

THE CODE OF THE STREETS. SOCIAL AND ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE OF THE WALLS OF RIGA

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Abstract

In the past few years graffiti has become a very popular topic for discussions. Many analytic researches prove that the different expressions of graffiti are a sufficiently interesting field for studies in Latvia and elsewhere in the world. It might seem strange – a visual phenomenon that is most frequently associated with vandalism, has taken an important place in the work of art and culture researchers. What makes this self-evident sight so appealing? Furthermore, why do we perceive graffiti as a self-evident sight? Quite possibly it is a code that set in our social perception thousands of years ago, and what we call *graffiti* in the 21st century is an ancient tradition that has been, and still is, practised all over the world.

Examples of ancient graffiti have been found in the city of Pompeii, Italy, but the most significant place to search for it is the New York City. Street art and graffiti of Riga has adopted a lot from both of these traditions. Local urban environment is alive and densely filled with different socially and artistically significant writings and drawings. The graffiti of Riga fits in the context of worldwide examples and has become a valuable part of social art, introducing artistic and political tendencies, as well as interpreting them in public environment.

Keywords: *graffiti, social art, Pompeii, New York, Riga.*

Code of graffiti. Pompeii

The murals made in the Palaeolithic era have great importance in the context of artistic and social means of art history, and very often they are associated with the tradition of antique graffiti. For a long time, all kinds of mural paintings have served as a component of communication. Many examples of antique graffiti are evident in Europe, South America and Asia. However, the best archetypes of antique graffiti are still visible in the city of Pompeii, in Campania, South region of Italy.

This historic city was buried and partly destroyed after a violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD and at that time had around 15,000 inhabitants. Thankfully, it is still a home for around 10,000 graffiti inscriptions. The graffiti of this Ancient Roman city has a significant meaning serving as a representative of visual content and, most importantly, has achieved great value as a mediator for communication and reflection of political opinion among citizens. Frequently these antique murals and inscriptions are considered to be the prototypes of political advertisements.

In context of graffiti, it is crucial to distinguish between their stylistic differences and conceptual approaches. Ethologically, the word *graffiti* has originated from the Latin word *graphium*¹. Over time, the meaning of this concept has undergone considerable change – since the mid-19th century, in Italian language it has transformed to *graffiare*². Taking a wider view of this notion, it is possible to assume that it is an artistic technique performed by applying various scratches on layers of paint or other material. In Antique Pompeii these inscriptions were made on special stone platforms and walls of buildings, reflecting the political views of the city inhabitants or their reflection of ordinary life. A researcher of the Pompeii territory – Francesco Maria Avellino – had a substantial role in discovering these wall writings. He began his work in 1839 and highlighted that the antique graffiti was a unique chance of exploring ancient culture through the means of language. Recently, it has also become an important field of studies, and the Pompeiian graffiti has been linked to the development of Latin. One of the most relevant researchers is Rex E. Wallace – an expert of ancient languages, who classifies graffiti by its content and use. He divides these writings into two categories – *graffito*³ and *dipinti*⁴. The meaning of these inscriptions is quite opposite – graffiti or *graffito* indicates the everyday life affairs and is a medium for public expression of an opinion. On the other hand, *dipinti* is a political advertisement made by professional street artists.

In the ancient world graffiti had immeasurable value – not only in context of historical research, but also as a Pompeiian way of communication in the public space and a moderator of inhabitants' lives. Regarding the quantity of wall inscriptions, the city has become a diary of the society. Research and analysis of the antique wall writings affirm that it is crucial to take into account ethical and aesthetic principles of that time. Bright drawings and political writings can be explained by a simple need of advertisement in a pre-historic age. *Graffito* can be construed as a Pompeiian reflection of life. Like today, in the ancient city, it was a pronounced trend to write one's name on the walls. The inscriptions were a

¹ Writing tool or style – from Latin.

² Scratch – from Italian.

³ Marking made with a special engraving or charcoal pen.

⁴ Bright paintings on walls.

method to maintain the position in society for representatives of the highest social strata [Petre 2017b: 106–109].

Antique graffiti is a possibility for contemporary researchers to take a look at the ancient society by reading the marks and texts left on the walls of Pompeii. Ancient graffiti can be considered as the beginning of social art and allows to assess the importance of street art for centuries. Despite the geographical location, political and economic situation or time in the world history, graffiti continues to exist as a visual representation of society in an urban environment.

