

## Introduction

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# Political Graffiti in Critical Times

*Andrea Pavoni, Yiannis Zaimakis and Ricardo Campos*

## Crisis

Crisis, today, is everywhere, or so we are told. From financial crisis to the refugee crisis, from the economic crisis to the crisis of representative democracy, and from the ‘new urban crisis’ (Florida 2017) to the crisis of political legitimation or the recent Covid-19 pandemic – our reality is framed as an endless series of crises. In the context of advanced capitalism, crises often justify as unavoidable the type of emergency ‘solutions’ that are crafted in response: militarization and commodification of space, economic austerity, suspension of rights, precarization of work... the list goes on. A permanent state of emergency, precariousness and uncertainty has seemingly become the white noise of our existence, as political systems are increasingly shaky, sociocultural bonds thinner, economics evermore unpredictable, and the global ecosystem off balance, while the overarching rhetoric, technology and normativity of security politics produce growing inequality, violence and fear.

Various excellent analyses have carefully dismantled the hegemonic discourses around such ‘crises’, showing to what extent they are indeed a by-product of the very systems (political, economic, financial, securitarian) that pretend to ‘overcome’ them (e.g. Arrighi 1978; Klein 2007; Harvey 2010). While much attention has (rightly) been given to demystifying the seemingly uncontroversial causal explanations of a given crisis, there has been less reflection on the notion of crisis itself, and the way it crystallizes as an uncontested framework through which we experience life under late capitalism (e.g. Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Lazzarato 2012). Crisis, in fact, also works as a filter through which reality is perceived, described, understood and, ultimately, contested (e.g. Koselleck 1988; Roitman 2013; Agamben 2015).

Originally referring to a medical condition – a *critical* tipping point oscillating between fatal danger and hopeful recovery – the etymology of ‘crisis’ points to a ‘rupture’ or a ‘separation’, as well as to the (critical) ‘decision’ that this rupture prompts.<sup>1</sup> Since the eighteenth century, the concept has undergone a significant translation. In the optimistic atmosphere of the belle époque, propelled by the industrial revolution and the nascent urbanization, as history began to be perceived as an arrow projected towards the future through the normative direction of progress, crisis came to signify a temporary interruption to the progressive temporality, and thus the normative injunction to act in order to restore progress and repair time (cf. Koselleck 2006). When translated onto the domain of politics, crisis has functioned as a mechanism of observation that suffocates the present, in the hopeful projections of a post-crisis future where the ‘troubles’ of this present will somehow be overcome.<sup>2</sup>

This reflection does not lead us to deny the reality of crisis, of course. More precisely, it highlights the functioning of crisis as an aesthetic and epistemological framework, and thus it strives ‘to consider the ways in which it [crisis] regulates narrative constructions, the ways in which it allows certain questions to be asked while others are foreclosed’ (Roitman 2013: 94). This volume takes inspiration from this observation, by diving within the reality of the polymorphous crises that encompass the contemporary existence, while at the same time assuming crisis as a frame – perhaps *the* frame – around (or against) which certain sociocultural and ethico-political imaginaries are produced, and others foreclosed. As an explicit or implicit indicator that something is not going as it should, ‘crisis’ increasingly appears as the framework around which contemporary politics is fought, in the shape of an aesthetic conflict over different ways to see, experience and act in the world.

As is very clear to anyone of us living in the present times, crisis works as a category that frames experience and provides it with a sense. The awareness of living in a crisis, or the experience of crisis, are the constitutive sites of a specific, precarious and uncertain subjectivity – an uncertainty and precariousness that at the same time speak of an inability to experience crisis itself, facing a world whose structural logics and logistics are increasingly alienated, dislocated, automated and imperceptible (Jameson 2007; Toscano and Kinkle 2015). One may simply think about the power that the TINA (There Is No Alternative) narrative has so far enjoyed in global politics; the extent to which crisis has become a background narrative of contemporary everyday life; or the role that technocratic narratives of the future (e.g. the smart city) play in shaping strategies of planning and governance. At the same time, we may also point to the seismic effects that times of crisis may have

on taken-for-granted systems of values, understandings and normativities, letting alternative spaces of agency, political action and aesthetic intervention emerge. In fact, we believe it is not an overstatement to argue that *the* battleground of contemporary politics is a fundamentally aesthetic one, namely the task of *critically* re-imagining our present, and its relation to the future, away from the linear path that the narrative of crisis seemingly forces us into (Holmes 2008) – an aesthetic-political task that today, we add, is fundamentally *urban*.

## Aesthetics, Visual Protest and Street-Level Micropolitics

During the twentieth century, the surfacing of a dominant visual culture with a gradual aestheticization and stylization of everyday life (Ewen 1988; Featherstone 1998) became remarkable, especially in the urban context. This is particularly evident vis-à-vis the contemporary rise of ‘creative city’ policies, today becoming a veritable ‘meta-policy’ shaping global urbanization dynamics (Peck 2012). As the sphere of entertainment has increasingly merged with those of economics, politics and security (e.g. Thrift 2011), aesthetics has become a key category of urban politics. This is all too evident to anyone living in contemporary cities, where urban branding has grown into a central development strategy, enrolling discourses and policies of planning, security, marketing and law in the production of safe, commodified and entertaining urban spaces, and functioning as a sort of lubricant that both propels and expedites this process of value extraction by mediating between the abstract and the concrete, the planetary and the local (Pavoni 2018). In this context, public art has gradually begun to play an important role in the process of place-valorization triggered by aesthetic capitalism (e.g. Deutsche 1996; Pinder 2008; Berry-Slater and Iles 2009; Guinard and Margier 2017). While it is not possible to even briefly sum up the complexity of this process – one that moreover is far from being linear and unilateral – what we are interested in emphasizing is the extent to which aesthetics has grown into a key context in which urban politics is expressed, repressed and fought.

