
Protest Posters and the Political Street Art Universe in Greece

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Abstract

The social movements of the last decade in Greece following the financial crisis and austerity packages brought to the fore the role and the usage of street art as a form of expression of the urban youth in general. There has been a significant number of publications from different disciplines and points of view analyzing the proliferation of political street art in the urban centers of Greece. However, the majority of this line of work remains fragmented has not been subjected to a comparison as the one suggested here. The aim of this paper is to provide a short overview of the history of political street art in Greece in relation to social movements while stressing the role of movement posters and presenting a case study. We identify gaps in the literature and suggest ways where future research should be targeted.

Keywords: Political Street Art, Social Movements, Greece, Posters

Introduction

Social movements have a long history in the use of street art for their purposes. Either as an “expressive resistance tactic that challenges power relations” (Waldner 2013), a social commentary or an alternative way of engaging in dialogue with the public, scholars categorize this type of action within the realm of “visually-expressive symbols of protest” (Fahlenbrach 2013; Buechler 2000), where space and street politics have a greater role. They redefine public space as a politicized space and reclaim it for the local citizens. The content of the messages of political street art reflects the struggles, associated with urban forms of living and form a type of social commentary (Ferrell 1995). A major characteristic of a city is its walls (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidou 2017). Especially, in dense-constructed urban districts and neighborhoods, walls are seen everywhere. It can be house walls, multi-storage buildings walls. These walls, as well as any other kind of surface, become often a canvas for artists, political activists and the urban youth. It is a popular form of expression that is characteristic of urban art, found either in small cities or bigger metropolises. The street is offered as a public space where we can investigate the history and the culture of the population, such as in the Greek case.

In addition, expressive forms of protest contribute to different functions in the formation of a collective identity, a ‘we-consciousness’. This can be done through agitation (provoking people with new ideas), a sense of esprit de corps (creating solidarity and belonging), morale or ideology. Street art and graffiti can position itself within all these functions. It can use them to present a condition of a financial crisis of unjust, to restructure the blame-game of who is responsible, provide ways of action. Either on an individual or collective level, the reading and viewing practices of political street art can enhance political empowerment that enables more “radical” organizations to gather support for political goals.

Political Street Art

An early major breakthrough of importance in the study of political street art is Lyman Chaffee’s *Political Protest and Street Art. Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries* (1993). Chaffee sees street art simultaneously as a political tool of expression and a mass communicational medium. The majority of scholarship described above tends to neglect these aspects, which are not taken into consider-

ation. Chaffee (1993: 4) focuses on posters, wall paintings, graffiti, and murals (and parenthetically with political stickers, T-shirts, lapel buttons, billboards, placards and banners). A secondary point by Chaffee is her focus on collective forms of street art. This constitutes another break with the mainstream scholarship where usually individual artists and/or practitioners are mostly investigated. This is may end up being problematic, especially in recent times where there is a growing tendency of commodification of street art, which serves a number of wide purposes from “alternative” neighborhoods filled with street art becoming sites of tourist attraction, promoted by local/state authorities or even building up an individual artists’ portfolio through commissioned art. Nevertheless, a number of shortcomings exist: Chaffee does not enter into an exchange with communication theories, visual culture or social movement studies. In addition, his approach has an “up-bottom” perspective focusing more on the historical, sociopolitical narrative on each of the three case studies with no empirical analysis in the micro-level of why and how activists choose a specific form and not others, along with their production and distribution practices. Street art and graffiti may be considered “underground” or illegal, but at the same time can lead to a career in the art world (Lachmann 1988). They can become “harbingers of gentrification and consumerism” (Ferrell 2017) in the cityscape. Chaffee offers (1993), nonetheless, some main characteristics of street art based on the case studied he examined that are also useful when one examines political poster. Summarized, he finds that majority of street art is:

- a. collective in nature, made by mostly groups and artists’ collectives, not individuals
- b. creators don’t care about neutrality and objectivity, rather serve an idea or purpose
- c. it is accessible to everyone, from marginalized groups to mainstream parties
- d. is characterized by direct messages and a simple discourse reduced to view words, phrases and slogans and
- e. it has an adaptable character that can be used from oppressive regimes to the most open, pluralistic societies.

