



THE STREETS ARE ALIVE

Athens is a shithole, an urban sprawl of mismatched houses and various intentional and unintentional city-planning policy disasters. Long congested streets lined with corporate shops and sad window displays, malls and roadside restaurants. A grey dust of crumbled cement, dirt and pollution covers it and nothing ever feels clean- even the rain brings dust. The hills and mountains surrounding it bear the scars of forest fires and real estate developments and from high up spots one can see the lure of the sea which seems so close but is somehow so far away, the Athenian seafront has been decorated by a big coastal road and industry, the water littered with floating plastic bags, unknown garbage and industrial waste. Yet this city contains some golden nuggets in its randomness, in fact it is full of accidental beauty. Like many cities, once you know it you avoid certain parts and stay only in others. Athens is great in that it offers a game of discovery, a search for interesting areas and experiences amongst a mostly boring landscape. Once known it can deliver surprises of beauty and absurdity over and over again for visitors and locals alike.

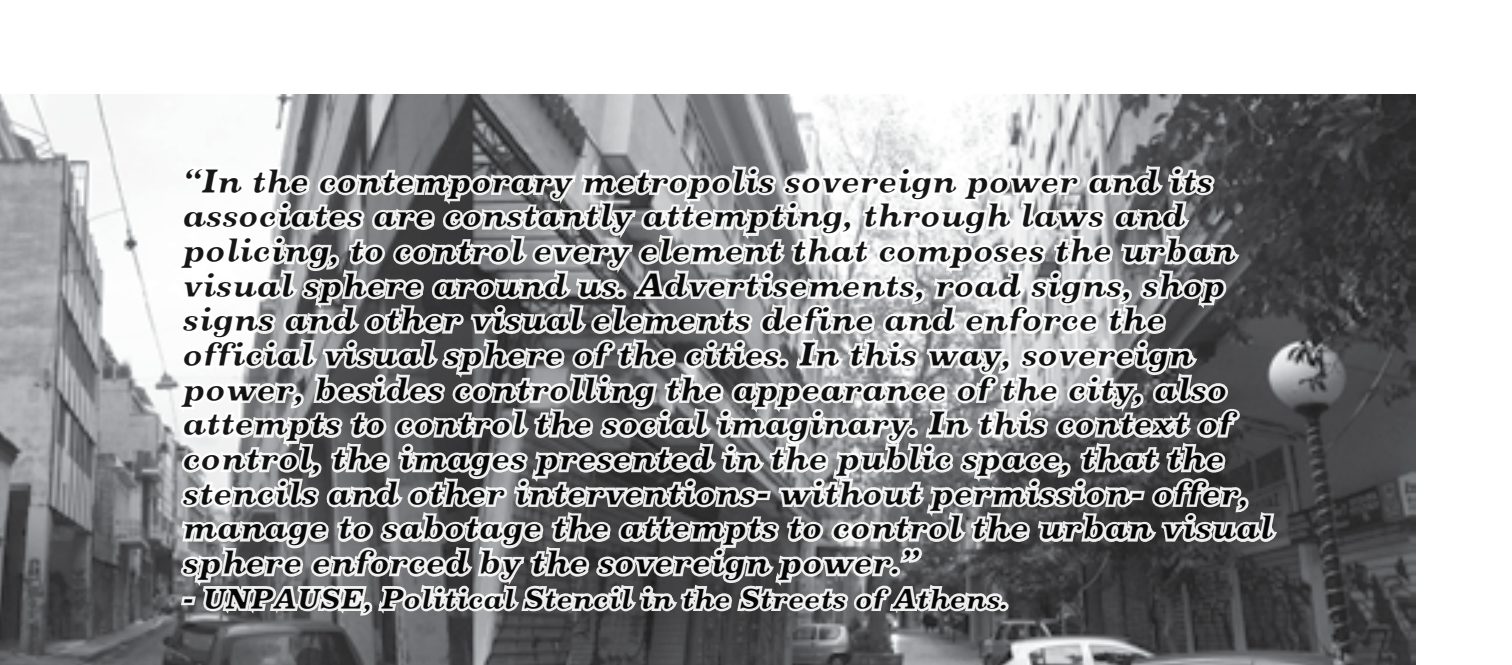
In the middle of the city, and not only, many explorers will find their eyes drawn to images here and there. Posters, stencils, stickers and graffiti litter the veins of the urban labyrinth catching the eyes of locals and tourists alike. In the same way that the unexpected beauty of Athens presents itself due to random circumstances, the streets are filled with uncoordinated imagery from vandals, artists and political initiatives. Street art in Athens is an obvious topic in a city which acts like a permanent but ever-changing gallery.

Street art is a direct form of art which does not ask for permission and which manifests itself in the public gallery mostly illegally and without restrictions such as demand, skill, taste or financial incentive. It is DIY in nature, democratic in its accessibility and in these ways contains many of the aspects of punk but also other art forms such as surrealism, dadaism and pop art. It is also controversial and increasingly connected to the process of gentrification. Let us first concentrate on the art form

itself though, as difficult as it may be for anarchists to discuss art without turning immediately to the negative.