To be sure, the city has always been a stage where power is manifested, and aesthetically so: from royal parades to contemporary mega events, from traditional monuments to certain forms of contemporary public art that extol heroes and emblematic historical episodes, as well as certain values cherished by governments. It is unsurprising, for instance, that after revolutions or violent processes of regime change there is often an energetic effort to remove symbols and artworks associated with the previous regime –

something that is buffered by propaganda, which also employs art as a medium. Political murals are perfect examples of this, as we can see from Soviet, Chinese, Mexican and Cuban murals. The instrumental use of art as a tool for propaganda, especially in the context of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, did foster a persistent suspicion for the aestheticization of politics, spelled out in different ways in the writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord, among others. This has cemented a belief in the pernicious effect that aestheticization may play vis-à-vis political expression, stemming from the assumption that ‘the use of art for political action necessarily aestheticises this action, turns this action into a spectacle and, thus, neutralises the practical effect of this action’ (Groys 2014).

While cautioning against such a decorative and ‘distractive’ danger, however, it is important to avoid over-deterministic approaches against the ‘use’ of aesthetics in politics. In fact, one may ask whether politics could actually exist without aesthetics or, following Jacques Rancière, whether aesthetics is to be *the* battleground of politics itself. According to Rancière (2015), politics has to do with the definition and framing of a *common*: a common space, relation, experience, with a given ‘distribution of the sensible’; that is, the way in which certain ways of seeing, speaking and being are included, while others are excluded. The ‘political’, accordingly, is understood as the emergence of a dissensus within such a distribution of the sensible; or as the appearance of something, someone or some demand that cannot fit within this ‘aesthetic’ (from the root of *aisthēsis*, referring to the sphere of sensible, the perceptible) distribution, to the extent that forces it to change. In this sense, ‘[art] is political as it frames a specific space-time sensorium, as it redefines on this stage the power of speech or the coordinates of perception, shifts the places of the actor and the spectator, etc.’ (Rancière 2006). In other words, art is not only political in so far as willingly and intentionally aimed at delivering a ‘political’ position, meaning or ideology. More profoundly, the encounter between art and politics is unavoidable, as both inhabit the common, aesthetic sphere of being together: at stake in this encounter is the relation between consensus and dissensus, compliance and contestation, and thus the consequent framing and reframing of the common (i.e. the public).

Lately the long-standing suspicion for aesthetics in activist circles has begun to be challenged, as the discourses, strategies and tactics of activist and artistic praxis have increasingly merged into visual forms of protest that challenge the hegemonic consensus, resignifying, reimagining and reshaping the urban landscape in significant ways. Stephen Duncombe argues that if ‘every age creates a form of protest appropriate to its hegemonic power ... artful protest is the response to a new regime of power: global Neoliberalism’ (Duncombe 2016). If neoliberalism is sustained by global flows, which at

their most essential may be understood as flows of information in which meanings, bodies, affects, technologies and money intersect and combine, then, it is argued, it is increasingly around the creation, legitimation and challenging of those meaningful and affective flows that politics will be articulated. This is all the more so vis-à-vis the current erosion of legitimation of the democratic system and its traditional actors, with the related breakdown of the formal political participation of citizens who, increasingly, seem to be looking for less conventional ways of participating politically (Loader 2007; Farthing 2010; Dahlgren 2013; Pitti 2018). In this context we have seen the surfacing of so-called ‘new new social movements’ (Langman 2013), characterized by various experimentations with novel codes and grammars which, although being significantly inspired and diffused via digital media (Juris 2012; Tremayne 2014; Simões et al. 2018), have the street as the privileged stage for its expression.

In fact, since its inception, the city has been a place of fluid normativity, political conflict and sociocultural vibrance; one in which official institutions overlap with informal networks and ways of life, and where strict and capillary apparatuses of regulation, governance and control coexist with extended patches of darkness, invisibility and resistance. It has been out of the vibrant and inspiring atmosphere of the city that public spheres have emerged, seditions have been plotted, public protests have been expressed, and revolutions have erupted. Here, social movements have deployed their tactics to try to win their battles; and here also more spontaneous and less structured groups or anonymous individuals have found a space for their political expression and participation. This has especially occurred in ‘times of crisis’, as urban landscapes are particularly affected in turbulent periods, marked by widening socio-economic imbalances, spatial exclusion and political turmoil, and, as a consequence, by intense citizen mobilization that brings novel politically and aesthetically creative responses onto the streets.

In the last decades, in fact, different incidents, events, and social movements challenging the ruling political powers have had the epicentre of their political struggle on urban streets, where new strategies of mobilization and communication have suddenly germinated. This includes the various forms taken by the so-called ‘Arab Spring’; the protests against increases in public transport ticket prices, and against Brazil hosting the football World Cup (‘Anti-Cup’); the expression of the Occupy movement around the world; and the anti-austerity demonstrations in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere. Not only have the majority of recent protests across the world occurred in cities, but most of the issues being protested against have also been distinctively urban: the privatization and commodification of public space, the intensification of surveillance and social control, housing crises, social

exclusion, austerity politics, and so on. In many of these protests, the ‘right to the city’ has often been upheld, providing a global dimension to the local discontents of the protesters (Sugranyes and Mathivet 2010; Brenner 2013; Harvey 2013). As the world’s urban populations grow, in fact, it is the right to the city itself that is increasingly unobtainable for their inhabitants, as the way in which cities are built, managed and lived in appears to be determined by global forces that escape our understanding, perception and control.