In the same point of view, Ryan (2016) asks if street art can be “understood as an example of “everyday politics”, or even “everyday resistance”, in that it provides a space and opportunity to contest and question dominant cultural codes and conventions” in a similar way of what James C. Scott has called as the “weapons of the weak” (1985). Ryan adopts a broad definition of street art focusing not on the content of the art (i.e. expression) but on its connection to a political meaning, “to be oriented towards society, to engage with and challenge existing structures and terrains of power” (2016). Unlike Chaffee, Ryan takes into account social movement literature and calls for an “aesthetic turn” in social movement studies. Street art, according to her, can play this role.

Political street art is often part of an alternative public sphere where artists, practitioners and political groups enter a “space of symbolic exchange” (Zaimakis 2015) in which opinions and ideas clash and collide not only with each other but also with political narratives of the mainstream parties and mass media. In Greece, media discussions about the roots and causes of the financial crisis were conducted in polarized conditions, within a frame that did not allow critical voices to be expressed. Opposing views about topics such as the efficiency of austerity programs, the role of IMF, the future of the Eurozone and EU, etc. were almost ostracized, creating in a way a gap between civil society and mass media (Pleios 2013). Urban landscapes and street art serve as a substitute for the lack of credibility where various political formations explore the possibilities of street art to articulate their thoughts and ideas.

Another characteristic is working in teams. As Chaffee notes, “groups employ this communication channel to identify problems, question values, make claims, and suggest alternatives” (Chaffee 1993:8). In contemporary Greece for example, political posters are in a great degree collective; they are a collective effort that requires planning, time and organization. Chaffee (ibid) finds that most of the street art in Latin America was mostly collective in nature due to their creation process requires planning and organization. The same can be acknowledged for the majority of the Greek political street art.

Groups have the tendency of their work although this is not always important, such as in the case of wall slogan writing¹ because what matters is the overall cause, reaching a wide audience, not the credits. On the other side, individual artists who practice political street art always sign their work which offers them fame and reputation, not only in the street art world but also to the public. It is also a way of building themselves in the art world. In the cases Chaffee studied, about 80% percent had an identifiable signature. In general, for individual artists signing their work has a greater value, which may be connected with the material interests. Kirsten McKinney supports this view, stating that:

The name is the currency of graffiti. The consideration and planning that went into the picking of a name could last for months and for good reason. The goal of becoming a graffiti writer was fame and respect and therefore the name carried an important weight. The name also needed to be functional, made up of five or less letters that would flow well together. Once a name was chosen it was turned into a tag, a signature that could be painted quickly and easily" (McKinney 2016).

Chaffee describes the role of street art to form social consciousness where activists are allowed to express their sentiments and, at the same time, lobby for their interests. In that way, according to Chaffee, street art connotes a decentralized democratic form where the only control comes from the producers themselves. This non-mediated aspect is considered important for the activists, as discussed in interviews with Greek practitioners.

Greek Street Art and Protest

Politics before and after the 2008 crisis

Street art and graffiti in Greece have a long trajectory. Political street art has been used, although not under this label, mostly in the forms of posters and placards throughout the 20th century. It has been, the main medium of political expression in the streets by protest movements, mainly

student movements, and by leftist parties. During election times, where it was a sine qua non tool of propaganda for every political party. A second medium was the slogan writing in the walls of the cities, a common and plain form, which became prominent during the Nazi occupation and resistance, the civil war (1945-1949), the student uprising of the Technical University (1973) and continued to be used as a form of expression, throughout the period after the restoration of democracy. The slogans on the city walls continue today to express popular protest and provide a vivid witness of the general political climate. In any case, it is argued that in the city of Athens exists a specific "wall culture" that is characterized by a plethora of street art usage that is difficult to pass unnoticed (Theodosios and Karathanasis 2008) and the most common practitioners are either "a reactive-artistic crowd of graffiti or the varying sociopolitical youth organizations and parties" (ibid, p. 19). Vamvakas (2020) attests that wall writing in Greece after the restoration of democracy era (1974 and after) is not related with just a (youth, artistic or any kind of) subculture as "with a relatively coherent ideological projection (propagation) of specific non-marginal political arguments" practiced by "specific political (far left collectivities) and not individuals." Greek graffiti, in its modern form, emerged and imported by influences from abroad in the late 80s as a marginal art form. In the 1990s, graffiti was often associated with the rising hip-hop subculture and started to gain popularity among the younger generations; the first artists and crews emerged during this time. In September 1998, the first international graffiti festival took place (Leventis 2013; Anonymous 2010) hosted by the municipality of Athens and Hellenic American Union. After the following of the announcement that Athens was officially selected to host the Olympic Games of 2004, the first commissioned works started to appear sponsored by state and municipality companies that continued after the games. These events led to the proliferation of graffiti and its establishment as a recognized form of art.

