

“IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK”: STREET ART AND URBAN BELONGING IN THE ATHENS OF CRISIS

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Political street art and slogans appear as visual markers of the shifting, complex discourses of power struggles, marginality, and countercultures that establish a new reality which must be seen and heard. As an art form, it is largely connected to and inspired by the existing social conditions. In the era of crisis, the central Athens of bygone years is now a terrain of conflict and metamorphosis, and the city’s walls are screaming a thousand stories. In other words, city walls are the canvas, and social conditions are the paint in a gallery of untold stories. Redefined symbols, decomposed stereotypes, re-visioned aesthetics, and antiracist slogans are the tools for the transformation of walls into social diaries. In this light, street art is examined as a form of social diary, a visual history of marginalized and minority groups. Street art captures the need for self-expression in a changing environment, and street artists actively participate in the production of culture in the micro level by consciously contributing to the need for urban re-visions.

Keywords: Street Art; Athens; Crisis; Urban Creativity; Urban Subcultures; Graffiti

This article is an investigation of the interface between emerging public imaginations and alternative representations in the city of Athens, Greece, in the period after 2008. In this investigation political street art is examined as a form of “social diary” (Bleeps.gr 2014:221), as a reporting forum introducing the passersby to the new urban realities in the city. Thus the main interest in this article is to define not what street art *is* (what counts or not), but what it *does*—and in particular, what its function is in a city in a time of crisis. As such, I am referring to the ways political street art is a kind of utterance—or in its being-in-the-world that it renders public places into spaces (de Certeau 1984).¹ By relying on the initial notion of talking walls, I am invoking the power of paint, stencils, tags, and slogans to vocalize, or to “give voice.”

¹ Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes place from space. Place, according to him, refers to what is considered to be preestablished and customary; thus, place implies order and stability of relationships. On the other hand, space moves away from the idea of stability and is the outcome of the “intersections of mobile elements.” Space is thus “practiced place” (de Certeau 1984:117).

In order to achieve this, the article focuses on political street art that is broadly defined by a particular aesthetic and ideological confrontation with the hegemonic landscapes and narratives in the city of Athens. In this light, street art becomes a visual history of nonhegemonic voices, an inscription on the social fabric of Athens that points towards the wider sociopolitical tensions in the era of austerity and crisis. City walls transform into a reporting forum of social dialogue where voices from the margins can be expressed.

As I have shown elsewhere, street art in Athens has boomed over the last several years, transforming what is otherwise considered the fixed landscape of the city into a more open platform for dialogue and negotiation (Tsilimpounidi and Walsh 2011). This investigation unfolds in four parts. Firstly, I provide some methodological considerations through my long-term involvement with the graffiti and street art scene in Athens. Then, the article introduces the readers to the Athenian street-level realities during the era of crisis, describes the role of political street art in exposing the hegemonic narratives, and provides a justification of the chosen inner city neighborhood (Exarhia). The investigation proceeds with an engagement with the street artworks, in which my "reading" of the visual materials is based on interviews with street artists in an analysis of street art and urban belonging. Finally, street art is examined as a barometer of crisis in an analysis of the municipality's reactions against the intensification of politicized messages on the walls of Athens.

For almost six years I have followed visual markers on city walls and engaged with street artists in an attempt to grasp and analyze this new street-level language. Documenting street art through photography was a relatively simple yet ongoing task, as new works emerged continuously, erasing even "old favorites." However, the opportunity to interact with artists and establish creative connections was much more difficult to "tag" to the wall and requires a longer-term engagement with both place and subcultural practices. Since street art is illegal² and since there is a necessary (and somewhat constructed) aura of mystery around this subculture, I found that I needed to allow trust to develop and a network of contacts to emerge through creative conversations. My initial engagement with the street art scene in Athens began in 2008 and was focused on artists creating their work in the neighborhood of Exarhia, as this was the main hub of politicized artists and crews. This article is based on fieldwork research I did as part of my doctoral studies in 2009–2011 and two brief research visits in Athens in 2013–2015.

