Abstract. The emergence and the widespread usage of politicized urban art on Athens’ walls, as a physical, visual and conceptual border, could be seen as one of the most emblematic manifestations of the current “state of exception” generated by the crisis. Through writing, each group or individual displays its demands, needs and hopes, and, in the process, transforms walls into a living communication venue. These messages are doomed to pass into oblivion, losing their communicative dimension over time.

Nonetheless, by envisioning new worlds and adumbrating new potential ways of experiencing the existing, they provide a revealing glimpse into the communities which produce them. Politicized urban art is a testament to how creativity can occur in difficult times.
1. Establishing the Crisis: Legitimating the state of emergency

It is now more obvious than ever before that the crisis of neoliberal system, which gave rise to financial precariousness, and the crisis of the political system, which failed to address the demands of citizens, gravely affects society. Deep-seated factors interact with contemporary events, such as the European sovereign debt crisis and the impact of Arab Spring, fueling an expression of generalized civil distrust towards the system as a whole. People feel neither responsible nor powerful enough to change it. This frustration triggered the Greek political and social unrest, which especially in 2011 gave birth to demonstrations, strike actions, occupations, rioting, civil disobedience and urban turmoil.

In such an uncertain and difficult situation, and under the shadow of the recent Greek youth uprising, journalists and politicians spend their time trying to identify the source of the problem. In their view the culprit was neither the widespread political corruption and clientism, nor mismanage, but Greek people themselves living ‘above their means’. This mater narrative provided the framework in which the new political agenda was to be built. Absolute priority was the economy, to be recovered through sacrifice and ‘national responsibility’. The unpopular measures were presented as totally necessary to ensure Greece’s own existence. At the same time, amid this state of necessity, fear and anxiety began to spread which, generated feelings of panic in the public. The words ‘spread’, ‘haircut’ and so on, became a substantial part of the everyday vocabulary, albeit the majority of people remains unaware of their actual meaning. Posing economic recovery as an absolute emergency had led to a veritable “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005).

Amidst the aforementioned financially uncertain and politically unstable situation, in April 2010 the Greek government decided to ask the IMF for help. The IMF itself has ratified the state of emergency through a series of means that can potentially transform a democracy into an

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authoritarian state. As Agamben (2005:50) argues, "the state of exception is not a dictatorship but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations are deactivated". The suspension of law and enhanced executive power can potentially lead to stripping citizens off their citizenship (Agamben, 1998). The more the feeling of a state of emergency increases, the more questions of citizenship and individual rights recede. More often than not, during such times, certain voices are valued and accepted, while others are banned (Agamben, 2005). Also, the process of transmitting certain information and suppressing the other may take a violent form.

2. The rise of the protests and the role of communication practices

Needless to say, the arrival of the IMF in Greece was followed by harsh austerity measures, namely welfare cuts in public health, education, wages, pensions etc. These unpopular measures increased the unemployment rate and educational and institutional dysfunction. In this respect, it is not surprising that the Greek youth, the age group which faces the most severe problems nowadays, is characterized as a doomed generation. Amid this prolonged period of political instability, collectives and single individuals came together to give voice to their shared anxieties and ideas; to express a generalized discontent towards government, institutions, and system. In other words, this situation opened a space for informal networks among young people to mobilize, communicate and act accordingly. The arrival of the IMF triggered some of the most severe acts of civil unrest that the country has seen in its recent history. Strikes, demonstrations, building occupations, urban protests, and riots take place on a daily basis. According to TV and newspaper coverage, these protests, although justifiable, are vain and misleading: the Greeks – so argue a part of the media – should not react because the crisis is mainly their own fault.

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2 The state of exception, according to Agamben, has gradually emancipated from its war context and is introduced during peacetime to cope with social disorder and economic crises. As Humphreys argues "the key observations are, first, that the modern state of exception is a creation of the democratic-revolutionary tradition and not the absolutist one", and second, that the state of exception immediately assumes a "fictitious" or political character, where a vocabulary of war is maintained metaphorically to justify recourse to extensive government powers" (Humphreys, 2006:679).

Beyond the mainstream media coverage, more and more people enter the public arenas in order to share their collective frustration. These arenas, which operate as social spaces, are formed in both the virtual and physical world. It is an undeniable fact that the so-called social media have played a unique role during the recent mobilization of citizens, on a global scale, enabling them to organize and communicate their views and actions. The continuing uprisings spreading across Europe, the Arab World, and New York City, have been inherently associated with the emergence and the widespread usage of social media, through which an horizontal circulation of information has taken place.