From the mid-2000s, the anti-globalization movement along with student movements against reforms to the privatization of higher education became the main vehicle to the appearance of a younger generation of activists that had nothing to do with the previous "silent" decade of the '90s with its absence of collective actors and movements. The growing neoliberalization of the economy and its con-

1 - Slogan writing here is used as the writing of a phrase or a sentence, which can have sports-, political- or religious- related purposes. This kind may be some insignia or a symbol-logo of the creator(s) like the hammer and the sickle for communist groups, the letter "A" in a circle for anarchists or the logo of a football team.



Fig. 1 Street Art and Posters in Mesologiu Street in Athens. Photo taken by author.

sequences (like precarity, lower wages, flexibility, social security etc.) along with the exclusion of young people from the labor market (Greek youth employment was and still remains among the highest in EU) were the main grievances even before the financial meltdown of 2008 (Anagnostopoulos and Evangelinidis 2017). This generation, which included many artists/activists that practiced street art use it to express the fears and prospects of an entire generation, played the main role in milestones events like the December 2008 riots, the anti-austerity protests of 2010, the indignados occupation of the squares in 2011 just to name a few. This precarious subject experimented with various ways of organizing and proposed a number of alternatives in the context of prefigurative politics and horizontalism beyond the traditional models of party politics or bureaucratic trade unions. Side-by-side with these forms of precarity activism and cultural forms of expression that include –but not limited to– dance, theater, cinema, singing were always present in the peak of mobilizations, from occupied theaters and opera houses, to public singing and street performances.

During this time at the start of the decade, the rise of free press magazines like Athens Voice and Lifo, that focused on urban culture gave a significant boost to the spread of street art and graffiti (Anonymous 2010: 34). Following examples from abroad, both magazines created urban mythology for the “consumption” of subcultures in the margins and recognition of a “sensitivity” of mildly youth offense. In addition, the medium of stencil graffiti is introduced, which from now is used widely and practiced during every demonstration by activists, while some early collectives are using it solely (like the group Political Zoo during 2007-11)². In any way, stencil becomes a standard tool in the political street art repertoire that accompanies social movements and uprisings (Stravrides 2017; Drakopoulou 2016; Theodosis and Karathanasis 2008).

Hence, the most interesting dimension is that during the formative years of this generation (mainly 2004-2009), there is an explosion of interest in street art that goes hand-in-hand with protest movements. A number of authors have

observed a shift in the content of street art that features more political statements, social criticism before, during or after the student protest movements of 2007 (Theodosis and Karathanasis 2008). Karathanasis (2019) notes after the December 2008 rebellion it is observed an increase in political references through graffiti. At the same time, he continues, political groups choose more often this type of method to express their grievances. Zaimakis (2016) also connects precarity with this type of political graffiti as a means of political activism. It is no coincidence that three journalistic accounts were published in Greek that focused on the political street art produced during the December 2008 riots (Chatzistefanou 2009; Kuriakopoulos and Gourgouris 2009; Haritatu-Synodinou 2010) while one more was published on slogan writing just before these events (Peponis 2008). All four books build their way through documenting and taking photos of street art. These books recognized very early that this ephemeral material, although self-expressive and symbolic according to them, needed to be recorded. Without it, grasping emotions and sentiments around this youth rebellion would have been impossible. The authors took many photos of the Athenian cityscape and focused mostly on the neighborhood of Exarchia, which was the epicenter of the events. In a similar way, 30 years before, some photojournalists tried to capture in photos the slogans and posters written in the streets of Paris during the May '68 protests (Memou 2013). Academic work on street art followed the media interest –domestic or international– started to grow.