A naturally democratic – although not necessarily legal – means of expression, urban streets, spaces and surfaces have always been a potential stage for the expression of more informal, vernacular, transgressive and counter-institutional forms of communication. Across the decades, writers, crews, activists, political groups and street artists have been using various strategies and tactics to disseminate marks of artistic experimentation, signs of existential quest, piercing sarcasm, idiosyncratic exhilaration and political dissent around the city surfaces. Lately, many authors have been highlighting novel forms of creativity and aesthetic creation, whether in exercise of everyday life micropolitics, or in the more episodic actions of contentious politics, in particular when these are manifested in the context of social movements or collective activism: for example, hybrid forms of protest combining both the street and the internet (Castells 2012; Juris 2012; Tremayne 2014); the development of new grammars of communication and protest (Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013; Baumgarten 2015; Díez Garcia 2017); and the emergence of new non-institutional and horizontal collective actors (Castells 2012; Dahlgren 2013; Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013; Tejerina et al. 2013; Pickerill et al. 2014; Ancelovici, Dufour and Nez 2016). The analysis of these different ways of conceiving and practising politics has given rise to novel notions such as ‘creative democracy’ (Hankins 2017), ‘creative citizen’ (Hargreaves and Hartley 2016), ‘creative activism’ (Harrebye 2015), ‘artivism’ (Sandoval and Latorre 2008), ‘aesthetics of protest’ (Buser et al. 2013), and ‘carnival of protest’ (St John 2003).

It is surely not a coincidence that this outburst of creativity, at the intersection of aesthetics, politics and the urban space, has coincided with the current ‘times of crisis’. If crisis, as argued above, is first of all a frame through which the world is perceived, it will be when the urban landscapes are more explicitly immersed within ‘crisis’ that aesthetic efforts to challenge, resignify, reimagine, and indeed dismantle this imaginary will multiply in quantity and quality. Challenging the rhetoric, aesthetics and thus the reality of crisis means first of all to imagine and express valuable alternatives to its taken-for-granted reality; a precise aesthetic task is to find ways and channels to express sociopolitical dissent and critique, as well as anger, in the face of a political system that is increasingly unable to represent social demands.

It is in this complex situation that this edited collection is situated: at the point of encounter between crisis (and the construction thereof), urban space, and the visual expression of protest. This is the battleground that this volume intends to explore. It is an attempt to understand how the politics and aesthetics of the urban *in* crisis are experienced, engaged with and reworked, by looking at the way forms of artistic visual production from the street are engaging with, and challenging, the current ‘times of crisis’. How to turn the passive enduring of these times of crisis into the active imagining of alternative *critical times*? Inspired by this question, the volume gathers various contributions reflecting on the relation between urban space and visual protest across both geographical and historical axes. In order to navigate through this vast variety, we chose to focus on graffiti, a form of expression that continues to be relevant, accompanying and complementing other novel forms of visual political expression (e.g. performance, pranksterism, occupation) emerging in the streets. In particular, the contributions gathered in this volume focus on what we define as ‘political graffiti’, and the various forms this practice has evolved in contemporary urban space.

## Political Graffiti in Critical Times

Graffiti is a complex, mark-making phenomenon; a specific form of writing that usually occurs ‘out of place’, produced by the use of simple writing instruments, such as spray paint and marker pens. It is unofficial, informal and, frequently, illegal. Modern graffiti is said to have emerged in the 1970s, together with hip-hop music and breakdance, out of the underground culture of deprived US East Coast inner cities (Castleman 1982; Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Phillips 1999; Austin 2001; Macdonald 2001).<sup>3</sup> ‘Classic’ signature graffiti, or tagging, is mostly concerned with the act of marking a presence and a territory with a self-referential claim (the tag), the meaning of which is often fully resolved within an internal language that for the most part remains obscure to the outsider. Born as being, by definition, excessive to the social, legal and aesthetic normativity of the urban, graffiti was immediately perceived as an assault on urban morality and decor, thus attracting social stigmatization and legal persecution. At the same time, its subversive aura, literally incorporating a transgression to the aesthetic regime of the contemporary city, and especially to its normative utopia of order, safety and cleanliness, provided it with a unique capacity to redraw the perception, experience and meaning of public space, allowing for hitherto subdued expressions, claims, narratives and conflicts to publicly appear (Ferrell 1996; McAuliffe and Iveson 2011: 133). With time, the rupturing quality of some

forms of graffiti has to some extent waned, as the aesthetic of contemporary capitalism gradually attuned to the 'gritty', 'edgy' and subversive allure of this, as well as other, countercultural spaces, styles and practices, consistently with its tendency to co-opt and ingest radical artistic practices by turning them into marketable lifestyles (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Moses 2013; Bohme 2017). Most importantly, to significantly alter the sociocultural, legal and economic status of this practice has been the surfacing of street art, or 'post-graffiti' as it is sometimes called (Waclawek 2011).