However, too much attention has been paid to the new political possibilities that have opened up though the digital networks, neglecting the physical ones which can ignite a series of related debates. More traditional ways of communication and mobilization still play a crucial role. For instance, within the recent turbulent atmosphere (2011) in the Greek capital we have witnessed a great number of politicized public wall writings. The number of such urban marks increased dramatically since the 2008 Youth Uprising and reached its apogee during the recent political protests. Their number is the greatest that the city has seen in its post-dictatorial era (1974), and this is not a coincidence.

In this article, I deal with this low-tech form of communication. In particular, I focus on recent politicized urban art in the centre of Athens, where a generalized expression of disappointment, triggered by the imposed austerity measures, has evolved into a creative reclaiming of the city. The aim is to show that these marks can be seen both as a record of popular history (Chaffee, 1993:4) and as a means of communication. Furthermore, the question raised here can be put as follows: Is the city simply the backdrop where demands are expressed, or is urban space and its artifacts crucial elements which give form to them? (Stavrides, 2010; Weizman, 2006) In other words, is the city the scene where the actors perform predetermined roles, or does it provide them with the necessary elements in order to improvise and in the process affect the meaning of specific urban rights? (Stavrides, 2010) We know that “the struggle for rights produces space” and new ways of imagining space (Mitchell, 2003:29). In our case, how can we re-imagine the potentiality of space as communication channel? Indicative of this relationship between struggles and space are urban tactics like wall-writing, which redefine the relation to the elemental space of the wall. In the case of wall writing in Athens, we may find some answers to the aforementioned questions.

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4 It should be noted here that Athens has a significant tradition of political wall writing, mainly due to its turbulent past and its tolerant citizens. However, Athens has to show no specific idiom as is the case in other cities, such as Belfast or Sao Paolo, where political writing flourishes.
My perspective is based on Lefebvre’s allegation that “the city is the projection of society on the ground” (Lefebvre, 1996: 109). Space and society are inter-produced through a dialectical process. The city is the place where both dominant notions of society as well as their contestations are expressed. Some types of wall writing substantiate such a contestation: their spatial configuration and proliferation highly affects not only the image and the meaning of urban space but also the ways publics communicate, as well as the culture of spatial use. Despite its importance, wall-writing is often ignored and rarely researched. “As one of numerous information sources”, Chaffee (1993:3) argues, “it should be viewed as one dimension of the multimedia communication system. It gives expression to groups that otherwise could not comment upon or support current or perceived social problems”. But, are all these public writings the same? Are they all politically oriented? Are they all graffiti? The answer is no, since they are produced by different people, under different circumstances and for different purposes.

3. An alternative communication: Categorizing wall writings

Let us start by pointing out that every public form of writing is not graffiti. There is a difference between slogans, wall paintings and graffiti. What makes the difference is neither the means nor the aesthetics of the pictures, but “the topics, the intention of the agents and their potential audiences” (Avramidis, 2009: 161) (Table 1).

The slogan can be defined as the written language, worded briefly, emphatically and vividly, to attract attention and to mobilize readers. Slogan producers compress sociopolitical conditions or personal emotions to a few words and concise messages. Slogans aim to be easily memorized, as they often use rhymes and catchy phrases. Their simple rhetorical nature leaves almost no room for waffle. These messages are mainly political and social but also personal and emotional. The former are oppositional and usually challenge the political status quo. Slogan writers could be potentially everybody at some point of his life, especially in uncertain political times.

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It is not the purpose of this article to introduce an inclusive definition, nor to argue whether graffiti should be analyzed as art or vandalism.

