

GRAFFITI WRITING IN SOFIA: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND URBAN SPACE

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Abstract

The article is based on the analysis of fieldwork studies of the local graffiti and street art production in Sofia, Bulgaria. The author argues that at present the majority of the graffiti writers there tend to produce TTP graffiti following the global graffiti tradition and taking into consideration its conventions and heritage. As a result of that the meaning of the local TTPs and street art is quite clear and understandable to the foreign TTP writers, to the majority of the young people in the city as well as to a growing group of connoisseurs. The rest usually see in the same writings either strange art or nothing but scribbles, oddly deformed letters and unclear symbolic images. The article interprets the processes of mutual understanding or misunderstanding which contribute to the creation of new types of coherences and differentiation in the local urban milieu.

Keywords: *graffiti, identity, urban space.*

Introduction¹

Some graffiti writings easily render themselves to reading while others carefully hide their meanings. In the last decades old legible graffiti in the city exteriors have been gradually replaced by new, almost illegible ones. Big, colourful and sprayed in a specific manner, they usually consist of special graffiti names – TTPs (i.e. tags, throw-ups and pieces) chosen and written in compliance with the global graffiti tradition. Basing myself on a study of the graffiti production in Sofia including interviews with writers and documentation of thousands of pieces, I will further

¹ The article was written as a result of the work of the author on Project DH 09/17 sponsored by the Bulgarian National Science Fund.

outline some of the specifics of the local TTP graffiti scene while at the same time paying attention to local street art, which is genetically linked and closely connected to them¹. I will then seek to explain why and how the inherent meaning of the TTPs and street art in Sofia is quite clear and understandable to the foreign writers keeping to the global graffiti tradition, to the majority of the young people in the city, as well as to the growing group of connoisseurs but, by contrast, the others usually see in the same works either strange art or scribbles, oddly deformed letters and unclear symbolic images. All that will allow me to outline the resultant processes of mutual understanding or misunderstanding which contribute to the creation of new coherences and differentiation in the local urban milieu, create new urban networks and modify local identity construction.

TTPs and street art in the polis

TTP graffiti writers actively use central public space to write their graffiti there, thus communicating with one another and differentiating from the rest. While the earlier graffiti names tended to be written close to some remote locations in the city where young people hang out and where the elderly rarely used to go, in the 1960s and in the beginning of the 1970s a number of special graffiti alias began to circulate in the busiest urban spaces of Philadelphia, Los Angeles and New York turning them into a kind of a billboard [Austin 2001: 41–48]. The most popular writers were the ones from the New York subway – mainly young guys aged between 11 and 18, they became quite skilful in making fame by establishing their alias in the urban space and by creating specific ways in which their particular writings could be better seen and made impressive. In the 1970s as well as in the 1980s these writers invented a specific calligraphy by experimenting with strange and unusual forms, with the outlining of the letters, with the background, as well as while using big size, bright colour combinations and ornaments such as arrows and dropping. As a result, the basic types of graffiti writing were invented: tags (stylized signatures), throw-ups (signatures where the contours of the letters are outlined), as well as more sophisticated works usually called pieces within the writing community [Castelman 1982: 52–65]. Parallel to that, community standards for the quality of the graffiti production were created [Lachman 1988: 234–243]. In the 1980s the New York subway graffiti were actively popularized by the film industry and in the advertising campaigns of the hip-hop culture, as well as on special happenings and thus became

¹ This scene is thoroughly under-researched. It has been documented by the author and recently by a team of researchers from the Department of Cultural Studies of the University of Sofia, whose work has not been published yet.

quickly spread in Western Europe¹. Around 2000 TTPs were already globally spread. Today it is probably difficult to find a country where there are none of them. At the same time the writing production is more or less similar all over the world because of the following of the already global graffiti tradition with its basic models, variations, principles of creation and even by way of following of some of the specific ethical propositions invented in the tunnels of the New York subways [Castelman 1982: 52–65; Ferrell 1993: 5–16; Miller 2002: 21–22; Neef 2007: 418–420]. Thus, this specific way of graffiti writing which used to be local in the beginning has gradually become a global one.