As street art is an illegal activity, access to artists who were willing to participate in research was one of my key challenges. Initial access was granted through key contacts who indicated their willingness to approach other artists and crews of artists about the potential to be interviewed. The artists chose to be interviewed as

² The act of doing street art, graffiti, and stencils or of writing slogans on public walls in Greece is illegal as it is interpreted as damaging public property. Similarly, unsanctioned pieces on private walls are illegal. Yet, especially in the urban centers, the attitude of the wider public and the Greek police to the practice of wall writing is more laid-back. There are of course, sanctioned murals and street art pieces that are not illegal, but the focus of this article is on political street art which is by definition unsanctioned and thus illegal.

individuals or in crews, depending on how they worked and are identified by their “tag” names. The sample of the participants (nine street artists and four crews) already dislocates some of the well-known critiques and stereotypes mainly attributed to street artists by their opponents, for example:

- Most of the participants were between 25 and 35 years old and university educated; this goes against the mainstream interpretation of street art as the result of disaffected and rebellious youths fighting against the system. Pigeonholing street art as merely the reaction of angry youths is a misinterpretation that deliberately exoticizes and depoliticizes certain practices. It is important to note that the street artists who choose to locate political street art in this area are also responding to its particular, charged history and they see their work as directly challenging the status quo.
- Another common misconception about many street level subcultures is their domination by male groups and masculine performances. This is not the case with the participants of this investigation. On the contrary there was a fair representation of female artists in the sample (all the crews had female street artists in the team, and I have also interviewed four individual female street artists, which means almost an equal representation of male and female artists). As many participants explained,³ this is the case with this particular group of politicized street artists who participated in this investigation and not a common characteristic of the street art scene in Athens or Greece more generally.
- Finally, in the 1980s and early 1990s tagging and train graffiti were associated with gang territories and marking of space in deprived neighborhoods, particularly in New York (Nandrea 1999:122). Yet, most of my participants came from middle-class backgrounds, were well read and educated, and had their daytime jobs.⁴

Furthermore, my use of photography to construct visual diaries of street artworks added another dimension to the data sources, thereby attempting to avoid the tendency to reduce all social phenomena into text (Saukko 2003). Documenting an ephemeral event such as street art can reduce its components to disconnected parts. Yet, photography can capture “moments,” helping to locate a lived experience through visual means. Despite the apparent realism of photography as a medium, the visual materials are not designed to provide a uniquely authentic account of the street artworks but rather to offer a more in-depth understanding, from a visual perspective. As Chris Jenks has postulated, “both seeing and social theory are acts of interpretation: selection, abstraction, and transformation. Both are socially constructed and culturally located” (1995:210). I thus acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in both taking the photographs and selecting them to accompany this article.

³ Interviews with artists xkon and 84, both in 2011.

⁴ Most of the participants were not professional artists and were working in different kinds of day jobs, for example as architects. This is the case with this sample of politicized street artists, while more mainstream and sanctioned pieces like murals are usually created by professional artists who are being employed in order to paint the walls.

SETTING THE SCENE

Street art and wall writing is hardly a new phenomenon in the Athenian urban aesthetics. A short walk in the city center reveals writings on ancient columns, poems on marble signs, and names of and quotations from ancient philosophers on marble monuments, with some of the inscriptions going back to the fifth century BCE. Next to the ancient ruins, as the current layers of the city intersect with the old city center, the passerby experiences a visual bombing of graffiti writing, street art, stencils, stickers, and political slogans. As evident in Figure 1, this visual bombing creates an elaborate juxtaposition of historical layers. As graffiti historian and street art practitioner Orestis Pangalos suggests, nowadays in Athens one can observe "an unforeseen concentration of writings on the city's vertical surfaces, rendering it one of the most 'stained' and 'saturated' cities in the world" (2014:154).



Figure 1. Oversaturated walls, 2012.⁵

As both Pangalos (2014) and anthropologist Pafsanias Karathanasis (2014) suggest, there was a proliferation of graffiti and street art practices in Athens even before the 2008 crisis, but they intensified during the crisis for two reasons: Firstly, it is very expensive and difficult for the municipality to sustain an active antigraffiti program as the funds needed for that cannot be found in the era of financial austerity. And even if the funds exist, the municipality prefers a more strategic investment of its money (antihomelessness program, soup kitchens, etc.). Secondly, the financial

⁵ All photographs were taken by the author in 2008–2014 in part for the Ministry of Untold Stories, which is an collaborative umbrella organization based in London that brings together academics, artists, and activists in order to explore issues of social change.

crisis experienced by Greece was quickly transformed into a political and social crisis in which marginal groups of the population were silenced by the mainstream media. Simultaneously, protests and uprisings resulted in the creation of a highly politicized public. Thus, more people were using political street art, graffiti, and slogan practices as one more means of autonomous expression and reclamation of public space. According to architect Konstantinos Avramidis, “since every struggle in the city is materially grounded and geographically expressed,” then through politicized urban art “new modes of living, new modes of inhabiting are invented that contain forms of reclaiming the city” (2014:187). For example, in Athens a common tactic of the protesters was to paint slogans people were chanting while the crowd was marching. Usually marches and protests are impromptu reactions to an emergent political situation, yet there were many common demands amongst the protests post-2008, such as against austerity, racism, and police intimidation, to name a few. Most of the artists I interviewed also participated in the protests and used these embodied experiences as the creative stimulus for their work.

