totally absurd and Dadaistic project, but that is why,

going beyond all logic, it was extremely engaging.

We clearly went beyond the paintings themselves, and the most important moment of the festival became a huge demonstration which involved the artists and all the inhabitants of the village carrying banners and many of them driving a tractor. The village was bursting with the participants. Inside the gallery space, it would never be possible to provoke such a high level of emotion and such mass engagement.





Figure 25 Demonstration aiming to turn the village into the forefront of the avant-garde.



Figure 26 Granny Tota in the centre of a demonstrating group of artists.

It was a procession responding to nostalgia for the avant-garde times that gave an idealistic vision of a better future built on the irreplaceable energy of young people. Our reference to the avant-garde was not accidental. 2017 was a year of celebration not only marking the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution but also the 100th anniversary of the Polish avant-garde and the first avant-garde manifesto. The motif of the avant-garde perfectly synchronized with the revolutionary roots of Staro Zhelezare and its rebellious genes. Therefore, following the Dadaists, the fathers of the world avant-garde who opposed the ruthless reality through absurdities, the artists in the village expressed their artistic postulates, goals, and needs in a happening based on absurdity.

It can be said that the common feature of our activities in Staro Zhelezare is the romantic vision of art as a carrier of positive utopias and the belief that "art can change the world." This is an optimistic vision of the future that was born among residents in opposition to what was, only a few years ago, their pessimistic everyday life thinking. At the universal level, it is a dream about a world without borders, free from inequality, domination, and ethnocentrism. Regardless, even if it is not possible here, art is able to bring this feeling so close and make it so real.

## 6. Social movement, financing

Staro Zhelezare street art project is unique because it comes out of a social movement that has nothing to do with other forms of street art or post-graffiti. It is different from what is going on in the cities around the world where artists paint in public spaces without permission. It is also not financed nor organized by municipal authorities. Instead, the project was born out of a residents' movement with almost no funding. The Polish Culture Institute in Sofia helps each year by buying two or three plane tickets for students. For the first time this year, we got some funds for painting materials from the Plovdiv2019 Foundation. The rest of the costs up until now have been covered by the artists themselves. Another positive aspect is that the mayor of the village has always been fully engaged and ready to help with any organisational problems twenty-four hours a day. The inhabitants of the village are wonderful, and, in fact, we have been overwhelmed by their openness, commitment, and willingness to help. They are proud of how their village was transformed and have shown how much they care for the artists from Poland by bringing tomatoes, cucumbers,

honey, watermelons and more. At the end of the festival, at the official vernissage, they come in crowds dressed in their best clothes, bringing cakes, and bragging to visitors. With regards to official support, various Polish and Bulgarian institutions such as the Mayor of the City of Poznań, the Institute of Slavic Philology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and the Polish Cultural Institute in Sofia agreed to give their patronage and to help with media promotion. The festival is also included in the official program of the European Capital of Culture Plovdiv 2019.

## 7. Conclusion

Staro Zhelezare discovered the extraordinary potential that lies in this kind of street art village formula. We respect and honour diverse community knowledge and support policies and practices that are informed by the community. Ultimately, success means we step back as residents step forward. Thanks to this kind of approach and these activities, the rural community's potential has a chance to be redefined. Questions concerning tolerance, diversity, and the interaction of different cultures are put in a new context providing a new perspective on the history of the village as its myths and legends awaken the community's identity and self-esteem. As a result, new reflections about the contemporary approach to heritage and community memory appear. The visually coherent formula of "Village of Personalities" is currently the only one of its kind in the world. Every year features a different theme, such as 'Lost Memories, Found Dreams,' 'Reconstruction of Bulgarian village,' 'Village of Avantguard,' or 'Staro Zhelezare MoMA.' The latter is planned for 2018 and will feature the first outdoor branch of the Museum of Modern Art in the village. This diversity gives an opportunity to undertake a deeper analysis of certain topics, particularly contemporary problems appearing globally, and to see what reflection they have in the context of the local community. This kind of artistic endeavour builds a stronger visual identity that helps shape the image of the village. In the end, we see a community woven more tightly together with actions supported that increase the individual and collective quality of life. The community's needs and values determine the appearance of timid resilience traces in Staro Zhelezare village.

MANIFESTO OF THE VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE  
 THE REAL AVANT-GARDE IS BORN IN THE VILLAGE!  
 THE VILLAGE IS THE SOURCE OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS!  
 STARO ZHELEZARE IS THE SOURCE OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS!  
 ALL ARTISTS TO THE VILLAGE!  
 VILLAGE FUTURISM IS COMING!  
 LONG LIVE THE WORLDWIDE VILLAGE ART – THE DECISIVE FACTOR OF SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT!  
 IN THE CITY MAN EXPLOITS MAN, BUT IN THE VILLAGE IT'S JUST THE OPPOSITE!  
 CITIZENS! BE READY FOR VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE!  
 EACH VACCINATED VILLAGE ARTIST – THE PILLAR OF HUMANITY'S DEVELOPMENT!  
 LET'S RAISE ART TO A HIGHER LEVEL!  
 VILLAGE AVANT-GARDE IS INEVITABLE!  
 ARTISTS TO THE BARRICADES!

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## The commodification of alternative cultural spaces

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### Abstract

The commodification of “alternative” cultural spaces is a process that has started to take place in several European cities, like Lisbon, for instance. This has happened due to the pressure of the real estate market, tourism trends or the austerity measures imposed by Troika, during the global economic crisis (2008). It is in this context that a specific real estate agency acts in order to create an opportunity for its business, investing in the rehabilitation of buildings and revitalization of certain areas of the city (interstices), supported by decorative aesthetics and an architectural design inspired by cultures of resistance. This strategy of territorial and decorative investment has had a big impact in the city of Lisbon. The reuse of images, buildings and practices related to “alternative” environments leads to the aesthetization of certain architectures – particularly those which host creative and cultural projects, and whose designs and marketing strategies distort political or social meanings.

**Keywords:** Commodification, creative city, industrial clusters, Lisbon, aesthetization, alternative

*Mas a pureza da arte só existe na “sujidade” do mundo, sempre foi assim... a arte antes do Modernismo fazia parte do mundo, estava onde as pessoas estavam, nomeadamente nas grutas, nas florestas, nas igrejas e palácios.*

Rui Chafes<sup>1</sup>

"Oh, you are so lucky! I love Lisbon, it's my favorite town!", I hear every time I refer to this city, as its inhabitant. Its charm is present in the hills, which defy the steps of the visitor, as well as in the luminous and sunny environment, almost constant, which contributes to feeding a certain exotic imagination related to distant places. The guarantee of a relatively safe country in a disturbed world context<sup>2</sup>, or the affordable prices (accessible for the larger part of the foreigners), have made this city a privileged destination in recent years. The mild climate and the proximity to the sea are also factors of its attractiveness. In addition to these favorable conditions, there is a whole historical past with lots of stories to tell and monuments to see, reflected in historical neighborhoods, beautiful buildings and a stimulating urban environment, offering a vibrant cultural ambience.

With a simple click we can find a cheap flight and quickly realize at the moment we arrive, a few hours later, in Baixa<sup>3</sup>, that many other people had the same idea. The excess of hotels and tourists breaks the exotic charm that was promised online or by friends. We then try to escape the crowd and find a more "authentic" Lisbon, forgotten by the global networks; a more characteristic Lisbon, where the locals “really” live. We head to the historical neighborhoods of Alfama and Mouraria – trying to find the *fado* – but we quickly realize that also *fado* is already "corrupted", intended for tourist consumption.

We try to explore a little further. We hear about "alternative cultural" spaces existing in less central areas. One of them is called Lx Factory (LXF), whose name evokes both the industrial past of the neighborhood of Alcântara and Andy Warhol's factory (which existed in New York in the 1970s<sup>4</sup>). Located at a former working-class district, between the railway lines and under the bridge 25 de Abril<sup>5</sup>, this new “creative district” offers a series of qualities expressed in the



"recipe for success" written by the Canadian urban studies theorist Richard Florida (2002): cultural activities and an economic business supported by the rental of workspaces to "creative professionals"<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, at LXF there is a bohemian atmosphere associated with the artistic activities (restaurants, cafes, shops, street market and street art), and a post-industrial spatial environment (landmarked buildings of municipal interest where one can find remains of the previous activity developed in this place, including different types of machines, printers and other objects).

The main entrance of LXF is not very clear, visitors needing to pass through a narrow and busy street to enter. "Lx Factory" is written over a gate, which is illuminated and reminds us of the entrance to a cabaret. This brief luminous and theatrical joy is suddenly cut off by a man dressed in uniform who controls the entrance. On the left we see the control room, filled with screens connected to surveillance cameras. For a brief moment we hesitate to enter, fearing to trespass the border of a private land. But the guard does not

seem to react. We study the map of the site exposed on the wall and we move on, trying to find our way amongst people and cars.

It's Friday evening and there are a lot of people at LXF. There are coffee shops and open terraces, live music and a kiosk-container that sells architecture and design magazines. We also see a store that sells exotic clothes at exotic prices. It is a bit confusing. But the atmosphere is fun and relaxed. This place is like a neighborhood inside a neighborhood, with roads, sidewalks, parking lots, several coffee shops, restaurants and shops (img.1). We decide to explore the site.

Tall buildings are mixed with smaller ones, wide showcases offer souvenirs, furniture and design objects. Colorful murals painted with "street art" can be found at every corner, contrasting with the gray walls of the industrial-style buildings. Each mural stands out, signed by the artists. The general environment of LXF is bohemian and artistic, and its buildings reveal traces of the history of its multiple life uses and experiences (img.2).



Img 1. The ambiance of Lx Factory; a neighborhood inside of a neighborhood, with roads, sidewalks, car-parking, several coffee shops, restaurants and shops (drawing by Letícia Carmo).

### 1. Economic crisis and urban interstices as an opportunity

The aim of this paper is primarily to address the contemporary conditions of production of cultural-creative spaces such as LXF, concerning their "alternative aesthetics", the links to tourism and to municipal policies, to private companies, to market logics and to rules. But it is further intended to understand all of the previous aspects when they are related to each project's spatial characteristics and architectural practices. So, the research that was done – in the context of a larger project focused on the subject of "creative cities" and "counter-culture" (see acknowledgements) – has adopted a qualitative approach supported by direct observation and a form of a comparative study that considered several cases in different European cities. It uses information from different sources (in large part from semi-conducted interviews and informal conversations with the related social actors), and follows diverse visual methodologies of analysis (related to photography, sketching, mapping, etc.).

A path that starts with a romanticized idea of a certain city, a scenario built from a considerable distance (an intangible one) has been followed in this introductory text. Then, step by step as the person approaches this city and starts to know it, a process of disenchantment of the imaginary that had initially been created begins to take place: first it

happens with the symbols of the "typical things" (like the historical neighborhoods, the *fado*, or the *pastéis de nata*), which are processed and sold at every corner of the city as merchandise. Afterwards, when trying to get away from this scenario to try to find a "more authentic" Lisbon, that traveler comes across the industrial sites where old factories are today being used by people related to the so-called "creative professions". These buildings, victims of the process of deindustrialization, are today caught in revitalization processes of globalized networks, concerning their function and their visual and spatial aesthetics.

The commodification of the «counter » or the « alternative » culture, and of the spatial environments where they happen, is a process that has started to take place in Europe, particularly in cities like Berlin or Barcelona, for instance. This process of turning into or treating something as a mere commodity has been discussed by several authors. David Harvey, for instance, refers to cultural products and events (the arts, theatre, music, cinema, architecture, heritage, collective memories and affective communities), wondering about how their status of "special character" can be reconciled with their status of "commodity" (Harvey 2002, 93). "Alternative Cultural Spaces" (ACS) are places and projects that gather precisely both components: culture and events. Furthermore,



Img 2. At Lx Factory, colorful murals painted with "street art" can be found at every corner, contrasting with the gray walls of the industrial-style buildings.

these are places where one generally can see artistic objects and several references to counter-cultures (expressed in DIY crafted objects, posters and political slogans). The inherent “artistic critique” – that is present and offered under multiple forms – and the “authentic” character of the goods and spaces that are produced on site are progressively being transformed into “products” that are becoming integrated into the market’s for-profit oriented strategies, just as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have noted. This happens as an answer of the capitalism to the strong demand of differentiation and demassification claimed since the end of the 1960s. The critique, singular objects and incertitude (both characteristics of “authenticity”) become “integrated” and commodified, acquiring a related price and being therefore able to be exchanged in the market. According to the authors, “commodification” is the simplest process through which capitalism can recognize the validity of a critique and make it its own by integrating it to its strategies and actions (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999, 592-3, 868). This process – also linked to the ones of pacification and of professionalization – is therefore what has been happening with the sphere of architectural production of the last few years, and with the ambiances of many cultural and creative spaces. The search, the preference and deliberate choice (of the architects, managers, owners and users) for non-aseptic and crafty spatial environments (that “special character”) somehow attract a certain public that desires to find freedom, creativity and entertainment.

In Lisbon this situation is linked to the moment when the global economic situation started to decline, around 2008. The pressure of the austerity measures imposed by the Troika<sup>8</sup> led to changes in the urban property rental law, which affected drastically the land market of the Portuguese capital, and led to a rampant investment in the historical center of Lisbon<sup>9</sup>. This has led with astounding speed to the development of several processes of urban change such as gentrification, touristification and privatization. In the previous context of deep economic crisis (during which most of the major urban real estate projects planned for the city have stopped), a specific real estate agency acted, taking advantage of the existing gaps and interstices (created by the deindustrialization process and the effects of the urban rental law), whose uncertain future became an opportunity to create its business. This agency – named Mainside – has invested in the rehabilitation of buildings and revitalization of certain areas of the city, supported by decorative aesthetics

and by an architectural design inspired by certain cultures of resistance. This strategy of territorial and decorative investment has had, more or less since 2008, a considerable impact on the city of Lisbon.

## 2. The aesthetization of alternative cultural spaces

An aesthetization process related to the so-called “alternative cultural spaces” began therefore to take place in the last decades. “Aesthetization”, being understood as the creative process of decoration or ornamentation of a space, is here explored as the process of institutionalization of the transformation of visual elements and spatial environments of a certain cultural project. According to Alexander G. Baumgarten (1714-1762), the “aesthetics” allows theorizing the sensitive knowledge as something historical, rhetorical and poetical, and fundamenting, in a critical way, what seems to be accidental and irrational (Gianni Carchi e Paolo D’Angelo, 2009, 110). Aesthetics has a political nature that can be critical (against the establishment or injustices), on the one hand, or manipulative (when used by the forces of power), on the other hand. If the aesthetics of a space may reveal the political nature of the hosted project, the analysis of the aesthetization processes happening in such spaces contributes to the interpretation of meanings. When the design of a project or the creation of a certain ambiance or atmosphere takes place, there is necessarily an aesthetic manipulation through the choice and application of objects, materials, colours, sounds or lighting (Gernot Böhme 1993, 123, 125). When certain kinds of choices and compromises are made, following market oriented strategies, this leads to the commodification of the ACS, the projects, the objects or other kinds of goods.

The cultural or creative projects carry out specific spatial transformations in buildings by presenting a new use to a pre-existing structure, and having a significant impact on the surrounding urban space. Historically, the change of the function of a building is one of the most common spatial actions. Old abandoned or obsolete structures often host new uses adapted to current times. The economic factor is certainly one of the main drivers of this kind of change, as we can see today by the unprecedented investment in the area of tourism, thereby enhancing the built heritage. It is in this context that central districts from cities like Lisbon, Berlin or Barcelona have undergone intense processes of touristification to which no one can be indifferent<sup>10</sup>.

According to David Harvey, contemporary tourism claims



"uniqueness, authenticity, particularity and speciality". The historically constituted city or areas associated with particular cultural or social practices, artefacts or architectural environments, hold special marks of distinction which have a significant drawing power upon the flows of capital, underlying an ability to capture monopoly rents (Harvey 2002, 103). The investment in tourism – an important source of economic revenue for a country in crisis like Portugal – requires spatial and architectural transformations to welcome visitors and foreign investors. Cherished by the local traditional culture – i.e., the historical monument, the image of Fernando Pessoa, the *pastel de nata* or the sardine – the city of Lisbon tries to satisfy the tourists. In order to satisfy this demand, an industrial production of the images of those symbols of local traditional culture is required. These symbols of the paradoxical "glocal" (global + local) spirit result in the trivialization of the content of such

"typical" objects. This trend is followed by the practical application of urban politics of the ideology of the "creative city" (Florida 2002, Landry 1995, 2006), which suggests that the promotion of the arts and culture is fundamental to the economy and to the social and territorial dynamics of the city. It is also in this context that the trivialization of the images, symbols and spaces of the counter-culture occurs, suffering a process of aesthetization.

Built heritage holds as well the kind of power of touristic attraction, when properly explored in terms of architectural rehabilitation and communication of its cultural content. Tourists, as the main targets of such actions, float therefore like atoms "in a sea of structured aesthetic judgements", as Harvey explains when drawing on Bourdieu's ideas (Harvey 2002, 103). So does built industrial heritage, even if it holds a more globalized character and therefore less unique. The fact that many factories lost their purpose in the post-



Img 3. The decoration of Lx Factory is based on the reuse and on the exhibition of recycled old objects (such as furniture or machines). This is associated with an architectural concept based on the reuse and rehabilitation of the pre-existing buildings, inspiring the visitor with references to the past life and history of its buildings.

industrial era led to the abandonment of many of these kinds of buildings. The revitalization processes occurred in the last decades – led by artists, architects, the local communities or even private or public actors – together with a less favorable economic situation, favored reuse, rehabilitation, conservation and recycling, as a reaction to profit-oriented and competitive kinds of architecture, like megalomaniac urban projects or star-architectures<sup>11</sup>.

More conscious and alternative ways of thinking and “making the city” have been progressively acquiring some importance in the last 2010s, being the subject of several architectural exhibitions and biennales since the 2010s (e.g. *RE-Architecture*, Pavillon de l’Arsenale, Paris 2012; *Reduce/Reuse/Recycle*, German Pavilion at *La Biennale di Venezia* 2012 entitled *Common Ground*; *Close, Closer*, Lisbon Architecture Triennale 2013). By playing with the contemporary complexity of the metropolis, this promising new generation made of multidisciplinary groups and associations, “experiment with the city to reinvent the everyday life of the inhabitants” by putting into practice participative projects based on dialogues and shared experiences, according to Anne Hidalgo (2012) – First Deputy Mayor of Paris and the one responsible for urban planning and architecture, but also the president of the *Pavillon de l’Arsenal*. These unconventional teams assume critical positions through their micro-interventions or larger urban strategies and through their ideas and manifestos. They explore the role of architecture in the evolution of society and take opportunities existing in vacant territories by transforming abandoned wastelands into convivial, sustainable, civic and ecological places. As the general director of the *Pavillon de l’Arsenal* Alexandre Labasse (2012) says, “they make possible forgotten utopias” through auto-produced and auto-constructed, innovative and experimental interventions (ephemeral or durable). They have as principles to *recycle* everything that can be *reused*, to economize what cannot be *renewable*, and also to avoid creating constraints that may limit future choices. Of course these practices are inspired by some of those that criticized the modern movement, taking place back in the 1960-70s. Originally motivated by ecological concerns or by social justice, this is also in part an architecture of resistance (Carmo 2016, 32-38).