The TTP graffiti scene in Sofia is a comparatively new one as far as single examples of this type started to appear in the city in the period between the middle of the 1990s and the year 2000. Instead of inscribing the names of their preferred groups, bands and teams, the writers started to write their own graffiti names or the ones of their respective graffiti crews. All TTP names in Sofia are special graffiti alias showing close sound and visual resemblance to the pseudonyms used within the global graffiti traditions. Following a well-established pattern, they sound American, make wide use of a specific word play connected with the global graffiti tradition and are written in Latin, thus being radically different from the traditional Bulgarian names which are written in Cyrillic and more often than not follow Orthodox models. In addition, the names which the Bulgarian crews tend to choose for themselves sound as mottos or graffiti promotions: Crazy Bombing Crew or Flash the Dark Crew, etc. Other writers are not expected to know those names, but only their abbreviations (e.g. CBC or FDC). Every new crew is more or less expected to choose a name, basing itself on a similar principle. Thus, the choice of the name already implies in itself an aspiration of belonging to the international graffiti tradition.

The authors of Bulgarian murals are predominantly young men aged between 12 and 28. They have all consciously chosen for themselves to do graffiti because of a strong attraction to the pleasure of doing murals and despite of the never ending moral, physical and legal hazards, which that hobby brings to the practitioners. The collaboration between the writers is to a great extent practically determined and aimed at diminishing the perils of their hobby, even more so because writers run the risk to be exposed to public condemnation or police prosecution. At the same time, precisely because of the substantial risks, willingness to engage yourself

¹ At the same time in the 1980s the New York City administration totally discouraged graffiti writing in the subways so the local writers' culture ceased to exist in its initial form. This was also the point when the best writers became already quite eager to present their pieces in art galleries or to work for the commercially oriented hip-hop culture [Lachman 1988: 243–248; Austin 2001; Dickinson 2008; Snyder 2006].



Figure 1. Bombing done by Ko3 crew at the turn to the twenty-first century.
Photo Miglena Ivanova, Sofia, 2005.

in mural writing is strongly fuelled by the young men's need to prove themselves in difficult conditions. Doing murals itself is in addition highly praised and respected mostly because it brings you inside a close circle of graffiti writers belonging to an international tradition, within which you can prove your bravery, courage, persistency, devotedness and creative potential. Even more, it offers opportunities to gain respect and fame among other peers. All those possibilities already stay open for somebody who dares to choose and follow a career within the writers' community.

In the course of time and with the growing of the mastery and age of the first cohorts of Bulgarian graffiti writers some of them have started to do street art which is often commissioned by connoisseurs or by certain private NGOs organizing graffiti festivals, exhibitions and other cultural events connected to street art and graffiti writing. As a result of that some former graffiti writers who have now indulged in street art have been able to make successful careers and to a certain extent their living from what used to be just hobby in the teens.

Illegal graffiti (called bombing within the writers' community) remain quite long on the streets of Sofia while legal writing and street art enjoy wide attention not only among the local connoisseurs and some of the guests of the city, but also the municipal administration, some of the school masters and even certain politicians and managers. All that actually allows safely to say that the attitudes to graffiti writing and street art in Sofia are quite tolerable. This is most probably due to the general



Figure 2. Legal piece done by the End2end crew. Photo Miglena Ivanova, 2005.

tolerance to graffiti writing created gradually in the city in the period between mid-1980s and especially in the early 1990s¹. This is also a tendency which continues well into the 21st century despite the fact that as early as the last decade of the 20th century some other forms of graffiti were popular in Sofia – mainly youth street performances and political graffiti of the early 1990s, but also some remnants of the earlier youth graffiti writing of the 1970s and 1980s.

Besides, youth activist graffiti (called also political graffiti in Bulgaria) and student protest rally performances were the most representative forms of the protest art in the 1990s Bulgaria. They were aimed at getting voice and visibility in the urban space, explore the very limits of artistic and non-artistic creativity and function (both directly and indirectly) as opinion outlets, reaching far beyond the immediate youth social context. Remaining there comparatively long, their political statements distorted and transgressed the values, encoded in the static elements of the city exterior. The grotesque, politically engaged enactment of the performances lasted only a couple of hours but effectively supplied new critical points of view. Main streets, squares and places were turned into cheerful workshops for redefining meanings, social attitudes and artistic tastes. At the same time in the early 1990s political graffiti and the performances demonstrated a remarkable quality to overpass the confines of the urban street setting and to multiply their transgressive impact on wider audiences by providing for colourful media coverage. From the middle of 1995 to 1997 political graffiti were gradually diminishing in

