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Street Art and Graffiti between
Commodification, Dissent and Oblivion

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Editorial

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Understanding Walls on the Periphery:

Street Art and Graffiti between Commodification, Dissent and Oblivion

“Street art represents the voice of the periphery”

— Alexandra Henry at Ljubljana Street Art Festival, 2022

The notion of the periphery usually serves as a starting point for critically examining and problematizing the contemporary dynamics of capitalism, ranging from global inequality to extractivism. This concept, however, may be also extended beyond the field of political-economic analysis (Wallerstein 2004) to embrace other socio-cultural dimensions. As Bazzini and Puttilli (2008, p. 23) argue, the transformation of cities in postmodernity has led to the disintegration of the relationship between center and periphery, giving rise to multiple centers and multiple peripheries. Thus, these multiplying centers and peripheries are not only mere political, geographic, urbanistic typologies—and we could add topologies—but encompass also fluid cultural and symbolic flows (ibid.; see Appadurai, 1996), making them dialogic and relational. If we are to understand peripheries relationally (cf. Massey, 1994), then at the level of the production of social space, we must highlight their dialogic, communicative, transverse power/capabilities, and the inscribed meanings that are transmitted across and through these multiple peripheries, multiple centers. One such vehicle is the artistic, activist and political practices within urban space encapsulated in the often contested notion of ‘street art’ and, by extension, ‘graffiti’.

This thematic issue is a direct result of the international conference “Periphery of Street Art / Street Art on the Periphery”, held as part of the Ljubljana Street Art Festival in 2022. The two-day event merged the rigor and freshness of academic papers with the multimodal artist interventions, including artists’ presentations, film screenings, installations and photo essays. It took two years after the initial call for papers to ripen and recombine into a collection of contributions that deal with the interplay of street art and peripheries, both in terms of space-power relations and from the perspective of liminal, extra-institutional street art practices and historically significant, but marginalized and neglected, graffiti-scapes. The idea of having such a broad spectrum was twofold. On the one hand, we wanted to focus on the (geographical) periphery of street art as a political, activist practice, as a past and present “weapon of the weak”, to use the notion of anthropologist James C. Scott. On the other, we felt the need to address hidden, liminal street art practices on the peripheries; those that emerge in the translocal and transformative field of non-heteronormative, queer and feminist street art; those that embody the emancipatory potentials of wall-writing as a direct-democratic medium; and finally, those that point to the ingenious and playful transformation of street art into new forms and synergies with performative forms of expression, new media, intermedia and other formats.

The thematic issue somewhat aims to follow this design. It presents studies dealing with graffiti-scapes on the periphery of memory (Ušić) and the historical analysis of proto-street art manifestations (Konda). It focuses on the processes of

co-optation of street art and its symbolic, aesthetic and commercial transfer from the urban peripheries to creative, artistic and urban centers (Abram), as well as on street art practices in subaltern political and social movements (Tunić, Proehl). Finally, it explores the potential of artistic (re)appropriation of the medium to challenge the ephemeral nature of street art (Tremblin).

Eric Ušić's article takes us back to World War II and its symbolic and material traces in the peripheral Northern Adriatic borderland, exploring a particular graffitiscap composed by political inscriptions and symbols written by antifascist and communist activists almost 80 years ago. After a concise portrayal of the historical context of this proto-graffiti production, the article shows how these writings, that are celebrating Tito, Yugoslavia, antifascism and Stalin, are defying the passage of time and radical socio-political changes in their environment, conveying a multi-faceted and complex image of the past embedded in the present landscape. As such, the author understands the World War II graffitiscap as a neglected open-air archive made of unfiltered texts and scattered notes that conserve and transmit particular historical experiences and memories. While dissecting and interpreting several features and meanings of the graffiti-scape, the author highlights its historical, archival, cultural and memorial significance as an integral layer of the borderland's memory landscape, a layer that has very often been marginalized or simply ignored.

Helena Konda's text presents the artist collective Mizzart, one of the earliest groups of street artists in Ljubljana (Slovenia) that were active in the 1980s and 1990s. She contextualizes Mizzart's practices and public interventions within both the local and broader artistic, activist and socio-political landscape of the time, situating Mizzart as one of the earliest, if not the first, street art collective in the city, evaluating its cultural and historical significance. This positioning of Mizzart within the emerging field of proto-street art allows her to explore in detail the pioneers of street art on the global semi-periphery as well as their (dis)connections with the phenomenon of graffiti and street art. Konda argues that Mizzart can be understood as a proto-street artist collective within the framework of

(in)tangible cultural heritage that emerged on the margins of the 'transition' from socialism to capitalism.