Slogans vary from the chanted and verbal to written and the visual. Their topics vary from religious and commercial to personal and political. Here we focus on written political slogan. The military and conspiratorial slogan are absent from this definition, because mixed here may confuse.
Wall painting can be described as the authorized (by the owner or occupant of the property) colorful and figurative depictions, usually of passive or abstract topics. Wall painting is an artwork painted directly on a wall, ceiling or other large permanent surface. Their purpose is decorative and should not be confused with political murals. Wall paintings are often used to reduce graffiti attacks in an area prone to graffiti 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contemporary Public Writing</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>slogan</td>
<td>opinions</td>
<td>non-representational</td>
<td>language</td>
<td>extended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wall painting</td>
<td>passive</td>
<td>representational</td>
<td>picture</td>
<td>everybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graffiti</td>
<td>varied</td>
<td>(non)representational</td>
<td>language &amp; picture</td>
<td>limited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

As far as graffiti is concerned, Susan Phillips introduces two distinct categories: the “popular” and the “community-based” graffiti (Phillips, 1999: 47-56). These types differ in both content and proposed audiences. Popular graffiti (ibid., 47-49) is the everyday stuff, namely the humorous comments and jokes, the phallic symbols, and the declarations of love or hate, written on public toilets 8, urban walls, benches etc. This type of graffiti is ever-present and is usually written in a national language so that everyone can understand it and respond accordingly. By contrast, community-based graffiti (ibid., 49-56) is “produced by and for communities that share common interests”. In this, Phillips offers three sub-categories, namely “hip-hop”, “gang” and “political” graffiti (Table 2).

In short, hip-hop graffiti is considered to be the visual product of hip-hip subculture 9. This type of graffiti can be described as the “unsolicited and commonly illicit practice of producing

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8 The term ‘latrinalia’ introduced by Alan Dundes in 1966 to describe a type of unauthorized writing made on bathrooms walls (latrines). Its form varies from drawings and words to poetry and personal narrations.


9 ‘Hip-hop’ should not be considered to be another musical genre; is a label that describes four elements: (i) the ‘mcing’, which stands for songs and lyrics, along with rap music productions, (ii) the ‘djing’, which is a real-time music production by vinyl mix and scratches, (iii) ‘breakdancing’, which is dynamic dance moves under the sound of breakbeats and (iv) graffiti. The definition of “hip-hop graffiti” divides both graffiti writers themselves and the researchers of the phenomenon. The usage of the term ‘signature graffiti’ instead of ‘hip-hop graffiti’ is also quite common among scholars.
drawings and names, as virtual identities, mainly of non-presentational\textsuperscript{10} style, in specific public places, with the aim of claiming fame and internal communication” (Avramidis, 2009:41). Its form is complex and sophisticated as opposed to the other graffiti forms. Hip-hop graffiti writers, by inventing virtual identities, do not try to communicate a specific message to society; quite the contrary. They write their names in order to be read from other members of their subculture and their main purpose is to gain some sort of reputation. This graffiti type may have similarities\textsuperscript{11} with gang graffiti, namely the formation of groups and some territorial links, but in a completely different way.

\textit{Gang graffiti}\textsuperscript{12} is that type of graffiti which is created by gang members in order to define, through marking, their territory of action and power. The content and form of gang graffiti is composed by secret codes, various initials and numbers, and it is strictly stylized with symbolic calligraphy. It is a non-representational, codified and symbolic writing which aims to delimitate a territory. This graffiti seeks to mark a specific neighborhood in order to demarcate an area of influence and power. However, as opposed to hip-hop graffiti, gang graffiti is only a part of the gang culture and activity.

Finally, \textit{political graffiti} is based on an internal symbolism through which mainly oppositional political feelings are voiced. Its form varies from frescoes (murals) to stencils and posters, since, as aforementioned, the definition of graffiti lies in the nature of intentions. Its authors may be “unrecognized or underground groups, student movements, or simply dissatisfied individuals” (Phillips, 1996). It is the type of graffiti that appears especially during

\textsuperscript{10} “As its name implies”, Lisa Gottlied argues, “the concept of nonrepresentational art is best understood in juxtaposition to representational art. Representational art depicts elements such as objects, people, scenes, and events that are readily identifiable. Nonrepresentational art does not appear to depict these elements: it does not, in other words, operate as ‘a mirror of reality’. Another way to consider this distinction is that nonrepresentational art does not present to the viewer an obviously discernible signifier for what the artwork signifies” (Gottlied, 2008:12).

\textsuperscript{11} Apart from some geographical and the social links, gangs and graffiti crews are two totally different entities with completely different purposes. Even if they are sometimes violent to each other, graffiti crews are not formed for protection of neighborhood space or themselves, as is the case for gangs, but for companionship, collaboration, and support, in order to ensure and enlarge their reputation. A writer can be a member of more than one crews and its affiliation is mainly concerned with graffiti, whereas gang membership is exclusive and lifelong. On the relationship between gang and hip-hop graffiti see further Phillips, \textit{ibid}, pp. 312-314.