“For the street artist, the joy and passion for art comes not from the finished piece, but rather from the act of creating it. Street art is at its heart an ephemeral art form; meaning that the artwork has a limited lifespan. It’s not meant to last forever. [...] for these artists, the connection to the artwork ended the moment the art was put up on the street and incorporated into the city landscape. The joy comes from the communal aspect of putting work up outside, in public, with little time to worry about perfection.” -Wooster Collective.

The art form commonly called ‘street art’ is not one which is based on style or meaning or aesthetic direction. It is merely the



“In the contemporary metropolis sovereign power and its associates are constantly attempting, through laws and policing, to control every element that composes the urban visual sphere around us. Advertisements, road signs, shop signs and other visual elements define and enforce the official visual sphere of the cities. In this way, sovereign power, besides controlling the appearance of the city, also attempts to control the social imaginary. In this context of control, the images presented in the public space, that the stencils and other interventions- without permission- offer, manage to sabotage the attempts to control the urban visual sphere enforced by the sovereign power.”

- UNPAUSE, Political Stencil in the Streets of Athens.

definition of an art form which exists in a certain context. Whether it is good or bad, interesting or boring, avant-garde or predictable is uninteresting. The definition is based on the location: the street. Unmediated creativity expressed on walls and all other surfaces the city has to offer, is the definition of a method of delivering art in what could be argued to be the purest form of art around. Art for the sake of art, creativity as a selfish form of expression. Is it not perhaps the case that the central aspect of art is creativity? And what creativity is more pure than one which does not promise any return on the investments of time and cost and even offers the risk of fines and lost freedom?

Art is always presented to be judged; in galleries and museums, in the art world with its critics and on the capitalist market. Art is an industry and works of art have to be new and fresh yet profitable as the commodity that they are, either as the decorations sold by galleries or the entertainment offered by museums. Movements such as the futurists, dadaists and surrealists,

amongst others, offered more than just commodities as they journeyed through philosophical and political explorations, but I can think of no other art method which expresses itself as directly as street art.

Created for no other reason than joy, street art becomes the simultaneous action of creativity and sabotage as the monotony of clean walls and advertisements becomes interrupted by alternative messages and imagery. This does not mean that street art is in itself anti-authoritarian or anarchist but the method is. It is an art form which is anti-authoritarian in its praxis and interrupts the visual images of the city with the potential of disruptive propaganda. Furthermore, the relative ease and accessibility of the methods invites any viewer to become a co-conspirator; it is the direct action version of art.

The above quote by UNPAUSE is a political framing of the phenomenon here discussed, but of course in reality much of what we see on the streets does not come from any complex political purpose.

It is probably fair to suggest that most people who offer their artistic creations to the urban gallery of Athens do it for fun even though groups and individuals also use the same walls and techniques to convey more political messages. In many ways, the process is similar to tagging and many street artists know each other and leave little messages for each other or compliment each other's works. For instance, in the style of the recent internet phenomenon known as the 'ice bucket challenge', several Athenian street artists have been doing a 'graffiti challenge' where they create a piece and challenge other artists in it, who in turn create another piece and challenge more.

This playful nature of street art and graffiti in Athens is partly due to the fact that right now it is a city with a weak state and little resources or ambition in relation to preventing graffiti and street art. In this sense, the above quote about how street art manages "to sabotage the attempts to control the urban visual sphere enforced by the sovereign power" might seem a bit

exaggerated. The truth is that when one is out in the streets with some cans and stencils it tends to feel quite safe. You can stand at a street corner in Athens, drinking a beer between applying layers of stencils and have random discussions whilst paint dries and cars and pedestrians pass by. Many artists have had limited contact with the police whilst applying their creations and eventual contact tends not to be very serious. Of course this is not to say that being caught in the act of putting up an image with anarchist text will be ignored by a battalion of Delta cops in a dark alley at 2 in the morning, but the authorities are not targeting street art in any visible way generally.

This is not the case in other cities in Europe, and in relation to the sterility and oppression of street art in these places the playful possibilities in Athens must be seen as a phenomenon which exists thanks to specific circumstances. You wouldn't stand around on a street corner of many places in the UK taking your time putting up posters or graffiti. An abundance of CCTV cameras should assure you that a visit from the police wouldn't be far away, and even if you are fast there is a big possibility that the cameras are keeping up with you and the cops are waiting around the next corner. The chance of getting caught is combined with the possibility of substantial fines that can go into many 1000s of euros and lengthy prison sentences (maximum in the UK is 10 years). In Stockholm, a city policy against the existence of any graffiti as a zero tolerance approach towards all forms of street art was in place since 2007 and just recently came to an end after the defeat of the conservatives in the September elections. This kind of control did however create an interesting counter-offensive as street artists reacted and took action, thereby creating a political element of resistance.