Many of these architectures have been gaining a special importance in types of projects related to the arts, culture and “creative professions”. Many of these projects use

spatial practices and visual ambiances that are inspired by symbols that are produced and used by anticapitalistic, counter-cultural or marginal contexts. If the image of Che Guevara, commercialized and reproduced (on t-shirts, key-holders, cups, etc.), has gradually lost the original content of “resistance” and “struggle” due to the trivialization coming from commercial exploitation, the same happens to the spatial environments of what we call here “alternative cultural projects”. A growing number of new spaces are being created to look like “alternative” projects, i.e., their image, form and programme of activities are designed or chosen in order to attract a specific kind of visitors and customers, whose tastes and preferences are linked to arts and/or to counter-cultures. Particular spatial environments are created in order to provoke a certain effect on the visitor, as shown in the example of LXF. This careful design that envisions the creation of a very specific atmosphere has resulted in a process of aesthetization.

### 3. The case of Lx Factory

The decoration of LXF – based on the reuse and on the exhibition of recycled old objects (such as furniture or machines – img.3) inspires the visitor with references to the past life and history of its buildings. The degraded walls – with multiple layers of peeling ink or covered with graffiti – contrast with the white and aseptic ones that can be found in museums or in art galleries. A large hole in the façade, made to let large machines pass through back in the day, has been left as it is, in a raw condition, thus giving a certain aesthetic aura to the main building (img.4). The LXF’s hole and the peeling ink walls exalt the buildings’ state of ruin as something desired and which has a certain charm, highlighting its “cult” dimension. Just as if these elements had become works of art. This idea follows Walter Benjamin’s notion of “aura”, when addressing the characteristics of nostalgia, illusion, relic and “value of cult” associated to the “work of art” before the era of the mechanic technique and object reproduction (Benjamin 2012, 22, 25-33). However, there is a certain contradiction when considering the particular case of LXF, since its buildings were created to make reproducible objects, and still sell today, in their shops, such kinds of objects and works of art.

What is important to highlight here is the intention of the design project of the architects who led the revitalization concept of LXF, when deciding to keep such a hole and a decaying

aspect. The aesthetics of recycling and nostalgia are present in the objects, in the memories and in the architecture of the buildings of LXF. One of the leaseholders of LXF resumes its ambience as “the perfect marriage between luxury and decadence”, saying that this is the reason that convinced him to come there (Ferreira 2009, 33). This kind of aura, or of concept, seems therefore to work as a strategy of attraction addressed to leaseholders and of visitors, following the idea previously highlighted by Harvey that the characteristics of unique, authentic, particular and special work as a factor of attraction of, not only tourism, but also of capital.

This recreation of former ambiances (through the recycling of nostalgic elements) can create in turn, a slightly artificial environment. This aesthetization process incorporates visual stimulation that plays with the sensations and emotions of

the users of these spaces, seeking to amuse and entertain them. This dimension, which aims to achieve a specific objective, can be considered a premeditated manipulation that attracts the attention and directs the choices of the consumers. This kind of “aesthetic pleasure”, of which the philosopher Gernot Böhme speaks (1993, 125), is thus worked and used to serve the fashion trends, tourism, and particularly the market.

From the conditions of (re)production of the aesthetics of the counterculture and of the artistic *milieu* we can understand broader processes of economic capture of the artistic activity. This capture is conveyed to us through the expensive rents, the excessive price of the products that are sold on site and the transformation of the space into a tourist attraction.



Img 4. A large hole in the façade, made to let large machines pass through back in the days, has been left as it is, in a raw condition. This exalts the state of ruin of the industrial building, seen as something that is desired and which has a certain charm.



However, the fact should be considered that the aesthetic, visual and spatial operation that took place at LXF fits into a particular urban and economic context. LXF was formally constituted in 2007 by the company called Mainside<sup>12</sup>, and it is located in a former industrial area named Alcântara. This area, occupied by the industrial sector in the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, had powerful anarcho-sindicalist representants and was a republican bastion. They worked in the local factories of the textile, metallurgic, chemistry, ceramics, sugar, tobacco industries, amongst others (Seixas 2012, 7-18). The huge area of land (23 000 m<sup>2</sup>) where the complex of buildings of LXF is today installed, in Rua Rodrigues Faria, belonged to *Gráfica de Mirandela*<sup>13</sup>, which maintained its activity in this locale for a while in parallel with the LXF project. But before it hosted the printing press company, those buildings had many other multiple hosts (*Companhia Industrial Portugal e Colónias*, in 1888, and the *Anuário Comercial de Portugal* typography, for example) and uses, one of them being the *Companhia de Fiação e Tecidos Lisbonense* (the spinning and textiles company of Lisbon), which was on the origin of the construction – between 1846 and 1849 – one of the major 5-floor industrial buildings of the area (Dabraio da Silva 2013, 76).

The Alcântara neighborhood underwent a large-scale revitalization urban project in 1999, named *Alcântara XXI*. This project had an intervention area of 400,500 m<sup>2</sup> (Henriques 2005). It was an impressive real estate project signed by “superstar” architects like Álvaro Siza Vieira, Aires Mateus, or Jean Nouvel, the idea being to erase most of the remains of late 19th century industrial life, though keeping one or two elements that would work as symbols of that past. Furthermore, regulations enacted as the result of a certain controversy<sup>14</sup>, along with the effects provoked by the global economic crisis of 2008, led to a curious phenomenon. Taking advantage of the void created by this context, the company Mainside became interested in a parcel of the available land and tried to make some profit out of it. Contrarily to the other investors of the *Alcântara XXI*'s project, Mainside decided to adopt a different strategy: not to demolish the existent buildings and build new ones, but instead to reuse those pre-existent buildings and rehabilitate them, along with the surrounding exterior space. Since then, Mainside sublets spaces for shops and offices on a temporary basis.

At LXF's website, a description of the project is written: “An urban fragment, kept hidden for years, is now returned to the

city in the form of LXFactory. A creative island occupied by corporations and professionals of the industry serves also as stage for a diverse set of happenings related to fashion, publicity, communication, fine arts, architecture, music, etc., attracting numerous visitors to rediscover Alcântara through an engaged dynamics. At LXF you can actually breathe the industrial environment at every step. A factory of experiences where intervention, thought, production is made possible. Staging ideas and products in a place belonging to everyone, for everyone.”<sup>15</sup>. The “profitability of the concept that already exists on site” (as described by the Portuguese media<sup>16</sup>) convinced a French commercial real estate agency named Keys Asset Management to buy LXF in September 2017<sup>17</sup>. According to Mainside's previous owner, the engineer José Carlos Carvalho<sup>18</sup>, this concept revolves around a lifestyle based on a creative and entrepreneurial ambience, in the sense of merging leisure and work activities. In order to make that happen, it would be necessary to create a “cluster” able to promote a closer relationship between the individuals, the companies and the events (Carvalho 2009, 115, 179).

As Joana Gomes, one of the architects of Mainside, stated when interviewed about the company's projects (2013), LXF does not look for a particular kind of public, but rather to have a maximum number of people. In the same sense that Florida uses when he defines his “creative class” as the engine of “economic success”, LXF seems to apply his recipe through the hosting of a mix of architecture and design studios, shops and restaurants, massagers, osteopaths, yoga and dance teachers, a biological food market, tattooers, photographers, a coworking space, fashioning, advertising and casting companies – even an accountant and a lawyer. Joana considers that LXF is “more than just culture”, including also business and social constituents and having therefore a particular kind of life (Gomes 2013).

LXF project, which opened its doors to the public in 2008, and had at the beginning an ephemeral character due to the contract conditions specified above, started gradually to settle down. Today, the new urbanization plan for Alcântara, published in 2015, no longer expresses the intention to destroy the buildings already existing on site<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, LXF has received the support of the municipality in its document named “Strategic Charter of Lisboa”<sup>20</sup>, referring to it as a “cultural experience” to preserve<sup>21</sup>, alongside big cultural institutions such as Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Centro Cultural de Belém or Culturgest (Costa 2009, 64, 86).

#### 4. The promotion of a concept

Boltanski and Esquerre – in their book *Enrichment. A critique of merchandise* (2017) – refer to the notion of "heritage", which, according to the authors, seeks to understand how abandoned objects and buildings can be revalued. They explain how capitalism seeks to exalt this type of materiality (including even waste) by generating scarcity from anything, creating in this way gaps that claim to be filled (Keck 2017). Keys Asset Management (the new owner of LXF) justifies the purchase of LXF due to the economic success derived from the existing concept<sup>22</sup>. This makes us think of the categorization that Boltanski and Esquerre make of the multiplication of the forms of development of the merchandise under the modern capitalism.

If we consider LXF as the commodity in question, we can consider that its development is placed between the "asset form" and the "trend form" (Boltanski & Esquerre 2017). In the same way as financial operations, the "asset form" can generate scarcity from everything or from nothing, by promoting the objects through "betting on their market potential" (Keck 2017). Keys Asset Management has bet that LXF has the ability to generate money over time, the same way museums and art galleries manage to do it with the contemporary art market (where we can observe an arbitrary valorization of works). LXF can thus be seen as an "asset heritage" which allows the enrichment of the real estate agency due to the adopted "concept".

At the same time, the creative industries fit into the "trend form", since they reveal themselves as merchandise that stimulates specific desires in the customers of a market that is structured by social hierarchies (old / young, poor / rich, rural / urban, creative / non creative, cool / not cool,

etc). This means that the desire of belonging to a certain social group, for example, can be satisfied by acquiring a commodity – LXF, in this case, or the products it generates –, giving the impression of "a social climb" framed by an apparently egalitarian market (Keck 2017). It is also in this form that is placed the luxury market, according to Boltanski and Esquerre, which is partly considered in the concept of LXF ("a perfect marriage between luxury and decadence") through the design and concept that have been designed and defined for its spatial ambience.

#### 5. The deviant use of "alternative" spatial and visual practices

So, does the architecture –practiced at LXF (or in other similar examples) – still have a critical value today, in terms of spatial intervention practices or urban policies? In many of these alternative cultural spaces that use such re-architectural practices, there exist well-intentioned uses. These kinds of projects reveal a concern for participative practices, intervention actions and the desire to help (re) building the city. But there often exist certain appropriations of aesthetics and/or visual symbols (as those used by the actors of the counter-cultures, resistance movements or the urban struggles, which fight authoritarian, repressive or intolerant forms of spatial domination), which prove to be abusive. In these cases, either there is a deviation of the original content of these symbols or of these visual and spatial references. These deviant practices and aesthetics can be detected through the analysis of their production conditions, which are sometimes led by commercial logics (against an organic logics of construction, led by participative and transformative intentions) (Carmo 2017).



Img 5. The management of the common spaces is the responsibility of Mainside. The interior space of each parcel rented by each leaseholder is designed and adorned by its users, allowing each company to create "a space in its own image".

Many interventions in the city are based on the law of profit, according to the architect Manfredo Tafuri, who says that architectural, artistic and urban ideology was left only as “utopia of form” (Tafuri 1976, 46, 48). This “utopia of form” could refer to star-architectures, for instance. However, at LXF, there is rather a *utopia* associated with the image, the atmosphere or the “concept” it has created, playing this way with the users’ sensations while crossing the different spaces. LXF is in this way conceived as an agent of the promotion of a certain style of life (cool, bohemian, artistic, creative). This conception integrates the idea of *disorder* (allowing therefore a certain kind of acting freedom). This *disorder* can be found in the heterogeneous volumes and stylistic composition of LXF buildings:

- in the depicted (painted?) walls and in the careless maintenance of the construction materials;
- in the preponderance of exhibited old objects, machines or furniture (used today as decoration);
- in the festive atmosphere of the “open days”<sup>23</sup>;
- in the open air flea market and in the numbers of offered weekly events;
- in the chaotic / anarchic way of parking the cars.

Nonetheless, order is quite present at LXF:

- the existence of the guard that controls the entrance of the area;
- the vertical management of LXF’s spatial

distribution, conceived by the Mainside architects (i.e., not spontaneous and in a horizontal manner, developed with time by its users, as the visitor could have imagined during the first walk on site);

- the good functionality of LXF spaces, despite its careless or crafty appearance (it welcomes professionals, it offers public events, etc.).

The management of the common spaces is the responsibility of Mainside (outdoor spaces, technical installations, conception and distribution of inner spaces). Only the interior space of each parcel that is rented by each company (collective or individuals) is designed and adorned by its users (img.5). According to Joana Gomes, one of the great advantages of Mainside’s strategy is that every company can create “a space in its own image”. However, Mainside’s architects always have suggestions, constraints and a final word to say, in order to frame the spatial transformations led by the clients and the companies.

The directive managers of LXF also created a long corridor that crosses the whole interior of building A<sup>24</sup>, dividing the former open spaces (suitable for all types of machines and activities) into several small spaces (img.6, img.7). These logics of spatial segmentation (contrasting with the logic of the “free” plan) adapts to the *classic office* plan, able to accommodate as many companies as necessary. Furthermore, Mainside’s architects designed all the floors of the building in order to have in each one a different ambience<sup>25</sup>. Joana believes this strategy might foster closer ties among the occupants of each floor, because of the differences in their visual identities.



Img 6. Lx Factory building (aerial view).

According to José Carvalho, “Lx Factory managed to create a production unity, by adding to that space (full of histories of Portuguese industry) a new industrial reality, the creative industry of 21st century. A business centre which provides the transaction of cultural products” (Carvalho, 2009, p. 109)<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, Carvalho explains that the idea was to make this space work like a shopping mall in order to attract the maximum possible number of people, being necessary first to attract particular *brands* that would work as “anchor companies”<sup>27</sup>. Carvalho explains that these companies have privileged rental conditions (location and visibility, for instance) because they contribute to establish the “image” of the whole project, being their showcases of great importance. The engineer refers to the work of Jeffrey Hardwick on American shopping malls<sup>28</sup>, highlighting the importance of the architectural details of a store: “lighting, signage, materials, decoration, storage and many other elements are able to change a traditional and banal store (...) into a selling machine” (Carvalho 2009, 115–16). Carvalho proceeds with his reasoning saying that he would classify LXF as a “fashion manipulator” because, such as any other commercial establishment, its success “depends on the creation of an original image”.

So, on the one hand, at LXF a few good-intentioned architectural spatial practices can be found, such as:

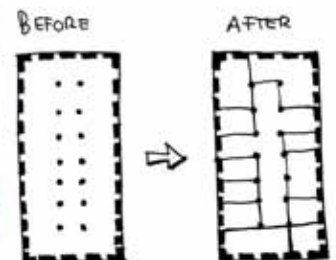
- Keeping the memory of previous uses of the buildings by adding new layers, distinguishing these ones from the older, favoring mixture;

- Offering the opportunity for users to appropriate their own workspace;
- Using inexpensive construction materials;
- The coexistence of architecture with artistic interventions;
- The use of “common” space with open terraces, ephemeral installations or occasional events (performing arts, music, street market...).

On the other hand, at LXF there will always be a relationship of submission and dependence of its users vis-a-vis the real owner of the building that its tenants occupy (previously Mainside, now the French agency), this concerning each desired kind of spatial transformation or use change.

## 6. The role of architecture and design associated with the “alternative” market

It can be noticed, in a general way, that, on the one side, architecture and design are every day more and more framed by norms that impoverish the creative and spontaneous vocabulary of spatial constructions, thus contributing to an asepticization of the city. On the other hand, the market seems to demand the filling of this gap with images that send us back to a kind of a lost imaginary. By applying it to the concrete case of the built heritage, the market uses it as a decorative formula that addresses the freedom inherent to creativity, the challenge of resistance or of the subversive universes. However, the safe environments of such a project (where there is no risk) assign to the “alternative” aesthetics a status of trend.



Img 7. The spatial division of building A, before and after Mainside's intervention.

In conclusion, the importance of architecture within market strategies needs to be here underlined, just in the way design affects urban aesthetics and the territory, as the examples created by Mainside demonstrate. By dedicating a special attention to, on the one hand, urban rehabilitation, rebuilding or reuse, and, on the other hand, to revivalist industrial, popular, underground or kitsch aesthetics (like in Pensão Amor, another project led by Mainside, located in Cais do Sodré), Mainside was promoting the development of a particular kind of business and of the “cool tourism”. And even if a few signs or references to cultures or practices of resistance exist in the material and spatial expressions of these buildings, a void of content often exists: these examples address an image – or rather a imaginary– that refers to a certain content that actually makes little or no ideologically sense in the present context. A parallel can be made between the commodification of these “alternative” architectural approaches and the recurrent problematic of street art, which is becoming less and less ephemeral, illegal and anonymous, today being framed by curators, dedicated festivals and artistic signatures.

So, aesthetization, as one of the processes of spatial and visual commodification, is today at the core of the operations of the (re)creative city (“cool, fun, popular and sexy”, according to the words of Jean-Louis Genard (Brussels 2017)), which works under a commercial logics alongside cultural, territorial and leisure policies. Nevertheless, this is a phenomenon that does not concern only the city of Lisbon. In many other cities worldwide similar signs can be observed that reveal a tendency pattern linked to “alternative” means of spatial intervention and decoration. The wooden pallets, the recycled objects and random *vintage* furniture, the industrial machinery, the peeling painted walls or graffiti have found an audience, all these being today part of commodification processes that use imaginaries linked to art, creativity, marginal environments and resistance symbols related to different urban struggles.

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## Endnotes

1 - "But the purity of art only exists in the "filthiness" of the world, it has always been like this... art before Modernism was part of the world, it was where people were, namely in caves, forests, churches and palaces" (translated by the author). [URL: <http://www.artecapital.net/entrevista-217-rui-chafes>].

2 - Since the Arab Spring took place (starting at the end of 2010), Portugal – considered a quiet country, free of large-scale conflicts, and without terrorist attacks – has become a favorite destination for thousands of Europeans.

3 - Name of Lisbon's central district. *Baixa* is the equivalent term to "downtown".

4 - The factory was once Andy Warhol's place of work and residence. It was also the meeting place for young artists, painters, dancers, actors, musicians and poets. Judy Garland, Mick Jagger, Muhammad Ali, Velvet Underground (Lou Reed), or Jack Kerouac are just a few examples of the personalities who frequented the place.

5 - *Ponte 25 de Abril* is named after the Carnation Revolution of 1974.

6 - In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), Richard Florida defined these "creative professionals" as all people whose professions are involved in the invention of new forms of knowledge (such as "the scientist or the engineer, and the architect or the designer, a writer, an artist or a musician" and those who use their creativity as a key factor in their work, such as "business, education, health care, law" (Florida 2002, 9).

7 - The English translation for *pastéis de nata* is "custard cakes".