Despite the wide range of definitions that attempt to capture the differences between graffiti and street art, the debate is far from being settled (McAuliffe 2012; Blanché 2015; Ross 2016; Avramides and Tsilimpounidi 2017). Norms and definitions change with time, and it may thus be more productive to focus on common evolving trends and shared features, rather than attempting strict categorizations. Street art emerged in the late 1990s at the intersection between graffiti subculture and art market, adding new techniques (e.g. collage, stencilling, posters, stickers, throwing-up, pasting-up of drawings, airbrushing) to the traditional spray can, and gradually moving from the cryptic language of tagging to the pictorial image. Street artists have fewer ties with conventions of the subculture scene of graffiti, and their work 'is less likely to be considered vandalism, because it is more easily understood and accessible for the greater public than graffiti' (Blanché 2015: 35). Its 'shift from the typographic to the iconographic' (Manco 2004: 16), together with a greater attention to the political content of the message, has provided street art with 'a more universal, democratic aesthetic' (Dickens 2010: 77), as well as with a more comfortable relation with the art world and market (Bengtson 2014; Wells 2016; Molnár 2018). To be sure, this evolution has been, and is, far from linear or smooth. In the contemporary city, graffiti and street art take different forms and produce different effects that are transversal to, and differently affected by, ongoing phenomena of commodification and securitization of the urban space. In many contexts, street art is undergoing a remarkable institutionalization, the result of often becoming, intentionally or not, a tool in the context of creative city politics and urban branding strategies (cf. Schacter 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Guinard and Margier 2017; Campos and Sequeira 2019). At the same time, graffiti continue to be criminalized, writers fined or arrested, and walls cleaned by generously loaded brushes of moral outrage and grey paint (McAuliffe 2012). Simultaneously, there are other artistic forms using urban surfaces as a means of expression, such as muralism, which underwent a rather different stylistic and conceptual evolution, and cannot simply be explained via the graffiti–street art dichotomy.



The dynamics and contested geographies of graffiti (here taken in its widest sense) are, in other words, complex and multifaceted, and their boundaries remain porous (Kramer 2010; McAuliffe and Iveson 2011). Policymakers, local authorities and practitioners alike constantly negotiate with the constitutive ambivalence of a practice that remains unamenable to strict stylistic, moral and even legal categorizations. This is most crucially dependent on the fact that graffiti are unavoidably public: ‘by *taking place*’, Chmielewska (2007: 161) explains, graffiti ‘makes itself public’. As a consequence, their role, existence and ‘social life’ are never static or stable, but always dynamically immersed in the complex structures, power relations and ‘distribution of the sensible’ of a given space and a given time. On the one hand, this highlights the necessity of exploring these spaces and times with transcultural, historical and ethnographic sensibility; on the other, this makes explicit that the political quality of graffiti resides in its capacity to question not simply a given notion or theme but, first of all, ‘the definition of the nature and the limits of public space *qua* public’ (Brighenti 2010: 328).

Intentionally or not, graffiti have always to do with negotiating and reworking the spatial and aesthetic normativity of urban space and experience. In this sense, they may be said to constitute a veritable site of crisis in its most profound sense, as well as a *critical* site in itself: that is, a site in which the conditions of possibility of urban space, publicness and experience are potentially subjected to radical reformulation, and so are put *in crisis*. Even prior to conveying any critical ‘message’ or aesthetic ‘form’, graffiti are critical – and thus *in nuce* political – in so far as materializing a *rupture* with respect to the sociocultural and aesthetic normativity of the street, and thus of everyday urban life at large, thereby embodying a challenge to the given order and its aesthetic, legal and moral consensus (Campos 2015; Light 2018).

While graffiti always incorporate a political quality, this volume is particularly interested in ‘political graffiti’. In crafting this definition, we refer to the wide understanding of graffiti encapsulated in the Oxford dictionary definition, namely as ‘writing or drawings scribbled, scratched or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place’ – with a specification, however, that we do not assume political graffiti to be only the ‘illicit’ ones. Regardless of their legal status, we use ‘political graffiti’ as an umbrella term (e.g. Lynn and Lea 2005; Carrington 2009) that includes various styles and forms of visual expression (e.g. marker and pencil markings, drawings, slogans, stencils, street art, murals) that forge a relationship between the graffitist and the citizen over current sociopolitical issues and social change.

We recognize this is an extremely broad concept that encompasses different techniques, languages and styles, belonging to various social and geographical backgrounds.

There are many different traditions of street visual communication that can be framed within this field: from the graffiti produced during the French ‘May 68’ to the political muralism of Northern Ireland and of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia; from the Brazilian *pixação* to contemporary stencils (e.g. Banksy) and the revolutionary graffiti produced in the context of the Arab Spring and beyond. In fact, all these examples share something in common. Unlike other forms of graffiti and street art, political graffiti have, of course, an explicitly political content; and they engage in a less conventional yet more effective political struggle that is designed to resist particular constellations of legal, political and religious authority inscribed in social institutions and materialized in socio-spatial relations (Ferrell 1995: 34; Waldner and Dobratz 2013: 379). Especially in contested areas, such as Northern Ireland (Goalwin 2013; Rolston 2013) or the Spanish-Basque region (Chaffee 1988, 1993; Rolston and Berastegi 2016), political graffiti may figure prominently as an alternative means of communication and political mobilization among rival political groups negotiating conflicting political identities. This collective dimension is worth stressing.