Social experience of walls in New York

The first evident marks of modern graffiti in the United States were seen around the 1920s, when various criminal gangs operated in several cities. With spraying cans, they blew large-sized inscriptions¹, thus “highlighting the concerned area” [Hoover 1999]. However, by the modern assumptions, the onset of graffiti art is attributed to the second half of the 20th century, especially the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time in the world when people, strained by the socio-political changes, wrote inscriptions on the walls of the buildings as a way to protest and communicate with the government. At the time, the U.S. were particularly exacerbated by severe issues concerning racial inequality and common human rights. More frequently the substantial meaning of graffiti was to reflect the social problems and a diversion of the day-to-day phenomena through an aesthetic prism [Petre 2017b: 106–109].

A stylized writing of one’s nickname, also known as *tagging*, became particularly popular in the late 1960s. It was also the most common form of graffiti amongst teenagers. The chosen pseudonym had an extremely important role and usually consisted of a combination of one’s nickname and the street number of residence². Name of the tagger was the only sign of expression and recognition. Soon the graffiti as a tendency begun to fascinate the elderly and these simple, representative signatures became bright and calligraphic illustrations. Graffiti writers were influenced by pop-culture and animation, thereby laying foundation for new social and aesthetic culture [Farthing 2015: 552]. The spraying paint gave significant artistic freedom and a leg up for artists to sign and make multi-coloured drawings easier³. The ideal platform for such drawings were the subway trains, often inscribed with specifically addressed messages. By 1989, the New York subway coaches were covered with drawings and writings by more than 3,000 artists. That created the possibility and

¹ Most frequently these inscriptions were direct gang names (Author’s note – *A. P.*).

² Gray, Steve. *20th Century Graffiti – The Rise of Graffiti Art*. Available: <http://www.widewalls.ch/20th-century-the-rise-of-graffiti/> (viewed 23.03.2017.)

³ Bambic Kostov, Ana. *80’s Kings: Basquiat, Haring and Futura*. Available: <http://www.widewalls.ch/80s-graffiti-new-york/> (viewed 25.03.2017.)

platform for a new field of urban culture research, and authors, such as Norman Mailer, to study the development of street art in context of socio-political events. In 1985, the government of New York started the “Clean Train Movement” in order to clean up or replace the rolling stock¹. This contributed to the modification of the urban art. The manufacturing of the graffiti-style drawing on canvases and becoming an integral part of an interior increased, changing the attitude towards modern street art for many graffiti artists. Just like in the ancient times when the house walls were used to transfer information, the New York City graffiti of the 1970s exists as a proof of human existence.

Social experience of walls in Riga

Since the 1980s, street art in Europe has rapidly spread, however in Latvia, this fruit of western culture manifested itself by installing a fragment of Berlin Wall in 1989. At that time, the underground culture, hip-hop music and street art thrived in Latvia. The underground movement resisted the censorship of information and propaganda art. Any whiff of western culture was perceived with great enthusiasm and became an interpretation and expression of freedom. The achievement of freedom was associated with eternal harmony, although publicly enthusiasts implemented it in a progressive way. Conceptually, Latvian graffiti continued the tradition of the United States, but there were some quite significant differences. While street artists from New York gradually occupied galleries and private spaces, in Latvia, the social art sphere remained as a significantly small form of communication and creative expression.

The first graffiti in Riga was made between 1987 and 1994 in the tram tunnel of Mazā Krasta street, and its authors were the pioneers of Latvian street art – Krys, Malysh and Picasso.

Their drawing was a composition of a laughing rat on the background of a semi-ruined city and an image of Jesus. Symbolically, the authors expressed their view on heavy moral political compulsion of the time [Petre 2017a: 21]. This work was initially made completely illegal, but at the same place, since 2014, legal drawings have been developed there by the graffiti team *Tribal.lv*. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of graffiti in Latvia crumbled as a result of the reduced need for protest. However, some part of young people continued to write messages of social content on the walls of Riga. Nowadays, with the increasing importance of communication through social media, for the graffiti subculture, the facades of the city buildings still remain a platform for political and social opinion expression [Petre 2017a: 45].