The zero tolerance policy in Stockholm included a general negative attitude from the city which involved preventative measures, especially towards young people- as if street art was some kind of drug addiction-, a total prohibition towards all promotion of graffiti as well as a policy of removing any piece of street art within 24 hours. This created a situation where a near total sterility existed and lone street artists didn't stand a chance as their work would disappear almost instantly. To counter this some street artists started the 'April Offensive' which aimed at creating a coordinated attack every April, filling the streets with so much street art that the city would not be able to keep up with its promise of the maximum 24 hour lifespan. For several years the offensive united street artists and challenged the state discourse and authority. Similarly, some of the same people created a street art advent calendar leading up to christmas, an initiative they borrowed from Copenhagen. Everyday, leading up to Christmas a different piece of street art would appear somewhere in the city and people would be encouraged to search for the piece and send a

photograph of it to the website which organised the project. Both of these initiatives were coordinated efforts by street artists wishing to defy the zero tolerance policies of Stockholm and existed within a larger political context of trying to challenge these policies through articles and debates.

Even though Stockholm's zero tolerance policy has come to a recent end, as is the case in other European cities where it had also been tested, it can be assumed to have been inspired by the broken window theory which was first presented in 1982 and which has had an international influence on the management of urban space and law and order. The theory can be summarised by this quote from its first appearance:

“Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.

Or consider a pavement. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of refuse from take-out restaurants there or even break into cars.”

-James Q. Wilson & George L. Kelling, “Broken Windows”, 1982, The Atlantic Monthly.

Now consider the clean and sterile Swedish capital in all its conservative glory, the home of the royal family and political elite, with rich brats strolling through the picturesque city and you can understand how the zero tolerance attitude towards street art has been used to maintain the pristine environment desired by this ruling class and no allowance has been granted for the growth of alternative imagery due to the same reasoning that broken windows are believed by some to lead to more broken windows. The imagery of the city is monopolised by capital in the form of advertisements, window displays and street signs telling you what you can and cannot do. In this environment street art becomes immediately political as a challenge to the visual propaganda of the status quo. Then consider the streets of Athens, crowded and mismatched, crumbling buildings with broken windows everywhere, chaotic and lacking any consistent appearance and immediately street art does not seem to be a political expression in its form alone, in that it challenges the visual landscape, because actually it fits in perfectly.

That Athens is a gallery of images is not due only to the street artists and graffiti writers, but rather it is the nature of the city. The sterility of monoculture which has so effectively been imposed on most of Northern Europe is lacking here. Street art in itself might have political aspects but as with all things methods are always connected to tactics, and always in relation to context, so in Athens street art is in itself not political without intent. Political street art takes place within the broader public visual gallery of the city where it does not only compete with the visual propaganda of the state and capital, but exists within a multitude of images like sprayed political slogans

and posters, tags and hand painted advertisements from small time businesses- lets face it, the city is a mess. Even the crumbling buildings and the wild vegetation of empty lots contribute to the visual landscape: the spirit of the city invites you to contribute.

It is not even as if Athens is drowning in advertisements. Compared to other world capitals it is quite limited as there is no overwhelming abundance of billboards, advertisements on public transportation, bus stops, in toilets etc. In fact, the area surrounding Athens is filled with long abandoned billboards withering away next to the highways in fields of olive trees. The only thing which has happened to these billboards in a very long time is that some of the ones lining the road between Athens and the airport have been visited by artists who covered them with some bizarre images and words greeting both people arriving in and departing from the area. So, maybe the war of visual imagery is not exactly triumphant for capital and state at this time and place. The lack of this conflict does not, however, remove the political potential and use of the art form. Political groups also use stencils as a method of spreading easily reproducible graphics, and individual street artists express political ideas through their art- so of course street art is a tool with great political potential and there are aspects about its very definition that could be considered political.

Even though the Greek crisis is no longer hot news, it wasn't long ago that it was, and back then every major international and national news agency who did a report on Athens seemed to want to create a piece on political street art. Many times Athenian street artists did meet up, semi-reluctantly, with journalists



from CNN, BBC, RT and others to give a few quotes to the story of the creativity which was blossoming in the times of crisis. Mostly these journalists omitted much of the analysis which was shared with them and settled for a few good lines, but this does not change the fact that several street artists did have a political analysis of the situation and saw their art as belonging within this context. Though many street artists have a political analysis within which they see their art, others let the art speak for itself and some just want to put cool stuff on walls. Some projects, such as *Political Zoo*, have been more politically defined and act as a group which uses stencils as their tool of expression, while individual street artists contribute regularly to various political events on various levels.

Sometimes more specific projects appear, such as the recent creation of the group *Political Stencils*, a group which was started in order to create a solidarity project to raise legal costs for a comrade who had been arrested during a police invasion of the squatted park in Navarinou square in the Athens neighbourhood of Exarchia. The group was formed to create an exhibition at the VOX squat where art and a specially created book on political stencil street art in Athens were sold in order to obtain money for legal costs. The event featured creations by several artists as well as workshops and attracted new members to the group which has continued to hold exhibitions both nationally and internationally and has gone beyond the initial fundraising purpose to create new pieces and projects.