In this investigation, street art is seen as what a crew of street artists Bleeps.gr (2014:221) calls “a social diary on public display,” particularly useful as a means of analysis of a sociopolitical milieu since it is not sanctioned or commissioned. It is an expression of public consciousness that springs from lived experience, but which most often is seen as an illegal activity or vandalism. I argue that a close view of Exarhia’s street art scene is an opportunity to understand the political and social views of local leftist and antiauthoritarian individuals and groups that would never otherwise be expressed in the mainstream culture or in the media. Furthermore, individual street artists take advantage of the urban environment to expose hidden stories to scrutiny and criticism and thereby enhance awareness in the wider community. At this point it is a necessary caveat to add that, while I am aware of the warnings against glorifying subcultural practices (Downes and Rock 2007), there is a need to explore and understand the (semi)anonymous contributions to social discourse these particular street artists have made in Athens.

If the question of space cannot be separated from the question of politics (Massey 2005), then it only follows that an engagement with urban interventions and street art has to take into consideration the politics behind the actions. The topographical frame of my fieldwork was the suburb of Exarhia, the bohemian, non-conformist neighborhood of Athens. The area has played a significant role in the social and political life of the city. It is the center of most independent publications, a place where many intellectuals and artists live, the meeting place for leftist and antiauthoritarian groups, and, therefore, the ideal terrain for many socially engaged organizations and cooperative social centers. It is also the area mostly demonized by the government and mass media as the “hub of anomy and terrorism.”⁶ In other

⁶ This is the term Nikos Dendias (former Minister of Public Order and Civilian Protection) used to describe the district of Exarhia in 2013 in order to justify the even tighter police surveillance and the many instances of police brutality in the area (Konstantopoulos 2013). One of the well-known instances of police brutality in the area was the unprovoked assassination of the sixteen-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos in 2008 that fueled large-scale protests and resulted in 21 days of riots.

words, this article engages with examples of politically motivated street art coming from the antiauthoritarian margins of social production. This is a political choice as these are the groups and artists less represented in the media or other publications on street art. At the same time this choice provides the framework of what I refer to as "political street art": illegal reappropriation of the city walls in order to create subversive representations.

With this in mind, this article is not trying to assess the artistic quality of the artworks or provide definitions and genealogies of graffiti and street art. Rather, I examine how street art becomes the marker of an alternative voice in the city and engage with specific street art pieces in order to unpack the multiple social realities of a city in crisis. Having said this, this is not an investigation of what constitutes political and apolitical street art in relation to aesthetic categories. Such analysis serves only to mark out "belonging" in relation to artistic skill or technique. Instead, I have highlighted practices that emphasize disturbance, since political street art has the capacity to disturb the hegemonic conventions of cityscapes. It is this notion of disturbance that is perhaps the most forceful argument for the value(s) inherent to the practice of street art in times of crisis—not least because the visual disruption of urban spaces documents, archives, and reflects the milieu of growing inequalities, police brutality, and social uncertainties in the city.

INSCRIPTIONS ON THE SOCIAL FABRIC: "WELCOME TO ATHENS"

The city, however, does not tell its past, but it contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

As the above quote by Italo Calvino suggests, there is never a single urban story but rather a multiplicity of narratives inscribed on the city fabric. This article shifts the focus from the mainstream and hegemonic inscriptions of Athens that insist on portraying the city through its glorious past as the birthplace of democracy and Western civilization to the untold stories painted on the city walls. As such, it tells a different story by closely following the politically charged street art scene of the district of Exarhia.

I have elsewhere (Tsilimpounidi and Walsh 2011) characterized the manner in which political street art and slogans appear as visual markers of the shifting, complex discourses of power struggles, marginality, and countercultures that establish a new reality that must be seen and heard. As an art form, it is largely connected to and inspired by the existing social conditions. The central Athens of previous years is now a terrain of conflict and metamorphosis, and the city's walls are screaming a thousand stories, to extend Tristan Manco's (2002) characterization of the noise of the walls. In other words, city walls are the canvas and social conditions are the paint in a gallery of untold stories. Redefined symbols, decomposed stereotypes, re-vi-

sioned aesthetics, and antiracist slogans are the tools for the transformation of walls into social diaries. Street artist 84 reflected on street art in Exarhia in one of our interviews:

As the song goes, “the street had its own story, someone painted it on the wall.”⁷ That’s how you understand what has happened there. Basically, it is a story, a story that needed to be written, there was no other alternative. The one who wrote it felt the need to speak. Or just like my personal favorite slogan in Athens: “Do I really exist?,” and underneath someone signs as “God.” In a city where even God questions its existence, hmm, that denotes something.⁸

Since this article engages with the multiple stories “tagged” on the Athenian social fabric, the best way to introduce readers to the city is through a street art piece. The analysis here follows the premises of visual sociology in which, as Caroline Knowles suggests, “photographs are eminently significant social texts. They depict elements of the social fabric for skilled interpretation and are hence to be seen as a resource in the task of social analysis” (2000:21). In other words, the analysis moves away from purely logo-centric arguments by engaging with the images of street art pieces and treating them as relevant social data.