¹ Kordic, Angie. *Brooklyn Graffiti: History and (R)Evolution*. Available: <http://www.widewalls.ch/brooklyn-graffiti-new-york/> (viewed 26.03.2017.)

The next graffiti wave of Riga is attributed to the first decade of the 21st century. Organised by a local graffiti artist Malysh, the first hip-hop and graffiti festival in Riga titled *NRG*¹ which was held from 1997 to 2004 [Pavāre 2010]. In 2003, the public event “re:publika” took place, inviting artists from all around the country to create interactive, local-context based works. It was a social project, aimed at promoting the integration of Riga suburbs in different infrastructures. Part of this project was a hip-hop and graffiti event *Moskovskij Bazar*, organised by an artist group Bio.codes. This event was an attempt to communicate with the gypsy commune living in *Maskavas foršate* neighbourhood [Krese 2007: 238]. It revealed the visually communicative role of graffiti in the context of social practice – with the help of art, various political challenges were highlighted.

Graffiti in Riga (and Latvia) strengthened around 2006, when many new authors, such as Kiwie, Saki, Sēne and Farp, started to work [Bražinskis 2017: 30–37]. They developed a new, previously unseen style, playing with typefaces² and supplementing the inscriptions with images or *characters*. Kiwie and his distinctive drawing became particularly recognizable, and now he is commonly known as the cult Latvian graffiti artist. With the activities of these authors, the local graffiti scene completely changed, losing the peculiarities of local expression and adapting the drawings to the European and U.S. tradition. It was largely an aftermath of the skyrocketing technology development. The Internet became a great platform for young graffiti enthusiasts to draw their inspiration from the global street art processes. Graffiti increasingly lost its importance as a way of protest, but also became a proxy to society and its social processes. Socially and politically important actions were fixed with an ironic approach by using a stencil. In Riga, the development of such street art was first observed in 2006 and 2007, when an anonymous author³ (or a group of authors) filled the streets with visualisations of different politicians and their distinctive expressions. They were humorous, even mocking portraits inspired by public opinion on socially significant events.

In Riga, graffiti has been present for a relatively short period of time, but has played a huge role in the overall view of the urban environment. Many Latvian graffiti authors have obtained international recognition and keep leaving their signatures in

¹ This event, as well as the festival *Legal Wall*, was organised by graffiti artist Malysh. (*A. P.*)

² At that time the style of *throw-up* writing became popular. In slang this term is used because the inscription is quickly “tossed” on the wall. It is a stylistically copied author’s signature that does not contain many characters and uses two or three colours. (*A. P.*)

³ While painting and writing graffiti in most cases is attributable to anonymity, usually some works can be recognized by authors by their alias or signature. When analysing stencils, it is far more difficult to identify the author because this technique is not characterised by an individual approach. (*A. P.*)

their hometowns and elsewhere all over the world. The original aim of graffiti – to protest against the existing political situation – has been replaced by a desire to prove the strength and competitive edge of Latvian graffiti at a global level [Petre 2017a: 23]. Exactly like in the ancient Pompeii and last century New York, Riga graffiti and street artists are challenging the boundaries of art and its meaning, also playing an important social role in communication between the city and its citizens.

Artistic experience of walls in Riga

In context of graffiti, the most pressing question is whether a graffiti drawing is considered an art object or not. Certain level of avoidance is contributed to this part of modern and contemporary art and its research field. Most of the research studies devoted to this topic, look at the legitimacy of graffiti and street art by comparing the urban art scene in Riga to other European cities. On a broader scale, the value of graffiti was discussed in 2014, during the project “Riga 2014. The European Capital of Culture”, when different street art and graffiti related events were organised. The most popular event of 2014 was the graffiti development festival “Blank Canvas: Art-ground, play-ground, crime-ground” aimed to begin a discussion about graffiti as a part of societal and professional environment. Taking part, eleven street artists from different countries created 10 legal large-scale murals¹. One of the most fascinating murals at the festival was “*Saule, Pērkons, Daugava*” (“Sun, Thunder, Daugava”) by Latvian authors Kiwie and Dainis Rudens. The aim of this work was to “remind the citizens of Riga and Latvia about our national history and cultural values, to be aware of ourselves, our inner strength and take pride in our origin”. The debate of graffiti being art or not highlights the issues of professionalism. If the primary objective of graffiti – being a social communication promoter in the urban environment – is not applicable to measure the level of professionalism and artist’s quality of work, then the modern graffiti or street artist’s prestige can be determined by his or her experience. By this theory, the most professional graffiti artist in Riga is Kiwie, because of his creative activity for more than 10 years. He has also worked a lot on maintaining his public image as a law-abiding artist and tried not to tie himself up with the practice of illegal graffiti. As a result of a successfully executed marketing strategy, Kiwie became the best-known Riga street artist. Moreover, he became a distinguished brand. In recent years, Riga graffiti movement has changed in direct relation to his professional activity [Petre 2017a: 43]. More often graffiti artists make solo exhibitions, partly refusing to accept the necessity of remaining anonymous, due to the illegal aspects this art genre entails. This kind of development of street art has contributed to the division of artists, raising doubts about the future of the urban

