Graffiti, Street Art and Murals Against the Neoliberal City: Wall-Written Dissensus

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Abstract
The text explores graffiti, street art, and murals in the context of the neoliberal city, highlighting the transformation of these forms in the context of growing commodification, touristification and gentrification of urban space. Through an ethnographic research in Ljubljana (Slovenia), the study illuminates the wall-written dissensus against the current production of abstract space. Special attention is given to the visual transformation in autonomous zones, especially how squatter communities, and in particular an anarcha queer feminist group, use graffiti and street art as media for voicing radical activism, while relying on collective muralism to build a political community. The paper argues for a nuanced understanding of the role of graffiti, street art and murals in the context of the neoliberal city and within social movements, emphasizing the multi-layered nature of political graffiti and street art as a form of radical political activism.

Keywords: graffiti, street art, gentrification, touristification, urban social movements, squatting, Ljubljana

1. Introduction

Jack Hirschman's poem The Graffiti Arcane, later part of his magnum opus The Arcanes, opens with the line "The code the kid, now fled, spraycanned on the wall / there is a hieroglyph and a defiance, / and the particles thereof" (1995, p. 1). In the poem, Hirschman weaves his ode to the idiosyncratic code with an allusion to a now-absent graffiti tagger and the persistent figure drawn with a black marker (in fact, the lettering read 'REDISTRIBUTE'). These inscriptions, which persist on the vertical surfaces of the cityscape, were portrayed as nothing less than "act[s] of the revolutionary" (ibid.). Hirschman, a prolific author with a keen eye, reflects in his pamphlet-poem (Hirschman, 1995) on what he has witnessed: the process of 'bombing' the streets of New York City, the creation of an extensive array of tags and/or throw-ups in a specific area, in the cradle and long-standing epicenter of this puzzling communicational medium. Graffiti culture, originating in the peripheries of urban centers, began by appropriating Henri Lefebvre's abstract space – piece by piece, tag by tag at a time. Often, spaces such as former military infrastructures, abandoned industrial buildings, old residential complexes, and railway station yards in deteriorating urban neighborhoods turned into zones of creativity, expression, and resistance.

This paper attempts to trace these acts of political activists in Ljubljana (Slovenia) who take up spray cans to assert their right to expression, their 'right to the city'. By anchoring the ethnographic research in various squatter communities and an anarcha queer feminist group, I highlight their wall-written dissensus against the current production of abstract space in the city. I begin by contextualizing the visual language of graffiti, street art and murals in autonomous zones. I then proceed to a detailed exploration of various graffiti interventions performed by a leftist sub-political group, conceptualized as a media for expressing radical activism. The analysis culminates in an examination of collective muralism that is understood by this group as a platform that facilitates the reproduction of a (sense of) radical political community. My analysis is informed by the graffitiscape that I have encountered on foot during my fieldwork and experienced in my daily life in Ljubljana. First, the autoethnographic material stems from a serendipitous fieldwork in the urban space from 2017–2024. Central to it were everyday walks that allowed me a spontaneous, grounded, and perhaps even a surprising window into the ever-evolving geographies of graffiti and street art. This practicing of urban anthropology on foot is situated in the framework of "new walking studies" (Lorimer, 2011),

an interdisciplinary field that combines mobilized social research with critical arts practice (ibid.; see also Abram and Bajič 2022). These goal-oriented everyday walkscapes—from dog-walking, running errands to commuting-on-bicycle to my workplace—allowed me to sight wall-written urban tapestry, and eventually to collect material textures of places in transformation, even those that turned out to be short-lived. Second, I relied on systematic ethnographic research conducted between 2023–2024. The fieldwork included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, reflective follow-up group discussions, graffiti research walks, and informal conversations with activists from a radical leftist political group who, during my research period, generated a substantial amount of "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) that offer critical perspectives on the dominant power structures and, by extension, the hegemonic neoliberal urbanism that characterizes contemporary Ljubljana.

Adopting Scott's notion of hidden records, which represent the discourses of the powerless against the prevailing power dynamics, I therefore extend my everyday walking practice of following the graffitiscape, by "following the people" (Marcus 1995, p. 106) writing graffiti. Thanks to my thick presence and participation (Grønlykke Mollerup, 2017; Samudra, 2008) in the autonomous zones and digital media (Abram, 2023), I could observe the street art and graffiti production that was taking place in squats and beyond. The graffiti jams, spontaneous walks, cultural and sports events, protest marches, political gatherings, street protests and other occasions, as well as browsing digital media platforms and participating in direct communication channels, proved to be insightful windows into the practices of activists and artivists who questioned and challenged, yet also unintentionally aligned themselves with the neoliberal remodeling of Ljubljana's urban space.