8 - In this context, Troika is a committee formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which provided loans to indebted peripheral European states (such as Portugal, Greece and Ireland) over the course of the eurozone financial crisis that began in 2009, with the imposition of harsh austerity measures. For more details about the austerity measures imposed by Troika, see: <https://acervo.publico.pt/economia/memorando-da-troika-anotado>.

9 - The urban rental law was kept without adjustments for several decades, this having several consequences (Acciaiuoli, 649-53, 668): almost no investment was made in buildings for renting after April 1974 (there existed in 2015 about 7,000 buildings in precarious state or in ruins); a large part of the residential property owners that inhabit their homes is heavily indebted (and have to support high monthly payments to the banks plus heavy municipal taxes and other charges). A recent law, dated from 2012 and revised in 2014, searches to create rules for the renovation, so much needed by the city (Law n° 31/12, in *Diário da República*, I série, n° 157, of 14 August 2012, reviewed and updated by Law n° 79/2014, in *Diário da República*, I série, n° 245, of 19 December 2014). Such rules intend to promote the increase of the rents, seeing it as the solution to the abandonment that occurred during the last decades. Nevertheless, this is provoking the eviction of traditional commerce and residents, who are being replaced by a flood of hotels and apartments rented exclusively to tourists at higher prices.

10 - A recent newspaper article announces: "Lisbon has (...) two hotels and 107 local dwellings per square kilometer. The bus fleet decreased by 23% during the decade when the number of guests increased by 70%." (translated by the author). This article compares Lisbon's present situation with the one Barcelona has been living the last decades, presenting figures and graphs that compare data on tourism, highlighting how the 4.4 million tourists visiting Lisbon in one year is a lot, considering that the municipality of Lisbon has about 5 hundred thousand inhabitants (Relvas, Moreira, Leão. "Lisboa ainda não é Barcelona? Não está assim tão longe", in *Eco.pt* 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018. Available at: <https://eco.pt/2018/03/18/lisboa->

ainda-nao-e-barcelona-nao-esta-assim-tao-longe/).

11 - This is an expression that addresses buildings that are signed by famous architects.

12 - Mainside Investments – SGPS S.A. is the holding company (the equivalent word in Portuguese is “Sociedade Gestora de Participações Sociais”) of several affiliated companies. One of them – Catumbel, a real estate company – acquired the control of the land, and another one – LxFactory, another real estate company, affiliated to Catumbel – does the daily management of LXF. All the other companies are real estate agencies mainly dedicated to “facilities management” and “urban rehabilitation works” (Baptista 2013). We can see, in the Mainside’s website (<http://mainside.pt>), that the concerned buildings are all located in the central area of Lisbon: they are bought in a decaying condition and – after the necessary rehabilitation works are done – resold as housing, hotels or offices.

13 - *Gráfica de Mirandela* printed many of the Portuguese newspapers until it was bankrupted in 2012.

14 - At the time, a passionate controversy was originated due to the fact that the project was violating the rules of the Municipal Master Plan (PDM), and in the end only a small part of the whole plan went forward; in addition, a big area intended to host part of *Alcântara XXI*’s project was demolished and left to abandonment.

15 - URL: [www.lxfactory.com/en/lxfactory](http://www.lxfactory.com/en/lxfactory) (seen on 03.10.2015).

16 - URL : <http://expresso.sapo.pt/revista-de-imprensa/2017-09-13-Lx-Factory-vendida-a-grupo-frances> and <http://www.jornaldenegocios.pt/empresas/imobiliario/detalhe/franceses-compram-lx-factory?ref=DestaquesTopo>.

17 - It was actually the company Catumbel that was sold, and, through it, LXF.

18 - As interviewed by his son Gonalo Carvalho in the context of his master thesis. Gonalo is also one of the architects of Mainside (Carvalho 2009).

19 - The *Plano de Urbanizao de Alcntara* (PUA) was approved in *Dirio da Repblica* (2a srie – n37 – 23 de Fevereiro 2015). We can find the applicable regulations in the CML website [URL: [www.cm-lisboa.pt/viver/urbanismo/planeamento-urbano/planos-eficazes/plano-de-urbanizacao-de-alcantara](http://www.cm-lisboa.pt/viver/urbanismo/planeamento-urbano/planos-eficazes/plano-de-urbanizacao-de-alcantara)].

20 - The municipality of Lisbon ordered in 2008 the execution of a cultural strategic plan, to be developed by a team of researchers of several professional backgrounds and linked to academic research platforms. In the resulting document, which includes the “Cultural Strategies for Lisbon” (Costa 2009), the relationship between ‘creativity’ and ‘urban development’ is stressed. It is a document that recognises the importance of cultural and creative activities in the economic development of the city, and where several elements

can be found that prescribe the creation of the necessary conditions to attract a competitive “creative class”, as inspired by Florida and Landry’s approaches (see The Strategic Charter of Lisbon 2010-2024, available at the following URL address: [www.cm-lisboa.pt/en/city-council/city-council/strategic-charter](http://www.cm-lisboa.pt/en/city-council/city-council/strategic-charter)).

21 - Some other “cultural experiences” existing in the city of Lisbon are mentioned as well, like Fbrica do Brao de Prata, Galeria Z Dos Bois, Associao Bacalhoeiro, Filho nico or Associao Santiago Alquimista.

22 - As mentioned in the previous section of this paper.

23 - “Open days” are held twice a year, allowing visitors to find out what is going on at LXF, to get in touch with companies and the people who work there. They also offer exhibitions and concerts, music shows and theater, or other activities related to fashion and live painting.

24 - This is the main industrial building of the whole complex of LXF. Before the reconversion of the LXF, the first 4 floors of building A were remarkable because of their wide and bright open spaces, with several circular metal columns and large east-west oriented windows (which allowed the workers to have sunlight most part of the day. This building is classified as a “cultural and historical property of great value” in the Lisbon Municipal Heritage Charter (*Dirio da Repblica*, 2015).

25 - The first floor is painted white, the second has recycled *pombaline* style doors, the third has a long white wall with round windows similar to those used in boats, and the fourth has black painted walls.

26 - Translated by the author.

27 - Jos Carvalho mentions the following « anchor » companies: the bookshop Ler Devagar and the school Frum de Dana. These ones are followed by NCS, Lollipop, Cantina, ACT and Crowd (in 2009).

28 - M. Jeffrey Hardwick, “Mall Maker - Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream”, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010.

# What's Up Doc: A Review and Analysis of English Language Documentaries On Contemporary Graffiti And Street Art

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## Abstract

Over the past four decades, most large urban settings around the world have experienced an increase in graffiti and street art. One of the consequences of this activity is an attempt to interpret this phenomenon. Not only have popular and scholarly articles and books catalogued, examined, and analyzed graffiti and street art, and the people who engage in and respond to this activity, but so too have documentary movies. In order to better understand this latter method of capturing and explaining graffiti and street art, this paper reviews and analyzes seventeen English language documentary films (produced between 1980-2014) drawing generalizations about the dominant themes that have been expressed in this body of work. This analysis includes a review of the settings, individuals interviewed, and provides a critical commentary on this body of work.

**Keywords:** Graffiti, Street Art, Documentaries, Films, Movies

## 1. Introduction

Social phenomena are explained and interpreted in many different ways. One of the communication vehicles for this has been through mass media. One of the most powerful media has been films, movies, and cinematic productions. Documentaries, in particular, can educate, entertain, and shape viewers' opinions. The information presented can also motivate the behavior of viewers. Despite their pretense of objectivity, documentaries selectively choose information to present to an audience (e.g., Nichols, 2010).<sup>1</sup> One relatively contemporary subject that has been the focus of documentary coverage has been graffiti and street art, the people who engage in this activity including community and political response.

Although graffiti has existed for centuries, modern graffiti typically traces its origins to New York City (NYC) subway writers<sup>2</sup> of the 1970s (Austin, 2001; Waclawek 2011, p. 12).<sup>3</sup> For a number of reasons, these writers started placing their work on various surfaces in the city and beyond. Shortly after contemporary graffiti appeared, a complementary activity called street art developed (Castleman 1984; Young 2014).<sup>4</sup> Before continuing, it is useful to understand that most graffiti and street art is considered by law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies as a form of vandalism

and it exists in most of the major cities in the world. It can be found on all kinds of surfaces, from walls, to signs, to means of transportation. Graffiti and street art differ from public art, which Waclawek (2011: 65) defines as "a vast assortment of art forms and practices, including murals, community projects, memorials, civic statuary, architecture, sculpture, ephemeral art (dance, performance theatre), subversive interventions, and, for some graffiti and street art."

The people who engage in this activity and the causal dynamics surrounding their work are frequently discussed. For example, many articles and books have been published, and websites and blogs have been produced about this subject (e.g., Gastman and Neelan 2010; Seno 2010).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, an emerging scholarly body of work has been published on graffiti and street art (e.g., Austin 2001; Ferrell 1996; Philips 1999; Macdonald 2003; Snyder 2011, etc.). One of the numerous effects of graffiti and street art has also been a steady flow of films, both documentary and fictional (also referred to as commercial, feature-length, Hollywood, and popular). Although analysis of fictional types of films is emerging (Author), work regarding documentaries remains relatively dormant.

This paper attempts to contextualize and understand this body of work. In short, the paper argues that while

documentaries on graffiti and street art, particularly the earlier ones, were important conduits to both preserve and disseminate information about graffiti and street art to various audiences across the country and around the world, as new ones were developed there was little in the way of conscious reflection on the content that was previously produced and thus little value was gained with each new documentary. In several important respects, as documentaries continued to be produced, they tended to become formulaic and less reflexive. One of the consequences of this was that the possibility of offering an alternative discourse on graffiti and street art, one that would depart from those typically found in mass media, was lost.

## **2. The importance of graffiti and its representation**

Numerous reasons attest to the importance of graffiti and street art. These forms of creativity are now fairly pervasive and can be found in most, if not all, major cities around the world. Alongside its proliferation, graffiti and street art has spawned ongoing “cultural wars” over its meaning. This battle over the meaning of graffiti and street art is fought by various sectors of society.

Governments and private concerns (e.g., corporations), alongside some individuals and community organizations, often spend a phenomenal amount of resources in responding to graffiti and street art, especially its eradication and abatement. In addition to material practices, opposition to graffiti and street art also takes discursive forms, which has led to what one might reasonably call a dominant discourse on graffiti and street art. In this discourse, graffiti is often understood through the rhetorical conventions of the “broken windows” thesis, and thus comes to be seen as a practice, associated with gangs or uncontrollable urban youth, that will devastate local economies if left unchecked. In constructing graffiti as a threat, dominant discourses routinely deny that it has any political meaning. Moreover, the dominant discourse on graffiti often circumscribes public debate by drawing a binary distinction between “art” and “vandalism,” and insisting that graffiti can only be the latter (Author).

Against this, however, art galleries, museums, curators, and collectors increasingly recognize graffiti and street art as a major development in the history of art. To be sure, this may well be the product of attempting to exploit the economic potential of graffiti and street art, but it nevertheless offers an alternative framing of graffiti. Somewhat comparable,

some academics and experts understand the phenomena as important and meriting serious scholarly study. Such accounts are typically sympathetic towards graffiti writers/street artists and their work, often striving to develop theoretical accounts of this subcultural practice.

A third major source of discourses that vie over the meaning of graffiti and street art can be found in films. Although fictional movies with actors playing graffiti artists, or graffiti serving as a backdrop to tell the story have been analyzed elsewhere (Author), a relatively comprehensive review of documentary films on this subject has yet to be done. Despite the improved access to documentaries via streaming technology, we do not have a good understanding of the information and themes that these movies have presented and portrayed, and to what extent they are a reflection of reality or have perpetuated myths.

Documentary movies are often understood as having a “realistic” nature. Insofar as this is the case, they provide an additional medium to understand this phenomenon. Like other forms of popular culture, documentaries can create and establish expectations for their audience and frame issues. In this framing, they may reinforce and/or challenge dominant stereotypes, which can influence policy decisions and responses (Aufderheide 2007; Rafter 2006; 2007; Rafter and Brown 2011; Welsh Fleming and Dowler 2011; Yar 2010). On a related point, numerous graffiti artists indicate that seeing one or more documentaries about this subject matter served as a basis of inspiration for their work.<sup>6</sup> In short, there is a widespread belief that documentary films are more honest or authentic in their portrayal of subject matter (Nichols 2010, p. xiii).

The following is a review and analysis of popular, readily-accessible, English-language documentaries that have been produced on graffiti and street art. This research lies at the crossroads of a number of interrelated fields including cultural criminology, visual criminology, and urban studies. The first body of work sees the primacy of culture as a context in which to understand crime, criminals, and responses to it. In addition to a focus on ethnographic methods, cultural criminology examines how numerous cultural industries portray deviant subcultures (Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2008). The second collection of scholarship deals more with how images are constructed, used, and framed (Hayward 2009; Hayward and Presdee 2010). In both cases, there is an interest in the role of movies, particularly in their power to shape and reinforce dominant stereotypes of marginalized



sectors of society, but at the same time, various media may also be carefully used to have liberating and educational effects on sectors of society that are oppressed, repressed, and marginalized. The final body of relevant literature examines the complex relationships among urban processes and trends such as culture, public and private space, planning, housing, work, change, gentrification, crime, city services, planning, transportation, and economics. In some small way our analysis should contribute to literature in these three complimentary areas.

### **3. The world of graffiti and street art documentaries and their analysis**

There are numerous methods by which films can be analyzed (e.g., Aumont and Marie 1988/2015; Sobchack and Sobchack, 1997) including, but not limited to, content, historical, iconic, narrative, psychoanalytical, semiotic, and shot by shot analyses. We adopt a socio-historical approach that conforms most closely to a topic-based analysis.<sup>7</sup> In using this approach, the focus is on identifying recurrent themes within and across the documentaries. Moreover, to the extent possible, this study delves into the choice of individuals who are featured and/or interviewed, their decisions regarding the graffiti and/or street art they engage in, the places that are featured, as well as those factors that have an influence on the films, such as the social, historical, and political contexts in which the films were created.

In order to identify the universe of movies depicting graffiti and street art, we searched the Internet for examples of English-language documentaries that disproportionately focus on graffiti and street art. When the research was conducted, the website [www.graffitimovies.weebly.com](http://www.graffitimovies.weebly.com) listed 206 films on the subject matter of graffiti, most of which are uploaded to that site. On closer examination many of these movies are self-produced "home movies" of minimal quality. Moreover, many of these films do not appear to have a distinguishable narrative. Once the films were selected, the researcher asked selected scholars who specialize in this subject matter if they could add to his working list of movies. While not all films listed by the experts were documentaries focused disproportionately on graffiti and street art, or were easily accessible (i.e., they could be streamed), the investigator was able to narrow down a manageable list of documentaries, and then systematically watched these movies, paying careful attention to identify prevalent themes.<sup>8</sup>

An attempt was made to watch these movies in a chronological fashion. By seeing these films in this manner, the researcher hoped to witness the evolution of depictions of graffiti and street art and the relative changes, if any, in content and the approach to the subject matter.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, it was necessary to view these movies several times to better understand, categorize, and contextualize them.<sup>10</sup> Finally, by limiting the universe to popular (easily accessible) documentaries, the analysis was made more manageable. From 1979 to 2014, approximately 24 full-length English-language films depicting graffiti and/or street art and artists/writers were made (Author). Of this total, seven are fictional accounts and seventeen are documentaries. The majority of the documentaries focus disproportionately on graffiti and graffiti writers rather than street art and its practitioners. The balance of this section deals with inclusion and exclusion criteria of the analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, the documentary genre consists of films with nonfictional content, the intent of which is instruction or the capturing of a part of the historical record. Full-length documentaries usually run between 45 and 95 minutes in length. In addition, numerous short films (i.e., "shorts") (e.g., *Atlas: Los Angeles Graffiti Documentary* (2005), and *MUTO*, a wall-painted animation by BLU) documenting graffiti and street art have been made. Many of these are accessible via YouTube, Amazon Prime, or third-party websites (Light, Griffiths, and Lincoln 2012). The focus of this analysis, however, is on the longer and, in most cases, better known, and easily accessible full-length movies. Thus, the study excluded what appear to be mostly unnarrated, self-produced/vanity home-style movies.<sup>11</sup>

Another point is worth mentioning. Some readers may question the inclusion of the Academy Award-nominated movie *Exit Through The Gift Shop* (2010) in this study. Why might this be the case? This movie, directed by street artist Banksy, ushered in considerable debate over whether the events portrayed in it are true, and some critics have suggested that this film should be more appropriately considered a mockumentary (Dubois 2010-2011). After a close reading of the discussion surrounding this film, however, the investigators decided to classify it as a documentary, even though it falls outside of the norms of the other documentaries on graffiti and street art.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the documentaries on graffiti and street art included in this review were made between 1980 and 2012. The majority 12 (70 %) were produced during the first decade

of the 2000s. With the exception of Reiss (director of *Bomb It* and *Bomb It 2*), no director made more than one documentary. All the directors were men and directed their films on their own. The documentaries ranged in length between 45 minutes and 95 minutes with an average of 73 minutes. Since some of these movies have been reviewed in other venues, this paper is not meant to be a collection of reviews. It seeks, however, to interpret their content and approach to their subject matter.

In general, the movies can be placed into three categories: movies focusing primarily on one graffiti or street artist and/or a particular graffiti crew; movies that feature this subject matter in one particular location; and movies covering graffiti and street art in different locations throughout the United States or around the world.

Documentaries that concentrate on one particular artist or a crew, include *Tatscru: The Mural Kings*; *Beautiful Losers*; *Exit Through the Gift Shop*; *Graffiti Wars: Banksy vs. Robbo*, and *The Legend of Cool "Disco" Dan*. More prominently represented are documentaries that focus on graffiti and street art done in one city. This group of films includes *Stations of the Elevated*; *Style Wars*; *Graffiti Verite 1: Writing on the Wall*; *Piece by Piece*, and *RASH*. However, the largest category of documentaries is constituted by those that cover graffiti and street art in a variety of locations. A few of these films have an overarching point, while others are narrowly focused. This group of films includes *Infamy*; *Just to Get a Rep*; *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting*; *Bomb It*; *Alter Ego: A Worldwide Documentary about Graffiti Writing*; *Bomb It 2*, and *Vigilante Vigilante: The Battle for Expression*.

After viewing the 17 movies numerous times, several key themes can be identified. In general, the viewer gets the impression that graffiti is done by disaffected youth, mostly engaged in by men, primarily done in New York City, and that graffiti writers frequently have disagreements with other graffiti artists. Alongside these general themes, there is a readily discernible aesthetic quality that characterizes graffiti films, and they tend to incorporate similar narrative structures. In the remainder of this piece, the focus is on these aesthetic qualities and narrative elements, and the ways in which they tend to inhibit the development of new insights into graffiti writing culture. The paper closes with a discussion of how the content of graffiti documentaries could be expanded.

#### 4. The aesthetics of the graffiti documentary

A considerable amount of resources have been invested in the shooting, editing, and distribution of these movies. It was no easy feat to track down many of these individuals who spend a considerable portion of their lives engaging in graffiti and evading detection. Also, in many cases, these documentaries required the directors and their crew to travel to both domestic and foreign places to capture the footage they wanted. This introduced additional logistical challenges. The conditions under which some of the films were shot, evidenced by grainy video and night shots under street, poor, and/or minimal lighting conditions is testimony to the conditions under which the directors were forced to make their movies. It was also very resource intensive to track down the archival footage and photographs that were included in some of the films.