Sandi Abram's article examines the (side)effects of neoliberalism in relation to street art. Relying on perceptive theoretical insights intertwined with prolific empirical findings and ethnographic experiences, Abram put forward a comprehensive and multi-layered study of the city of Ljubljana (Slovenia), delving deep into its spatial transformations that occurred under neoliberal urbanist pressures in general, and the correlated processes of touristification and gentrification in particular. On one hand, the article explores the modalities and repercussions of street art's cooptation and commodification that is exercised following the neoliberal 'creative city' ideologeme, with street art functioning as one of its constitutive aesthetic element in the apparent de-ideologization of urban space. On the other hand, it focuses on critical responses, spatial re-appropriations and wall-writing dissents by street artists, graffiti writers and political activists that employ street art and graffiti as tools and media for their radical activism aimed at criticizing, subverting and demystifying the neoliberal grip on public space, contesting and disrupting what the author calls "the muralization of capital".

Srđan Tunić presents a detailed investigation of the street art and public interventions of the artist Nikša in Belgrade (Serbia) and his street endeavor called Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled (IYW). Tunić provides a microbiography of IYW, situating the project in the complex socio-cultural and political landscape of Serbia, which is characterized on one hand by retraditionalization, ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism—all endemic features of post-socialist countries—and on the other by the LGBTQ+ community and the multifaceted problems it faces. The appearance of IYW in the form of street art represents a poetic, perhaps even distinctive and provocative intervention in urban space, effectively subverting the often-present graffitied hate-speech, radical football fan discourses, and homophobic language. Visually enriched with numerous photos, the article shows the street-level resistance against the normalization of hateful rhetoric, which extends from parliamentary politics to the city streets. Tunić's analysis

of the semiotic, aesthetic, spatial, and linguistic tactics employed by IYW highlights the impact, yet also its limits, of the project on the norms and articulation of LGBTQ+ identity within a turbulent social context.

Kyle Proehl's contribution is a comparative exploration and philosophical reflection of graffiti, structured as a series of separate theses covering various aspects – from the graffiti's cultural relevance, a variety of socio-political issues and specific situations, to photography in particular. By questioning the interplay between street art/graffiti, along with the dichotomy between center/periphery, Proehl proposes to think of graffiti in its dual nature, both as text and image: "When it comes to describing graffiti as creative or destructive, or as text or image, one must have it both ways" Proehl argues, especially when analyzing graffiti within the context of social crises. Proehl explores the manifestations of various localized crises and social turmoil in a comparative study that takes us on a journey from the degraded areas of New York City to insurgent Oaxaca (Mexico) and Santiago (Chile). Drawing on a range of theoretical work, the article contends that graffiti is more than just an act of vandalism. In Proehl's view, graffiti is coarse, vulgar and a critical medium; it represents a form of "wild aestheticization" at the riots and ruins, reflecting the contradictions and conflicts embedded in contemporary neoliberal conditions.

Mathieu Tremblin explores the transformative nature of street art by introducing the concept of 'pentimento' to locate the intersections between different layers and signs that emerge in the process of overpainting. Through a semiotic and visual exploration, he highlights the socio-political, historical, (sub)cultural, aesthetic and affective characteristics of the practice of intervention onto particular artworks in public space. By examining a series of case studies of artists, activists and public artworks, he points to a wide range of effects, (sub)cultural and political potentials, social tensions and aesthetic novelties that can be inferred, or be deciphered from overpainting murals and other works. The text attempts to reconcile the ephemeral nature of street art with its impact on urban landscapes. The discussion focuses on the tension between (commissioned) murals ('art') and unauthorized graffiti ('vandalism'). It is

proposed that urban overpaintings should not only be seen as vandalism, but as a productive dialog between artists, a (self-)reflection of social dynamics, and perhaps even as a development of (or demand for) public art that provokes a reconsideration of notions such as cultural heritage and urban aesthetics.

Last but not least, we hope the compelling collection will invite the readers to reconsider the boundaries, peripheries of street art as a medium for social commentary and creative transformation, even if it appears on its surface only temporary and/or destructive.

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