It could probably be said without much doubt that the three neighbourhoods in Athens where street art is thriving and can be found in abundance are Exarchia, Psirri, and Metaxourgiou. At the moment, these areas offer a golden age of creativity as the lack of repression combined with the ease and acceptance by not only the state, but larger society, combined with an abundance of creative energy produces an ever evolving gallery with a variety of styles. Also, the areas are already pretty rundown to some degree and the lack of clean walls means more painting makes little difference. Some spaces have existed beyond the walls of the streets to accommodate this art form. Exarchia used to host the gallery and creative space *Stigma Lab*, a group which provided an exhibition space for graffiti, street and amateur artists and also organised the international *Meeting of Styles* graffiti festival. In Psirri the street artist gallery *Sarri 12* puts on professionally curated exhibitions with both local and international artists, whilst the more recently opened *Skord-Art* around

the corner offers artists the possibility to exhibit and sell their work on a more open amateur level.

The *Sarri 12* gallery also hosts a Saturday art school for children in the largely migrant populated area. These Psirri galleries do offer artists, at different levels of ability, the possibility to exhibit their work (if not in *Sarri 12* then in *Skord-Art*) and can be seen as a kind of community resource and a gathering point for both local and international artists. They can also be seen as total tools of gentrification. When street art moves away from the street and into galleries, a certain dynamic changes as the works now have a financial value. The area around these galleries in Psirri have been transformed massively by very intentional efforts to use the streets as galleries, something which influences the very image of the neighbourhood. Similarly, the neighbourhood of Metaxourgiou, which is very full of street art, is undergoing an intentional process of gentrification, one which the street artist can unwillingly be contributing to. As city tourism is developed in Athens and the centre starts to change and become cleaned up, however slowly, these kinds of creative initiatives are bound to play a part in the process of gentrification.

“Urban theorists have debated it for decades. According to one view, the artists kick it off [...] moving into cheap housing and transforming the area from poor to bohemian – then investors and families follow. Another view is that the developers and public agencies come first, buying up cheap property and then selling it for a profit to the middle classes.”-Philip Ball

When looking at street art, it is impossible to ignore the topic of gentrification but it is not a straight-forward discussion. The state of gentrification in Athens has been on something of a hold as the economic crisis has prevented some of the fuel needed for its continuous acceleration. The current state of neighbourhoods, such as both Psirri and Keramikos are the result of policies aimed at creating planned entertainment districts constructed around the time of the euphoric days of the Athens Olympics back in 2004. In the case of Keramikos, the new metro station opened up on a square where the development of rows of clubs, restaurants and mega-cafes led to the displacement of the ethnic minority population which had lived in the area. One could pop out of the ground from the metro, be in a sterile zone of modern Athens and then disappear back to comfort without having to deal with any of the realities of the urban jungle. But these projects are beyond what many call gentrification, as they are swift and intense city planning policies which are implemented with full force and lead to an immediate and definite transformation.

Gentrification is a word which is used commonly, but the definition is debatable and often overly simplistic. For many, it goes along with specialist cafes, gastropubs, fixed-gear bicycles, galleries, bohemian vegan pizzerias, street art, boutique hotels and hipster barbers. These are symptoms and perhaps tools, but gentrification is something else and it exists on various levels. Gentrification is the process by which an area in a city is transformed by various factors leading to an increase in attractiveness, the influx of new residents, initiatives and businesses, with both positive and negative





results. The obvious negative result is that the cost of living increases, leading to long term local residents being forced to move away as they can no longer afford the new costs. However, the process *might* also create factors which are beneficial to the neighbourhood such as safer streets due to people being more engaged in their surroundings and socialising outside and with each other, a more pleasant environment and increased creativity. Not all pre-gentrification areas are pleasant, as poverty, neglect and poor-on-poor crime can be prominent and not all change is purely negative.

Sometimes gentrification can occur in a 'natural' process where a series of events leads to the change of a neighbourhood, and eventually the process of gentrification causes an economic transformation with a negative impact. For instance, as cities become more and more expensive, low-income inhabitants are pushed out of neighbourhoods where they live due to increases in rent and pulled towards areas where they can afford to live. Some

poorer inhabitants such as artists, squatters, musicians and precarious youth might end up drawn together by financial necessity and common desires. The influx of young, creative and sometimes political people in a neighbourhood can start a process where more people move there, the area becomes interesting and appealing, people start going out there, the media do some reports on it and voilà: It is trendy! Then rents go up, people with money start investing, the area becomes interesting and a more intentional transformation begins. Many of the original inhabitants then have to move, as well as some of the first newcomers, since the factors that attracted them there have ceased to exist. And so the population of cities are often shifted by a series of push and pull factors which are caused by both intentional and unintentional initiatives. However, this is not to say that areas cannot also be transformed by much more intentional processes. Local business and state initiatives can drive gentrification to increase both value and control of areas. There

are several factors that exist around the term and the definitions vary but let me attempt to be specific for the sake of clarity: *Gentrification is the intentional process where an area in a city is transformed in order to increase the financial potential for business and property owners.*

The importance here is that it has to do with a process, not symptoms by themselves. The point is this: street art is one of many factors which can be used by capitalists to transform an area into something which is profitable for them without any concern for the subsequent effects on local residents or, for that matter, the street artists themselves. After the process of gentrification has done its thing, there might just be a sterile monoculture where the playful freedom that street artists enjoy is no longer possible. So the radical potential of the art form is directly connected to an awareness of the processes that street art might unintentionally contribute to: the economic and political transformation of the city.