While graffiti have often been tied to an individualist subculture, political graffiti are usually produced through collective action, at the coming together of writers, artistic collectives, activists. Working together on the graffiti-making, urban activists may produce a sense of creative community, solidify social bonds and enhance collectively perceived sentiments of solidarity. Contemporary scholarship has recognized the contribution of the visual to the expression of social movements, and its role in the effort to confirm and empower a collective, often marginalized or excluded, identity (Doerr and Teune 2012; Philips 2012; Rolston and Berastegi 2016), and there is indeed consistent awareness among social movements as regards the value of political graffiti as an autonomous and independent form of aesthetic production that is able to link art and politics by bringing together the public, the partial and the intimate (Schuster 2015; Schachter 2014, 2016b). Graffiti may serve as a catalyst in the effort of social movements to release imagination, explore innovative politico-aesthetic practices and express their identities and political claims in a creative way. Social movements may deploy them as part of their repertoires of collective action and micro-level political activism constituting an expressive resistance strategy in struggles against politically powerful actors (Awad and Wagoner 2017; Ryan 2018). Political graffiti may serve to frame sociopolitical issues by employing visual frames which are often exercised at the emotional, affective and aesthetic

level (Doerr and Teune 2012: 161; Rolston and Berastegi 2016: 34), by acting as a pedagogical tool and interactive avenue for creative expression and engagement in community dialogue and political debate (Harris 2006: 97), or even by working to subvert and deface billboard advertising, as in the case of BUGA UP activists in Sydney and Street Advertising Takeovers in New York and Madrid (Iveson 2013; Deitz 2016). Particularly significant is the case of Latin America, with its long tradition of graffitiists framing the contentious politics of divergent political actors by drawing political slogans and iconic symbols, memorializing remarkable events of the past, and depicting desired trajectories of future change (Chaffee 1993; Paento 1999; Campbell 2003; Borland and Sutton 2007; Kane 2009; Burdick and Vicencio 2016; Ryan 2018).

To be sure, the political use of graffiti as a means of self-expression and critique, especially in contexts of reduced freedom of expression, has been documented over many centuries, from the Roman and Umayyad empires to Franco's Spain and Chile's Pinochet dictatorships; from the antifascist graffiti written in the Milan subway by Italian fighters (Fabbri 2007: 418), in Rome's Nazi prison by political detainees (Pugliese 2002) during the Second World War, and in Berlin's Reichstag by Soviet soldiers in 1945 (Baker 2002; Burdick and Vicencio 2016) to those employed as a means of communication among exiles on isolated Greek islands during post-civil war Greece (Mamoulaki 2013). This is unsurprising, as political graffiti are particularly appropriate to produce counter-hegemonic discourses used by marginalized people and political actors who lack access to institutionalized forms of political participation, or who believe that, as usual, politics will not bring about the desired change (Waldner and Dobratz 2013: 387). Much fieldwork suggests that political graffiti may become a site of resistance against authoritarianism, oppression and injustice during periods of social and political upheaval (Chaffee 1988, 1993; Borland and Sutton 2007; Hanauer 2011; Marche 2012; Waldner and Dobratz 2013; Zaimakis 2015, 2016; Rolston and Berastegi 2016; Campos 2016; Ryan 2018). It is in fact especially during periods of authoritarianism and extreme oppression that they are employed by counter-establishment social forces in 'hit and run' visual protest expressing opposition to the regime, as well as by governmental organizations in attempting to mobilize popular support (Bushnell 1990; Johnston 2006; Ryan 2018). A striking example are the intifada graffiti (Peteet 1996; Hanauer 2011), where Palestinians 'without access to a national media [or] political assembly' take advantage of graffiti activism to transgress the censorship and to visualize opinions (Toenjes 2015: 57), sometimes encouraging the continuance of the intifada and its tactics of civil disobedience, 'sometimes asserting the dominance of a particular political faction in an area, and still

other times expressing Palestinian national identity'. Likewise, political graffiti became an empowering tool of revolutionary communication and public mobilization in the different contexts of the so-called Arab Spring (Elias 2014; Lenon 2014; Nicoarea 2014; Werbner, Webb and Spellman-Roots 2014; Toenjes 2015; Abaza 2016), as well as within the aesthetic protest that emerged across the anti-austerity mobilizations in Southern Europe and beyond (Tsilimpounidi and Walsh 2010; Tsilimpounidi 2015; Zaimakis 2015, 2016, 2018; Campos 2016; Tolonen 2016; Serafis, Kitis and Archakis 2018). At the same time, graffiti may take a more problematic ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and racist nuance, becoming a tool to denigrate and attack minorities (Wilson 2008; Nayak 2010; Zaimakis 2015). In fact, graffiti are always embedded in delicate dialectics, which see them being at the same time a tool employed, or exploited, both by those who champion 'right to the city' politics, and by those who impair them by engendering processes of commodification, gentrification and touristification, using graffiti themselves, directly and indirectly, to do so. Such dialectics, moreover, are increasingly global in scope. Being an eminently urban phenomenon, graffiti are unavoidably prolonged by the planetary dimension of the contemporary process of urbanization (see Brenner 2013). This is also a result of new technologies, as digital mediatization allows graffiti writers to achieve international visibility by overcoming the physical boundaries of their site, in this way taking advantage of the multileveled potentials of graffiti themselves to put screen and street cultures into complex negotiation and self-reflexive reappropriation (Elias 2014: 89; Davies 2017: 7). While they have been for the most part examined as rooted, place-based practices, today graffiti increasingly need to be explored and conceptualized as a global phenomenon (Avramidis and Drakopoulou 2015; Hannerz 2016; Ross 2016).

In sum, if social and political turbulence (thus when the common *doxa* is fragmented into contested imaginaries) has always been a particularly fertile ground for the surfacing of graffiti, it is especially in the current 'times of crisis' that political graffiti are an important source for understanding how people experience the conditions of undesirable social change and the structures of feeling that lie behind a crisis-ridden world, capturing issues of oppression, unveiling social inequalities, and expressing passionate and affective responses (e.g. Argenti 2007; Knight 2015). Political graffiti may reveal the politics of public visibility (Campbell 2003) used by new social movements and protesters in their efforts to maintain, empower and materialize their own identities, narratives and aesthetics, perform contentious politics and influence social experience (Zaimakis 2016: 80). This edited collection emerges out of this promising complexity, at the encounter between crisis, urban space, and the visual expression of protest.