Figure 2. *Welcome to Athens*, by WD, 2012.

⁷ 84 is referring to the well-known Greek song written by Kostoula Mitropoulou with Manos Loizos’s music in the turbulent years before the Greek dictatorship of 1967.

⁸ Interview with artist 84, 2011.

The artwork in Figure 2 is placed on an old-style semidemolished house and depicts a youth holding a mask in one hand and a Molotov cocktail in the other. The tag immersed in fire reads "Welcome to Athens." The choice of the semi-demolished building can be a useful metaphor of the current state of the city and its populace after the fifth consecutive year of imposed programs of economic austerity, debt-relief memorandums, and a series of precarious governments.⁹ Between 2010 and 2012, the spending capacity of ordinary people was reduced to 40 percent, leaving one-third of the population below the poverty threshold. Meanwhile, the official unemployment rate is 25.1 percent, but among those in the 18–30 age group that figure rises to 55 percent—however even these numbers could be skewed by the fact that many people who are still considered employed may not have been paid for the last six months (Kollewe and Inman 2012). Statistical analysis can provide an immediate "picture" of the ways crisis has affected Athens and its citizens and therefore become an appropriate means of introducing you to the city; yet, the focus of this article is on the untold stories of daily life tagged on the walls.

One can see in the street art piece in Figure 2 the youth juggling the mask and the Molotov cocktail, an artistic statement highlighting the struggle between the different options and reactions available to Greek youths in the current milieu. On a simplistic level, the mask could be a common tactic by protesters to anonymize themselves. If, however, we consider the youthful figure symbolically, wearing the mask creates space for certain social performances, which are in turn informed by the belief that the current sociopolitical crisis will be over soon and society will return to normal. The mainstream narrations and explanations of the current milieu say that the crisis is just a temporal shift and everything will go back to "business as usual." Indeed, the etymology of the term "crisis," from the Greek word *κρίσις*, is based on the assumption of a former path of normality that is interrupted by a temporal shift, yet at the end normality and normativity will return (Tsilimpounidi 2012). In other words, etymologically crisis is an ephemeral shift in a given path of normality.

Taking into consideration the sociopolitical shifts in Southern Europe (and beyond) in the last several years, it seems empirically impossible to foresee a return to normality—if it ever truly existed—or indeed to imagine whether normality can be seen as a positive value for social cohesion. The mask, therefore, becomes the symbol of a behavioral repertoire of a superficial generation that unquestioningly accepted the neoliberal aspirations of the illusions of a Western capitalist lifestyle. Yet, one of the outcomes of the current state of affairs is the semidemolition of those dreams. In this light, the crisis creates space for reflexivity and redefinitions of fixed patterns of behavior. As Dimitris Dalakoglou and Antonis Vradis point out, the Greek meaning of the word "crisis" refers to "judgment and thinking" (2011:14). There is a call then to position the self in order to navigate the current realities. The choice of the mask

⁹ In the last five years, three different prime ministers (Georgios Papandreou, Lucas Papademos, and Antonis Samaras) have tried to grapple with the difficulties of implementing further austerity measures but ultimately failed and resigned under social pressure. In the January 2015 elections political power shifted from conservative and neoliberal governments to the Left coalition Syriza.

is a declaration: “I choose not to choose” in order to avoid the painful process of self-transformation. The mask also offers protection as it fails to acknowledge the personal implications and tends to create fake enemies in order to put the blame on these scapegoats.¹⁰