After the December 2008 events, the context of the financial crisis and the danger of default allowed political street art and graffiti to become more visible in the urban fabric of Athens. The crisis became one more knot to this chain of that ‘long’ decade that sparked an increase in attention to street art, that had at its center the consequences and causes of this situation and so, attracted international media attention³ followed by catchy phrases like “Athens in the new Berlin” or Athens as “a Mecca of Street Art” and expressed

3 - See for example: Guardian, [Greece's anti-austerity murals: street art expresses a nation's frustration](#) (04.07.2015), Guardian [Contemporary graffiti art on the walls of Athens – in pictures](#) (11.11.2014), New York Times, [Across Athens, Graffiti Worth a Thousand Words of Malaise](#) (16.04.2014).

2 - The artist' collective *Political Zoo Stencil* was one of the few groups that focused on political street art. See for more in their webpage <http://politicalzoostencils.blogspot.com/> (last access 20.05.2020)

in alternative street art city tours⁴. By creating the image of a city as “alternative” and “trendy” destination, where street art is everywhere available, was not always positive. Several authors had mentioned some negative effects of this phenomenon such as attracting tourists-street artists (Daskalopoulou 2018), the gentrification of the city center (Karathanasis 2019, Vamvakas 2020) which is no exception to the international trend.

On the other side of the abundance of graffiti/street art is the fact that the cleaning services of the municipality of Athens (but also others as well) suffered a great loss of personnel due to the austerity measures imposed⁵. In addition, anti-graffiti programs are expensive and authorities use their funds on more important topics such as social care (Tsilimpounidou 2015). Alexandrakis (2016: 288) mentions that graffiti has become so common in the city of Athens that when his interlocutors (a teenage graffiti crew) were caught by a shop owner painting, instead of complaining or calling the police, thanked them that made his shop part of the neighborhood. In this context, political street art acts as a visual-social diary (Tsilimpounidi 2012, 2015) that records events, labelled as important by minor political actors and activists. It is another form of manifestations.

We do not argue here that Greece should be considered an exceptional case or innovations for its use of street art during social movements. It follows a rather worldwide trend in the same timeframe, from Gezi Park during its occupation in Istanbul in 2013 (Taş and Taş 2014), the Occupy Wall Street Protests in New York in 2011 to mobilizations against the Mubarak regime in Egypt in 2011 (Awad and Wagoner 2017). In all cases, street art in general as a means that accompanied the political goals. What is amplified in the context of Greek street art is its connection with a precarious youth and politics in the long durée, not only in the peak of mobilizations. It is incubated slowly but steadily.

4 - In the case of a company that organizes street art city tours <https://www.alternativeathens.com/tours/street-art-tour/> (Last access 20.05.2020)

5 - The former mayor of Athens, George Kaminis, argues in an interview that 1/3 of personnel has been reduced due to the inability of hiring new staff. See https://www.lifo.gr/articles/athens_articles/108561 (Last Access 23.05.2020, in Greek).

A Neglected Medium: The Protest Poster

A type of political street poster is one that focuses not on parties or propaganda purposes but on the service of social movements. In various instances, posters have been acknowledged as forms of cultural expression but have been neglected to the margins of the art world, distribution and cultural reception. The traces of these can be traced in the late nineteenth century workers' movement but it was developed during the global protests in the 1960s and continues in a way until today. The explosion of protest posters in the 1960s was an international phenomenon connected with the various “new” social movements (Melluci 1989) that appear and include among others civil rights, student unrest, national liberation, antiwar, ecology, feminism and LGBT issues.

This “Renaissance” of the poster was geographically diverse. They spanned from the revolutionary Cuban posters of Castro' administration (Sontag 1970) and the Chilean posters against Pinochet dictatorship in Latin America, to the anti-Vietnam war posters in the United States (Reed 2019) to the May '68 student mobilizations in Germany and France, the anti-nuclear protests in Germany and Chinese posters of “cultural revolution”, posters became again an important medium for activists all around the world.