2. Graffiti and Murals in Ljubljana's Squats and Beyond

The empirical material provides an insight into the political activism scene of two autonomous zones in Ljubljana: Autonomous Cultural Centre Metelkova and the former Autonomous Factory Rog. Both autonomous zones, characterized by their resistance and perceptiveness towards gentrification and touristification (cf. Abram and Siegrist, *forthcoming*), have become vessels for waves of visual protest communication. For instance, both squats already in the early stages of the growing tourist arrivals highlighted the pressing issue of overtourism within the city and the autonomous zones. In 2017, in Metelkova, in front of the mural-adorned social bar Jalla Jalla, a handmade cardboard sign stated "*no photos of people / this is not a zoo*",[1] with an accompanying symbol of a crossed-out camera, pointing to the squatters' disdain for the objectification, even voyeurism of certain bypassing tourists and tour groups on the "hunt" for an "authentic" (Zukin, 2008) experiences. In a similar vein, at the Autonomous Rog, a touristophobic placard made of cardboard read "*days without tourists being injured: 2"*, with the number two added as a sticky note. Pointing to the disturbances of uninvited tourist visits, an alert below additionally stated "*cameras or phones will not be repaid! (you have been warned)*." Unlike the subcultural graffiti covering almost every vertical inch in these spaces, the political graffiti, and occasionally also political street art—such as stickers, stencils, paste-ups, posters—articulate the pressing issues these squats face, including mass tourism, eviction, and gentrification.

In Metelkova, a complex of former military barracks that was squatted in the early 1990s, a noteworthy political campaign emerged in response to the municipality's plans to build a health center nearby and expand the existing Celica hostel, thereby threatening to demolish the graffiti Hall of Fame.[2] To raise the awareness about the planned demolition, various forms of street art, including murals, stencils, and graffiti, were (spray) painted with messages such as "*fewer carparks / more playgrounds*" (manj parkirišč, več igrišč) and "*playground is not a parking lot.*" The graffiti on the Hall of Fame announced to "*defend*

1 - All verbatim graffiti is transcribed and translated, and presented in italics. Moreover, I also provide a few of the original transcriptions of graffiti. To improve the readability and accessibility of the text, all graffiti transcriptions have been standardized by replacing the frequent use of capital letters with small caps. Transcriptions and translations of interviews are anonymized and indicated in italics as well.

2 - This bundle of U-shaped, 90-metre long walls has been an integral part of Metelkova since 1993, serving not only as a legal canvas for artistic and political expression, but also as a community space for various team sports.

Metelkova" coupled with the declaration "*fuck Ljubljana / the capital of gentrification*". These visual protests, and many others,[3] encapsulate the squatters' opposition to urban gentrification and the commodification of the autonomous space.

The second case of anti-gentrification and anti-tourism graffiti in Ljubljana's squats concerns the abandoned bicycle factory known as the Autonomous Rog Factory. Squatted in 2006 until its eviction in 2021, the approximately 8,000-square meter site along the Ljubljanica River housed more than 25 indoor spaces for art, activism and sports, including art studios and galleries, concert halls, dance and performance studios, multipurpose sports fields (e.g. football, martial arts, skate park, gym) and various spaces for political activism (Avtonomna Tovarna Rog, 2024). In the summer of 2016, the municipality's attempt to evict this autonomous zone failed. Subsequently, a wave of solidarity for the Autonomous Rog Factory and protest against the municipality's actions manifested itself through political graffiti and street art. While wheat-pasted posters depicted police robocops and denounced "*the social cleansing of the city*", the graffiti proclaimed "*on the living barricades / for Rog*", "*let's defend Rog*", and "*leave Rog alone*", the latter accompanied by a stenciled portrait of the mayor. The mayor of Ljubljana appeared in several of these visual narratives, such as the sticker with his image and the caption "*stop the dictatorship of gentrification*".

The bulldozer emerged as another symbol associated with the Autonomous Rog Factory after 2016. During the attempted eviction in summer 2016, squatters seized and sabotaged a bulldozer that had breached the squatted premises. After the squatters painted the entire machine bright pink in the midst of the anti-eviction resistance, the pink bulldozer immediately became both a symbol of resistance against municipal actions and a marker of community identity, reproduced in various forms such as stencils, posters, graffiti, stickers, ad busting, and even tattoos and DIY merchandise. The color pink found its way onto the squat's facade. In June 2016, a month marked by the celebration of the successful resistance against the eviction and the mobilization against further interventions by municipality and right-wing groups, the Autonomous Rog Factory welcomed the artist BLU from Italy. BLU was invited to paint a solidarity mural as a "gesture of support to the autonomous zone" (Rokavec, 2021), and created a mural on the front facade, featuring a pink-and-red pistol with other objects representing various political realities of the Autonomous Rog Factory. However, Rog and BLU's mural were subjected to erasure. In January 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Autonomous Rog Factory was evicted in a municipality-led, orchestrated action involving plainclothes, unmarked enforcers, private security firms (with right-wing employees), riot police and a construction company tasked with demolishing the building's structures and interior to render it 'unsquattable' (i.e. uninhabitable and inaccessible). The eviction only reinforced the visual narrative that problematized, first, the municipality's brutal use of force and, second, the consequences of this urbicide. Clear and ambiguous expressions such as "*Rog lives!*", "*Rog*" (with the stylized letter "O" as a squatters' symbol), "*Rog back in the city*", "*bulldozers for all*", "*death to bulldozers*" spread and became emblematic of a broader protest that materialized on walls, pavements, signs, billboards, streetlights, and other urban surfaces.