The artist Shepard Fairey is one of the worlds most famous and successful street artists who has gone on to receive global critical acclaim. He is most widely known for his paste ups of Andre the Giant and the slogan OBEY as well as the design of the iconic 2008 presidential election poster of Barack Obama with words such as HOPE written under the portrait. Above images from the left: 2 famous iconic images of Shepard Fairey, two images by Fairey splashed & finally a piece by Swoon before and after splashing.

“By challenging what the experts term ‘street art’, our actions have, in turn, uncovered an alliance between the coercive force of the state and the ‘creative class’ of the artist.” -The Splasher Group

In late 2006 someone or some people defaced several pieces of street art in the trendy bohemian neighbourhood of Williamsburg, (Brooklyn, New York) by splashing them with paint. Political statements entitled “Avant Garde: Advance Scouts for Capital” and “Art: The Excrement of Action” were pasted on the walls next to the artworks. The statements were wheat-pasted with broken glass added to the glue in order to make removal more difficult. The group or individual carried out several actions like this across New York and the actions continued until June 2007 when an

individual was arrested for trying to set off a stink bomb at the opening of an exhibition by Shepard Fairey and charged with ‘third-degree arson, reckless endangerment, placing a false bomb, criminal possession of a weapon, harassment and disorderly conduct’. The group became known as the *Splasher Group*, even though they never gave themselves a name, and disappeared without a trace except for the publication entitled ‘*If we did it this is how it would’ve happened*’ containing various essays on street art, gentrification and the role of artists, which was later released.

Several artworks on the streets of New York were defaced and the actions culminated with the publication which was distributed for free and sent to some media offices. The manifesto is an arrogant and dismissive collection of texts which attacks the art world as a

whole and street artists in particular who are accused of carrying out a ‘bourgeois sponsored rebellion’ and being ‘advance scouts for capital’, signalling that an area is ripe for gentrification. The texts are filled with anarchist and situationist inspirations (and even plagiarisms) and appreciation towards dadaism and surrealism whilst at the same time being negative towards everything, especially anarchists who like and/or are involved in the creation of street art or possibly creativity as a whole. The publication sees street art as a specialisation, a form of advertisement for artists and advancement of their egos. The group instead places ‘cultural activity’ in a revolutionary context by seeing it as ‘a method that can and should be continually developed to ensure the withering away of the division of labour.’ Even though it is full of self-righteous generalisations, offering no suggestions whatsoever,

ART: THE EXCREMENT OF ACTION

“A Dadaist once smashed a clock, dipped the pieces in ink, pressed the ink-soaked pieces against a sheet of paper and had it framed. His purpose was to criticize the modernist idealization of efficiency. Rather than inspiring the widespread smashing of clocks and the reevaluation of time in society, the piece of paper has become a sought-after commodity. The production of a representative organ (the ink-imprinted paper) for the action (the smashing of the clock) guaranteed this outcome. Like an idealistic politician, the piece of paper, despite its creator’s intent, can only represent, and it is for this reason that it instantly became a fetishized object segregated from the action. Only in a culture obsessed with its own excrement are the by-products of action elevated above action itself. Representation is the most elemental form of alienation. Art as representation is no exception. It is just another means by which our perceptions and desires are mediated. Art is the politician of our senses: it creates actors and an audience, agents and a mass. True creativity is the joyful destruction of this hierarchy; it is the unmediated actualization of desires. The passion for destruction is a creative passion. We are all capable of manifesting our desires directly, free of representation and commodification. We will continue manifesting ours by euthanizing your bourgeois fad.”

-Text from one of the communiques posted next to vandalised street art in New York

“Revolutionary creativity does not shock or entertain the bourgeoisie, it destroys them. Our struggle cannot be hung on walls. Destroy the museums in the streets and everywhere”.- ‘The Splasher Group’.

“We have now issued our maintenance crews with photographs of Banksy’s work, so if they come across it, they’ll recognise it for what it is. We will then try and remove it if at all possible and auction it for charity. That doesn’t alter our position that graffiti is illegal and attracts other crime.”-[National Rail Spokesperson]

Last week, six pieces by Bristol-born Banksy, 32, fetched £372,000 at auction. A work in sprayed paint on canvas, depicting old women playing lawn bowls with bombs, went for £102,000. “ - Patrick Sawyer, ‘Rail workers paint over Banksy art’, Evening Standard, 14 February 2007

the collection of texts and actions successfully formulate a valid criticism towards street art, gentrification, radical politics, the city and the commodification of everything we create.