Protest posters display the history of a movement in the form of an archive. They are able to document the struggles, concerns, claims and events that took place when they were printed. As Lipsitz (2001) argues, posters provide the “material memory” artifacts and are critical tools for understanding the issues for the times but also the passions they provoked. They also constitute an important part of the “hidden” public sphere that is usually left out from official or state media channels. They have been created to make direct appeals for action, for everyday use on every possible surface, on walls, lampposts or bulletin boards in order to inform passersby for forthcoming demonstrations and meetings. One of their main function is to nurture and sustain collective memory by commemorating important movements of past struggles (Lipsitz 2001). They also play a role in constructing solidarity and defining collective identity (ibid, p. 73). Social movements need to create and sustain a collective identity. To do that they use symbols of the past to connect historical struggles (Reed 2019) with the political imperatives of the present. Geise (2016: 1211) argues

that posters “represent intended strategic communication reflecting underlying structures of political power and unequal access to resources and distribution channels...[they] are not neutral witnesses. In situations with unbalanced political power, posters can function as an efficient protest against existing hegemony and domination”. In the way, posters signal the emergence or existence of spaces for an oppositional and alternative activity.

The Poster Wars in the Greek streets

The streets corners and storefronts of empty shops are filled with political posters in the center of Athens (fig. 1 and 2). Due to the lack of hoardings, every possible surface becomes a canvas for posters. Political posters along with

also commercial ones are found side by side, next to each other. The time and effort for those involved in these political poster displays are evident of the importance attached to this medium, even in this age of digital era. They also testify to the strength of the tradition of political activism in Greece. During periods of heated political crisis (like the financial breakdown of 2009, the referendum of 2015 or the COVID-19 pandemic), different parties and groups even carry a dialogue on the walls through posters. New posters are pasted to the walls on a daily basis. This places time constraints on the actual total time that posters remain available to be read on the walls before being pasted over with a new poster or destroyed by weather conditions.