However, after the eviction and erasure of the political, sporting, and creative realities housed in the Autonomous Rog Factory, the question of the fate of BLU's mural (Figure 1) remained unanswered for a while. In contrast to the discourse, which often declares graffiti to be spray-painted eyesore, the municipality recognized the mural's aesthetic

3 - As a destination of one of the main tourist corridors in the city, Metelkova also faces the pressure of intersectional social complexities brought about by growing tourism, such as the issue of drug distribution by the local population, asylum seekers, migrants, as well as drug abuse leading to sexual assault and interpersonal violence. The issues were addressed through various debates and forms of public demonstration, including night-time flash mobs. However, in an effort to communicate the issue directly to the various temporary populations visiting Metelkova, including tourists, a series of multilingual posters were wheat-pasted in and around the premises of the squat. The protest posters, written in Slovenian, English, Arabic, Farsi and Italian, urged visitors not to engage in drug transactions, with messages such as "Metelkova against racism / drug dealing / violence / sexism" and "no to violence and drug dealing in Metelkova". "Do you want to help the community? Don't buy drugs here".

Figure 1. Broken-windowed and evicted Rog, with BLU's mural in the back. Source: Martha Cooper (30 June 2021)

value painted by the infamous muralist, whereupon the local authorities declared that they would "seek the opinion of experts in the field of graffiti art on the advisability of retaining the graffiti in another location" (in Rokavec, 2021). But six months later, the municipality demolished the mural, officially for financial reasons, as the cost of relocation was estimated at 90,000 euros (šum, 2021), and replaced it with a new steel-and-glass extension on the façade.

Similar to Berlin or Bologna (see Henke, 2014; Pavoni, 2021; Tremblin, this issue), activists from Rog engaged with BLU shortly after the municipality announced the possibility of preserving and/or relocating the mural. The assembly, made up of local activists, graffiti writers and international street artists, was ready for a defacement action with paint guns. BLU took a stance of solidarity with Rog, affirming "the piece is yours and that of all the comrades who defended Rog [in 2016]" (BLU, e-mail communication, 2021), and endorsed any form of activist/artist-led destruction necessary: "I agree with any destructive action you want to do on the piece" (ibid.). From this we can see that the endeavor to deface the mural was not a simply legalistic dispute over the *rights* to the mural itself, as it was part of the commoning (the mural and squatted Rog were two sides of the same coin). Rather, the case was another example of the deep and protracted conflict marked by a radical asymmetry of power between the forces of property speculation, privatization and ultimately eviction, and the various resistances of the squatting community against them – a struggle over the gentrification of place *and* the 'gentrification' of politics. This aesthetic-political recuperation manifested itself later in the form and content of the newly founded Center Rog, where a significant part of the radical, subversive, leftist ideas/practices that once spirited in the autonomous Rog and beyond were co-opted and repurposed by the local elites and authorities into a 'gentrified', left-(neo)liberal framework (Bajič and Abram, *forthcoming*).

Figure 2. Mural by Ambasada Rog (bottom left) and mural of Centre Rog (right). Source: left, Ambasada Rog (4 October 2023), right (Sandi Abram 30 March 2024)

Although the case outlined above echoes many of the current controversies surrounding the preservation politics applied to *certain* murals and uncommissioned graffiti (e.g., Curralo, 2015; García Gayo and Santabárbara Morera, 2022; Merrill, 2011; Pavoni, 2021; Shank, 2022), which are, in one way or another, commodified and/or destroyed, the painted surfaces in Rog tell a different story; one that highlights the displacement of a squatters community and the subsequent appropriation of media, cultural identity, historical struggles and commoning spaces. In 2023, after the municipal investment of 27 million euros in the renovation of the building structure, now refashioned as Centre Rog, another commissioned mural appeared on its premises. The new mural was placed on a wall of a vacated grassroots organization in the former squat that brought together refugees, workers, and activists to foster community networking and provide free meals, education, and socio-legal support to migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. This wall, which bore the symbol of the Autonomous Rog and was originally painted by refugees, became the canvas for a post-demolition urban art project, in which an artist from Serbia created a mural depicting a female cyclist—a visual reference to the products of the former socialist industrial site—yet completely leaving out of sight Rog's more recent, squatting history. The author of the mural explained that she wanted to honor those "who had to fight for their rights, not those who inherited power" (Danilović in Kokol, 2023). According to her, the mural is meant "to speak to the people who are experiencing the problems I'm talking about." (ibid.). In response, the displaced grassroots organization pointed out the irony of placing a mural, one supposedly embodying freedom and

the struggle for (gender) rights, at the very same site of the urbicide committed by the Municipality of Ljubljana (see Figure 2), criticizing the oblivion of the historical and social context (Ambasada Rog, 2023). They further commented on the Centre Rog as a project aimed at displacing the less affluent people from the city center to then accommodate the wealthy residents and investors into the locale (ibid.).[4]

Last but not least, the controversies, ambivalences and tensions surrounding muralism in contested urban spaces (cf. Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017),[5] such as Rog, call for a deeper reconsideration of the dynamics between autonomous zones, street art and neoliberal policies. If both political graffiti and solidarity-oriented murals within autonomous zones often serve as bold expressions of activist wall-written dissensus against the neoliberal approaches to urban development, does this not *ipso facto* render them immune to the incorporation into the dominant regimes of urban development that praise the 'creative' *and*, when opportune, the 'edgy', the 'subversive'.[6] As the example of the murals in Rog shows, the aesthetic, commodity and ideological incorporation not only co-opts and recuperates the alternative media and its radical aesthetics associated with commoning spaces and activist spheres into the neoliberal regime, but also seeks to recalibrate through negation, erasure and veneering these forms against the political subjectivities that originally aimed, by the very same means of expression, to criticize the neoliberal, creative city agenda. The technical process of beautifying new speculative investments in the urban space is thus not just a mere *technique* for maximizing the exchange value of space, but moves towards becoming an ideological *project* (as embodied by Rog).