¹ For the purposes of this analysis I am mainly interested in raising the general level of tolerance. Though, it is probably important to mention that in the last years of socialism tolerant attitudes were predominantly developed towards the graffiti of the football fans or towards the youth opinions in the public space such as individual musical and other preferences, subgroup belonging, certain graffiti maxims, etc. In the first years of the transition period the tolerance towards these types of graffiti continued, but at the same time the abundant political graffiti were also widely tolerated.

number and were later substituted by other forms of youth political promulgation. At the same time, with the beginning of the NATO strikes in Bosnia, a lot of anti-American and anti-NATO graffiti started to appear in Sofia and in other big Bulgarian cities. Their peak was during the visit of the USA President Clinton in Sofia in the autumn of 1999. Although produced at a time when artistic graffiti tags were widely popular in Bulgaria, even in the late 1990s political graffiti were unsophisticated slogans and easy to read signs or sign combinations and thus quite different from the TTPs.

Today, despite the fact that TTPs are definitely the predominant type of graffiti production on the streets of Sofia, the majority of the local citizens are rarely able to decipher the distorted Latin letters and to understand the meaning of the particular works. Resultantly, TTPs tend to be often considered by the general public images rather than writings and are often appreciated as a kind of a strange, colourful art or, alternatively, are simply considered splash of paint or dirt. Even for those of the representatives of the general public who do take their time to read TTPs they continue to be quite difficult to understand as far as their reason for existence and their presence in the city exterior is concerned:

“This mild autumn Sofia is all in graffiti... Have you seen reports from Bronx where every building looks like as a tattooed prisoner...? At present we see the Balkan variants of all that... While walking on the streets of Sofia, I always note the amazing energy and industriousness of somebody’s hand that painted walls, vans, billboards, telephone boxes, schoolyards, subways, universities, military barracks, etc. with the mysterious writing “Vapski”. Who is Vapski...? All over the world the writers do their works and then do their signatures, but in Sofia the writers just leave signatures” [Krastev 2004].

Abreast of Times. The case of the monument to the Soviet Army

Memorials dedicated to the victory of the Soviet Army in the Second World War were built during socialism not only in the former Soviet Union, but also on the territory of some of the so-called sisterly countries such as Poland, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, the former GDR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. In Bulgaria these memorials still remain in their places despite the fact that their existence, meaning and future have been ardently debated in the transition period, as well as in the recent years. On 17 June 2011, under the cover of the night anonymous group of young men painted one of the massive bas reliefs of the most representative monument to the Soviet Army – the one in the centre of Sofia. As a result of that the Soviet soldiers from the composition representing the victorious march of the Red Army in the Second World War were turned into heroes from popular American comics such as Jocker, Wolverine, Santa Claus, Superman, Captain America, Wonder

Woman, etc., while the Soviet flag was painted into the stars and stripes of the American one. A caption saying “Abreast of Times” was added beneath.

In the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century the monument was quite often covered with inscriptions and drawings, but they had little to do with the memorial itself. By contrast, the authors of the 2011 action managed to both integrate and subvert the initial propaganda meanings implied in the bas relief bringing forth a new group of heroes who are not so well-known in Bulgaria, but are at the same time quite common in street art in general. The painting triggered numerous and long-lasting reactions on the local level and abroad proving besides that the initiative touched two substantial debates – on the one hand, the debate for the future of the Soviet war memorials from socialist times and, on the other hand, the debate on the nature of modern graffiti and street art together with their increasing presence on some of the most important places in the cityscape. Here I will concentrate on the analysis of some of the reactions on the local level as far as they allow to test from a particular and very specific angle some of the conclusions reached in the previous part of the article.

In the social media the representatives of the local graffiti writing and street art community congratulated the intervention on the monument to the Soviet Army. At the same time, when certain members of the community gave an interview for a newspaper, they did not recognize those who painted the monument as being members of the local writing community; they didn't even believe them to be graffiti writers or street artists. In addition, ordinary people, but also journalists and specialists in anthropology, art, urban studies, etc. referred to the action as connected to graffiti writing and street art.