In general, the documentaries on graffiti and street art are informative and professional looking. This is noticeable in the range of subject matter that most of these films cover, the quality of the editing, the shots chosen to be included, and the sound used to accompany some of the visuals. Viewers get to see inside the world of graffiti and street art and the people who do this sort of thing. The audience learns about how and why graffiti writers are attracted to this activity, as well as the process of graffiti and street art, the difficulties among various artists, and the work of anti-graffiti activists and vigilantes. These interviews and images are accompanied by music that is disproportionately drawn from the hip hop and/or rap genres.

The audience is presented with a considerable number of time-lapse photographs and grainy images. Time-lapse photography shows graffiti artists and crews installing new pieces on walls or other surfaces and how the walls have changed over time as different writers have placed their graffiti and street art there. The faces of interviewees are frequently pixelated to disguise the identity of the artists. Interview material is often interspersed with black-and-white and color archival film footage, photographs, and color animation used to illustrate some of the artists' activities. These kinds of aesthetic qualities have a functional quality: the painting process can be slow and rather boring to watch but becomes much more engaging when sped-up through time-lapse photography. Grainy imagery is also likely to be an outcome of the conditions in which footage is produced and the reliance on older source material. Concealing the artists' identities is certainly intended as a pre-cautionary measure to prevent any legal consequences of appearing in

such movies.

However, such aesthetics are also symbolic, conveying meanings that go beyond their functional necessity. In many respects, the use of time-lapse, grainy imagery, and pixelated faces works to reproduce the idea that graffiti writers are inherently outlaws: sped-up footage connotes the ways in which graffiti is likely to be an adrenalin filled experience, and the grainy image suggests some kind of clandestine activity. It is not hard to imagine how the pixelated face might evoke in viewers the feeling that they are hearing the perspectives of those who engage in criminal activity. All of which is somewhat odd given that a common narrative thread throughout the films is that graffiti is a legitimate activity. Over the thirty-five-year period these movies span, the films reflect an increasing technical sophistication. The sound quality gets better, there are a diverse number of shots taken at different angles, and there is more use of color. In some ways, this replicates the history of graffiti itself, which is oftentimes more a display of technical competence in painting than a matter of communicating some kind of deeper message.

### **5. The narrative formula of graffiti and street art documentaries**

In an indirect manner, most of these movies attempt to confront popular myths and misrepresentations of graffiti writers and street artists as lacking respect for private property and as mindless anarchists. Some of these documentaries are very good at pointing out the hypocrisy of various situations. For example, in *Vigilante Vigilante*, buffers walk or drive around the cities in which they live or work, often painting over graffiti without authorization. Insofar as this is the case, the buffers are committing acts that could be framed as vandalism. Viewers also learn about how public space has been increasingly taken over by corporations advertising their goods and services, and how this has a negative effect on the urban landscape.

With notable exceptions (e.g., *Exit Through the Gift Shop*; *Vigilante Vigilante*; *The Legend of Cool Disco Dan*), most of the documentaries resemble each other mainly because they repeat the same information, interview the same graffiti writers and street artists, dwell on the same kinds of issues, and rarely go beyond these tropes. The narrative formula of graffiti documentaries dictates that we learn about the history of graffiti and its major players, rehearse debates regarding whether it is art or simply vandalism, and pursue

the problem of whether graffiti is still “legitimate” once it is moved from the streets to the gallery.

This is all kind of standard fair and, in many important respects, it replicates the kinds of debates/discussions one is likely to encounter in the mainstream media. Arguably, it would not be too much of a stretch to say that the content of graffiti documentaries serves as a good illustration of hegemony. That is to say, documentaries on graffiti have a tendency to stay within the confines of a “permissible discourse,” one that is established by those who oppose graffiti and wield greater social power (Gramsci 1971/2012; Hall and Jefferson 1993).

This is evident in debates over the “authenticity” of graffiti-inspired art and, especially so, in the recurrent theme of whether graffiti is art or vandalism. Respondents who paint graffiti, or who are sympathetic to the subculture, often claim that “graffiti is art.” Presumably, a statement such as this seeks to use the label of “art” in order to win legitimacy for graffiti. As Austin (2001) suggests, framing graffiti as art transforms it into a valued cultural practice.

Such interpretations may seem to oppose a dominant discourse that reduces graffiti to vandalism. However, claims that graffiti-is-art take for granted the parameters of debate as established by powerful opponents of graffiti and, insofar as this is the case, are problematic. While the graffiti-is-art position tries to push graffiti away from the stigmatizing effects of the vandalism label, it reproduces the idea that it has some kind of inherent definition, as if the meaning of graffiti could be determined by its intrinsic qualities. In this debate, graffiti is either this or that, either art or vandalism; as if it were a ball that might be tossed back and forth between two ends of a tennis court.

The problem with this discourse is not so much that graffiti might be art and vandalism, but that it glosses over the constructed nature of graffiti and its relationship to public space. In this view, what graffiti comes to mean is a social process, one shaped by material and ideological interests. Those who oppose graffiti, for example, might simply be benefitting by portraying it as vandalism. This allows graffiti opponents to articulate their vision of a desirable urban environment, what the city should look like, and what kinds of subjectivities and activities should be permitted within it. This point can be illustrated by drawing attention towards the phenomenological experience of city environments. All kinds of written text can be found in public space, from signs dictating appropriate behavior (e.g., “Tow away zone,

No parking”), corporate logos, informal fliers, and other forms of advertising, to name a few. Phenomenologically, these forms of writing (or at least some of them) have as much potential as graffiti to be constructed as vandalism. Who gets to decide what kinds of public writing will be tolerated and what forms despised? Who gets to carve up the field of public writing into those forms that are necessary and those that are problematic? How are such distinctions imposed upon the world of urban text? When documentaries obsess over whether graffiti is art or vandalism, these kinds of questions will be unlikely to enter the picture. In short, the “art versus vandalism” trope is ideological – irrespective of where one stands – because it forecloses the possibility of discussing how graffiti, and the struggles to establish what it *is*, are connected to an intricate web of cultural politics and material interests.

A second way in which the narrative formula of graffiti documentaries reproduces dominant discourses can be seen in the well-rehearsed theme of what counts as “authentic graffiti.” The problem of authenticity emerges when graffiti is transferred onto canvas in order to become a part of the art world. In these respects, we are often encouraged to accept the idea that graffiti on canvas is not “real,” or that only illegal graffiti is “authentic graffiti.” Apparently, something “gets lost” when graffiti is taken out of public space and transformed into a cultural commodity.

Such a discourse would seem to oppose the notion that graffiti-is-art, but this seeming paradox is resolved in light of the hegemonic ways in which graffiti is framed. Whereas the graffiti-is-art claim seeks to reject the “vandalism” label within a binary discourse, the notion that authentic-graffiti-is-illegal insists that graffiti is a crime, but never art. If the first claim amounts to a form of critique that is permitted within (if not useful to) the dominant discourse on graffiti, the second represents an internalization of that dominant discourse. In both instances, we are left with narrative elements that do not escape the confines of permissible discourse.

The viewer of these films may ask what new information each new movie offers. Overall, these movies sort of run together and get a little boring because their core narratives are so similar. With each new documentary, it becomes a case of diminishing returns. Over time, the films rarely present any new information or novel interpretations. In short, it does not seem like the directors did their homework and reviewed the other movies that were produced before embarking on their films. In defense of the directors, it may very well be that at the

time that many of these movies were produced (mid 2000s), the other films may not have been as widely accessible as they are today. Perhaps these movies were primarily playing in the independent film festival circuit and thus accessibility to these movies was not as prominent as they are today in our interconnected web based world. It could also be the case that the directors placed more emphasis on the act of creation rather than contributing a product that was unique.

## 6. Towards new narratives

What would it take for these documentaries to produce a discourse that pushes debates over graffiti in new directions? Rarely are the differences among the various types of graffiti and street art explained to the viewer in an easily digestible manner. Indeed tags, throw-ups, pieces, and paste-ups are identified, but rarely are definitions provided, nor are the advantages and disadvantages of these various techniques explained to the audience. The films also tend to be silent on how different communities are likely to conceptually organize these various forms of graffiti. For example, while much of the public is likely to conflate tags and throw-ups with “ugly” graffiti but may construe “pieces” as “more artistic,” graffiti writers are likely to frame these forms in a different manner. Amongst graffiti writers, all forms of graffiti are likely to be judged in relation to aesthetic standards set within graffiti writing subcultures. In this sense, graffiti writers may debate whether any particular tag, throw-up, or piece is “ugly” or “good.” It may be fruitful for documentaries to pursue why different communities operate with specific conceptual maps.

While the majority of movies review graffiti artists and the graffiti and street art scene in big cities, both in the United States and elsewhere, other large cities with thriving graffiti and street art scenes, including Cairo, Shanghai, and Toronto are absent from these films. With the exception of some footage in South Africa, none of the movies touch upon graffiti and street art in Africa and the Middle East. Also underrepresented are places in Asia.

Most of the narratives lack an argument and/or easily identifiable chronology. Some of the films seem to simply be collections of vignettes with no central argument or point (e.g., *Bomb It 2*). They bounce around from one location to another, and from one graffiti and street artist to another. In some cases, the movies defy logic in terms of the choice of why certain cities and themes are included. For example, in early scenes of *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting*, we see

shots of a spray paint manufacturer, but there is no logical reason why these are included. Other than the fact that graffiti had its historical origins in New York City, and the movie starts and ends with shots of graffiti in that city, the viewer is not certain what the director's intent was in this case.

Although a handful of the graffiti and street art documentaries also interview citizens, law enforcement, and politicians about their reactions to graffiti and street art in their cities, almost all of the movies disproportionately rely on interviews with the artists/writers. Nonetheless, these individuals appear to be one-dimensional and caricatures. Interviews with politicians, anti-graffiti activists, and law enforcement officers seem tacked on like an afterthought. The almost singular approach to interviewing graffiti writers and street artists unnecessarily privileges the perpetrator's (or if you prefer artist/writers) voice, (making the primary source of information), placing them on pedestals and portraying them in some cases as super heroes (Campos 2013).

One of the problems that follows from here is that, because graffiti writers are likely to be "on the defensive," they typically produce a discourse that responds to a dominant discourse. But this minimizes the odds that "disinterested" and novel interpretations of graffiti will enter the picture. For example, although *Vigilante*, *Vigilante* is an exception in these regards, the films do not interview scholars of graffiti and street art to get a sense of how they interpret this activity. Likewise, *Style Wars* is the only film in which the families and loved ones of the graffiti and street artists are consulted to understand how they feel about this activity. The films fail to integrate the contemporary scholarly research on graffiti and street art that is more nuanced with respect to who the perpetrators are, their motivations, and the kinds of challenges that graffiti writers face in their lives.

Because of these drawbacks, many of these movies provide superficial analyses of their subject matter and keep within the orbit of well-rehearsed cultural debates surrounding graffiti.

## 7. Conclusion

As previously mentioned, this body of work is important on different levels. There is a wealth of information that has been captured and translated to the viewer. Most of the influential individuals who do graffiti and street art appear in these films. Undoubtedly the documentary medium has enabled those who care to watch with another avenue (or

means) to understand this phenomena, which has framed the issues, and as a byproduct has created and established expectations for their audience. Given that the intended audience is, in all likelihood, the graffiti writing and street artist community, it is not necessarily clear if these movies challenge or simply reinforce dominant stereotypes and misperceptions. Their ability to influence policy decisions and responses is difficult to determine within the kind of analysis presented here.

Nevertheless, in some respects, it would be more interesting for viewers to learn about how graffiti artist/writers and street artists go about making choices with respect to the types of images, paint, colors, and methods of application and location.<sup>13</sup> Other questions could include: What was the writers' intent and meaning for the piece, if there was one at all? How much, if any, planning went into the pieces that they created? How did the writers feel about the ephemeral effects of their work? These sorts of questions and nuances are not answered well in the documentaries produced in this field.

Additional insights might have been drawn about these films if the investigators had interviewed the directors, producers, film crew, and/or graffiti and street artists featured in these movies. At the very least, the researcher could have asked the directors of the movies about their rationales behind their productions. However, the investigator did not have the appropriate resources, nor did they think that the additional information would contribute much value to the findings presented here. This study only included English-language movies. Additional insights about documentaries on graffiti may have been drawn and different results may have been achieved if documentaries produced in foreign languages were also included in the review. Again, this would have required more resources than the researcher had. Finally, had the investigator opted to engage in a close textual analysis of the films, different conclusions would have been achieved. Instead the objective was a fuller understanding of the content of these documentaries within specific social and historical fields.

Over time, and in conclusion, these movies tend to repeat basic information and themes (i.e., the terms, the illegality of graffiti and street art, and well-known individuals who engage in this work). The constant repetition of content in these movies serves as the biggest encumbrance to this body of work in order to understand deeper meanings



regarding the motivations of individuals who engage in this activity, public and government reactions, and the future of graffiti and street art.

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## Endnotes

1 - Documentaries, much like commercial movies can misrepresent and perpetuate myths primarily for the sake of the narrative and to engage the viewer. Although important to understand, this argument is not explored in this paper.

2 - This paper uses the word “artist” and “writer” interchangeably.

3 - Although it is neither the paper's intent to discuss, nor debate the development of graffiti, some observers are quick to point out that modern graffiti originated in Philadelphia. However, because of the sheer quantity of work the major emphasis for the contemporary movement can be better traced to activities in the South Bronx.

4 - Multiple definitions of graffiti and street art exist (Ross 2016), at a bare minimum graffiti typically refers to words, figures, and images that have been written and/or drawn on surfaces where the owner of the property has NOT given permission for the individual to place them on it. Street Art, on the other hand, refers to stencils, stickers, and noncommercial images that are affixed to surfaces where the owner of the property has NOT given permission for the individual to place them on it (Ross, 2013). Needless to say, the world of graffiti and street art is more complicated than these basic distinctions (e.g., Waclawek, 2013), and includes numerous subtypes and participants, but for

current purposes, this basic definition will suffice. At a bare minimum because of its illegal nature, graffiti and street art are acts of vandalism.

5 - Some may quibble with respect to my characterization of these books as popular, this label is used to distinguish them from traditional scholarly approaches to the subject matter.

6 - This sentiment has been expressed to the researchers through face-to-face conversations with numerous graffiti artists over the past five years of conducting research on this subject.

7 - This paper does not attempt to test hypotheses but takes a more grounded empirical approach. Its contribution lies in the conclusions that are articulated after the analysis of the data.

8 - Some observers may have difficulty with delimiting the analysis to documentaries that were accessible in this manner. We see nothing wrong with this approach, because the movies that are readily accessible should have a greater impact on the graffiti community rather than the more obscure and harder to access ones.

9 - In reality, as the review progressed, because of the need to revisit movies that had already been watched, conformity to a chronological approach could not be maintained.

10 - Although a coding sheet was initially used, it was progressively determined to be unwieldy, and that the additional benefits to be accrued (in terms of results) by using this technique outweighed the resource expenditure.

11 - These films include but are not limited to *Cope2 - Kings Destroy*; *5 AM Part 1*; *5 AM Part 2*, *State your name*, and *Fuckgraff #1*.

12 - This was a judgment call, the elements of the movie seemed to conform more towards a documentary than a typical commercial movie and thus *Exit Through The Gift Shop* was classified as a documentary.

13 - See, for example, Ferrell and Weide (2010) analysis of spot theory alludes to this discussion.

## A brief history of street art as a term up to 2000

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### Abstract

This working paper gathers the different understandings of the term “street art” found in books up to the turn of the millennium. Several opinions and theories about street art are nowadays proposed, often depending on working, cultural or geographical contexts. The idea of street art has also changed in the course of time. By a chronological analysis of the most important meanings referencing the word, the study outlines street art as a continuously changing term, with the purpose of providing an historical grounding to better frame the idea of street art today. The survey is conducted based on a literature search with the help of WorldCat (worldcat.org). The empirical material consists of printed books from 1950 to 2000 mentioning the term “street art” in their titles.

**Keywords:** Street art, Term, Understanding, Books, Literature Search, WorldCat, Mural art, Unsanctioned.

### 1. Introduction

Different theories about what street art is and what it should be are regularly propounded, both by scholars and fans. It comes as no surprise with such generic terms as “street art”, “urban art” or “public art”. Given its literal meaning, the term “street art” could refer to any artwork or artistic expression related to the street environment. Notwithstanding that today there seems to be a broad consensus on the fact that to be an artwork recognized as street art the mere “street” location is not enough, the word still generates a different range of ideas. When dealing with a term of this kind usually the context plays a decisive role in determining which understanding might be the most appropriate. Within the academic world scholars work on frameworks set up by their own theoretical backgrounds, academic interests and operative methodologies. As a result, their understanding of street art is in fact dependent on their working contexts. For example, Nicholas Alden Riggle’s personal and academic training as a philosopher led him to a need for “*thinking*” about street art and its analytic meaning (Riggle, 2010a)<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast, art historian and sociologist Peter Bengtson (2014) discusses the impossibility of defining street art once

and for all<sup>2</sup>, by tackling the issue from the anti-structuralist perspective of considering art in general as a social construction.

Individual ideas on street art may also depend on particular cultural and geographical contexts. Anna Waclawek’s understanding of street art in her 2008 doctoral thesis is interchangeable with the term post-graffiti (Waclawek, 2008). Her position in considering street art as the next stage of graffiti comes out of her US-oriented art historical perspective on the phenomenon, leading her to overlook the contribution of several non-American cultural and artistic ambits other than graffiti.

Lastly, the understanding about street art has steadily changed in the course of time. I agree with Ulrich Blanché (2015, p.33) that “street art was not always called street art [...] the meaning of street art has changed over time”. The term has been employed for an array of heterogeneous subjects, from community mural projects to political propaganda.

This short working paper aims to offer an overview of the understandings that have been proposed of the term “street

art” in books until the turn of the millennium, when the street art phenomenon started becoming global. The purpose is to historically survey street art as a continuously changing concept that shifts in time and space. This is done to provide an historical grounding to better frame and argue about the idea of street art today. The analysis is conducted based on a literature search with WorldCat<sup>3</sup>. The empirical material consists of printed books from 1950 to 2000 mentioning the term “street art” in their titles. Since the paper addresses the ways in which the aforementioned term has changed its significance over time, translations and texts that use similar terms in languages other than English are excluded from the study. The same applies to books on topics which can be included in the field of street art but that are not explicitly being referred to as street art.

## 2. Street art as community art projects/mural art

The earliest reference to the term seems to date from 1968, in *Street art/NY*, a photo essay published by the New York City Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration (*Street art/NY*, 1968). This short publication documents through black-and-white, full-page photos the local government arts workshop program, which took place in the streets of New York during the summer of 1968 in the interest of community social integration. That initial understanding of street art was meant to cover every form of sanctioned art – from visual arts to poetry, from dance to theatre – acting in the urban public space, as just another way to say community art or public art.