By and large, revitalizing a space that is already vital and lively, as occurred in the case of the evicted Autonomous Rog, is tantamount not only to the negation of its existing liveliness and life, but also to the institutional repression and euthanasia of all forms of collective creativity and insurgent politics that it harbors, rendering it an urban cadaver ready to be possessed and conquered (Abram, 2017). This strategic dispossession and subjugation of life to the power of death in order to accumulate capital is what Banerjee (2006) calls necrocapitalism (see also Mbembe, 2003). Such necrocapitalist practices resonate with Lennon's (2021) observations on urban revitalisation through street art. Building on Lennon's (2021, p. 174; 189) insights, street art-driven revitalisation—which harnesses street art to mask the impact of gentrification on marginalized urban residents (e.g. minorities, the poor, refugees, squatters)—first kills the original creative *and* political, social spaces. It then defaces "the city's corpse with its murals […] reanimating the creativity it has displaced" (Lennon 2021, p. 174), thereby producing 'zombie' city spaces that only the wealthy can enjoy and afford (ibid.).

While the role of street art and urban art in the revitalization of cities has already been acknowledged (e.g. Abram, 2008; Campos and Sequeira, 2020; Curralo, 2015; Garrido Castellano and Raposo, 2023; Lennon, 2021; Parker and Khanyile, 2024; Schacter, 2014; Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017), the critical question, highlighted against the backdrop of Rog, remains of how commodity-oriented, politically harmonizing street art and the new muralism are deployed in the service of producing an abstract space, a homogeneous space, in the words of Lefebvre (1991, p. 151), with a high degree of segregation. The question therefore arises as to how both forms—street art and

4 - This elementary definition of gentrification was later echoed also by the mayor himself, who admitted that "because the old Rog no longer exists, but there's the new Rog", the value of the surrounding residential buildings will at least double (Janković in N1, 2023).

5 - Muñoz Morán (2017) recounts how the political assembly of La Carbonería squat in Barcelona was initially reluctant to create a new collective mural on the façade of the squatted building, as the existing mural had already become one of the tourist attractions.

6 - Reflecting on the controversial removals of BLU's murals in Bologna, which were also placed on local squats, Pavoni (2021) concludes that the graffiti and street art community can only retain its political potential if it resists the ongoing aestheticization of contemporary capitalism. This resistance to the commodification of urban space would "require rescuing its vandalizing quality – not necessarily in the illegal sense but, more profoundly, against the constellation of art, experience and preservation, which remains dominant in the current urban aesthetic regime, and is responsible for the ongoing objectification and exploitation of the UC [urban commons]" (Pavoni, 2021, p. 150).

new muralism—can arrive to be redressed as practical toolkits of the neoliberal aesthetics of gentrification. With allusion to "artwashing" (Pritchard, 2020), it is inviting to refer to this subgenre of neoliberal aesthetics makeovers that "suppresses and replaces cultures of resistance" (Montgomery in Lennon, 2021, p. 17) as street artwashing (see also Schacter, 2014). I understand street artwashing as process of de-ideologization within the framework of gentrification, where street art is utilized as a veneer to sanitize, depoliticize and mask urbicides, only to, afterwards, on its ruins, re-create visually appealing, commodified urban areas that absorbs and/or impede alternatives.[7]

Although a variety of groups and individuals problematize such mechanisms, often defacing the urban art paintings on public walls with colors and/or spray cans, the ideology producing aesthetic effects, to borrow Althusser, behind such walls is, due to structural conditions, reproduced on the local level even within radical leftist circles who otherwise use graffiti as a means of confrontation with neoliberal urbanism, as we will see in the following pages. The next section thus deals with the members of an anarcha queer feminist[8] collective from Ljubljana, which operates under the name 'Pink Walls Gang' (hereinafter: the PWG), who, by using the vast arsenal of graffiti and street art, confront and critique with the same force both the real estate developers and municipal politics, yet hesitate to intervene on the street artwashed walls that are putting a stronger grip on Ljubljana as representatives of the aesthetics of the creative city.

3. Pink Walls Gang: Splashing Radical Urban Artivism and Painting Queer Feminist Anarchism

The PWG is an anarcha queer feminist group from Ljubljana. The fluid size of the group can range from a few people to a few dozen, depending on the context. PWG engages in a range of grassroots tactics, strategies, and practices to address intersectional issues including migration, (trans) gender rights, militarism, and various facets of neoliberal urban challenges such as displacement, pauperization, and touristification. Their activism extends to manifesting solidarity with translocal social movements and radical left political initiatives, spanning from Poland, Rojava to Chiapas and elsewhere. Insights into their perspectives on politics of urban creativity were gleaned from participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal (group) discussions, complemented by my encounters with the PWG during graffiti research walks and my substantive presence at political and cultural events in and beyond autonomous zones (see Abram, 2023).