\textsuperscript{12} It is important to point out that gang graffiti does not occur in Greece. A similar one is ‘fan’ graffiti, which is produced by organized association (football) fan clubs. The latter resembles gang graffiti, since these organizations fight against each other, by signing their nicknames on the walls around the offices of opponent clubs. It is also very common to write the name of the club, something quite similar with the writing of gang name. The penetration in ‘enemy’ territory, which is controlled by opposing team fans, is quite common, and resemblances with the territorial expansion of the gangs.
crises or political turmoil (e.g. Argentina\textsuperscript{13}, Ireland\textsuperscript{14}) and tries to communicate using language and symbols that evoke collective knowledge and common feelings. It should be also noted that this type is usually representational.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graffiti Type</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Invocation</th>
<th>Periodicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>political</td>
<td>political</td>
<td>representational</td>
<td>picture</td>
<td>common feeling</td>
<td>occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gang</td>
<td>symbols &amp; numbers</td>
<td>non-representational</td>
<td>language</td>
<td>common practice</td>
<td>occasional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hip-hop</td>
<td>names (numbers)</td>
<td>non-representational</td>
<td>language &amp; picture</td>
<td>common practice</td>
<td>full time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

The term politicized urban art\textsuperscript{15} can be introduced as an encompassing phrase that captures what is considered to be the most common forms utilized for political mobilization, communication and opposition: political graffiti, especially stencils and posters, and slogans. It is not surprising that these two categories are the most prevalent forms of public writing in Greek capital during the last year or so.


\textsuperscript{14} More on Irish political murals see: Rolston B. (1994) Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland, Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.

\textsuperscript{15} Included in this concept of politicized urban art could also be considered some additional forms, such as placards, political stickers, T-shirts, lapel buttons, and banners (Chafee, 1993:4), but they are more individual expressions and therefore are not taken into account. It is also important to point out that some hip-hop graffiti writers also produce politicized pieces. The latter are considered within the notion 'politicized urban art'.
4. Politicized Urban Art: The Case of Athens

Chaffee identifies five main characteristics in politicized urban art¹⁶ (Chaffee, 1993:8-9). First, it is a collective process, meaning that it is employed as a communication channel by and for groups. Second, it has partisan and non-neutral character, as there is no compelling need to be neutral or objective. Third, it is competitive, non-monopolistic and democratic, in the sense that it is open to all producers despite of ideological or political perspective. Fourth, urban art is characterized by direct expressive thought which means that it utilizes words and ideas simply and economically. A fifth feature of politicized urban art is its highly adaptable character, which means that its topics and forms change to meet the political and spatial conditions respectively. We might also identify some more characteristics in politicized urban art, namely anonymity, ephemerality and illegality. All the aforementioned characteristics provide their producers with the necessary autonomy and freedom to avoid any visual and communicational discount.

Extending some observations deriving from the case study¹⁷, politicized urban art can be divided, according to topic, into two broad categories: oppositional (mainly slogans, stencils and graffiti), and informative (mainly slogans and posters). The former is mainly concerned with news about the imposed measures on economy, labor, education, and juridical system, while some of them are offensive and express anti-systemic, anti-authoritarian or subversive feelings. The latter usually advertises collective action to come, or informs a wider public about certain issues (e.g. unfair imprisonment of peers, police tactics etc).

The ephemeral aspect of this art and its easy (re)production turns out to be essential, since it provides producers with the opportunity to be always up-to-date. This is why the recent wall writings in Athens are mainly concerned with the imposed politics during the current financial crisis and the arrival of the IMF. For example, a political graffiti by Bleeps at Psiri area, has a picture of model with a wooden pirate-like leg, and says “Greece Next Economic Model” which refers to the well known reality show ‘Greece’s Next Top Model’ (Picture 1, Left). At Syntagma square, one stencil depicts a helicopter and refers to what happened to the Argentinean President in 2001. Nearby, in Stadiou str., a slogan warns “We’ve woken up!”.

¹⁶ Chaffee uses the notion “street art” to encompass them all. Here the use of this term is avoided because it also refers to a new type of hip-hop graffiti which is not at all politicized, apart from some special exceptions (e.g. Banksy, Shepard Fairey).