The fame of artists such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey, probably the most famous of the artists whose works were vandalised, have removed much of the counter-hegemonic aspects of street art, as their success has led to the art form gaining credibility and hype within the art industry and their works now sell for hundreds of thousands of euros. They are street artists who found fame and wealth and thereby moved beyond the role of random street vandals. Banksy’s place in gentrification (voluntary or not) becomes clear when his work changes from criminal to being protected by city authorities or removed and sold for vast amounts of money. Both he and Fairey use political imagery and slogans which can lead to the question: are they using art to sell revolution or are they using revolution to sell their art? Whatever the answer, the criticism

towards them cannot be levelled at a whole art form as street art does not usually lead to wealth, much of it is created for pure joy and it still contains political potential. The criticism which is contained within the texts from the *Splasher Group* is full of contempt towards art as a whole and raises questions about the radical approach to art, creativity and the permission for artists to make money from what they do. Once the ability to make a living from art is criticised, we must ask where we stand in regards to all work and how people make a living? As someone once said, *all money is dirty money.*

The *Splasher Group* became the harshest of art and politics critics when they attacked all street art. There is plenty of validity in the criticism of Banksy and Fairey for using revolutionary chic to make millions. They do express radical politics in the art world to some extent and at least Banksy has continuously mocked the art industry, but now it would be more appropriate to consider them famous artists who sometimes put

their stuff on walls in public. In fact, they now commodify both the phenomenon of street art and general radical political images. However, other artists such as Swoon, who was also vandalised, are much more connected to the anarchist scene and the ideologies which the *Splasher group* draws much of their discourse from “and the destruction of her works led members of Visual Resistance and other anarchist groups to denounce and ridicule the Splashers and their project.” (*J. Cockroft*)

The *Splasher Group* managed to create a very valid critique of art and its role in gentrification but they totally dismissed artists as a whole and due to this stance created no possibility to make links with other groups and individuals. In terms of looking at gentrification they focused on a possible precursor rather than at the process and scapegoated a group of people rather than the factors and real players. It has been pointed out to me that some would find the state of gentrification in Brooklyn and New York city generally to be so



appalling that nothing other than a total attack on street art would be possible in dealing with the subject. Still, a constructive analysis of gentrification and street art would need something more thoughtful than their radical art criticism which falls short due to its simplistic approach.

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It is now 25 years since the Berlin wall fell and the city has been transformed massively. The end of the division of the city led to huge changes as the central parts close to Brandenburger Tor and Potsdamer Platz were quickly modernised and commercialised, whilst other parts of the city such as Friedrichshain were left empty after a mass exodus of citizens and soon occupied by squatters who moved in and created autonomous zones of experimentation and creativity. The new united German state gradually gathered its senses again and evictions and legalisations of buildings led to the inevitable reoccupation of the city by capitalist control. Eventually,

a form of gentrification saw evictions and transformations of the city as rents went up and new inhabitants moved in. The rent in Berlin is still considerably cheaper than most European capitals and many artists, bohemians, hipsters, communists, anarchists, media workers, musicians etc. were drawn to the city from both within Germany and beyond, and still are. Young hip families wanted to enjoy the thrills of Berlin, but also wanted clean streets and quiet nights as they started breeding. Property developers built new buildings and ridiculous car lofts (you drive your car into an elevator/garage which takes you and your car into your apartment!). These kind of new developments saw poorer people forced out of the apartments and the projects of the *autonomen* under attack as property became more desirable and the state sought to bring more control to the hip city.

As far as I know, street art has mostly (but not totally) avoided criticism by people participating in anti-gentrification struggles in Berlin even though the city has plenty of it. The facade of the epic Berlin ex-squat and radical space Köpi is adorned with paintings and the graffiti and street art aesthetics are common imagery in the radical scene rather than being blamed for gentrification. Instead, the anti-gentrification struggles have taken

on broad forms as coalitions such as *Mediaspree Versenken* which have gathered massive and continuous opposition against the property development of the Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain sides of the Spree river which cuts through the city. Similarly the *Wir Bleiben Alle* campaign has opposed the evictions of housing projects, squats and autonomous infrastructure in particular and gentrification and city planning policies in general. Recently, there have been cases of mass civil disobedience against evictions of long term residents in areas such as Kreuzberg which have seen massive rent increases. On top of this, a campaign of sabotage against new constructions combined with arson attacks against luxury cars, amounting to 100s per year, was long a popular militant activity that complimented the broader mobilisations to attempt to create a hostile and dangerous environment less attractive to gentrification. Along with creating hostility against the development of Berlin as a trendy metropolis, focus at some point became more personal as focus shifted from state and capital to individuals. Tourists, new foreigners and artists became scapegoats for gentrification as they were seen as pushing up rents and fuelling the new 'poor but sexy' Berlin which successfully focused on tourism and creativity as a top priority (this description was famously coined by Berlin's former mayor Klaus Wowereit). A small text appearing in the direct action publication *Interim* suggested