In a similar vein, during the following decade (1980 included), the term recurs in titles of a handful of publications<sup>4</sup> concerning a spectrum of various sanctioned art projects in the US, mostly involving wall paintings. As one could imagine, this group of books is all from the US. The only exception is Horst Schmidt-Brümmer’s *Street art* (1974), a German-language catalogue of an exhibition held at the Amerika-Haus of Berlin, in which the term is first mentioned in a non-American publication, although referring to American mural art.

The longstanding tradition of mural art experienced an intense new wave in the US in the 1970s. In this context, the term “street art” was particularly suitable to emphasize the phenomenon and remind us of the spatial location of the

artworks. Besides overviews on street art/mural art such as Robert Sommer’s *Street art* (1975), that is the best known and widespread book among this group, others are more specifically addressed towards art initiatives of minorities, as in the case of John Bright’s L.A. *Chicano street art* (1974), focused on Mexican American artists’ decorations in Los Angeles, or Samella S. Lewis’ *The street art of Black America* (1973), on African American “street art” exhibited in Houston 1973 (Blanché, 2016, p. 45).

If the idea of street art at that point has matched with that of community arts and mural painting, new understandings came up in the 1980s.

## 3. Street art as unsanctioned art

Marian Kester’s, Peter Belsito’s and Bob Davis’ *Street Art: The Punk Poster in San Francisco 1977-1981* (1981) first introduced an alternative comprehension of the term to indicate punk rock posters, mostly advertising local music events, pasted all over the streets of San Francisco. This is an early understanding of street art involving the unsanctioned nature of the artwork, probably the core significance nuanced in the majority of definitions provided nowadays by scholars<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, the book points out that street art as unsanctioned art finds its roots in several cultural phenomena apart from graffiti.

However, the term “street art” was still far from being a uniform idea. Two publications from 1982 clearly show this lack of definition. One is from the renowned French art critic Pierre Restany (1982), about the “street art” by Dutch artist Karel Appel. Here the term relates to the artist’s long urban walks in search of waste objects and other material to assemble in original artworks<sup>6</sup>. A definitely generic reading is instead advanced by Donald J. Davenport’s *Street art* (1982), a how-to manual for various kinds of open-air decoration techniques and methods, from automotive custom painting to airbrushing, from sign painting to gold leafing.

### 3.1 Street art as unsanctioned art socially committed

Despite not being the only scene of non-authorized art in the streets, New York City during the 1980s was documented

early on in Allan Schwartzman's *Street art* (1985). With that seminal publication, most likely the first "modern" understanding of street art was born. From the pages of the book the term now calls for a specific identity and points to – apart from graffiti<sup>7</sup> – street artworks that most would call street art today. Schwartzman's innovative understanding of the word can be summarized by a statement from Jenny Holzer, quoted at the bottom of the book back cover: "This is art done in secret for the public. It's art where it's not supposed to be. It's art on serious subjects put where anyone can see it. It's art that's extremely beautiful to show how good things could be". The unsanctioned nature of these practices along with their strong public and social engagement are the focal points around which Schwartzman builds the new idea of street art.

Schwartzman's legacy can be found across the ocean in a couple of European publications of the 1990s – firstly the catalogue of Jenny Holzer's Street art exhibition held in Warsaw in 1993<sup>8</sup>. Yet, most significant in the framework of this survey is Paolo Buggiani's and Gianluca Marziani's *Keith Haring: le lavagne metropolitane e la street art 1980/86* [*Keith Haring: subway blackboards and street art 1980-86*] (1996), by which the term was introduced in Italy. Along with presenting Haring's subway drawings from the collection of the Italian artist Paolo Buggiani<sup>9</sup>, the book gives an account on 1980s NYC street art in a similar extent to the work that Schwartzman had done before. Unlike the latter, however, Buggiani explicitly claims for street art a separate role from graffiti<sup>10</sup>, thus setting apart from graffiti writing what we now call street art. In other words, Buggiani's understanding of street art is that of Schwartzman less graffiti, making it quite close to today's common comprehension of the term<sup>11</sup>.

#### 4. Other understandings

Notwithstanding this early attempt of specification, in the street art "guidebooks"<sup>12</sup> authored by German psychiatrist Bernhard van Treeck over the course of the 1990s, the meaning of the word proves, once again, to not follow a process of gradual refinement. If van Treeck's understanding of street art is roughly that of an all-inclusive term encasing heterogeneous forms of visual art in the street, whether sanctioned or unsanctioned, Bob Edelson's *New American street art* (1999) returns again primarily to legal murals, even though, this time, they are also realized by graffiti writers.

To complete the analysis, the political perspective employed by Vladimir Tolstoy's, Irina Bibikova's and Catherine Cooke's *Street art of the Revolution: festivals and celebrations in Russia 1918-33* (1990) has to be added. In this English translation of a Russian book from 1984 street art means propaganda through art in public space (Blanché, 2015). The latter is almost an isolated episode, since following references to the term linked to the political sphere seems to deal more with protests against the regime rather than propaganda. Both aspects are anyhow in any case included comprised in Lyman G. Chaffee's *Political protest and street art: popular tools for democratization in Hispanic countries* (1993), in which street art is described as a "communicative device for informing and persuading" (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4)<sup>13</sup>, adopted by governments and protesters as well.

#### Conclusions

The term "street art" was first and mainly used in the United States until the 1990s, when it began to spread in European publications. The mentioning of the term gradually rises in the time span considered (1950-2000) – one in the 1960s; five in the 1970s; eight in the 1980s; eleven in the 1990s up to 2000. However, the most relevant element emerging from this analysis is that the idea of street art before the turn of the millennium remains uncertain and spans a diversified spectrum of interpretations. The term is apt for referring to one or all forms of art in the street. Nevertheless, the negotiation process of its understanding took essentially four avenues:

- 1 - street art as *community art projects/mural art* – during the seventies;
- 2 - street art as *unsanctioned art socially committed* – in the view of Schwartzman (1985), followed also by Buggiani (1996; 1999);
- 3 - street art as *generic visual art in the street environment* – foremost in the books by Bernhard van Treeck (1993; 1996; 1999);
- 4 - street art as *political communication* – as presented by Tolstoy, Bibikova & Cooke (1990) and Chaffee (1993).

No route seems more predominant than the others.

After 2000 the search results for "street art" increase in number. The term has been experiencing an overwhelming blooming in book titles since 2004/2005 – references go from twenty-five in the first thirty-three years (1968-2000)



up to around three hundred in the next eighteen years (2001-2018). This shift reflects the fact that street art – as unsanctioned and ephemeral art in the urban public space different from graffiti<sup>14</sup> – became a global phenomenon at the turn of the millennium attracting big media interest. In this respect, the works of Schwartzman and Buggiani compared to the common understanding of the term after 2000 are not to be disregarded.

Yet, mural art or wall painting has had a huge renaissance in the popular comprehension of street art fostered by media, especially over the last ten years. When considering that, we need to be aware of the multifaceted body the idea of street art had in recent history, or we run the risk of ruling out other opinions without any evident reason for them to be excluded.

## Endnotes

1. The need for *thinking* about street art is meant also as a reaction to the lack in criticism among street art enthusiasts: “There is a general disdain, it seems, for *thinking* about street art – street art enthusiasts tend to resist thinking about artistic value, artistic influence, artistic context, or pretty much anything related to art history and criticism” (Riggle, 2010a). Riggle tackled the issue of defining street art also in the article from the same year “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces” (2010b).

2. “the term street art has no inherent meaning” (Bengtson, 2014, p. 13).

3. WorldCat gathers the collections of thousands of libraries around the world. Available at: <https://www.worldcat.org/default.jsp> [Accessed March 2018].

4. Lewis (1973), Bright (1974), Schmidt-Brümmer (1974), Sommer (1975), Wagner (1979) and Weihsmann (1980).

5. See in particular Bengtson (2014, pp. 138-141; 2017, p. 104).

6. “celui qui assemble des objets trouvés”(Restany, 1982, p. 49).

7. Despite the book includes both graffiti and art we now

call properly street art, the latter is being given the bigger attention, whereas the first represents more a necessary background to contextualize the work of “traditionally trained street artists” (Schwartzman, 1985, p. 107).

8. Works on display included Holzer’s renowned poster series – *Truism*, *Survival Series* and *Inflammatory Essays* – she pasted up on walls in Manhattan. Artworks were also placed in various spots of the Polish Capital, however they were authorized or in direct relation with the gallery show.

9. Paolo Buggiani lived the 1980s NYC art scene from the inside, as an artist performing and making interventions with fire in the streets of Manhattan. He was part of the Rivington School movement in the East Village as well as involved in the artistic scene of Pier 34 on the Hudson River at Canal Street. Moreover, he was one of the first to photograph and preserve a considerable number of *Subway Drawings* by Keith Haring between 1980 and 1982.

10. The text written by Buggiani (1996, p. 48) is from 1994. Buggiani also dealt with this issue in a text published a few years after, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Pittura Dura. Dal graffitismo alla street art*, held in Turin between 1999 and 2000 (Buggiani, 1999, p. 29).

11. It should be stated that Buggiani’s understanding of street art, as that of Schwartzman, was more oriented to the social value of street artworks than it is today. In this respect, from personal talks with him, I know he today appreciates artists such as Banksy or Blu for their criticism to society, as opposed to “decorative” interventions he can hardly refer to as street art.

12. van Treeck (1993; 1996; 1999).

13. The author specifies that “it is not given an all-inclusive definition” of the term, thus his understanding of street art is aimed to the purposes of the study (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4).

14. Although overlaps between graffiti and street art seem to resist.

# The Evolution of Street art and Graffiti in India

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## Abstract

This working essay attempts to trace the history of art making in the public space in India. This is important for understanding the evolutionary process of the local graffiti and street art culture and the organisation of many street art festivals across the country. This festival structure often leads to a collaboration with various government bodies in order to work within a city or a neighbourhood to create a large scale immersive experience. This essay will try to argue the importance of people in the creation and evaluation of street art while collaborating and negotiating with various government institutions.

## 1. Street art in India

The practice of painting in public and communal spaces is an old one in India. The oldest evidence of mural making comes from the Buddhist cave painting in Ajanta, Maharashtra. These caves were accidentally discovered in 1819 and date back to the second century BC (Mitra, 2004). Having inspired artists and sculptors for generations, the Ajanta murals continue to be an important part of Indian history of art. Folk art can also be seen painted on the interior and exterior walls of the homes of tribal communities as part of the local traditions (Figure1).

Cultural marking of the streets has long prevalence in all regions of the country, urban and semi urban. The mode of expression and manifestations have been quite unique, for example, hand painted Bollywood posters, typographic signboards, truck art, slogans, images of gods painted along sidewalks or tiles affixed to walls to prevent people from urinating in public, painted advertisements by small businesses, and political graffiti (for examples, see Figures 2a,b,c,d,e,f). West Bengal, which was the epicentre for political graffiti in 1960-1990, had a thriving culture where political parties and the common man equally expressed themselves in the public sphere, as aptly explained by Kamayani Sharma:

It was a multi-layered and textured conversation between the frequently anonymous artist, the public and the constructed environment. Ranging from drawings of Naxalite party workers killed

by the police sketched using pieces of charcoal taken from their funeral pyres to Portraits of Indira Gandhi in psychedelic colours, these images were subversive, irreverent, socially aware and gave vent to a deeply felt resentment and anger against the establishment. (Sharma, 2018: 41)

These graffiti practices have since disappeared from the streets of Kolkata, the centre of political power in West Bengal. As graffiti practices declined in Kolkata, a rise in tags could be observed in Delhi and Mumbai by artists like Yantra in 2006, Zine in 2007 and Daku in 2008 (Shukla, 2012).

While the community of graffiti artists is growing slowly over time, the practice of street art in an organised fashion is also rapidly growing. Many street art festivals are being organised across the country like those by St+art India Foundation, Delhi street art, Shillong Street art festival (April 2018), or the Kolkata street art festival organised by Jogen Chowdhury. The first instance of a street art event being organised was in Delhi, 2012, called 'Khirkee extension' organised by Astha Chauhan and Matteo Ferraresi. For Astha, the impetus was to see if a public art project can exist without funding and by its own merit, because, in her opinion, receiving funding can dilute the artistic expression and act as a censor to the ideas you want to portray (Chauhan, 2018). This event brought together like-minded people in an organic and unplanned manner. The local b-boys came to the event on their own accord and performed and artists approached the organisers to paint as part of the festival, for example. The success of the festival according to Astha was the

economic independence and transparency and the trust of the residents (Chauhan, 2018).

Up until 2012, and before Extension Khirkee, there was a small scene for graffiti and street artists who acted independently and did not have a large community to engage with. Artists mostly acted locally, tagging or painting murals, while collaborating with local patrons.

Post 2012, with the rise of social media and the outreach it provided to the Extension Khirkee festival, a market was created for the consumption of murals (Chauhan, 2018). This led to the creation of what we now term as the Indian Street Art scene. Organisations such as Delhi street art and St+art India Foundation were established in the following years, and they developed a style of working that brought various government organisations on-board. The idea was to create Murals to beautify public spaces with all permissions in place, says Hanif Kureshi, a co-founder of St+art India Foundation and an artist himself (Sharma, 2018). But joining hands with government bodies such as NDMC, DMRC, Swachh Bharat, Ministry of urban development and CPWD, inadvertently gives away the artist's freedom of expression. The images created as a consequence are un-offensive and devoid of any strong meaning (Sharma, 2018).

At the same time, the graffiti practice in India took shape in unique ways visually, with the artists commentating on on-going socio-political debates. For example, Daku's many interventions in the city's available infrastructure, *Mat do* (Figure 3) is a commentary on the then upcoming elections of 2014 and the ongoing debate of whether one should vote or not considering the recent political upheaval the city of Delhi had witnessed. Figure 4 comments on the social problems of rape and consumerism on already existing "Stop" signs.

Over the years, one can observe the absence of such commentary in the public space. In 2016, Daku created an artwork for St+art India's Lodhi Art District 'Time changes everything' as part of the 'St+art Delhi 2016 festival' which displays the slow assimilation of the graffiti artist into the street art format. Though Daku still engages in making graffiti, he has since moved more towards street art. Similarly, many graffiti artists have moved from an unsanctioned graffiti practice towards street art which is either commissioned or created with sanctions from government organisations or various patrons. The practice of graffiti thus never took root in India in a big way, as Sharma states, "with any subversive spirit being tamed by the adoption of the less offensive genre of street art." (Sharma, 2018: 35)

## 2. The people

Most organisers of street art festivals or mural festivals have asserted their aim to take art out of the gallery space to take it to the people; thereby, making it more accessible (Sharma, 2018: 34; St+art Kolkata Press release, 2018). Such a claim, to begin with, establishes the importance given to the people, who are not necessarily 'the art world public' (Dickie, 1984:80) but also includes people who would otherwise, for example, not visit a museum or a gallery. This would include a wide range of people – art professionals, art enthusiasts, students, residents of the neighbourhood in question and passers-by.

Since the art form in question is practiced in communal places, de Certeau's discussion plays an important role here. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau talks about the important relationship a place has with the people, the transformation of the many "configuration of positions" called 'places,' by differentiating places from 'space' arguing that a "place is a practiced space. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into space by walkers" (de Certeau, 1984:117). This is further explored by Merleau Ponty who distinguishes between geometrical space and anthropological space. According to Merleau Ponty, "there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences." (as cited in de Certeau, 1984:118) Taking into consideration this phenomenological perspective on spaces any person traverses, the experience of the various artistic interventions in the fabric of the city will lead to a range of responses.

Considering the involvement of various government bodies in the organisation of street art events and festivals and the reach of such art works and events, it is worth questioning the process of putting together a festival that, as a consequence, stands between the government institution exerting control and a large audience base. Do street art festivals successfully negotiate between the restrictions directly and indirectly imposed by the government institutions and the intention of putting forward art that is for the people. It is also essential to study the extent to which the local community is affected by an intervention like the creation of Lodhi Art District in New Delhi or the Sassoon Dock art project in Mumbai. Both of these projects intended to reinvigorate the neighbourhoods by an organised artistic intervention. In Lodhi Art District, over 30 murals have been painted in a single neighbourhood over a period of two years, and as a



Fig.1 A mud house in Bihar, painted in Madhubani art

Image source: <http://blog.aabihar.com/the-story-of-mud-houses-of-bihar/>



Figure 2 a) Hand painted advertisement

Image source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/66357794487351690/>





Figure 2 b) Hand painted Bollywood film posters. Image source: <https://scroll.in/article/719468/the-magic-of-mumbais-alfred-talkies-and-the-dying-art-of-hand-painted-posters>



Figure 2 c) Truck art - Image Source: <https://www.quora.com/>, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-27/prancing-horses-peacock-feathers-and-spaceship-these-pakistani-trucks-aren-t-any>



Figure 2 d) Hand-painted signboards  
Image Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/195977021256085172/>



Figure 2 e) Political graffiti, West Bengal Image source: <http://indianexpress.com/article/elections-2016/cities/kolkata/west-bengal-election-2016-the-writing-on-the-wall/>





Figure2 f) Gods idols along foot-paths to avoid public urination  
 Image source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20601552>



Figure 3. Daku, Mat Do, 2014  
 Image Source: St+art India Foundation



Figure 4 a),b) Daku, Stickers on existing stop sign  
 Image Source: St+art India Foundation

result can provide ample information to better understand the implications of an ongoing project over a long period of time. The Sassoon Dock art project, on the other hand, was organised in the Sassoon dock area with the support of the Mumbai port trust (MBPT) in an attempt to revitalise the dock area. This project lasted three months with a temporary exhibition inside a warehouse with multiple murals created in the surrounding areas. The Sassoon Dock Art project will be crucial in analysing the impact of an event on the local fishing community and possibly a changing relationship with government organisations (MBPT).

Alison Young (2014) said in *Street Art, Public City*, this growing popularity of street art has led to “changes in school curriculum, the generation of profit in the art market, changes in curatorial practice as galleries adapt to the difficulties of exhibiting work originally meant for this street and architectural developments incorporating graffiti and street art into urban design.” Another change that I would want to study through Lodhi Art District and Sassoon Dock Art project would be a change in curatorial practices when applied to a large-scale festival organised in the public space for a medium of art that was supposed to thrive without any intervention and control.

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# Depicting Physical And Social Fears: Shark Graffiti On Reunion Island

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### Abstract:

This short paper focuses on graffiti depicting desperate warnings over the increase in shark attacks, the threat of which has been encouraged by the idyllic feeding climate on the Indian Ocean island, and suggests a metaphorical simile of the threatening invisible and ever present malevolent force felt in the social climate of expanding inner cities through greed within capital investment.

**Keywords:** graffiti, Reunion Island, shark attack, profit, corporate greed.

### 1. Jace depicts sharks on Reunion Island

Jace, a 44 year old street artist from Le Havre, France places his little yellow figures, known as 'gouzous' all around the world. In Réunion, Jace depicted Gouzou surrounded by circling sharks (see Figure 1).