¹ The map and photos of created works is available: <http://www.blankcanvas.lv/en/> (A. P.)

culture in Latvia [Petre 2017b: 106–109]. In the post-graffiti period, various urban subcultures have combined, creating a new, vibrant and powerful branch of modern culture and expanding the concept of public art. Street art has advanced to different types of visual expression, such as fashion and photography, as well as extreme sports and music [Gastman 2007: 29–34].

In order to describe the artistic impression of street art in Riga as accurately as possible, it is necessary to do a graffiti classification. Like any other expression of art, graffiti has evolved over the time. As mentioned above, in the 20th and the 21st century, graffiti has lost its importance as a way of protest, due to increased association with public and legal art. If in the ancient times it was possible to distinguish two types of writings and drawings (*graffito* and *dipinti*), this classification is far more complex. Graffiti has always been based on either textual meaning or the development of painting letters, the so-called urban calligraphy [Bražinskis 2017: 30–37]. By expanding the boundaries of graffiti and street art, these two terms are often confused or associated with one or another. However, it is essential to understand that the concept of graffiti refers to textual work, while the interpretation of street art is used more freely and includes large-scale drawings, creation of stencils and both legally and illegally performed art on environmental objects. Therefore, it is concluded that the base of graffiti art is a simple tag – a monochrome author's caption or initials, containing encrypted messages, for the communication of graffiti writers¹. These short texts are often considered to be the identity of the graffiti writers and are the most common, because they do not require any artistic talent [Petre 2017a: 48]. Such tags on the house walls are sprayed with a paint can or written with a marker. But in more uncommon cases (according to the traditions of ancient Pompeii) they may even be scratched with a sharp object. The already mentioned *throw-up* is the brightest type of tagging and can be written as bright coloured letters with a 3D effect shading and contours of letters [Bražinskis 2017: 30–37]. In Riga, an extremely common form of graffiti is a *piece* or a *masterpiece*. This type of graffiti usually reflects on national or global pop-culture related topics, are quite large and have a broad colour register.

But the artistic and social experience of *trash graffiti*² is particularly interesting in Riga. Except for tagging, this is the most common type of Riga graffiti, most of which resembles the primitive inscriptions of ancient Pompeii and New York. These inscriptions and childish drawings tend to be either scratched with a sharp object or written with a marker, pencil or pen. Trash graffiti can be defined as an ironic remark of the social reality that is often created by previously inexperienced graffiti authors.

¹ Encrypted messages that these tags can contain are mostly unflattering opinion of graffiti writers on another author. (*A. P.*)

² Definition invented by the author. In Latvian – *naivie grafīti*. (*A. P.*)

First of all, it is an instinctive tendency to mark a public place without following any guidelines or principles. Secondly, it is considered as the most impulsive, conceptual and contemporary form of graffiti, because the content is limited exclusively to the author's mystified reflections on current environment. If tags are well-considered and recognizable signatures of a graffiti writer, then on the contrary, the indistinct trash graffiti author's identity is irrelevant [Petre 2017a: 49]. Trash graffiti reveals information about society in the most direct way. It addresses every passer-by on a personal level and is based on the principles of association. The house walls are not used for advertising purposes or art, but just simply to stand as a free space for everyone's expression of thoughts [Petre 2017a: 49]. Graffiti is not only socially and politically charged, but also contemporary. Its peculiarity can fade as fast as it can appear, and create an environmentally exclusive and unique communication, regardless of the time being.

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