that tourists might become legitimate targets in the fight against gentrification and that you could 'steal their mobile phones and wallets as you walk by their cafe tables, burn their cars, smash their hotel windows, drop rubbish, throw stuff at tourist buses'. This relatively short suggestion for an 'Anti-tourism Campaign 2011' was widely publicised in both national and international media but largely criticised within the militant left. (It should be noted that the publication is illustrated by 3 images of Banksy stencils). Simultaneously, a low level hostility against foreign speaking newcomers from the 'western world' increased and 'artist' became equated with 'gentrification'. It is true that newcomers could afford the cheap prices and that landlords took advantage of this by not only ripping them off but increasing all rent in the areas. Similarly, artists were given cheap spaces for little shops and galleries by state and business initiatives who sought to transform areas such as Neukölln which had been labelled as a *no go area* for the police by tabloids such as *Bild*, but now host trendy bars, cafes and vegan pizzerias. Still, the general and radical hostility towards outsiders also met with resistance from within the radical scene who criticised the regional (*heimat*) pride which was inherent in such targeting. The most typical example of this might be the *Hipster Antifa* group who put up stencils with slogans like 'Smash Heimatschutz

(regional protection), *Tourists Against Xenophobia*' and stickers proclaiming a need for more 'tourists, hipsters, bavarians'. These are visual statements which parody and reject this new kind of misdirected xenophobia whilst pointing out the similarities with nazi German discourse.

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The targeting of individuals such as artists, newcomers and tourists in the fight against gentrification reeks of nationalism and misses the point. In the same way the *Splasher Group* fails to reach a practical critique of street art by offering absolutely nothing but anarcho art-criticism and dismissing a whole art form. There are moments in time when street art can seem to play into the hands of property developers whilst at other times it can be a resilient pest which pisses off city authorities. The struggle against gentrification can never be combined with the destruction of creativity, but at the same time creative individuals cannot claim total neutrality and ignorance if the products of their creativity are used for the benefit of capital and state. While Athens is re-inventing itself as an urban tourist destination, it might seem that tourists, hip bars, social centres, collective restaurants and street art are agents acting on behalf of the authorities. This is not true, but as street art is something which has been



used to fuel gentrification in other places it is impossible to not point it out as a form of creativity which has uses beyond initial intentions. For instance, there is a difference between a tag, a small political stencil, a sticker, a commissioned work by a corporation and a huge mural paid for by the city. Some pieces play into the hands of city development more than others. In crisis we especially don't have such great choices when it comes to what work we do, and many artists have to create things which they rather wouldn't but are forced to by the same economic circumstances that force most of us to go to jobs we hate.



There is another aspect to the destruction of street art which is worth pointing out. Whereas in Stockholm, as in many other cities, the authorities would have street art destroyed, in Brooklyn artworks would also be destroyed in the spirit of anti-gentrification. But in Athens attacks on street art often come from the fascists of *Chrysi Avgi* (Golden Dawn) and their buddies. Both of the Athenian street artists Mapet and WD have had their work vandalised by nazis. Mapet made an anti-fascist painting of an old man with the text "I fought the fascists and my grandchildren brought them back", but a piece by WD was just a painting of some indigenous children from the amazon and received the text "'Fuck your anti-racist propaganda- foreigners out" written across it. This doesn't mean that only the state and the fascists can sabotage street art, it can still be considered a valid tactic in some circumstances and perhaps in Brooklyn the actions of the *Splasher Group* did indeed make sense. If street artists take responsibility for the walls that they paint on and have an awareness of the developments of the city as active participants rather than one way producers, it might be useful sometimes to also sabotage street art and graffiti which

plays into the hands of state and capital. The difficult thing about this though is that as an active street artist, it is hard to decide what's ok and what's not. The open and inviting nature of street art means that anyone can create, so it is hard to then decide that someone is not creating in the right way. When it comes to one's own work however, destruction is easier.

Whilst writing this article a perfect example took place at a very historical location and to a famous piece of street art. The two most interesting areas in Berlin for alternative culture, in all their positive and negative forms, have long been Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain and a visual landmark which has been associated with the border of these two areas (one formerly west whilst the other formerly east respectively) is the set of paintings by the Italian street artist Blu. One image shows two characters unmasking themselves whilst holding up hand signs for East and West whilst the other, which was created more recently, shows a businessman with Rolex-like watches as handcuffs. In early December crowds gathered next to these massive murals, many yelling in protest, as the paintings were painted over by black paint. It was

not, however, the authorities or a property developer who was behind the action, but rather some of the friends of Blu who had helped him put the piece up in the first place, and were now destroying it with his consent as a protest towards the gentrification of Berlin. The artists involved in the creation of what could easily be considered Berlin's most iconic street art mural decided that it had to be destroyed as they did not want to be a part of the current Berlin, stating that:

"Gentrification in Berlin lately doesn't content itself with destroying creative spaces. Because it needs its artistic brand to remain attractive, it tends to artificially reanimate the creativity it has displaced, thus producing an 'undead city'. This zombification is threatening to turn Berlin into a museal city of veneers, the 'art scene' preserved as an amusement park for those who can afford the rising rents [...] From the first moment



of their existence, Blu's murals were doomed to disappear. It is the nature of street art to occupy space in celebration of its uncertainty, being aware of its temporality and fleeting existence."-
Lutz Henke

So all aspects of street art are relative to their current and shifting realities. The art form can be seen as destructive, it can be seen as something which should be destroyed and it can be destroyed by its creators when the time comes, when its meaning has changed with the changes of the city. Nothing is neutral, everything is fluid, and the street artist can choose how to be an active participant in the surroundings. The big problem with street art is the ability for capital to incorporate anything into itself. Groups like the *Onassis Foundation* and projects like *Living Athens* are initiatives which are purely representative of the interests of capital whilst at the same time promoting and supporting street art and graffiti in Athens. Groups like the *Atenistas* gather the good responsible citizens of Athens to clean up the city using a large

amount of street art techniques to transform parts of the centre which they feel has become too derelict. Their discourse stinks of smugness and middle class values. Whilst street art was illegal in Stockholm, the city of Bristol (home of Banksy) created a huge street art festival a few years ago which transformed the city centre into a massive gallery. Similar initiatives are behind many of the perfect pieces in central Athens. Capital is able to assimilate anything into a commodity and sell it on. Paint-splattered government buildings in Berlin have become tourist photo opportunities whilst holiday flats in Kreuzberg contain photographs of demonstrations and riots on the walls. Revolutionary edgy-ness and poverty chic are trendy commodities and those of us who desire revolt, mobility, alternative living, collective projects and creativity, as opposed to the predictable sterile lives that capital offers good citizens, are doomed to create and partake in processes and initiatives that can be absorbed, reworked and sold. And so it is with street art as with all anti-authoritarian projects, it must be adaptable and aware, free yet hostile, at least if it's to be considered antagonistic in any

way. We don't need any vanguardist radical art police to define which creativity is acceptable and which isn't, but we also need to have a clear understanding that well designed images on walls make areas more desirable- at least to some.

Whilst Athenian street art was an interesting side story for international journalists during the years of crisis and revolt, it is now mentioned more in the narrative of the new Athens and the urban tourism associated with the city. Even the *New York times* has labelled Berlin as 'over' but the 'poor but sexy', whilst radical and edgy, Athens is only recently starting to be mentioned as an alternative tourist destination. Campaigns such as *#ImAnAthenian* created by *Discover Greece* and Athens Airport are trying to create a new image of the Greek capital. British travel journalist Becky writes on her blog that 'on my recent visit as part of my 'I'm An Athenian' ambassadorship programme with *DiscoverGreece.com*, I got an insight into the growing trend of cultural 'co-working' spaces, new business

initiatives and the dedication locals have to community regeneration'. She goes on to write about various creative spaces and initiatives that are changing previously dangerous parts of central Athens as well as collectives and street art, and goes on a paid street art tour with a local artist. It is the reimagining of Athens as a whole that is for sale: the street art, the radical politics and the collective businesses.

So, this little journey through some cities around the world and their different scenarios has hopefully helped to investigate street art and its political and capitalist abilities. Here are some conclusions: Street art is not political by default, it can be used as a political expression and an active tool, but it can also play

into the hands of capitalists and the state to fit their agendas. The art form itself contains radical elements due to commonalities such as illegality, direct application (direct action), low financial necessities, no immediate financial return and the fact that anyone can do it. Athens is great for it and since there is so much freedom due to various circumstances, many people are involved. But Athens is also changing and there's a big chance that street art will increasingly be used for capitalist development which will have a negative economic effect on certain areas and might eventually lead to the kind of environment where street art is no longer tolerated. The fight against gentrification should not be directed against individuals, be they

street artists, tourists or collective small businesses. There are many other ways to fight. However, those of us involved in creating these images on the walls should have an awareness of how our creations might fit into a broader picture. Street art is not political by default nor without a consciousness of how it fits into the power dynamics of the city, and it is not radical if it is not antagonistic.

- Coraline

The author of this text wishes to point out that s/he also meddles in street art under a different pseudonym and is thereby not in any way impartial in the topics here discussed. -----



For further interest and reading:

- The Athenian *Political Stencil* group: images and text <http://www.politicalstencil.com/en>
- Athens stencils by Mapet: <https://mapetstencils.wordpress.com>
- Political Zoo: <http://politicalzoostencils.blogspot.gr/>
- An in depth analysis of the Splasher Group: James Cockroft, Street Art and the Splasher: Assimilation and Resistance in Advanced Capitalism, http://www.jamescockroft.com/graffiti/street_art/#n65
- The Stockholm based April Offensive: <http://www.offensiven.com>
- The street art advent calender: <http://kladdventskalendern.se>
- Statement on the destruction of Blu's murals in Berlin: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/19/why-we-painted-over-berlin-graffiti-kreuzberg-murals>

...and of course there's loads more out there on the walls and the internet!