Why sharks? Because this small Indian Ocean island, which is an overseas territory [Département] of France, has suffered a worrying number of shark-related fatalities over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> The shark-fest is rapidly becoming the main reason people in the anglophone world have even heard of Réunion.

Kelly Slater, an American surfer, responding to reports of the death of Alexandre on 21 February 2017, a 26 year old considered one of the best body boarders of the island, wrote on her Instagram page: 'there needs to be a serious cull on Réunion and it should happen every day. There is a clear imbalance happening in the ocean there. If the whole world had these rates of attack nobody would use the ocean and literally millions of people would be dying like this. The French government needs to figure this out asap. 20 attacks since 2011.'<sup>2</sup>

A couple of months later, in April 2017, the death of Adrien Duboscq, a 30 year old surfer, was reported at Saint Leu, following another shark attack - the 21st since 2011. He

succumbed to a severe bite on his right thigh. A newspaper report into this latest attack provided a photograph of the unfortunate victim alongside an inverted image of his surfboard which ironically depicts a graffiti image of a shark (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> A YouTube homage to Adrien provides this image in more detail.

Several of the graffiti artists in Réunion have taken up the cause of graphically depicting this menace. Figure 3 is a version by Kmis3:

### 2. History of shark attacks on Reunion

The problem of shark attacks is not a new one in Réunion. There have been documented attacks over many years: 38 recorded over a 30-year period.<sup>4</sup> However it is the recent intensification of the attacks – in double figures since 2011, which has brought the problem to the attention of the general public and to the global surfing and bodyboarding community. Three shark species blamed for what is now being dubbed the 'shark crisis' are the grey reef shark, the tiger shark, and the bull shark. Scientists have attributed the new velocity and timing of attacks to the seasonal presence of the bull sharks close to the coastline during their reproductive cycle [May to October] and the degradation of their environment, notably the lack of food due to over-fishing which has led to increased aggression as food searches become more pressured.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1 Gouzou surrounded by circling sharks



Figure 2 Shark depicted on surfboard of boarder who was attacked by shark



Figure 3 Street artists Kmis3 depiction of shark menace





Figure 4



Figure 5 Marine of the Shark

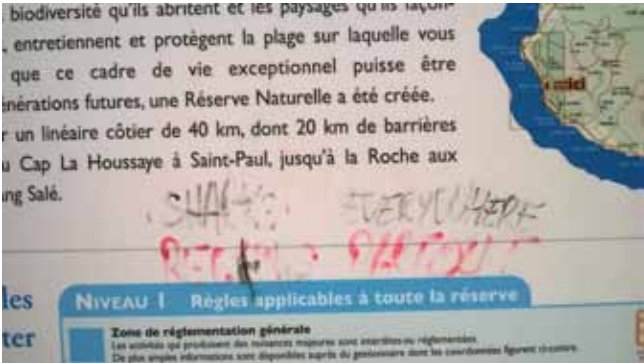


Figure 6 Rules for the Reserve – sharks everywhere warning

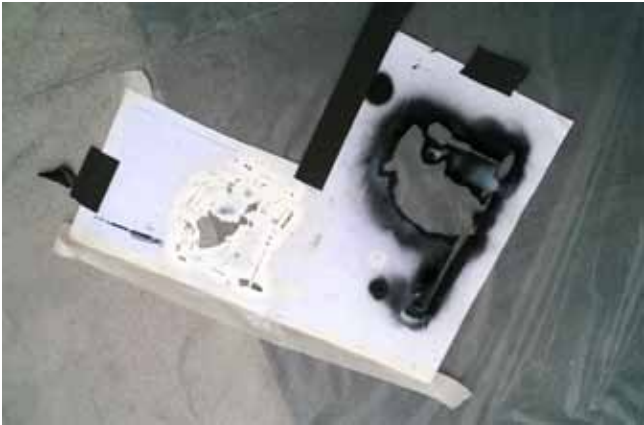


Figure 8 Rat stencils



Figure 7 Red shark stencil graffiti



Interestingly the majority of victims have been surfers from metropolitan France [known colloquially as *zoreils*] since local creoles or island born Réunionnais are less likely to be aficionados of such nautical activities. The depiction of government inaction in the face of this threat may, nevertheless, be invoked as representative of underlying tensions between the French metropolis and the Réunion hinterland where the shark graffiti becomes a metaphor for anti-establishment and anti-metropole popular expression.

Perhaps the most familiar and humorously disrespectful shark warning graffiti can be seen on a welcome billboard advertisement within the fictional seaside town of Amity Island from the 1975 movie *Jaws*. The alarming graffiti images on Réunion Island are without humour, essentially functioning as clear pictograms. The shape of a black silhouette of a shark (see Figure 4) is seen daubed with a brush and drawn with a nib all along the coast, added to official signage that does not identify the particular warning. The graffiti triggers immediate stimuli. There is a threat. It is stark.

The attractive 'Creole Village' becomes 'Shark Village' as if the shark is now what truly defines the village and the 'Natural Reserve Marine of the Réunion is renamed: 'Marine of the Shark.' (see Figures 5). Public information including a list detailing the 'rules applicable to the entire reserve' is succinctly added to with the English words: 'Sharks Everywhere' (see Figure 6). This has also been added to as a translation into French by what looks like another hand using a red pen: 'Requins Partout' (see Figure 7).

On a 'no swimming' sign on which the danger and risk is stated but not the reason - the body of a shark vertically attacking is stencil graffiti sprayed in red. Here the graffiti is operating as a warning of the ever-present yet unseen threat of the shark, the predator, the malignant force that flourishes causing damage void of surveillance. The metaphor of the mechanics of capitalist systems in place that affect our lives are ever present and as inseparable as the salt in the ocean.

The black silhouetted stencils of a rat (see Figure 8) running through the streets of Paris by Blek le Rat (and later adopted by Banksy to let loose in the streets of London) multiply like an underbelly class, a resident that just won't leave the city in which they belong. The recurring visibility of this unwelcome

occupant appears in streets by the street artists and is possibly intended as an off putting warning to the new generation of property investors who wish for a cleansed environment and selectively ordered lifestyle. The environment is no doubt conducive due to the encouragement of the city's expansion of capital investment and profit within the changing areas of regeneration.

The terms 'social cleansing' and 'ethnic cleansing' of people previously living/renting in and moved (priced out) from poor areas as a result of new development and subsequent gentrification has been used and is close to that of 'extermination' an employment used in order to solve the problem of the city's rat population. The fins of the city are moving forward freely and unhindered, and like the fast-moving greed itself and the damage it causes, if it were able to be slowed to a stop, it would die.

## Endnotes

1. Jace left with his mother to live in Reunion island at the age of 8 and it was here that he developed his unique graffiti style. [http://www.lemonde.fr/arts/visuel/2017/09/22/street-art-jace-un-gouzou-dans-la-ville\\_5189860\\_1655012.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/arts/visuel/2017/09/22/street-art-jace-un-gouzou-dans-la-ville_5189860_1655012.html).
2. <https://www.lequipe.fr/Adrenaline/Surf/Actualites/Kelly-slater-prend-parti-sur-la-crise-requin-a-la-reunion/780268>.
3. <http://www.ipreunion.com/requins/reportage/2017/04/30/21e-attaque-de-requin-mortelle-depuis-2011-pointe-au-sel-adrien-dubosc,61383.html>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G1hcsIGPPY>.
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5. [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attaques\\_de\\_requin\\_%C3%A0\\_La\\_R%C3%A9union](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attaques_de_requin_%C3%A0_La_R%C3%A9union).

## Specifics of Periodization in Russian Street Art

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### Abstract

Although Street Art as a consistent global movement existed from approximately 1998 to 2008, this periodization needs to be updated for the peripheral scenes. As street art is site specific and peripheral by its nature, it needs to be perceived as follows. Not everywhere, especially in comparison to the cities or regions with less developed art institutions and art market, the processes of instrumentalization and co-opting of Street Art by the Creative City discourse happens with the same dynamic.

**Keywords:** street art, Russia, periodization, terminology, regional scenes

### 1. Introduction

Street Art is a period—stated a widely discussed article by British anthropologist Rafael Schacter<sup>1</sup>. According to him, street art, as any other artistic movements, has its period, and was characterized by distinct practices, techniques, and a core group of artists.

“Street Art was operative and, crucially, innovational, between the years of 1998 and 2008 (...) 1998 was thus the year in which I would argue that a core group of artists – approximately 100–200 artists worldwide – began to explore new ways of working both site-specifically and independently in public space (...) The latter date of 2008, however, is what I argue to be the year of Street Art’s creative culmination. This is the point both at which all that could be produced within Street Art has been produced, the point at which artists began to move away from its confines and into other artistic arenas.” [Schachter, 2016, p. 105]

The aim of this article is not only to apply (and update) given periodization to the local context of peripheral scenes, but also to question some of the terminological conventions that exist in discourses on Street Art.

1 - Schacter R. Street art is a period, PERIOD. // *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City* / edited by Konstantinos Avramidis, Myrto Tsilimpounid. London: Routledge, 2016. P. 103–118.

### 2. A brief history of Street Art in Russia

The first wave of graffiti in Russia and the Baltic States occurred in 1985–91, as part of the popularity of break dance and electro. Some of the first graffiti were made by b-boys at official break dance contests organized by authorities (they were understanding it as a dance sport). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the scene experienced a period of demise.

The second wave of popularity of hip-hop starts in 1996, when a new generation of post-soviet kids were involved in different subcultures. Some of these kids were trying to rap, dance, and make graffiti. It was a time when information was still being distributed through more traditional media, such as magazines, radio, and television. Although the internet was becoming accessible for people as well.

In the beginning, these kids were un-critically adopting new trends coming from the West, but in the late 1990s some of them were trying to find new forms rooted in the local context. The new forms of site-specific art on the streets were later known as Street Art. Being peripheral and underdeveloped in the 1990s, the Russian art scene (in general, and street art in particular) was mostly adopting Western trends and searching for a self-identity.

By 2008, the year Rafael Schacter co-curated an exhibition at Tate Modern, Igor Ponosov<sup>2</sup> published his third book on Russian street art and organized an exhibition called "Russian Street Art is Dead." His idea was not to highlight the demise of street art in general, but to provoke artists to be more active on the streets. At that point, some of the key artists already organized their first solo exhibitions in galleries, while first mural festivals were already there. However, 2008 was also a year when the global economic crisis dealt a crushing blow to the fragile Russian art market, which was just about to absorb urban art practices (citation needed).

Therefore, art systems as well as other institutions were not able to give enough effort to co-opt street art at a given point. On the other hand, since 2009 street artists started to search for new ways of self-expression in public spaces. This tendency was dramatically catalyzed by the number of activist initiatives (environmental, right to the city, anti-governmental movements). These two factors (an economic crisis that reduced the art market and the politicization of society) created a situation of another specific wave of Russian street art, much stronger and unique than a previous one.

### 3. Analysis

Some of the important aspects to discuss: logocentrism of Russian (street) art, political street art and activist street art (partizaning), terminological challenge (street art, urban art, intermural art, etc.), what is after street art (post-contemporary art), street art theory and museumification of street art, later commercialization and instrumentalization of street art practices by the government and private institutions, new periodization.

### 4. Conclusion

Although Street Art as a consistent global movement existed from approximately 1998 to 2008, this periodization needs to be updated for the peripheral scenes. And, as street art is site specific and peripheral by its nature, it needs to be perceived as follows. Not everywhere, especially in comparison to the cities or regions with less developed art institutions and art market, the processes of instrumentalization and co-opting of Street Art by the Creative city discourse (needs to be described in introduction) happens with the same dynamic.

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2 - Author of a series of small books *Objects* (2005, 2006, 2008), book on history of global street art phenomenon *Art and the City* (2016), and currently publishing his next book in English about Russian street art scene (2018) — check all the dates and titles.

**Review of Glaser, K., 2017. Street Art and New Media. Actors – Practices – Aesthetics**

[See: <http://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-3535-5/street-art-und-neue-medien>; Original in German: Glaser, K., 2017. Street Art und neue Medien. Akteure – Praktiken – Ästhetiken. transcript, Bielefeld.]

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The book written by Katja Glaser is the outcome of several years of research for her dissertation in media studies. From this perspective, she analyzes the intertwined relationships between street art, the internet, and social media. Glaser relies on Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, among the work of other authors, which thinks of media as dynamic agents within social--and in this case digital--interactions. The outcome of this approach is a new understanding of art in general, which cannot be perceived any longer as a single piece by one author, but more as a collaborative, relational, and networked activity, which of course suits the general idea of street art very well.

Before introducing her case studies, Glaser gives a very useful overview of the current state of research on street art. She does not follow every ramification but concentrates on monographs, although Young (2014) and Schacter (2014) are missing. Another section summarizes recent developments in research on locative media art. Here she puts forward the term "distributed aesthetics", coined first by Lovink/Münster (2005), which tries to overcome the notion of an entirely visual perception by acknowledging digital and networked relationships in the process of art production and dissemination.

In order to succeed in the description of street art as a media-related, socially constructed artistic practice, Glaser uses quantitative and empirical research methods, like photographic documentation, interviews and analysis of online platforms like Facebook. She emphasizes that social media offer rich possibilities for dissemination and

participation, opening new means of communication between artists and their audience. Nevertheless, underlying criteria for special sites including algorithms, are not neutral, but are able to push or constrain images or careers as Derwanz (2013) has already pointed out. The practices of linking and liking between host sites, bloggers, artists, and audience reflect inherent and often unspoken values of the street art subculture, but this communication is arranged by the "like economy" and platform politics as well.

The case studies are divided first by in-depth descriptions of the most significant street art techniques: the stencils of Hamburg-based kurznachzehn and the paste-ups of El Bocho. Glaser gives a thorough report about the many ways in which images are processed, from the finding of a motive to the documentary photographs. Then the author follows their dissemination in mobile applications, where they become locative media and function as augmented reality for the user and via guided street art tours. Both options change the perception of the urban environment and not least of street art itself. Paolo Cirio's project Street Ghosts tackles these dynamics further by bringing back (involuntary) portraits of Google Street View on the streets as pasted cutouts and reloading them on Google+. By doing so, he discloses hidden mechanisms of a global internet player. Glaser dedicates the last case study to the relocation of images by Sweza. The artist shows the options of hacking the public sphere by using QR-Codes that bring back buffed works on a mobile device. He uses a virtual archive that is as ephemeral as his own images of QR-Codes, which in turn try to preserve ephemeral street art.

The author highlights the media-related implications of Sweza's pieces, questioning the (online) archive as an instrument for the preservation of cultural heritage in general.

In her conclusion, Glaser emphasizes that today's street art cannot be perceived as disconnected from digital media. Furthermore, her analysis shows clearly the instrumentalization of street art by touristic and commercial purposes, also through the growing number of festivals, which the author addresses in her conclusion as well. Closing remarks target the academic research on street art, for which Glaser demands more interdisciplinary and international collaboration to establish a field of study in its own right. Even though Katja Glaser is herself driven by disciplinary interests, she has contributed in a most valuable way to this demand.

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## Invited Authors

### Grupo OPNI graffiti and urban violence in present-day Brazil

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#### Abstract

São Paulo is the largest city in Latin America. In addition to its metropolitan and peripheral regions, there are more than 22 million people. All kind of reality is in the 1.520 km<sup>2</sup> that extends its territory. From super millionaires who own huge houses of 10/20 million euros with 10.000 m<sup>2</sup> of built area, with helipads and Ferraris in the garage, to wooden houses with 20/30 m<sup>2</sup>, without connection to the light and water network, with open sewage to your door. Nothing more violent and aggressive than this veiled socioeconomic segregation. Often this is observed within a radius of 5 km away, exposing and depicting a glaring inequality. The vast majority of this poor and excluded population is black. In this context, the Brazilian Hip Hop movement emerged in the 1980's, in the central region of São Paulo, which gave voice to the latent social problems of the metropolis. This is how the São Paulo graffiti, that spans the walls and concrete of the grey city is born, an ideal platform to express social problems and portray the colours and concepts of the new born musical movement. In this context, in 1997, in São Mateus, the far east of the city, the collective of urban art and graffiti Grupo OPNI was born, which remains alive and active, contradicting all unfavourable statistics.

**Keywords:** São Paulo, Violence, Graffiti, Inequality, Hip Hop, Periphery

\* with 18 years of experience in the Brazilian market, has a wide network of contacts built in front of the cultural market, mainly linked to urban culture, music and Hip Hop. Graduated in International Relations from Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP), has managed several cultural projects, acting as an interlocutor between people, cultures and realities that are often opposing and conflicting, improving the relationship between groups and working groups with sponsors, contracting agents and the media. Acted in partnership with cultural producers from other countries such as: England, Portugal, Spain, Japan, France, Germany and the United States.

*"Negro drama, between success and mud, money, problems, envy, luxury and fame. Negro drama, curly hair, dark skin, the wound, the sore, looking for a cure Negro drama, try to see, and see nothing, except a star, far, half obfuscated"*

("Negro Drama" - Racionais MC's - Album: Nada Como Um Dia Após O Outro Dia - 2002)

To sew a lot of sociological, geographic, economic concepts in the same article, and to portray a society as complex as the Brazilian, it requires a certain line of central reasoning. Based on a historical model of exploratory and slave development, Brazilian society today still reproduces and perpetuates customs, approaches, acts and thoughts typical

of its historical past not too distant. Because the graffiti is very associated with the Hip Hop movement, be it in the United States, be it in Brazil, that imports and copies a lot of culture of the great North American brother, I will use in this article references, phrases and pieces of lyrics of the biggest Brazilian rap group, Racionais Mc's, who have helped to form and corroborate a musical and social movement of resistance and survival through their political struggles and their fiery lyrics and verses that accurately, incisively and beautifully, depict the harsh reality of urban violence in the peripheries the OPNI Group can easily be identified as one of the many characters that inhabit the imaginary of these rhymes. The Black Drama (Negro Drama) portrayed here is the same as the OPNI Group expresses in a very particular

and unique way in its traces, in murals and walls by Brazil, and that now it initiates a trajectory of taking to the world its ideas of resistance and denouncement against the injustices and racism that occur systematically in Brazil today.

*Feel the drama, the price, the charging, in love, in hate, the insane revenge Negro drama, I know who plot, and who's with me; The trauma I carry, Not to be a just another fucking black man ; The drama of the jail and favela, tomb, blood, siren, cries and candle. Passenger of Brazil, São Paulo, agony, that survives, between honours and cowardice.*

("Negro Drama" - Racionais MC's - Album: Nada Como Um Dia Após O Outro Dia - 2002)

### 1. Brazilian violence data

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." Unfortunately and contrary to this phrase, initially attributed to the North American writer Mark Twain, the statistics of the urban violence of the current Brazil are sinister, worrisome and at the same time absurd. I will use these numbers to contextualize the social and economic environment and the reality that all Brazilians live in the moment, but mainly to illustrate and create the necessary conscience to the readers of how difficult and dangerous was the trajectory of the OPNI Group until arriving saved and surviving of its art, to the year of 2018. Again, it is worth using one more visceral and surgical verse of Racionais Mc's, which portrays exactly the current paragraph and the statistics below.