On the other hand, the Molotov cocktail points towards street protests which became the means for people to express their dissatisfaction with the existing status quo. From Greece to Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Ireland, from Egypt to the Occupy movement in the United States and elsewhere, we have witnessed a return to street politics that can be directly seen in the surge of political street art. Recent newspaper coverage has noted that politically engaged street art has proliferated in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, for example. The media coverage thus affirms the increased social value of street art but also highlights the immediacy of the form in exhibiting revolutionary thinking to the public in an anonymized way.¹¹ “Our consciousness was born on the streets,” states a tag on a building one block away from the artwork in Figure 2, highlighting the solidarity ties and the transformations happening when diverse groups of people meet on the streets to represent their issues. Marching side by side, the protesters not only question the hegemonic uses of space and the appropriate performances of citizenship, but most importantly they carve new ways of democracy in action (Douzinas 2013). Yet, civilian mobilizations were almost never peaceful in Greece after 2008 as even sit-in protests have faced an extreme oppression and police brutality. The uprisings in Athens have faced violent repression; the protesters have become targets for tighter surveillance measures and unjust prosecutions. In this light, or to put it more figuratively in this fire, the Molotov cocktail becomes a symbol of intense civilian resistance. I am well aware of the danger of romanticizing the street artists and their resistant acts, yet, in the milieu of crisis, their artworks are directly challenging the hegemonic blueprint rather than just adding a colorful façade to the Athenian urban fabric. On the contrary, this is a way (not the only way) to redefine the self and create new autonomous spaces. Most of the participant political street artists are also aware of the danger of romanticizing their work, as the crew of the street art collective Political Zoo explains, “Sometimes the risk of self consuming is there. You make your piece and you think everything is going to be all right, I declared my right for freedom today.”¹² As a response to the tendency to romanticize their activities as street artists, most of the participants identified the need to stay alert and participate in everyday community building.

This is not, of course, to say that there are only two ways—wearing a mask or holding a Molotov cocktail, social passivity or radical political action—to react against crisis in Athens; that would be a dangerous oversimplification. There are of

¹⁰ For example, scapegoating immigrants for “taking our jobs” or blaming “German imperialism” for the Greek crisis. Unfortunately, these allegations transform a crisis of the banks into a crisis between people and thus break the solidarity ties necessary to form meaningful grassroots reactions.

¹¹ See, e.g., Mulholland (2011) and Steavenson (2011).

¹² Interview with crew Political Zoo, 2010.

course multiple ways to “wear a mask” and different manners of “holding a Molotov cocktail.” There is no such thing as a fixed emancipatory promised land, but rather new spaces of radical openness where contradictions, tensions, and failures are also part of the emancipatory process. Political street art has boomed in Athens in the last years becoming another tool to question predetermined uses of space and hegemonic notions of ownership of public spaces. Political street art becomes what crew Bleeps.gr calls a “social diary on public display” (2014:221). He is referring to the ways that street art tags issues that remain invisible in the mainstream media “giving birth to a new street-level language that has twisted, innovated and filled in the gaps of a culture’s hegemonic discourse” (Tsilimpounidi and Walsh 2011:117). The same notion is evident in street artist 84’s understanding of the unsettling power of political street art: “What you say on the wall would not be said on the news, because if that was the case, then something else would happen. I think the name is [*whispering*] revolution.”¹³

STREET ART AND URBAN BELONGING

Street art is invasive. It creates a certain politics of space, claiming territories by marking out cultural borderlines and engendering a sense of belonging by laying “claim to an alley, a corner, a roof, or an entire area symbolically fenced off by gang signatures” (Nandrea 1999:112). Unlike gang graffiti in early 1980s in New York, current street art in Athens marks the terrain of a revolutionary urban tribe. Urban space is in direct correlation with human activity, it cannot exist on its own; some kind of relationship is invariably evident. This means that an urban setting does not only consist of buildings, streets, road signs, and other objects that define it—the main element of this urban scenery is also the people whose daily activities give it its metropolitan character. This is borne out in an interview with street art crew Political Zoo, who says:

In Exarhia it is easy to make a piece, because people here are open-minded and they like a good piece on their walls. Therefore, you have more time to create your piece. You have better communication with others, there’s always a comment underneath our pieces in Exarhia. Maybe that’s why we like making street art here. Because we communicate on the wall. We like the fact that Exarhia is the radical/bohemian area and as a result people living or hanging out here are more radical and ready to engage. Furthermore, it is a part of central Athens, so you get further visibility.¹⁴

The crew’s tag name derives from the Aristotelian conceptualization of civil society and active citizenship. According to Aristotle, human beings are *zoon politikon*—distinguished from other animals due to their capacity of reasoned speech and their moral sense of justice and equality. The artists’ postmodern interpretation:

¹³ Interview with artist 84, 2011.

¹⁴ Interview with crew Political Zoo, 2010.