The monument remained painted for several days and was then whitewashed. Meanwhile, thousands of the citizens and guests of Sofia visited the site and joined the debates in situ. Even more, the locals actively participated in the debates on the media. The attitudes expressed ranged from paying due tribute to the transgressive nature of the act to different speculations about the motivation of the authors of the intervention, and from considerations that those who did it suffer from a lack of elementary culture to an understanding of the action as a brave artistic act with strong symbolic implications for the overcoming of the communist past not only in the country, but also in the region of Southeast Europe.

In the beginning when Destructive Creations – the crew which painted the monument – had not taken responsibility for their artistic action, different motifs and understandings of graffiti writing, street art and the action itself were widely discussed. When in the autumn of 2011 the crew were finally interviewed for a popular youth magazine, it turned out that they were not a homogeneous group but rather everyone had his own understanding about street art, graffiti and the



Figure 3. The big interest in “Abreast of Times”. Photo Destructive Creations, Sofia, 19 June 2011, <http://destructivecreations.com>

action itself. Being liable to persecution and also because of the fact that at least some of them were Bulgarians doing their university studies abroad, they even later relied in the local debates on certain proponents presenting them and their opinions. One of these proponents was the young journalist Mihaela Samardzhieva – Mi who had worked together with the group on another project and had made an interview with them about the painting of the monument to the Soviet Army – a situation making herself both a proponent and to a certain extent an insider.

According to Samardzhieva, street art and the painting of the monument to the Soviet Army in particular is quite cool. She believes that it includes “installations, street performances, acts of vandalism with a definitive political flavour, actions, posters, stickers, writing on emblematic public buildings, protests” and turns our “going to work, the beer that we have after that, our dates, our promenades, our background in a place full of insights, in a coded background which waits to be read”. At the same time, according to her, street art has many negative side effects such as causing misunderstanding and perplexing, intolerance to stagnated thinking, fear, painful honesty and thus is not for everyone [Samardzhieva 2014]. As a result of all that Samardzhieva finds street art appropriate for a comparatively narrow circle of true connoisseurs. Actually, the debate connected to the monument of the Soviet

Army shows that those appreciating the action are quite a lot: wide general public, as well as artists, art historians, anthropologists.

Probably precisely because of being cool for all of them street art was thus capable of creating conglomerates of otherwise very different people. These human relations are based on common interest. They are temporary and could easily cease to exist, but are somehow remarkable as they help to raise strong public interest to street art and graffiti writing.

Conclusion

Both street art and graffiti writing effectively re-inscribe important places in the urban space and affect the identity of the city. Alison Young characterizes street art as a well-established place-making activity in the contemporary city [Young 2013: 35]. In the case of Sofia, I would rather extend this proposition to graffiti writing, too. During the last 25 years, when TTP graffiti writing and street art entered the local graffiti scene, they have caused substantial changes in the way the city looks both because of the sheer number of these works and because of the important places where they were situated. Resultantly, graffiti and street art have been able to influence both the image and the identity of the city itself. Yet, it is even more important that TTPs and street art have proved themselves as effective tools for the construction and demonstration of youth identity in the urban space.

At the same time, the tolerant attitude to graffiti writing and street art in the city allows for a large number of works to stay quite long on the streets of the city and makes them habitual in cityscape. It also contributes to some favourable interpretations of graffiti writing and street art as *vox populi*¹. All that enhances the proliferation of the resultant production, the creation of a number of legal graffiti writings and graffiti events, as well as the mainstreaming of street art.

In the last decade there was a notable tendency of mainstreaming all over the world allowing for the professionalization of the best writers and street artists so that they could make their former hobby a means of living but also affects the art market and all those who appreciate this form of art. Created comparatively late, the Sofia scene has actually undergone considerable development in this respect with the professionalization of some of the best street artists who had started their careers as graffiti writers. Very important in this respect is the degree of widening of the graffiti and street art publics, as well as the various cases of re-use of the works for civil, social, ecological, business and even political purposes. Although being a promising object of study, the majority of these specifics fall beyond the scope of this article and

¹ *Vox populi* – literally “the voice of the people”; part of the longer Latin maxim “*Vox populi, vox Dei*,” which means “The voice of the people is the voice of God”.

will be analysed elsewhere. Here I will confine myself to concluding that in certain cases, these re-uses have already effectively helped for the temporary mobilization and re-grouping of the citizens of Sofia for the implementation of particular projects, causes and purposes thus having a profound effect on the civil and social level.

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