With a smile on their faces, the PWG members make it clear on our first group discussion that they are not solely responsible for all the anti-touristification and anti-gentrification graffiti in the city, nor are these two issues their sole focus. They use graffiti strategically to highlight "*the broader social situation in which we find ourselves. […] We want to raise awareness about issues that we consider critical; those that remain marginalized from the perspective that we advocate.*" The PWG activists are deeply involved both as (co)organizers and participants in a variety of mobilizing campaigns, community-building projects, and international networking events. The origin of the collective is closely linked to the Autonomous Rog. The eviction of the latter propelled them to another silent squatting project on the city's periphery called Mačjak (lit. Cat's Den), with a discreet occupation of the building structures, without attracting

7 - This preclusion germinates also in a cunning consideration of the dominant unwritten rules of the graffiti subculture, which disapproves of any transgression of the aesthetic hierarchy that its members nourish. To simplify and generalize: a subcultural graffiti can only be covered up by a more elaborate form and style of graffiti, with murals and pieces crowning this structure.

8 - Queer anarchism, also known as anarcha-queer feminism, is an anarchist theory and practice that seeks autonomy from patriarchy, the state, capital, imperialism, and colonialism. It offers a radical critique of the assimilation and commodification of the LGBTQIA+ movement and community, advocating for gender(s) liberation, a revolution in sexuality, and communal forms of being. It rejects all forms of hierarchy, exclusion, domination, and violence (Avtonomne feministke, 2017; Daring et al., 2012).

Figure 3. Ad-busting by PWG. The original ad for a home décor company "And my home revives" spray-painted with "*what home???*". Source: Pink Walls Gang (n. d.)

unnecessary public attention. Following the recent harsh 'revitalization' of this isolated, degraded post-industrial area, which saw the demolition of the former industrial complex to pave the way for a large private housing project, the PWG was displaced again.

Graffiti, in the widest possible interpretation of the word, are one facet of the PWG's wall-to-wall radical and alternative (for the differences in terminology; see Atton, 2001, p. 9-19) grassroots tactics, strategies, and practices (see Boyd and Oswald Mitchell, 2012). These range from ad-busting, flash mobs, creative infiltrations, protest blockades, banner drops, demonstration marches, space reappropriations, to the production of texts and political materials, including screen-printed merchandise, pins, posters, badges, leaflets, and zine-making. As one PWG member put it while lighting a hand-rolled cigarette, graffiti is "*just one of the things we do and one of the media we use*." For the PWG, graffiti in the broadest sense means using all the hues of the colorful palette often associated with graffiti, as well as political street art and mural painting, including spray cans, paint markers, and brushes. But the PWG's toolkit for communicating messages onto walls also includes stickers, paint bombs, paste-ups, and stencils applied to various urban canvases. Albeit the choice of media and methods for voicing their dissent with the dominant neoliberal paradigm and promoting the presence of anarcha queer feminist ideology in the local urban setting is diverse, political graffiti and murals stand out as two dominant forms. The next subchapter is dedicated to the PWG's graffiti and the next to their practice and understanding of muralism.

3.1. Messages over Aesthetics: Graffiti as Radical Activism

First and foremost, members of the PWG harness graffiti as a radical media for articulating their activism and ideology. Although in my walking explorations of Ljubljana's graffitiscape, I observed the PWG's preferential use of pink, violet, and black, their choice of color is rather opportunistic: "*we just take whatever we get. And you work with it without fretting over whether the colors will match. If you run out of spray paint for the last three letters [of the graffiti], you'll simply wait for some passerby with a spray can to complete your piece – three weeks later.*" According to the PWG, the act of inscribing political messages on walls is not only cheap and quick executed but also yields a powerful effect on random readers, rendering the graffiti impossible to miss. They describe graffiti as "*obtrusive. […] You can't 'hide' from street graffiti - much like the ads that are shoved right in your face. […] You're forced to read them, just like with commercials. In this sense, graffiti are anti-ads. And that's the cool thing about graffiti.*" They underscore a critical distinction from commercial advertisements, which they regard as visual pollution subject to periodic replacement. By contrast, *some* graffiti is etched on urban walls for extended periods of time, reaching and resonating with a wider audience.

While acknowledging the power of social media to disseminate political messages on 'digital walls', the PWG argues that graffiti boasts a far greater reach, with a multiplying effect, when strategically placed and crafted. If done in the right place, at the right time, and with the right words, spray-painted messages, they note, have the potential to be seen by hundreds, if not thousands, in the case they find their way into popular social media feeds, amplifying their original location-based constraints. For the PWG, graffiti is also a way of distilling theoretical abstractions into tangible, everyday experiences that resonate with the general public (see Figure 3). For example, the graffiti "*where are the cherry trees?*", inscribed after a street lined with cherry trees was cut down during the reconstruction, is more of grounded thought than 'gentrification' written on the wall.

The main impulse behind the PWG's graffiti writing comes from the radical freedom inherent in this direct public communication. The walls serve as "*the only place where you can express your message to the public without any permission and bureaucracy. You can't do it any other way.*" The collective and anonymous authorship of graffiti, particularly in "*tricky locations*" (areas with foot traffic and surveillance), is seen as a "*team sport*" characterized by adrenaline, practice, skill, and unity in action. The PWG's approach to graffiti oscillates between what might be described as apollonian and dionysian practices.