We have an idea of a different society, different power dynamics, and different human interactions. [We] don't like to give a name to that: it is not anarchy, not communism, it is what we imagine and paint on the walls.¹⁵

The idea of self-expression and communication is a vital need for the artists; as street artist Mapet explains, "Exarhia is full of political street art. What helps is the fact that people are positive and more ready to engage."¹⁶ Politicized street artists tend to feel more connected with Exarhia because they share a sense of attachment with the radical and autonomous character of the area. Exarhia is treated as a symbolic place, a liminal space of collaboration, deliberation, and contestation. In general, local residents express their sympathy towards the artists, and, in an expression of support for a street art festival in 2009, they clearly outlined that "street artists are going to be protected in this area, as we—the inhabitants of Exarhia—think that this new form of art is 'endangered' by the law."¹⁷

On the other hand, because street art is provocative and about political awakening, the crew Political Zoo hopes to make more pieces in different neighborhoods in Athens. "We need to be careful of the trap of making Exarhia a small 'Gallic village.'"¹⁸ Political Zoo reflects the need for oppositional views to be cast as a dialogic form onto the fabric of the whole city, and not merely platformed by a group of few artists, activists, and citizens in the area of Exarhia. One common fallacy of scholarship about street art is to romanticize a place as alternative and revolutionary and to transform both the place and certain street art pieces into an unquestioned trend. This trap can be avoided through empowerment of the local community and at the same time opening up spaces for dispute and communication in different moments and spaces. A practical re-visioning of Athens calls for "in-between spaces" in which, as graffiti scholar Luke Dickens proposes, urban inscription allows "the city to become known through the bodily rhythmic writing and re-writing of it" (2008:27).

Street art breaks the conspiracy of silence: one of its roles is to form social consciousness. It is a decentralized, democratic form with universal access, and the real control over messages comes from the social producers, in this case the street artists themselves. "It is a barometer that registers the spectrum of thinking" (Chaffee 1993:3). Lyman G. Chaffee argues that mass communication need not be limited to professionals wielding technology or gadgets; there are "other significant processes and cultural settings involved in the flow of political information, that often, not exclusively, originate from below by grass-roots groups" (3–4).

¹⁵ Interview with crew Political Zoo, 2010.

¹⁶ Interview with artist Mapet, 2010.

¹⁷ This quote comes from a poster advertising a street art festival in the district of Exarhia in 2009.

¹⁸ Interview with crew Political Zoo, 2010. Here Political Zoo is referring to the French comic series *The Adventures of Asterix*, in which the titular character's native village remains a stronghold against the Roman Empire, willfully avoiding colonization against all odds.

In interviews the artists explained their practice of this new form of mass communication as follows: "Images speak louder than words, and if we use words, we make sure that they are in English so everyone can understand.... We want to create a new visual vocabulary."¹⁹ By contrast, an artist working with stencils said: "I use reversed propaganda in my work. I want to change the meaning of specific symbols, create a new dictionary. A new way of communication. It's a political act. You start from the realization that you don't like what surrounds you. You don't like what you've been served."²⁰ Street artists refine and define the communicative tools of social discourse by subverting symbols and exploiting recognizable images.



Figure 3. *Vote for No One*, by Bleeps.gr, 2010.

In Figure 3, Bleeps.gr is using the widely recognizable symbol of the statue of Athena, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom, inspiration, heroic battle, and strength, as well as the patron goddess of the city of Athens. In the picture, Athena is holding a banner that reads "Vote for No One" and is a direct contrast to the ancient Greek practice of direct democracy through the agora and the current situation of political corruption and mistrust in the government and in the process of the elections. Furthermore, this piece is a call to direct action and a juxtaposition with the forms of direct

¹⁹ Interview with artist Mister K, 2011.

²⁰ Interview with artist Mapet, 2010.

democracy, which were evident throughout the Syntagma square occupation (2010–2012) and are continuing in the form of local assembly groups in different neighborhoods of the city. Thus, the piece is an ironic critique on the notion of representative democracy while at the same time it utilizes the visual stereotype of the notion of democracy—goddess Athena is the figure of wisdom and the protector of the city of Athens that is widely recognized as the cradle of democracy and civilization. At the same time, by bringing together ancient and modern layers of history, Bleeps.gr is capturing the main tensions of modern Greek identity: trapped between the ruins of an ancient glorious past and the uncertainties and difficulties of a precarious future.

Street art is with us on our daily walks. Like passersby, images are part of our everyday experience. To greet them, we have to share with them an alternative visual understanding. In addition, artists base their community in a common awareness of not belonging: they do not fit in the societal boxes and they react to preexisting categories of belonging. Street artists question stereotypical forms of identification, and they also share a desire to create new visual communities. Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) speaks of a community founded on a communication that is far more than the simple exchange of images and words. It is precisely this form of communication that the experience of making and seeing street art can offer: an encounter “reminding us always of the Other, whose presence is both a challenge and a solace” (Young 2010:113). I suggest that artworks (in the sense that they remain after the initiating moment of spraying, sticking, or tagging) offer glimpses into the potential for transgressions and transformations of existing social structures as repeated actions. I assert that the street artworks demand that viewers reflect on this new grassroots visual vocabulary.