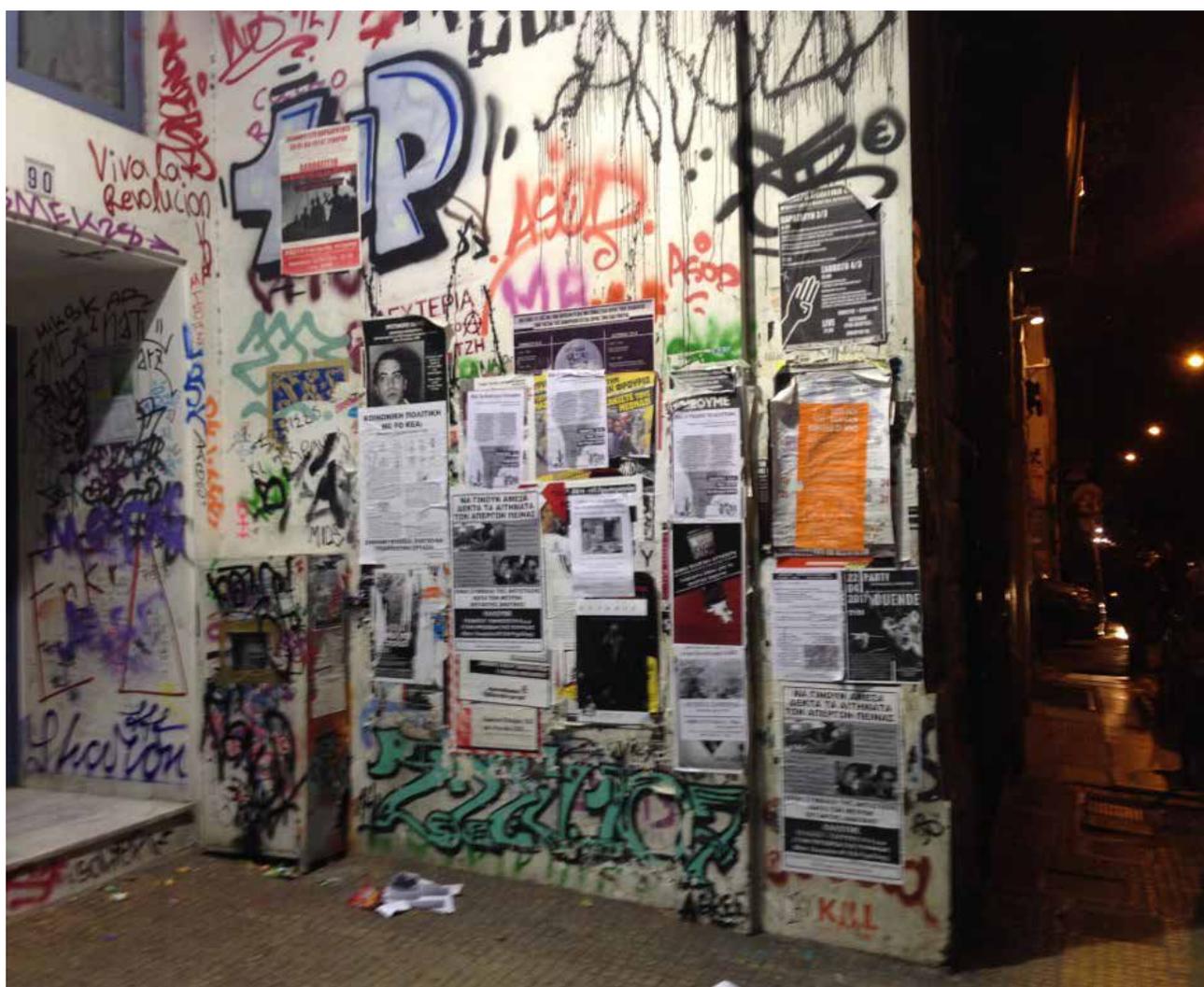


Fig. 2. A wall filled with posters and graffiti in Athens. Photo taken by the author.

The practice of putting posters on the walls by the people that were emotionally attached to them and acted as its representatives is today constrained to political activism, small groups and trade unions (Papaspyrou-Karadimitriou 2000: 4). The volume of poster activity in Greece, especially in major cities like Athens or Salonika, is the result of widespread political interest along with the numbers of political activists and groups that are active. Posters nowadays are used mostly by groups stemming from the tradition of the libertarian Left (Kitschelt 1989).

A Case Study from the Streets of Athens:

The Sunday Opening of Retail Shops

Here we present a case that focuses on a campaign that relied heavily on the usage of posters and can serve as an example. Sunday, November 3rd, 2013 marked the first day of a contentious pilot program launched in Greece to help spur consumer spending in its bleeding economy. Under a new reform, retail stores were supposed to be open seven Sundays in the year, while smaller, independent shops could open every Sunday, depending on local authorities. This development constituted a radical change to labor conditions nationwide, given that workers had to work for more days with equal pay. A nationwide 24-hour strike was organized the same day, which was followed by a demonstration in most of the big cities.

From that day on, and for the next five years, a campaign was launched led by the Athens-based grassroots union of book workers. Their strategy was quite simple: every Sunday that the shops should open, they organized a mobilization followed by a strike in their sector. Their mobilization included not only a demonstration but also a symbolic blockade of shops of the main commercial streets of Athens. In order to achieve this goal however, high numbers of participants were required, which was not possible on union mobilization alone. For this reason, the union launched a campaign that targeted not only the public but also the social movement milieu of Athens. This campaign was facilitated mainly through the medium of posters that glued regularly in the streets of Athens in mass numbers. The campaign proved to be effective since the union managed to achieve sufficient numbers for consecutive mobilizations, making this specific issue a central issue to the social movements' agenda. It also allowed the formation of an initiative called "Coordination against the Sunday Opening" with labour-re-

lated grassroots collectives, unions and activists that dealt exclusively with the Sunday opening of shops.