Apollonian practice involves careful preparation and consideration. The execution is well-organized and coordinated, often with like-minded political collective subjects, who strive for clarity and precision. The political graffiti writing, carried out collectively, draws attention to pressing socio-political issues in order to make them visible

in public space. In this way, it seeks to provoke reactions from individuals, political institutions, and the mass media. Such type of political graffiti writing, or what the PWG calls "*raketiranje*" (literally 'rocketing,' similar to graffiti bombing), is typically used for mobilization campaigns, with a focus on the city center, where the group vocally expresses its discontent with gentrification and touristification. "*Our analysis is liquid*," explains a member of the PWG, as if invoking Zygmunt Bauman, adding that they reflect on their engagement with the urban situation at every step of the way. They analyze it, she says

Each and every single day – every time you walk through the city; every time you have to pay the rent; every time you realize you don't have a place of your own; every time you go for a coffee and pay more for it; every time you can't get to the city center because there is no public transport; every time the city center is blocked off and closed off. (PWG, 2024)

Rooted in militant analysis, collective walking exploration and grassroots aesthetics, the PWG's apollonian graffiti aim to "*exploit public walls*" and attack those who are in the "*private, elitist*" sphere. The choice of micro-sites for graffiti is guided by strategy and solidarity, in the hope of achieving an almost Althusserian (2000) interpellation.

You choose the places [to write graffiti] where there are no people in the same shit as you. […] And with the messages, you hope that some will empathize with what's written on the wall. […] Someone has the right to shape a space in their own way, but someone else, who is also a user of that same space, does not have that right. With graffiti you create your own place, what is painted over at any given moment is yours. Not your own, but rather it expresses the thoughts of people, of a group that otherwise has no space to express their opinion. You hope that someone else will recognize the message and go in a different direction. (PWG, 2024)

In the heart of the gentrifying city center, the PWG sets its sights on commodified housing spearheaded by place entrepreneurs, real estate speculators, and private investors, all aiming to maximize the exchange value of place through developments such as villa-style apartment blocks, high-end hotels, and luxury residences. The graffiti (and paint bombs; see below) they deploy against the new quartz-white facades, fresh concrete textures, and sleek steel-and-glass constructions of these edifices articulate their right to the city and their ideological repudiation of neoliberal urbanism: "*We want to say, 'Hey, we don't like this, and we're going to paint over you the way we think it should be, at least on the exterior'. Of course, the owner will be informed [that the façade was painted], which serves as an indirect threat, a warning.*" Through handwritten protests and colorful, dripping dissent, the PWG claims to be putting pressure not only on well-heeled homeowners and speculative investors, but also on construction companies and property development firms. When a leading international real estate giant, with a significant stake in Ljubljana's construction sector, announced the development of a "sustainable and green" business complex under the banner "kind to nature, kind to people" (Corwin Slovenija, 2024), a PWG activist rhetorically countered on a signboard with "*for whom is such 'luxury' intended? Certainly not for us.*"

Other aerosol interventions by the PWG highlight the harsh reality of gentrification, with declarations such as "*gentrification kills (A)*", emphasizing its detrimental impact on poor, vulnerable populations and workers. This wall-written phrase is anything but a rhetorical exaggeration. It captures the harsh reality that workers on construction sites in Ljubljana are confronted with on a daily basis, especially where mega-projects in the property sector are being developed. These construction sites are often characterized by inadequate and perilous working conditions and have been the scene of severe, sometimes fatal, accidents in recent years. Hence, the graffiti "*gentrification kills*" reflects the twofold dimension of gentrification. On the one hand, the slow population displacement effect on neighborhood change and, on the other, the tangible human toll of urban development paid with life. A poignant example of this unfolded with a tragic accident on a construction site of the luxurious Šumi accommodation complex in 2020, where a 31-year-old worker fell 18 meters to his death.[9] Spurred on

9 - In 2023, during the construction of Center Rog, four workers were poisoned by carbon monoxide, further underscoring the perilous conditions on such sites.

Figure 4. More-than-textual graffiti splashed during the demonstration to commemorate the eviction of the autonomous Rog Factory. Source: Sandi Abram (20 January 2024)

by rumors of the calamity, the PWG embarked on a militant research investigation to uncover the hitherto undisclosed location of the mishap. After locating the site, they scrawled the verse "*the elite reap while the workers weep"* (elita profitira, delavec umira) on the construction site's notice boards in an attempt to break the mass media silence surrounding the accident. The morbidly poetic graffiti was intended not only to put pressure on the landowners and the construction firm, but also to illuminate the tragedy for a public that was largely unaware of the accident: "*The graffiti put a pressure on the construction company that built Šumi. […] and [were] at the same time spotlighting the event, as it was generally ignored*."