Some of the artists I interviewed²¹ reflected that they like the potential their artworks offer for thinking of themselves and society in a different way. This reaction against fixed notions of belonging and the desire to create from the margins speak back to postcolonial and feminist theories, which demanded that the oppressed resist closed categories. In the interviews, as well as in self-published zines, the artists’ discomfort with categories of belonging suggests the need for constant and active engagement with what exclusion and marginality mean. They were not speaking on behalf of a marginalized Other, they *are* marginalized Others in terms of their political beliefs.²² Cultural critic bell hooks warns of the trap of the margin as reinforcing binaries and oppression. And to use her evocative phrase, they are choosing the “margin as a space of radical openness” (hooks 1990:203). Yet, the trap to be avoided is thinking that marginalized voices can only make small, marginal interventions. Street art creates an urban gap—or, more correctly, identifies a new space where margins have a voice and communication is based on the formation of new communities and the inclusion of the Other. According to Manco, “communication has become

²¹ For example, artists Mister K, Mapet, and 84, as well as crew Political Zoo.

²² Even if most of the participants are well educated and come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, they are socially marginalized due to their political beliefs. Antiauthoritarian beliefs and especially the groups associating themselves with the neighborhood of Exarhia have been criminalized and scapegoated for many years as a threat to social well-being, especially after the 2008 riots in Athens.

a modern mantra: the city streets shout with billboards, fly posters and corporate advertising, all vying for our attention. They almost invite a subversive response" (2002:7). Artists create symbols and a new language on the city's walls. Each piece left on the wall interacts with the people coming into contact with it, and there are no restrictions to the audience. The city is a living organism, and street art is the art of everyday encounters, the art of unexpected communication unravelling the multi-layered stories of our urban realities.

Street artists actively participate in the production of culture in the micro level by consciously contributing to the need for urban regeneration. Street art captures the need for self-expression in a changing environment. The street artist's identity is largely centered around anonymity; as such, there is a subversive dynamic between authorship and anonymity. The main obstacle in my attempt to approach the artists was the fact that the practice's subversive and (often) nocturnal nature meant that issues of trust and the need for assurances of anonymity came to the fore. In addition to artists' personal mistrust of strangers and a natural suspicion of "experts" attempting to decode the subculture, the mystery of code names and tags is itself an important element in the street art scene as it removes personal "liability," marking itself as written by an Other. As Bleeps.gr explains, "the pseudonym Bleeps.gr is a depersonalization of the artist as an individual thus identified as a website."²³ Aside from the obvious security reasons, anonymity symbolizes the faceless majority excluded from social visibility and decision making. Many of the artists claim they work without names and faces because they represent many unseen faces and invisible names that are now, through their work, emerging as new subjects.

"HIDING IN THE LIGHT": STREET ART AS A BAROMETER OF CRISIS²⁴

Dick Hebdige argued that contemporary urban subcultures usually engage in public activities that include pleasure and transgression and translate the fact of "being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is hiding in the light" (1988:35). This response fits with the joyful anomic sensation of some street artworks, which are grounded in a sense of play although the playfulness is informed by politics, as evident by crew Political Zoo, who stated: "We play with shapes, we interact with the city. The city is both our muse and our gallery."²⁵ Such an ethos creates an initial sense of fun, but it is guided by an urgency to disrupt the comforts of norms and conventions of daily life. The playfulness of the city is manifest in colorful and faded images in a perpetual process of renewal and metamorphosis. Ephemeral by nature, street art pieces are left to interact with the other structures of the city. And even if, in some cases, these colorful critiques on the walls are treated with curiosity or even indiffer-

²³ Interview with crew Bleeps.gr, 2010.

²⁴ To paraphrase Chaffee, who argues that street art "is a barometer that registers the spectrum of thinking" (1993:3).

²⁵ Interview with crew Political Zoo, 2010.

ence from passersby, this is not the case with the municipality officials. Indicatively, the numerous attempts at a “war on graffiti” in New York between 1980 and 1983 succeeded not in eliminating graffiti but in “repositioning graffiti not only as a crime, but also as a metaphor for New York’s crisis” (Wacławek 2011:54). In a similar way in Athens, Amalia Zepou, an adviser of the municipality’s program to permit graffiti and street art, says that “when a city collapses, and has been tagged everywhere, we have an obligation to stop it. Once graffiti becomes commissioned art, it is a signal of the beginning of the end of the financial or social crisis that the city has gone through” (Alderman 2014). This statement reveals the deep aesthetic disturbance and revolutionary potential of political street art in Athens. According to the municipality’s adviser, the elimination of illicit street art becomes a powerful metaphor that suggests the end of the economic, social, and political crisis in the city. This could be a sign of the neoliberal preoccupation with surfaces rather than substance, as for Zepou, the elimination of noncommissioned street art would immediately signify the end of the crisis in Athens. Furthermore, the adviser recognizes that it is only when illegal and political street art becomes commissioned art, that the aesthetic effects it has on the city will cease to counteract the hegemonic narratives. This is not the only example of the insidious ways neoliberal ideologies have attempted to penetrate and hijack subversive social actions. As with other subversive artistic expressions in the past (punk music would be an obvious example here), the neoliberal strategy of suppressing them was to capitalize on their creativity and turn them into commodities.