## Contributions

The contributions to this volume form a variegated and yet coherent assemblage of voices within, against and beyond the present (of) crisis, across different geographies and temporalities, by engaging with diverse times of crisis and their dense imaginaries, practices and problematics. Through differently addressing the way in which the narratives and realities of crisis affect and modify the social worlds of street art and graffiti, they provide readers with a ‘bottom-up’ attention to the reality of the place-specific forms of visual protest in times of crisis, allowing an understanding of the dynamics of political mobilization and the diffusion of symbols and ideas inside and outside urban social movements, and in the urban environment at large. Albeit the themes explored in the different chapters often overlap, mirroring the manifold aesthetics and sociopolitical complexities of the urban in times of crisis, we have organized them in three main parts.

In the first part, we gather contributions exploring the relation between street activism and visual protest in the contemporary city. We begin with Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi who, employing the method of *periegesis* – the act of showing around – in five graffiti pieces in the Exarchia district of downtown Athens, reveal the complex relation between graffiti and political tension in the current turbulent times that city is living through. Developing in the form of a playful dialogue between a graffiti practitioner/architect and a sociologist/photographer, the text also reflects on how to cross the boundaries between doing and studying graffiti, art and social sciences, moving from praxis to theory, and back. Through five stops, the authors offer critical reflection on the multiple and contradictory narratives of practising graffiti and street art in times of crisis: the small and mundane visual expressions against fascism; the imported graffiti and the process of touristification of space; the divergent meaning of depoliticized colourful street art and its use as a tool for gentrification; the socio-spatial contrasts in the city and the crisis of representation of particular groups, such as the poor; the reuse of space in occupied public parks and the meaningful street artists’ spatial politics as a counter-response to the monopoly of state-run or commercially driven messages in the urban fabric.

The next chapter, by Jonna Tolonen, is similarly set in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and the consequent austerity policies that plagued several countries in southern Europe. In this context, various organized and unorganized forms of protests took place, with large demonstrations and strong spontaneous movements like the 15M in Spain, who carried out several prolonged occupations of public space, or *acampadas*. Unsurprisingly in a country that had experienced a long period of dictatorship, during

which political graffiti were often one of the few key devices of political communication in public, the context of this crisis proved to be fertile for this kind of political expression. Political graffiti played a prominent role in the urban visual landscape, as the street became a showcase of the anguish and problems being experienced by ordinary people. Drawing from an ethnographic research, Tolonen focuses on ways in which the crisis affected the personal narratives, political commitments, and artistic practices of Spanish street artists. With the help of insightful interviews, she shows how the crisis pushed artists into a different creative mode, prompting them to produce more politicized works on the street, and politicizing the street itself in the process.

The question of the intersection between alternative ways of doing politics and the transnational visual language of graffiti in critical times is the focus of the contribution by Yiannis Zaimakis and Leonidas Oikonomakis, which unfolds via a comparative analysis based in four exemplary countries, two in South America (Argentina and Bolivia) and two in Southern Europe (Greece and Spain). Despite the significant differences, common in these countries is the use of street art and political graffiti as an aesthetic and affective tool of communication and mobilization. During the last few decades, in the context of economic hardships, politicized graffiti collectives enacted their 'right to the city' by connecting small-scale tactical interventions in cityscapes with social movement struggles, in this way producing performative spaces of resistance and active participation with novel, playful and sometimes carnivalesque forms of visual protest. Exploring different examples, the authors show that, while the crisis also facilitated the rise of some xenophobic and racist graffiti, the vast majority have been embedded within various anti-capitalist movements through which they have expressed various forms of visual protest. At the same time, the latter may easily turn into spectacle, and critical graffiti can unintentionally become tools of urban commodification, thus showing the inherent ambivalence of the relation between graffiti and the urban landscape of crisis.

The next chapter looks at another country that experienced a dramatic dictatorship: Chile. While in this context muralism has been an important and well-researched political role, the focus of Javiera Manzi, Matías Marambio DLF, Isidro Parraguez and María Yaksic is another visual praxis, serigraphy, explored both as a technique of production tied to the artisanal and the collective, and as a tool of urban political intervention. Focusing on the recent cycle of social protest, the authors look at a decade (2008–2018) of graphic activism in the context of the student movement and its protest against neoliberalism and post-dictatorship politics. This is done via an analysis of posters made by student collectives and propaganda brigades, complementing

a focus on their ‘images, languages and materiality’, with attention on ‘the complex fabric of social relations that enable their production, reproduction and circulation in urban public space’. The authors, themselves located ‘between the archive and the streets’, reconstruct the historical trajectory of the intersection between graphic production and urban politics, exploring the circulation of images in urban public space as a peculiar form of visual imagination and reappropriation of the urban imaginary. In this way they provide an insightful reflection on visual protest in critical times, at the intersection between visual techniques, activism and urban space.

The next contribution by Jeffrey Ian Ross brings us to the United States in the times of Donald Trump. The latter’s 2016 election has become one of the most debated topics in the media and among ordinary citizens, generating a number of diverse reactions. Trump’s controversial proposals and poorly polished comments have generated strong reactions at the national and international level, while his right-wing conservative and populist politics have made him a target for various progressive groups and social movements worldwide, often materialising in various forms of visual protest. Trump has indeed become an iconic protagonist of criticism, satire and humour. In his chapter, Ross sets out to analyse the amount, distribution and content of political graffiti against Trump by focusing on the city of Washington, DC, the nation’s capital and home of the presidential residence. This exploration draws an interesting relation between a powerful figure whose impact on culture is seemingly global and deterritorialized, and the contingency of his embeddedness in the US capital, where he lives and works. Exploring different districts of the city, Ross provides an insightful snapshot of the visual landscape of protest in a city that hosts the most controversial president in American history.