As a counterpoint to the apollonian graffiti practice, the dionysian aspect of the PWG's graffiti emerges as imbued with spontaneity, expressiveness, instinct, and a visceral modality of engagement. This anarcha queer feminist discourse from below typically unfolds through individual actions by the PWG members, and is part of the everyday experience of life and activism in Ljubljana. It takes on the role of, as Velikonja (2021, p. 148) notes, "'a material disturbance', an interruption of empty walls". One person sums up the impulse behind such actions: "*you're walking home in the middle of the night, feeling frustrated about the situation in the city, and you happen to have a spray can with you.*" Here, the dionysian style of spray-painting echoes Marshall McLuhan's statement that "the medium is the message," emphasizing the primacy of the act of intervention over the conveyed message itself: "*Even without a clear idea [of what to write] […] when you see a white wall, the you can at least 'broach it' [načeti]. Not only do you open up the 'canvas', making it more inviting to public engagement, but it also serves as a call to action, encouraging others to contribute.*" In the spirit of anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's critique of private property as theft, the PWG's acts of lese-majesty challenge the institution of private ownership by temporarily reclaiming the urban space.

The spontaneity inherent in this form of sub-political expression is usually evident during street manifestations, when political graffiti writers emerge one by one from the demonstration to 'attack' a wall, only to then re-morph themselves anonymously with the crowd. The PWG calls this direct action, attempting to exert political pressure through the media (Sparrow in Greaber, 2009, p. 202) "*sabotage*", in their words, is an attempt to achieve a maximum desacralization of private property with minimum means. A significant instance of this dionysian propaganda by sabotage unfolded during the inauguration of the Centre Rog in October 2023. Some members of the PWG reported spray-painting "*a lot of random stuff. I don't know, hearts, lines, waves*", graffiti that was not "*sophisticated in terms of content.*" The primary objective was to cover the building with non-textual graffiti "*as much paint as possible; to 'destroy' it as much as possible*" (see Figure 4). Such more-than-textual political graffiti point to their twofold active-critical involvement: as spray-painted verbalizations of explicit political messages *and* as pre-discursive gestures (Velikonja 2021, p. 148). Again, the context of the opening of the Centre Rog is crucial to understand the intention behind the sabotage calibrated with graffiti.

It didn't matter what the message was, because every message on the [Centre] Rog was immediately clear […] there was a lot written [on the building] on the occasion and it didn't matter what was written. […] It was an attack against their aesthetics, against the bourgeois construction of the city, [against] the vision of the city that the elite wants to enforce. (PWG, 2024)

Furthermore, the impact through sabotage is sometimes manifested in the use of paint bombs. In these cases, the semantics of the graffiti are again irrelevant; the medium is the message *par excellence*, to repeat McLuhan. "Vandalism is an attack against the profane (against the building that pretends to be profane) showing that it is deeply sacred, bringing to the fore the totemic monument that lurks behind the mundane routine of everyday life" (Nobre in Pavoni, 2021, p. 156; see also Gamboni, 1997). The PWG's production of colorful, dripping dissensus (*sensu* Rancière) is an act of "overidentification" (Žižek, 2002) with the notion of 'vandal' (see Pavoni, 2021), embracing it in its totality, as in: 'OK, call us vandals, but we'll be vandals on our own terms and play the game to its fullest.' To the PWG, the overidentification serves as both empowerment and subversion of the dominant ideology embedded in neoliberal urbanism. Splattering with paint bombs is to activists what tagging is to graffiti writers. With words of Bakunin (1842), who said: "The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too," implying that in order to create a new social order, one must first dismantle or, in this context,

visually disrupt and deface, in fact *vandalize*, the existing neoliberal structures and bourgeois aesthetics. The PWG said about their counter-hegemonic aesthetics: "*Nobody wants red paint running down the windows. Or a black blot on the façade.*" Ultimately, in the context of the PWG's palette of anti-gentrification and anti-touristification graffiti practices, it is necessary to consider the color blots as radical expressions/transgressions that, due to their ideological excess, have so far managed to elude the trap of capitalist recuperation. Graffitiing is thus "destruction in the moment of creation – and […] creation in the moment of destruction" (Velikonja, 2021, p. 150). Similarly, such "actualization of […] desires" and "joyful destruction" were articulated by The Splasher (2007, p. 7), a subject who splashed paint on the public works of renowned street artists in New York City. If The Splasher back in 2007 symptomatically targeted a "pioneering new breed of art NYC professionals", including street artists, gallery owners, and art critics, as compromised with capital (ibid.), the present-day street art has, according to Schacter (2014, p. 162), almost in its totality, become a neutralized, domesticated, and institutionalized public art that is "beholden to the strategic, acquisitive desires of the contemporary, neo-liberal city" (ibid; see also Pavoni, 2021). Yet, as PWG demonstrates, the beauty of radical acts can still be found beneath the city's pavements, to paraphrase a spray-painted aphorism from the streets of Paris in May 1968.

3.2. Aesthetics with a Message: Collective Muralism as Community Artivism and the Fields of Contestation

Unlike the ephemeral nature of political graffiti writing in public spaces, the PWG's collective mural production represents a more permanent approach to place-making, particularly within squats. The murals serve as markers of the autonomous zones where the PWG is active and engaged, using "artivism" (Milohnić, 2005) to both beautify their surroundings and to voice political messages: "*We make murals to beautify the spaces we're involved in. […] Murals are also an art that is dear to us, provided that they carry a political message.*" More than mere identification with the space, murals act as gateways to political community building beyond the PWG's core membership (cf. Muñoz Morán, 2017). For the PWG, murals embody a form of "*community praxis*". "*Creating a mural, especially if it is done legally and with an 'attitude', creates community engagement. You invite people who have never done it before to spray and paint, to create something meaningful together*". In such an atmosphere, comrades and political sympathizers with anarcha queer feminism not only learn skills in mural production, but the process also facilitates further socialization and politicization. Thus, collective mural production becomes an intertwined mode of engagement of radical political communities within "autonomous heterotopias" (Siegrist and Thörn, 2020), fostering an environment for artivistic experimentation, away from the more and more hostile public sphere. Recently, in fact, the PWG members are noticing an increase in hostility towards graffiti writing. It is not unusual to encounter passers-by who vocally condemn their practice as an act of vandalism: "*I don't know if I've ever interacted with so many passers-by who are opposed to graffiti as I've in the last year*."