The process of commodification offers control over the messages and capitalizes on the street artworks in order to control the artworks. When political street art becomes commissioned art, it automatically transforms into a colorful façade adding to the grand narratives of the city. It is not a disturbance anymore but a sign of the end of crisis and the beginning of normativity. At the same time it boosts the value of the properties in the district as commissioned street art is marketed as hip and trendy in a direct incorporation into the gentrification of urban spaces. A slogan on an Exarhian wall reads: “Clean walls and clean civilizations exist only in dirty minds”—a reminder that characterizing space and peoples with “purity” and “cleanliness” is tantamount to a colonial, ethnocentric discourse. It is clear in this example that artists’ ability to react and intervene in the urban landscape creates the conditions of a disruptive dialogue. In other words, the state’s need to contain and package urban creativity belies the concomitant need to control and erase dissenting voices.

As Nigel Thrift notes, “cities are becoming ceaseless aesthetics projects” (2009:197) imposing forms of domination on the imagination. Political street art creates an urban re-visioning, an aesthetic subversion of the imaging and imagining domination. In Figure 4 a street artwork depicts two genderless faces painted next to a window, with faces distorted into horrible expressions: mouths open, but otherwise indistinguishable from the blood red background—a terrifying visual echo of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. The faces are accompanied by the phrase “expression vandalism.” Street artist Pete does not usually title his works, and so this phrase may be seen as a commentary on the ways urban insurrections on walls simultaneously constitute expression and vandalism. Yet, in both, there is an anguish that is immediate, visceral, and provocative.



Figure 4. *Expression Vandalism*, by Pete, 2012.

As demonstrated in the images and extracts of interviews alongside my analysis of the political street art scene in Athens of recent years, if these walls could talk, they would narrate counterhegemonic stories from the margins of cultural production. This terrain of subversive cultural production and alternative subjectivities is of utmost importance, especially in this era of crisis and aggressive neoliberalism. The battle over space is of strategic relevance—not only over public space but also space for different expressions of culture, space for new meetings and imaginings, in short, a space for resistance. In this light, street art offers an opportunity for a collective reflection on the imaginary domination of capitalism, or as Chantal Mouffe puts it, “artistic and cultural practices can offer spaces for resistance that undermine the social imaginary necessary for capitalist reproduction” (2013:88). In a similar line of thought, Antonio Gramsci ([1959] 1989) asserted that capitalism maintains control not only through political and economic coercion but through ideology. It is in the ideological terrain that capitalism, as famously stated, leaves “no alternative.”²⁶ Political street art, then, not only tags ways of subversive imagining on the walls but, most importantly, directly challenges the inevitability of capitalist ideology.

²⁶ This is a reference to the Conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her famous slogan “There is no alternative” (TINA). According to Thatcher’s TINA narrative, there is no alternative to economic liberalism, capitalism, and neoliberalism.

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«ЕСЛИ БЫ ЭТИ СТЕНЫ МОГЛИ ГОВОРИТЬ»: СТРИТ-АРТ И ГОРОДСКАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ В АФИНАХ ВРЕМЕН КРИЗИСА

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Политическое уличное искусство и слоганы являются визуальным отображением изменяющихся сложных дискурсов борьбы за власть, маргинальности и контркультур, они создают новую реальность, которая должна быть увидена и услышана. Как художественная форма стрит-арт тесно связан с имеющимися социальными условиями, в которых он черпает вдохновение. В эпоху кризиса центральная часть Афин стала полем конфликтов и метаморфоз, городские стены здесь кричат о тысячах разных историй. Они являются полотном для изображений в галерее нерасказанных историй. Переопределенные символы, разобранные стереотипы, переосмысленные образы и антирасистские слоганы служат «инструментами» для превращения стен в «общественный дневник». В этой перспективе стрит-арт рассматривается как форма общественного дневника, визуальной истории маргинализованных групп и меньшинств. Стрит-арт улавливает потребность в самовыражении в изменившемся контексте. Таким образом, уличные художники активно участвуют в производстве культуры на микроуровне, внося осознанный вклад в трансформацию городского видения.

Ключевые слова: уличное искусство; стрит-арт; Афины; кризис; городское творчество; городские субкультуры; граффити