*"I remain alive, I continue the mystique, twenty-seven years old, contrary to statistics. Your TV commercial does not fool me, I do not need status or fame. Your car and your money no longer seduces me, and neither does your blue-eyed whore. I'm just a Latin American youngster, supported by over fifty thousand brothers. Side effect that your system did, Racionais, chapter 4 verse 3"*

("Versiculo 4 , Capitulo 3 - Racionais MC's - Album: Sobrevivendo no Inferno - 1997)

Now let's get right to these statistics and terrifying numbers in Brazil. In 35 years, more than 1.000.000 million people were killed by firearms in Brazil. Yes, you read it right. More than 1.000.000 people. The records of the SIM (Mortality Information System) indicate that between 1980 and 2016,

more than 1 million people were killed by firing some type of firearm in Brazil. (HAF – Homicídios por Arma de Fogo - Firearm Homicides). As a result of such an absurd, 41.817 people suffered homicide as a result of the use of firearms in 2015 in Brazil. In further detail, we have:

- Or 71.9% of the total deaths.
- Between the years 2005 and 2015, there was an increase of 25%.
- 52.082 cases of illegal possession of firearms in 2016.
- 112.708 weapons seized in Brazil in 2016.

Obviously, to commit such crimes, people must have access to firearms. Thus, records indicate that there are approximately 15.000.000 million weapons (legal and illegal) in circulation in Brazil at this time. Just as a comparison, we have more guns in Brazil than the entire population of Portugal summed.

- 6.8 million registered
- 8.5 million not registered
- 3.8 million in criminal hands.

### 1.2 The Brazilian brutality

"Peripheries, alleys and tenements, you must be thinking: What you have to do with this.

From the beginning, for gold and silver, look who dies, then see you who kills"

*"Periferias, vielas e cortiços, você deve tá pensando, o que você tem a ver com isso, desde o início, por ouro e prata, olha quem morre, então veja você quem mata"*

("Negro Drama" - Racionais MC's - Album: Nada Como Um Dia Após O Outro Dia - 2002)

The biggest problem of these frightening numbers is the profile of the deaths, that is, young and mostly black as we can follow in this other series of bizarre statistics. Unbelievable 318.000 young people (between 15 and 29 years old) were murdered in Brazil between 2005 and 2015.

61,619 Intentional Violent Deaths in Brazil In 2016, Equivalent To:

- 168 deaths per day.
- 07 deaths per Hour.
- 14.557 victims of CVLI (Violent Intentional Lethal Crimes) in the Brazilian Captains.
- 29.7 people / 100 thousand inhabitants.
- 2.703 people murdered in Latrocínios (robbery followed by death)

### 1.3 The black genocide

Receive the merit, the uniform, which practices evil, see me poor, imprisoned or dead, are already cultural. Stories, records, writings, it's not a tale, not a fable, neither a legend nor myth.

Recebe o mérito, a farda, que pratica o mal, me ver pobre, preso ou morto, já é cultural.

Histórias, registros, escritos, não é conto, nem fábula, lenda ou mito.

("Negro Drama" - Racionais MC's - Album: Nada Como Um Dia Após O Outro Dia - 2002)

- Of every 100 homicide victims in Brazil, 71 are black.
  - 76% of victims of police intervention are black.
  - 21.897 people lost their lives in police actions between 2009 and 2016.
  - > 76.2% were blacks
  - > 81.8% were young people between 12 and 29 years old.
  - > Between the years 2005 and 2015, the number of homicides:
    - Of black people, homicide increased + 18.2%
    - Of non-black people, homicide decreased - 12.2%
- At age 21, when there is a peak in a person's chances of homicide in Brazil, blacks and browns are 147% more likely to be victimized by homicides than white, yellow, and indigenous individuals.

### 1.4 The femicide

Marielle Franco, the former deputy from Rio de Janeiro, was killed, shot dead with 4 bullets last March 2018. In the head. With a high probability that 4 heavy armed men, from militias, committed this awful crime. She is the tip of the iceberg, unfortunately. The femicide is another huge problem that Brazilian society is facing now. And that's why OPNI GROUP

pays homage in every single piece of art, to symbolize the struggle, the strength, the power of resistance of all the black women of Brazil, being that Marielle represents their mothers, sisters, aunts, nieces, wives and girlfriends scattered throughout the black communities of Brazil. One of the details of the "Contras as Injustiças" mural (picture 1A/B/C), made on the occasion of the Loures Public Art Week in Lisbon, Portugal - 2018, contemplates a simple homage to this woman who was fighting for a fairer Brazil. 4.657 women were murdered in 2016 in Brazil.

- 01 Woman dies every 02 hours in Brazil.
  - 65% of the femicide victims are black.
- Between the years 2005 and 2015, the number of homicides:
- Of Black Women, increased + 22%
  - Of Non-Black Women, decreased - 7.4%

## 2. War for territory

São Paulo is a huge agglomerate of concrete and steel, people, buildings, cars, smog, a typical third world chaotic metropolis. Below are some numbers and statistics that help you better understanding the urban chaos in which your citizens live.

### 2.1 São Paulo facts

- 12.2 million people
- (Without counting the metropolitan region and the peripheries)
- 6 million cars
  - About 5 million people, or half the population of São Paulo, live in irregular housing, which:
    - 2.5 million lives in illegal settlements.
    - 2.0 million lives in slums and 600 thousand lives in tenements.
  - The city produces 17 thousand tons of garbage per day
  - There are 15 homicides and 300 assaults a day.
  - Traffic kills on average (per day in the city):
    - 02 pedestrians / 1.3 motorcyclists / 0.8 driver -passenger/ 0.2 cyclists

### 2.2 São Mateus background

It's where the OPNI Group was formed in 1997. It has a territory of 13 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 155,000 people, and is 22 km east of the city centre of SP. It is one of the 96 districts that make up the city of São Paulo, city with about

22.3 million people. (picture 1D) São Mateus was first a large forest inhabited by Indians, then a farm located in the east side of the capital, São Paulo. In 1946, the Italian immigrant Mateus Bei decided to create a noble neighbourhood. Bought 50 alqueires of land and parcelled the area. In the same year avenues and streets were opened. At first, the idea of the immigrant did not give much result, because no one wanted to live four hours from the centre of the city. The way was to create facilities to attract buyers: each family that acquired a land earned 500 roof tiles and 2,000 bricks. The result is there: 70 years later, a large part with family income of two to three minimum wages; disordered growth; clandestine subdivisions; areas invaded; and more than thirty favelas. This is compounded by the lack of everything: health, safety, transportation, housing, employment and everything else the community needs.

To contextualize the power of survival and the importance of urban art practiced by the OPNI Group in the region of São Mateus, below are the numbers of urban violence that literally surrounds the daily life of the group and its activists, exactly in the neighbourhood where they were born and raised, and they live until today.

2.3 Numbers of Violence in São Mateus (only in the year 2017)

- 28 homicides
- 15 homicide attempts
- 51 rapes
- 05 loots (theft followed by death)
- 734 corporal injuries
- 112 prisons for drug trafficking
- 4.739 robberies
- 1.551 vehicles robbery
- 02 bank robbery
- 402 theft of cargo

### **3. GRUPO OPNI - A 20 year Afro-Brazilian activist graffiti collective.**

After portraying the panorama and the scenario of social struggle and cultural activism in which the OPNI Group fits, we will tell a little more of the history and trajectory of our collective. We were founded in 1997, originally with 20 people from the neighbourhood of São Mateus. OPNI Group reproduces everyday situations in their art,

protesting against homicide, especially that of black people. They encourage self-assertion which results in new forms of social dialogue. From the point of view of those who experience the exclusion of basic human rights, the OPNI Group inserts reflection of these violations through their art encouraging self-knowledge, education and entrepreneurship as a mean for development.

Despite the setbacks, between days of hard work selling candies at the traffic lights, between choices like working with low wages or joining the world of crime, the OPNI Group resisted and keeps their initial goal alive. A goal that has become legacy, aiding the 'development' of several graffiti artists under their watchful eye, who today, represent the ideal of resistance. The OPNI Group has also made international artistic interventions in countries such as Chile, Canada and the USA, and more recently in Portugal.

#### **3.1 Our social works**

Currently, the OPNI Group is also responsible for several projects carried out in São Mateus which creates a continual dialogue with similar communities around the world.

We founded a Non-governmental organization (NGO) called São Mateus em Movimento (picture 1E) in 2008 which is seen as the region's greatest cultural articulator. The NGO currently works in partnership with several social groups, offering in addition to support for artists, free courses and workshops, for children and adolescents.

We also created the Favela Galeria (picture 1 F/G), which the main objective is to paint, to 'graffiti' the whole region, transforming the community into a public art gallery. Development of the Favela open-air gallery is to promote the use of public spaces for local interests, human development and articulating ideas. The Favela Gallery is composed of a series of graffiti covered houses, shops and entire streets, forming a long route of artistic interventions. In addition to colouring the alleys, the project also offers opportunities for young people who want to learn the art of graffiti.

Many are inspired by the designs seen from their windows and take an interest in art. To help develop the talent of this public, the OPNI Group offer free graffiti initiation workshops, which are taught by the members themselves. This inspires the youth to strive for more than street crime whilst building their self-esteem and encouraging them to pursue more constructive futures.

#### 4. Conclusion

There are only two social classes, those who do not eat and those who do not sleep in fear of the revolution of those who do not eat. (Santos, Milton – Brazilian, writer, professor and doctor in Geography)

The historical past of slavery reproduces latent structural sequels to the present day in Brazilian society. It is worth mentioning that we fled and avoided the label of victims, despite the undeniable proof that the statistics point and prove. Thus, we continue in our struggle and our daily mission to seek through urban art to create opportunities, to colour and occupy public and private spaces, to stamp the traces of our African and Brazilian ancestors, in the urgent attempt to create awareness about our history. Through our actions, especially those with children and adolescents, we envision a better and milder future for the next generation. Respect and dignity as an instrument of struggle. Peace as the ultimate goal.

*Unbelievable but your son imitates me. in the midst of you, he is the smartest. Ginga and speak slang, not slang, dialect. This is not yours, look, it's gone up. I went through your radio, I took it, you did not even see it. We are this or that, what? Did not you say? Does your child want to be black? Rááá !!! How ironic Stick the 2Pac poster there. What about? That you say? Feel the black drama, go, try to be happy.*

("Negro Drama" - Racionais MC's - Album: Nada Como Um Dia Após O Outro Dia - 2002)

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<http://datasus.saude.gov.br>

Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública

<http://www.forumseguranca.org.br/>

Atlas da Violência 2017 – Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA)

<http://ipea.gov.br>

Secretaria de Segurança Pública de São Paulo (SSP SP)

<http://www.ssp.sp.gov.br/Estatistica/Pesquisa.aspx>

Musical links and Publishing information for Racionais MC's songs.

Nego Drama Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foGobzjl63E>

"Negro Drama"

Canção de Racionais MC's

Album: Nada Como Um Dia Após O Outro Dia

Lançamento: 2002 / Gravação: 2001

Gênero: Rap, R&B

Duração: 6:52

Gravadora: Cosa Nostra Fonográfica CD

Composição: Mano Brown, Edi Rock

Capítulo 4, Versículo 3 Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TITRneC6jLU>

"Capítulo 4, Versículo 3"

Canção de Racionais MC's

Album: Sobrevivendo no Inferno

Lançamento: 1997 / Gravação: 1997

Gênero: Rap

Duração: 8:06

Gravadora: Cosa Nostra

Composição: Edy Rock, Ice Blue, Mano Brown

GRUPO OPNI Social Media pages

GRUPO OPNI

<https://www.facebook.com/grupoopni/>

<https://www.instagram.com/grupoopni/>

FAVELA GALERIA

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## Photography in Public Space

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### 1. Photography in the arts

How can photography be a profession in today's world when everybody instantly shoots whatever they see? Joachim Schmidt makes a statement with his series "Other people's Photographs"<sup>1</sup> (*Durden p440*) about other people sharing online their photographs of the most trivial subjects. By being all copies of each other, they lack creativity. The installation of "24 hours in photos"<sup>2</sup> (*Durden p448*) of Eric Kessels makes the pile of images on the Internet tangible. Smartphones and apps, like Instagram or Snapchat, encourage all of us to contribute to this visual explosion. This quantity and high speed are in strong contrast with the difficulty of using with an analogue camera some decades ago. Shooting a snapshot on film was expensive and you could only admire your result after hours or even days, after this film was developed in the lab.

This technological turn transforms the role of the photographer without us being aware of it. Most photographers are only watching these changes passing by. A few are trying different techniques to spend more time on the process of making. Because it takes little effort to push the small button, or the screen, and send your photo into the World Wide Web. This convenience evokes an important question. What is the meaning and value of a picture, and even a photographer, now everybody can publish his pictures today?



The snapshot also lost its value as an expression of art. It does require some extra effort to be different. In this article I try to give an insight on the role that a photographer can take in the margin of the multimedia landscape. Some artists try to express their emotions instead of reproducing what they see. It demands an alternative usage of their art form, by experimenting and questioning the principles of this medium.

1 - Durden, M. (2014). *Photography Today*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Ltd.

2 - Durden, M. (2014). *Photography Today*. London, UK: Phaidon Press Ltd.



The rayograms of Man Ray<sup>3</sup> (*Hacking p199*) were innovative in 1922-1928 but turned into a traditional example of the avantgarde in photography. Instead of using his camera, he placed an object directly on photosensitive paper, which created odd pictures. Also the abstract images of Liesbet Gruppings achieve the same estranged feeling however by using more modern techniques. Gruppings explains her own work.

*“Trough (unconventional) use of photographic material, such as the implantation of a photo-slide in a flowerpot, a stroll with a pinhole camera, or the opening of a JPG-file in Microsoft Word, I generate images that question the codes of today’s photography.”<sup>4</sup>*

However abstract pictures can be found easily outside the art world today. Instagram and other creative apps, like Diana

Photo<sup>5</sup>, allow everybody to place a filter easily on top of their instant picture to turn it into an outlandish frame. So what could be the added value of using photography in the arts? Therefore the medium needs to go beyond abstract expressions.

Let us forget about recording reality with the camera, like millions of other people do on social media. Thankfully a photo exists of several elements that can be further investigated. The recent trend ‘material turn’ opens up new ways to obtain freedom. The material of the print can be explored to discover a new reality. This extension of the creative process can be as simple as emphasizing a sunset with a cigarette like Emma Wieslander does (*Mijn Vlakke Land – Over fotografie en landschap, FoMu, 2015*). It can also be more violent like Anne Van de Pals who scrapes the surface to deform a portrait (*Museum De Pont, 2016*).

3 - Hacking, J. (2013). *Fotografie in het juiste perspectief*. Kerkdriel, Nederland: Librero bv. // Hacking, J. (2015). *Photography: The Whole Story*. London, UK: Thames & Hudson.

4 - Gruppings, L. (2015). Preface. Retrieved from <http://www.liesbetgruppings.be/tekst/1.pdf>

5 - Diana Photo. The fastest double exposure app in the world. Retrieved from <http://dianaphotoapp.com>



Michèle Matyn<sup>6</sup> made a more challenging move in the exposition “In Situ/Ademgaten” (*Breathing Holes*, 2016) in M HKA by transforming her picture into a sculpture. Hanna 6 - M HKA (2018). Michèle Matyn – Ademgaten. Retrieved from <https://www.muhka.be/nl/programme/detail/421-in-situ-mich-le-matyn>

Whitacker embraces the mistakes of the camera. Therefore she merges the technique in combination with the use of an analogue camera. The strength of her works results of the influence of the medium textile. Whitacker applies the same structure and repetition in her work.

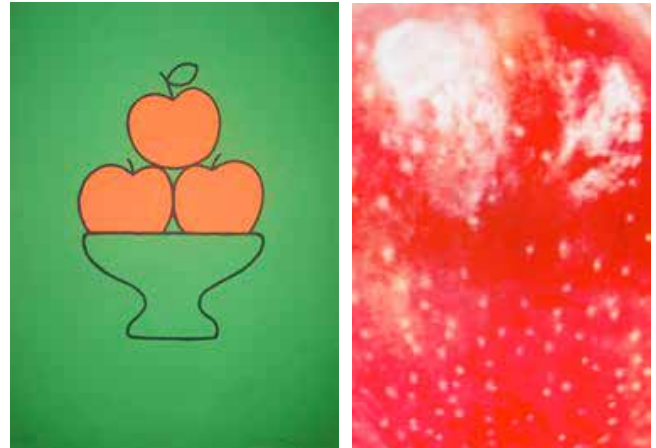






When focussing on the physical material of photography, a lot of possibilities are possible to approach the medium in a different way. The camera evokes a distance between the picture and the artist that always manifests in the work. Yet the technique of material turn gives the possibility to the artist to be physical present in the artefact. This way of working closes the gap between the camera, the subject and the photo. In my own work this resulted in the series “Wunderkammer/Nooit Gezien”. The inspiration resulted from the vision of people with dementia. Their reality is a reshaped version of our world. As it is not possible to register what they see, it requires the manipulation of the prints and abuse of the camera to give shape to their perception. It started with small actions like misusing the camera while photographing. After a while I managed to deconstruct a print of 3 meters high to reconstruct it to a new reality.

“Our brain constructs reality. While looking you our doing many things, you translate everything. You bring structure in the work that you see.” This quote of Immanuel Kant in “Critique of Pure Reason”<sup>7</sup> (Boon & Steenhuis p13) directs to the principles of Gestalt. At a high speed our brains translates different elements into one whole. And as a human being we want to give meaning to this object.



In our childhood the deducted images of Dick Bruna taught many of us that something red and round is an apple. We are repeating this behaviour during our whole life. When we see a picture we consider at the object as a reality. We see the apple. We never think “this is a picture of an apple” even when this is in fact what we see. The viewer is forced to look in a new way at the image when a picture manages to break free from this habit. For example by placing the photo in a new setting. For this reason René Magritte wrote “Ceci n’est pas une pomme” in his painting. Because you are looking at the image, not the apple.

When you see another work of Wunderkammer/Nooit Gezien you become aware that you are watching ‘a picture’ of an apple. You can observe the pixels on the surface of the apple, which keeps the viewer reminding of beholding a photo (see *image at the right*). Or the spectator can notice that the sculpture made of a picture (see *image page 3*). Because you are not used to see a picture in this shape, you are obliged to give a new meaning to what your eyes perceive. Giving meaning to objects and images became an automatism since birth. When witnessing the work “Wunderkammer/

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7 - Boon, M & Steenhuis, P.H.. (2009). *Filosofie van het kijken*. Rotterdam, NL: Lemniscaat b.v.



Nooit Gezien” you lose this habit. This experience is exactly how the visual perception of people with dementia erodes. They have to rebuild all the different elements into a new composition. And create a new reality. For this reason they experience our world in a completely different way.