The reception of the PWG's collective murals, however, contrasts these confrontations. A mural on Mačjak (Figure 5), the building squatted by the broader anarcha feminist movement, was met with approval for its aesthetic and creative qualities:

People look at the mural from an aesthetic point of view, it was seen as cute. They liked it because it helped to beautify an extremely neglected area. Someone even said 'this is how you address the people, in a nice way. You'll get the general public on your side with this, not with [graffiti] "fuck you gentrifiers", "burn the city" on these walls of yours'. (PWG, 2024)

But even if people find murals aesthetically pleasing, their political message often goes unnoticed. During the collective painting of an antifascist-themed mural on the walls of Metelkova, which problematized the police repression and urban renewal plans, an elderly person was delighted by "*the artwork*", as "*now there will be no more scribbles here*", referring to the graffiti tags.

The public's reaction to the PWG's muralism *in vivo* reveals a paradox. People tend to favor the "regimes of value" (Appadurai, 1986) associated with the art world, praising the aesthetics of beauty, creativity and art, while ignoring the political discourses that the murals are meant

Figure 5. Mural on the walls of the former Mačjak squat. Source: Črt Piksi (4 August 2023).

to convey. This paradox is somewhat perpetuated by the PWG themselves. Muralism becomes a fragile field, in which the PWG navigates, often contradictorily, between different regimes of value. "*It's a double-edged sword*," they acknowledge, "*on the one hand, these commissioned works keep art on the streets, allowing artists to purchase [spray]cans for their own personal projects. Commissioned [art]work allows artists to for example purchase paint; also painting murals can be done without a budget as an act of recycling.*[10] *On the other, commercializing, appropriating the graffiti culture turns spaces into 'cool' places*". Thus, commissioned murals are viewed as an institutionalization of street art and commercialization of public space. In their opinion, however, murals with an emancipatory message and social criticism also bring diversity to the otherwise blank and whitewashed city walls and offer a financial lifeline to artists who live and work in precarious conditions.

4. Conclusion

Although the PWG aims to subvert the visual language of capital, encapsulated in neoliberal aesthetics and its expanding urban spectacles—as discussed in the section on political graffiti writing (see Abram, this issue)—as well as graffiti pieces and murals,[11] the fundamental tension, or rather the disjunction, between different regimes of value poses an insurmountable barrier for the PWG to intervene on street artwashed walls in Ljubljana. Urban art projects and murals, particularly those with a socio-critical note,

10 - PWG only occasionally engages in mural painting. When they find surplus wall paint in abandoned places or among the bulky garbage on the street, they are eager to transform the found materials into "*something artistic*".

11 - The murals and graffiti pieces with sexist imagery are a particular target of sub-political groups, especially queer and feminist initiatives; see Avtonomne feministke (2017, p. 138-140).

"*aren't the first target of our sabotages as there are more pressing issues to address. For me, a piece of art is not a place to get upset about.*" Consequently, the ideological triumph of neoliberal urbanism, which through its diverse manifestations in the urban setting absorbs and/or impedes alternatives, appears definitive. Underpinned by the structural socio-economic conditions of neoliberal capitalism, even its most fervent critics find themselves in a quandary and prefer to avoid, to paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, employing political graffiti as a hammer to reshape this dimension of contemporary reality. Hence, the "muralization of capital" (Abram, this issue), harnessed by both the public and the private sectors, finds an open road to disguise community displacement and depoliticize social polarization.

If new muralism represents a site of negotiation for leftist sub-political groups, where ideological effects often discourage material interventions, the case studies showed how the visual language of resistance and subversion in the form of political graffiti and street art articulates issues pertaining to the autonomous zones, in which these groups are part of. As shown in the context of the (former) autonomous zones of Rog, Mačjak and Metelkova, these political messages on the walls, address issues such as mass tourism, displacement, and gentrification, among others, through two-dimensional graffiti and murals, supplemented by occasional interventions in the form of paste-ups, stencils, and stickers. The content, which primarily highlights on the pressing challenges faced by certain squats and the external threats looming over them, draws critical attention to the hegemonic neoliberal policies driving urban redevelopment projects. Another characteristic of these "images of dissent" (Velikonja 2020, p. 5) is that they not only target specific populations (e.g. tourists) and local institutions (such as the city administration), but also confront individuals in positions of power (e.g. the mayor, politicians, real estate developers) who foster to impose their vision of the 'creativity' and politics within contemporary neoliberal urbanism. I have read the murals and other wall-written dissensus that have emerged in the territory of squats and beyond as acts of solidarity, aligned with the broader struggles for space and urban movements that demand the right to the city, both locally and internationally.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/or consent to publish.

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