We conclude this section by going to Bologna, Italy, and specifically looking at an (in)famous event that took place in the city in March 2016, when the renowned street artist Blu took the drastic decision to erase all his murals from the city’s walls. Prior to this event, various graffiti, included some by Blu, had been removed from the city’s walls to populate the exhibition ‘Street Art. Banksy & Co.’ Taking inspiration from Blu’s iconoclastic protest, Andrea Pavoni develops a theoretical discussion that intersects notions of art, heritage and vandalism, exploring the contemporary obsession with physical preservation and the way it surreptitiously seeped through the lively public debate that followed Blu’s decision to erase his murals. Pointing towards a notion of urban commons that is dynamic, conflictual and in becoming, Pavoni shows the potential of Blu’s gesture in the context of the ongoing co-optation of street art and, more generally, vis-à-vis the complex relation between street politics, public art and urban commons.

The second part focuses more specifically on anti-gentrification protests in the context of cities characterized by political, socio-economic and spatial divisions. It begins with Betty Dobratz and Lisa Waldner who, looking at Berlin, Germany, over a long period of recent history (1945–2018), explore the intersection between political graffiti and the major political crises that the city has undergone: the division and reunification; the Cold War that saw Berlin as the epicentre; its contemporary neoliberal urbanization; and the concomitant growth of anti-immigrant and xenophobic right-wing politics. Such an ambitious historical gaze is held together by a piercing analysis of selected key examples of political graffiti, which are treated both as a precious archive to gain insight into turbulent times, as well as explored as veritable actors in the public sphere, often conveying alternative counternarratives able to provide a contingent as well as a long-term impact. The second part shows the extent to which the political force of graffiti tends to be entangled in a contradictory ambivalence, as street art critical of neoliberal urbanization and at times used to actively sustain squatters and poorer neighbourhoods, often ends up contributing to the economic valorization of urban space and, consequently, to those very processes of gentrification and touristification that it had contested in the first place.

Another temporality of crisis is explored by Pafsanias Karathanasis in the context of Nicosia, Cyprus, the last divided capital in Europe. Here, in contrast to other ‘cities-in-crisis’ like Athens, where the proliferation of political graffiti has been a direct response to the dystopian conditions of crisis, the content of visual protest mainly refers back to the initial ‘1974 crisis’, caused by the Turkish invasion in the island, and the traumatic experience of the prolonged territorial and sociocultural division of the country. In this context, drawing upon ethnographically informed semiotic and spatial analysis of relevant political street art pieces, the chapter investigates the city’s wall as a visual landscape marked by the material remains of division, and its street activists’ interventions. In the midst of a process of gentrification, with a concomitant rise in leisure activities, nightlife and tourist business that normalize and invisibilize the materiality of the division, Karathanasis focuses on the opening of the Green Line crossings in 2008, which transformed the Old Town into a zone of ‘prolonged crisis’ or ‘permanent liminality’, in which grass-roots movements have the chance of contesting dominant narratives and questioning established identities and separations via political stencils, often transforming the conditions of crisis into an opportunity for critical intervention.

The relation between visual aesthetics, street politics and gentrification in the context of creative city strategies is the context of the next chapter, written by Anna Giulia Della Puppa. It is also set in Bologna, a city with a



strong tradition of left-wing activism, one of Italy's most important student communities, and Europe's oldest university. This vibrant cultural scene, however, is slowly but persistently being neutralized of its most diverse, underground and informal quality, due to the interconnected action of the municipal forces and the market. On the one hand, Bologna is undergoing a widespread process of gentrification, twinned by the touristification of the city centre, where the revamping of whole streets and neighbourhoods via a cool 'creative city' aesthetics is complemented by its aggressive rebranding as the 'city of food'. On the other hand, ever-stricter social control regulations, consistent with the nationwide obsession with the notion of *decoro*, increasingly deprive the city of its most culturally active, diverse and non-commercial spaces, evicting squatted social centres, removing free access to libraries, and so on. Della Puppa explores the atmosphere of sociocultural and political crisis in which the city is seemingly immersed via a series of ethnographic perambulations through its 'contested spaces and surfaces', exploring the ambivalent relationship between the street art and graffiti, the current sociopolitical climate, and the urban space.

The third part addresses visual activism and protest in the context of political turmoil, regime transformations and revolutions. Cláudia Madeira, Cristina Pratas Cruzeiro and Ricardo Campos explore the Portuguese revolutionary murals of the 1970s and 1980s. The revolution, which occurred on 25 April 1974, overthrowing four decades of dictatorship, gave rise to intense and volatile political dynamics. The fragmentation of the political field and the eruption of citizen participation converted the public space into a privileged arena for debate and political propaganda. During these turbulent and vibrant decades, murals, mainly executed by left-wing movements, both official and unofficial, marked the landscape of the largest Portuguese cities, becoming emblematic of this period of renewed freedom of expression and democratization of public access to art, following decades of repression and silencing. Although they have now disappeared, they are still remembered as a legacy of the revolution and the democratization of Portuguese society, and they constitute an invaluable archive to explore the relation between political graffiti, public space and the political sphere in the fluid, critical post-revolutionary times. Analysing key examples, the authors unpack the role played by these murals in the crucial political and symbolic struggles that ensued from the revolution.