## 2. Relationships

Without doubt there are other ways to explore photography than abstraction or material turn. We forgot that the camera creates relationships from the start. It connects the person behind the camera with the world around him. The personal way of looking at the world is translated into the style of the photographer. We discover the world through the eyes of Stefan Vanfleteren or Martin Parr when we look at their pictures. As their personality is much stronger than the object, it takes over the diversity of reality. Whatever appears in front of their camera, it will be transformed into their subject.

An interesting gap is the creation of relationships. Photography is hardly used to evoke multidimensional

interactions. The pictures of the photographers mentioned above are based on a one-way relationship, due to the photographer his personal registration of the world.

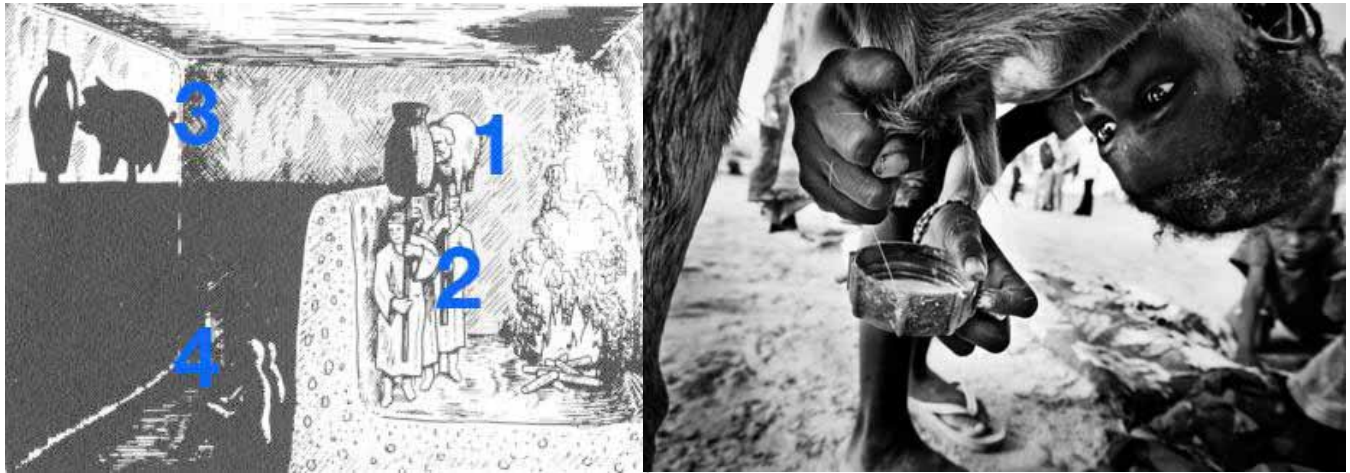
What would happen if you redefine “relationship” according to the manifest of Kandinsky<sup>8</sup>? (*Kandinsky p45*) In this writing the artist challenges painters to approach their medium in a new way. Instead of painting all the details of an apple to recreate reality, the focus should be on the different elements of painting. Like Matisse investigated “colour” and Picasso was obsessed by “shape”. This analysis brought these artists to the essence of their medium. The investigation of the components pushed the development of painting. What could happen when you investigate the element “relationship” in photography? Which possibilities would arise? For centuries we used photography to express the love affair between us and the world, conquering exotic civilisations like National Geographic. What would take place if photography is used to connect people?

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8 - Kandinsky, W. (1912). *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. München, D: R. Piper & Co.







The Allegory of the Cave of Plato distinguishes the elements that can play a role in this relationship. The camera unites two worlds, the one of the photographer and another person who might live in another world. The photographer Tim Dirven takes you on his personal journey in the exhibition "Karkas". As a viewer you can only observe this world. This places you as spectator in a passive role according to the Cave of Plato. The photographer (2) records the reality (1) around him and translates only a fraction of this in his picture (3).

This process of selecting a part of the subject is named 'framing' in visual terms. As a result the viewer (4) perceives the picture (3) as real, without being aware of the complete setting. So the picture becomes his reality. The whole process takes place in a linear hierarchy from reality (1) to the interpretation of the spectator (4). From the position of the observer it is hard to be aware that two steps are in between the photograph (3) and reality (4). This also happens by the media who offer the public a specific view on the world that is often in conflict with reality. Already a lot of research exists on this procedure of image-forming, especially by the mass media.

In a museum or gallery a guide or catalogue is usually provided to enlighten the visitor about the difference of reality (1) and the artwork (3). It is still rare to have a direct contact between the photographer (2) and the public (4). Artist talks are one way to offer the perspective of the creator, which explains the success of De Donkere Kamer<sup>9</sup>. Because the public gets to know the personal story of the photographer. Nevertheless the communication takes place in one way, leaving the spectators in a passive state.

9- De Donkere Kamer. Retrieved from <https://ddk-live.com>  
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This one way interpretation of the world takes place in all the visual arts. It is important to keep in mind that the viewer will easily perceive a picture as his own reality. A photo behaves like a window on the world. Especially when the result looks like a neutral depiction. The spectator takes this image for real because the operator is considered to be a camera that registers the world. This perception of photography is the result of history. In contrast with a painting or a sculpture where the manipulation of the operator is more easily visible in the strokes and material. Also the photographer manipulates the reality with the camera, which many spectators forget.

According to the vision of Kandinsky the elements of the medium should be used in a different way. Let us focus on creating a dialogue between all the elements, which makes space for interaction. For example the artist (2) and the spectators (4) work together to translate reality (1) into an artwork (3). The philosopher Jacques Rancière applies this on theatre in his book "The Emancipated Spectator"<sup>10</sup>. (Rancière p15-17) In 'good' theatre the spectator obtains an active role that eliminates the wall between the reality of the artist and the artwork. In his vision there is no fixed position, hierarchy or boundaries. Our society strives for equal opportunities and equality, but the artist world is still far behind. Most artists are locked up in their ivory tower, hiding for the public, for many different reasons. Some of them have no idea how to start this interaction. Others are fighting to keep their superior role in our society that was allocated to artists for centuries. However the community of artists should be emancipated like all other parts of our society. And the viewer should play an active role in the arts

10 - Rancière, J. (2008). *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, F: La Fabrique éditions.

because they are part of this society.

The keyword of this emancipation is vulnerability. The artist needs to admit to the public that he or she cannot gather all the knowledge necessary to create the artwork by himself/herself. Even more, the artist is in need of the public to understand the world. Of course the public does not possess all the knowledge too. Therefore this game of not knowing creates a dialogue between the reality, the artist, the artwork and the public. The sharing of knowledge and the experiments to gain this information leads to a common artwork.<sup>11</sup> (*Rancière p19*)

In the work *Wunderkammer/Nooit Gezien* this collaboration originated from a necessity. Literature and science could not provide the answers about the subject. Science did not wonder about the effects on daily life of the visual perception of people with dementia. It forced me to go back the origin of this subject, so to speak the people with (young)dementia. Conversations but also experiments resulted in works that reflected their invisible world.

From the start we, the people with (young)dementia and myself as an artist, had no idea how to explore this subject or which knowledge was needed for this investigation. I was also forced to question my medium photography because it was not able to produce their vision by the traditional way of taking pictures. This ignorance was our 'common ground', which became the source of our shared exploration.

How hard I still try, I cannot photograph something from my personal perspective. I gaze towards my camera without inspiration. My work always translates the perspective of someone else. For this reason time plays an important role, to get to know the person before the artwork even can manifest. It creates space and interaction that transcends their gaze into my work. So I mostly visualize hidden worlds. And I also need this collaboration to experience what they see.

The same process took place, but with less consciousness, in my earlier work. The series *Vocho Verde* required getting to know the Mexican people and the role of the green Beetle taxi in the society of Mexico City. I needed to understand

the value of this object to picture their culture. I also often felt a social worker or a good friend of the inhabitants of the *Flemish Interiors*. I spend a lot of time getting to know these people before I even took one picture. Photographing their interior was only a part of this project. It was essential to observe and absorb their interior as well as their personality. The pictures were reproduced in life-sized format so the viewer could sense all the details. All these elements enabled to observer to construct the interior of his/her (grand) parents in his mind. The photograph performed as a catalyst to evoke this experience. Also in this project the reality, the artist, the picture and the public were considered as equal so new relationships could arise. (As visualised in image 3 of the *Allegory of the Cave of Plato*.) The spectators shared their memories with each other while watching the pictures and played an active role that is also pursued by Rancière.

### 3. Case study

Interaction was already achieved through intuition in my previous work. The main difference with my recent project *Streetwalk* was exploiting interaction in different ways. The M Museum of Leuven started this project based on their vision to take up a bigger role as an institution to stimulate art outside the venue of a museum. They started a collaboration with different partners to experiment with "community art"<sup>12</sup>. To achieve cooperation, a framework was set to ensure interaction between the four elements in the *Cave of Plato*. The public could experience the difference between the artwork (3) and reality (1). As well as the artist considered the public (4) as a part of reality (1). This attitude plays an important role. This makes the artist aware that his inspiration arises from his personal history and the surroundings he still lives in. The original interpretation of the *Cave of Plato* beholds an invisible wall between the public and reality. But an artist should see the public, the artwork and himself as part of reality.

The interaction between the four elements came into existence by different activities. This varies from a personal meeting between the public and the partners. And also by

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11 - Rancière, J. (2008). *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, F: La Fabrique éditions.

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12 - "Community art is the creation of art as a human right, by professional and non-professional artists, cooperating as equals for purposes and to standards that they set together, and who processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance." François Matarasso



embracing a new expression of photography, which was also fresh for the artist. The final project was not a simple picture, as the elements time and space were used to cultivate participation. Starting from the first step of taking the picture of a certain location in Leuven, just as in the next step of sketching the composition. This finally resulted in a manipulated reproduction of the original image.

It required each partner to move outside their comfort zone to succeed in this interaction. In doing so everybody had to help each other. This dependency, and also the fragility, of each participant (the public, the artist, the artwork and the society/reality) created a bond that shaped the artwork.

The word 'public' can be confusing because it has multiple meanings. It's important to state that we can speak of two different publics in this case study. At first there are the people who are participating in the collaboration, in this case the children of the school Mater Dei. Secondly the indirect public who witnesses the work in the street, like residents and occasional passers-by. For now I refer in this chapter to

the children who were involved in the creation of the artwork.

Since kids are vulnerable and independent because of their nature, they require an adult to escort them to be part of our society. For most of them this narrows down their world to school or family. Thanks to the artwork they become visible as an individual in the public space. Together with the artist they move outside their safe place. In other words the artwork transforms thanks to their vulnerability.

Also the artist needs to expose his fragility by admitting that he/she doesn't possess all the knowledge to create the artwork. Jacques Rancière stipulates this equality of intelligence in "The Emancipated Spectator"<sup>13</sup> (Rancière p 15-17). To achieve this interaction and evenness, the artist needs to obtain a mind-set of depending on the other person.

For the same reason also the artwork needs to be vulnerable. Therefore the "material turn" in photography manifests in

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13 - Rancière, J. (2008). *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris, F: La Fabrique éditions.





this work. This method mainly focuses on textures to create a new reality of the image. By placing these pictures in public space they are exposed to external influences, which reveals their fragility. The prints are subjected to the surroundings and other users of the space as the prints are glued onto the sidewalks. The picture adapts to the structure of the surface. In another case the shadow play of the trees nearby add an extra layer to the image. These incidents establish a dialogue between the artwork (3) and reality (1).

Only the fourth element 'society' of the Cave of Plato has not yet being described. But also the community is being placed in a delicate state by showing tensions in the neighbourhood. The work at the playground of Groefplein looks very innocent however it visualises the stress between the habitants and the children. Since a lot of children play outside when the weather is sunny, the residences are often annoyed by noise pollution. For this reason the memory behind this image involves racist comments and even the presence of the police who intervened between both parties.

Besides the fragility of the four elements, also different interactions between them lead to the creation of the work of art. This causes impulses on the society that results in small changes. So the impact of the artist is much bigger than the work itself.

Let us have a look on the role of the indirect public, like the residents and passers-by. They recognize the locations, social issues and history that are layered in the images. These identifiable elements stimulate the neighbourhood. An extra effort was made to activate this public to obtain a relationship with the artwork and the direct public, namely the children of Mater Dei. For this reason each work was accompanied with a QR-code. Scanning this item showed a YouTube-video where the child explains his work and memory about this place. In this way they take up a part of the role of the artist. This non-linear communication offers new insights and changes in society, which results again into a source of inspiration for the artist.

#### 4. Future research questions

Thanks to the smartphone everybody can instantly register the world around him. This puts everybody in the role of 'photographer'. As a reaction on this, several photographers and artists identify their selves by approaching their medium in other ways like abstraction or 'material turn'. An alternative way to use photography can be found in analysing the Allegory of the Cave of Plato. By focusing on the creation of new relationships, the artist can bring democracy between himself and the spectator. In doing so the artist can elevate his work into an interactive dialogue between the reality, the artist, the artwork and the public.



At a first glance this vision appears disorderly. Because this approach of equality and interaction offers many possibilities. This means that the project Streetwalk with M Museum is a trial with involving children of one school. It might be an utopia to involve every person of a community in the creation of an artwork. Although Coming World Remember Me<sup>14</sup> of Koen Vanmechelen does come close with a collaboration involving 600 000 people. Each sculpture is made by hand by one person and represents one of the 600 000 victims of the First World War.



Further it remains a challenge to activate a public that is not involved directly in the artwork. Like passers-by who stumble upon the work without being aware of any context. How can I bring my work to the public so they can understand this, without the need for a guided tour? The cooperation with a selection of the society is not enough to communicate with the public. So it is an obligation of the artist to keep in mind

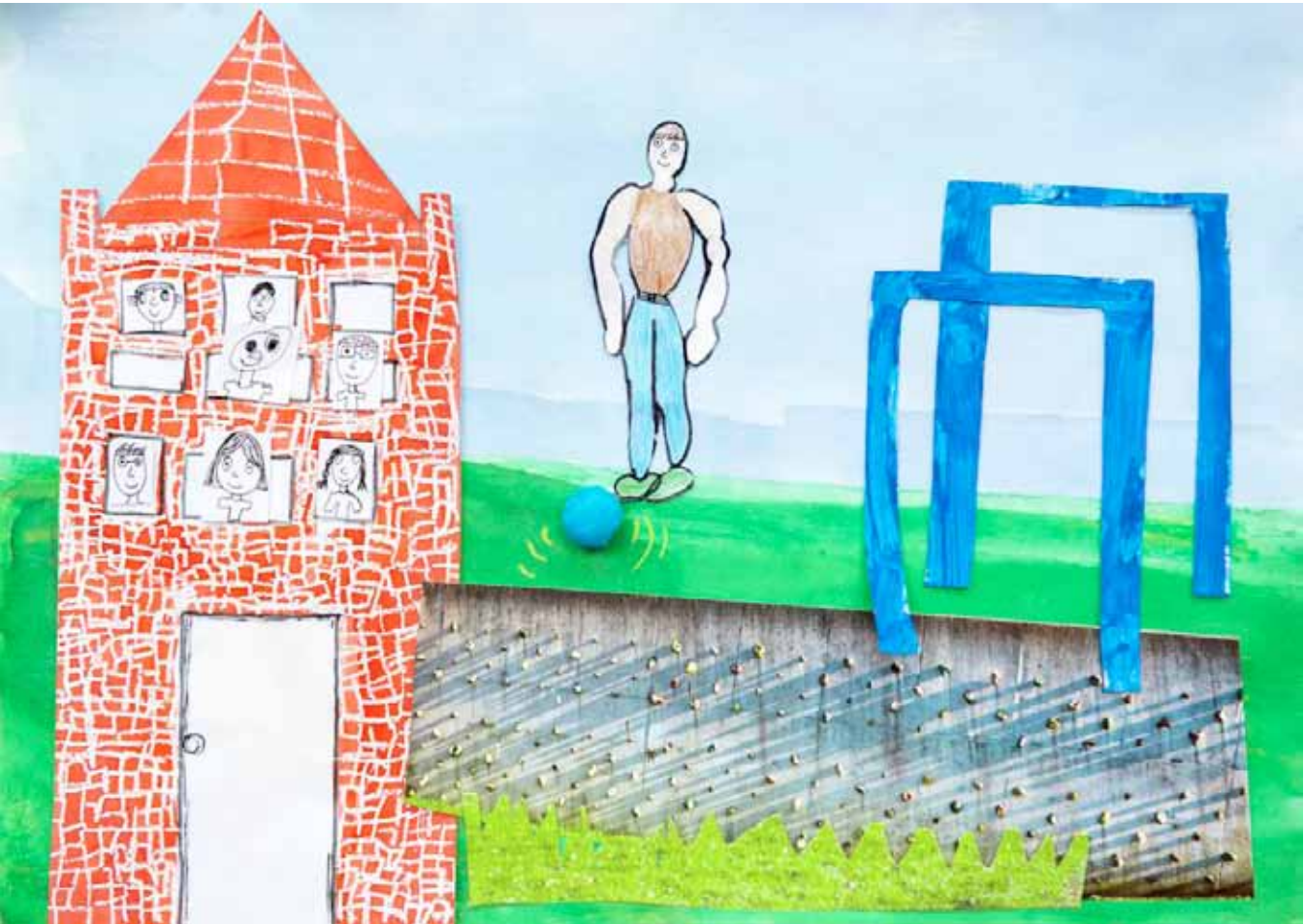
<sup>14</sup> - Vanmechelen, K. Coming World Remember Me. Retrieved from <http://www.comingworldrememberme.be>

the translation that the ignorant spectator could make of your work. And also how can you stimulate the spectator to relate your artwork with others and our society? This might be a quest for life. At least this article is another step to establish a dialogue with the public.

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# SAUC

After Urban Creativity Lisbon activities (5,6 and 7 of July 2018) here is presented the 4th Volume of SAUC Journal, reaching other audiences and building an ongoing trajectory of recognition aimed to the highest standards, not only academic and or institutional, but above all production and practice-oriented.

The 2018 activities thematic “about time” aimed the objective of problematizing the chronological constraints of street art, graffiti, and urban creativity in general. Reinforcing the idea of the atemporal, potentially interpreted as something indissociable of human nature, linking 30000 old archeological findings with today.

This issue 2, “Changing times: Resilience” gather contributions about Resilience and adaptability through institutionalization, formal aesthetic shift, Graffiti as a Palimpsest, Framing Poetical Expression, Poetic Objects in Public Space. Geographically framed approached as The “black-and-white mural” in Polytechnico in Athens, The Evolution of Street art and Graffiti in India, Shark Graffiti On Reunion Island Russia - Specifics of Periodization in Russian Street Art. Temporal overview looks upon: strategies for creating village identity symbols using street art tactics, The commodification of alternative cultural spaces, English Language Video Documentaries On Contemporary Graffiti And Street Art, A brief history of street art as a term up to 2000. And finally an article review of Glaser, K., 2017. Street Art and New Media. And the invited contribution of OPNI Group - Grupo OPNI graffiti and urban violence in present-day Brazil.

With contributions from Switzerland, Finland, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Poland, New Zealand, USA, Austria, UK, Russia, and Brazil.

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