The protest campaign went through many phases, with ebbs and flows, but managed to suspend the Sunday opening of shops, three months after a change in government. The activities of the activists follow a certain premeditated visual strategy that included the usage of posters that had a specific image that became the logo of the campaign and acted as a visual marker. The sketch was a woman wearing a coverall suit with a headscarf, showing her fist while looking angry. This particular image accompanies all posters of this specific campaign until today and is immediately recognizable from almost all people embedded into the Greek social movement milieu. The old-fashioned drawing of this woman (fig. 3) was however not entirely new, it was taken by a different context, a WWII Australian propaganda poster that had as its purpose to recruit women to work in wartime industries such as ammunitions factories. The logo was adopted as a signature logo in all the following posters made by activists the following years and continues to be in use until the time of writing.

Conclusion

Street art in Greece has been examined under the lens of various disciplines in social sciences, Art and Humanities such as critical theory and philosophy (Stavrides 2017; Drakopoulou 2016), cognitive science (Stampoulides 2019), linguistics (Serafis et al. 2018; Stampoulides 2016; 2018), cultural sociology (Zaimakis 2015a; 2016; Tsilimpounidi 2016), anthropology (Alexandrakis 2016; Knight 2015). A media or a visual perspective is not taken into consideration more as a descriptive point of view (with the exception of Chiotis 2015). The vast majority of the scholarship focuses on the context of the recent financial crisis and while most writers argue that during this time there is a proliferation of street art, very few try to contextualize the period before, as we presented before. Another issue is that most try to analyze street art without an ethnographic focus; either they build a corpus of photographs or analyze the message of the slogans/graffiti/stencil art through a linguistic, cultural studies lens. Within the few works that do have in an ethnographic focus (e.g. Stampoulides 2016, Zaimakis 2016, Alexandrakis 2016, Tulke 2013), often semi-structured interviews are conducted with street artists that have already achieved status and participate in commissioned art.

That is a necessity than a choice, given that the majority of street art is not signed since authors/practitioners are not rather interested in recognition or credits from the graffiti scene.

Very few practitioners sign the political street art they produce because it is usually followed by a political symbol e.g. a star, the letter “A” in a circle, hammer and sickle, etc. that means they are embedded within a certain political tradition. In addition, this kind of graffiti (slogan writing) is done at the level of the individual and not as a part of a team, crew or group. What they really want is a way to express themselves and promote overall claims. Artists who do sign their work are mostly professionals, some with a cultural

education, like fresh graduates from the School of Fine Arts that are about to begin building their way to the artistic world⁶. This of course does not mean that they are from the start focused on this role but gradually, they gain recognition and this as a potential way of winning some revenue. In any case, existing literature review shows that political street art or more specifically, political groups who regularly produce street art to promote their political campaigns, are not taken analyzed per se. In all works examined and cited here, no author focuses on work done by political activists and why they choose this type to promote their mes-

6 - See for example the most known street artists like iNo, Cacao Rocks and WD.



Fig. 3 Posters containing the central logo of the campaign. The accompanying text says: “Hands off from our Sundays and our lives. Think as workers and not as customers. At Sundays we should not work. Do not shop”. Photo taken by author.

sages and ideas, how they relate to the political landscape of Greece and how the “street” as a concept, is constructed in their view. This is a gap yet to be filled.

Furthermore, collective work in political street art is not something in scarcity at the Athenian cityscape. Some groups may produce stencil templates or organize walks for slogan wall writing as part of their duties as activists but they usually avoid signing their work because it is not of importance. Their aim, derived from preliminary data from interviews with activists, is to promote a message about an event or deconstruct mainstream narratives from media as part of an alternative public sphere. When they do sign their work, is done mostly through the medium of poster. This brings us to another gap in this literature. Although posters are mentioned, they are not taken into account or are part of a research corpus. Almost all of the authors mentioned in this article do not pay any kind of attention to posters although, if mentioned, they do include them within the definition of the street art ‘family’. Future research should aim to fulfill this gap.

Finally, another point of discussion is that researchers often see street art and graffiti as an end-product. They neglect or abstain from paying attention to the processes, rituals of creation and distribution. The repercussions of this choice is that we cannot grasp the full sociopolitical context, the way choices are made, under which conditions are taken, if they follow a pattern and so on. Even if, for the sake of counterargument, agree that street art is meaningful and not only an illustration with a superficial character what do they offer us apart from the message they directly offer? We must pay attention to these attributes if we want to see the full picture. Future work should aim to answer these questions.

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