The next chapter moves to one of the youngest nations in the world, East Timor, which gained its independence in 2002 after about three decades of Indonesian occupation. The ensuing political and social process has been turbulent, marked by several critical and violent episodes, including the violence that followed the 2012 parliamentary elections, which is the period

that Catherine Arthur explores. As in the other contributions, here we find the capacity of street art to give political expression to marginalized groups in turbulent times. In this context, Arthur focuses on the so-called Geração Foun, the ‘New Generation’, that grew up under Indonesian occupation, assimilating various aspects of Indonesian culture, and for this very reason found itself marginalized from the nascent state’s political sphere. Young artists from the Geração Foun countered this marginalization by employing street art as a tool of communication and representation, using the public space as a means to invoke indigenous, ethno-cultural symbolism, referring to a precolonial, indigenous identity that would precede and transcend current social divisions, and expressing an alternative and peaceful vision to the dominant, exclusionary ones.

The part ends with an in-depth immersion in the war-torn landscape of contemporary Syria, where the revolution of 2011 has been followed by an enormously destructive war that is still ongoing, albeit barely noticed by the global media. The revolution released a powerful will to express, after decades of systematic suppression of alternative political voices, including graffiti and street art, and provided a liberatory form of expression, communication and protest against both the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the occupying force of Daesh. In their contribution, Hend Alawadhi and Julia Tulke interview Abu Malek al-Shami, a self-taught muralist and rebel fighter in the Free Syrian Army, by tracing his involvement in the revolutionary struggle, and the effect that the siege of Darayya had on the development of his creative practice. The latter unfolds as a participatory and collective endeavour which repurposes the ruined landscape of the war-torn city into a tool of national and global communication, via digital media, by showing that ‘crises and struggles are not isolated events but connected across space and time through acts of solidarity and collective resistance’. Piercing the cloak of invisibility that covers the reality of Syria to those outside, this is a particularly valuable account on the relation between street art practice, political engagement, and war.

We conclude with Rafael Schacter’s engaging Afterword. Written ‘from lockdown’, it provides a topical complement to the volume’s central *problématique*, namely the relation between politics, street art and public space, by exploring what occurs when this very relation is drastically severed as a result of a global pandemic. The latter ushered in ‘a crisis of publicness, a crisis in which the quintessential site of protest, of debate, of urban life, has been (necessarily) evacuated’, and ‘our very ability to articulate dissent has thus been sharply curtailed’. While the exceptionality of this situation is evident, overlooking its continuity with the ‘normality of crisis’ would be naive, as many of the other contributions show. Thus, the significance of Schacter’s

question: ‘If the crisis has evacuated the city, absenting us of the traditional space of protest, where is the site of reimagination, where is the site for activity today?’ From ‘hyperlocal’ grass-roots solidarity to ‘hypermediated’ digitally formed groups, the text speculates on the creative and resilient ways in which the commons are reproduced, concluding by asking what this situation may tell us about the future of political graffiti – the question remains open.

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**Andrea Pavoni** is Research Fellow at DINAMIA’CET [Centre for Socio-economic and Territorial Studies], ISCTE-IUL – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal. Drawing from various areas such as critical geography, urban studies, legal theory, sociology and philosophy, his research explores the relation between materiality, normativity and aesthetics in the urban context. He is Associate Editor at *Lo Squaderno, Explorations in Space and Society*, and co-editor of the Law and the Senses Series [University of Westminster Press]. His book, *Controlling Urban Events: Law, Ethics and the Material*, has been published with Routledge.

**Yiannis Zaimakis** is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Local Societies, and Director of the Social Analysis and Applied Social Research Laboratory at the University of Crete. He publishes in the areas of sociology of popular music and rebetika, street activism and political graffiti, sport cultures and fandom identities, social and solidarity economy, and the politics of the commons. He coordinated the research programme ‘Political and existential graffiti and voices of protest on urban landscapes in times of crises – Greece’ and currently coordinates two research projects (‘The many faces of “Trouba”: A socio-cultural study of prostitution in Piraeus’ red-light district in the Post-War years-Greece’ and ‘Need assessment and local value-system in Lasithi highland plateau – Crete’).

**Ricardo Campos** holds a Masters’ degree in sociology and a PhD in visual anthropology. He is a researcher at CICS.NOVA – Interdisciplinary Centre

of Social Sciences, Portugal. He currently coordinates two research projects: 'A(c)itizenship – Young people and the arts of citizenship: Activism, participatory culture and creative practices' (2019–2021), and 'TransUrbArts – Emergent Urban Arts in Lisbon and São Paulo' (2016–2020), both financed by FCT/MCTES. He is also a co-coordinator of the Visual Culture Group of the Portuguese Association of Communication Studies, and of the Luso-Brasílian Network for the Study of Urban Arts and Interventions (RAIU).

## Notes

1. The Greek *Krisis* from *krinein* (to separate, decide, judge), from PIE root *\*krei-* (to sieve, discriminate). See also the Greek *krinesthai* (to explain).
2. Post-political theory has extensively dissected this point: 'crisis' is evoked as a mode of justification that opens a post-political sphere of action prompted by a moral imperative to act to reinstate a given norm (Žižek 1999; Rancière 2001; Mouffe 2005).
3. Other modes of graffiti associated with alternative ways of doing politics or even 'everyday resistance' also emerged in many Latin American and South European countries. As Ryan underlines, the rich tradition of political graffiti and street art in Latin America seems to have been neglected by contemporary literature, which has centred more on Anglo-American experience and focused on a very short time frame (Ryan 2018: 7).

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