¹⁷ The field work (photographic documentation and mapping) took place periodically from September 2010 to July 2011. The focus was on Athens centre, emphasizing on main streets, central squares and buildings of special interest.
which is the slogan of the Indignant Citizens Movement\textsuperscript{18}, while few meters farther another one reminds “We ate them all together, but only you had enough”, paraphrasing the ambiguous statement\textsuperscript{19} of the Deputy Prime Minister, Theodoros Pangalos.

Besides the chosen topics, urban artists \textit{visually treat} their messages to maximize their impact (Chaffee, 1993:6). They seem to be aware of the fact that color, shape and design highly affect the visual impact in communicating their messages. Colors are used to convey certain feelings or political orientation. Red and black are the most common in the case of Athens and are utilized to convey revolutionary, oppositional and subversive emotions. Along with color, \textit{design and size}\textsuperscript{20} also play a crucial role. Design is explicitly characterized by clarity while the adoption of certain logos (e.g. A in a circle for anarchists) and colors (e.g. red for leftist groups) is typical.

\textsuperscript{18} The ‘Indignant Citizens’, also known as ‘Direct Democracy Now!’; is a grassroot movement organized by ordinary people (without involving any political or trade union affiliations) via a Facebook page in May 2011. It was inspired by the ‘Democracia Real Ya’ movement in Spain.

\textsuperscript{19} Greeks reacted harshly when Deputy Prime Minister, Theodoros Pangalos, in front of the Greek parliament members, stated that “We ate it (referring to the debt money) all together (meaning the people and the politicians)”. With this statement he handed a merit of the responsibility on Greek citizens.

\textsuperscript{20} The case study shows that the slogans are two meters long in average and are commonly written in a single row, or maximum two, in accordance to the available space; stencils are mainly of A4 size, rarely A3, and sometimes of square format; political graffiti vary both in color and size, while posters are mainly of A2 size to be visually arresting and easy to read from a certain distance, or of A4 size to fit on building columns, especially those thatadvertize solidarity concerts, in Exarchia area, where streets are narrower.
However, the most crucial feature of politicized urban art is its *positioning* (Chaffee, 1993:7). Topics, colors, designs and sizes are chosen in relation to their targeted placement. Urban artists seem to understand that the message and its place of attachment are elements of equal importance, since they constantly sought for key walls, buildings, roads, and neighborhoods\(^{21}\) to maximize their effectiveness. It becomes clear from the case study that these interventions intensify, both in terms of content and numbers, along central\(^{22}\) roads where the recent mass protests took place, namely at Stadiou str. and around Syntagma square (Picture 3). This means that producers imagine, well in advance, their potential audiences.

Urban artists often choose symbolic places to intervene, targeting as responsible for the current ‘emergency state’ not only the Greek government but also the system as a whole. Except for public buildings (e.g. political party offices, government buildings, etc.), it is quite common to see their writings and posters on educational facilities (especially public universities), banks, and commercial buildings (especially international franchises). But, do these writings refer to local history or current conditions? Does the history of certain walls affect their meaning?

A close reading of the local context reveals that the message and its locality share a very special relationship. For instance, a slogan on a bank branch at Stadiou str., where three bank employees have been killed during a mass protest in 2010\(^{23}\), says “Set me on fire”. One can also frequently see politicized urban art works, which refer to current political and economic crisis, at Tzavela str. and around it, where a fifteen-year old boy was killed by two policemen in 2008. Thus, it might be argued that these different forms of marking “interact with their urban contexts in ways that are shaped by their linguistic, iconic, and territorial significations” (Chmielewksa, 2007:147). Another example: a slogan at Syntagma sqr. says “Live your Greece in Myths”, paraphrasing the slogan of the Greek tourist office, while some much more elaborate pieces at Tzortz str. next to National Technical University of Athens, from

\(^{21}\) Apart from specific walls, buildings, and roads that are prone to politicized urban art, Exarchia area should be considered to be the ‘capital’ of this genre. Exarchia, for many years now, is notoriously known for its politicized inhabitants and this is the case for a number of, mainly symbolic, reasons. Exarchia’s proximity with National Technical University of Athens, where the November 1973 student uprising took place which ended a seven-year period of military junta in Greece, and its later role as an revolutionary and alternative entertainment centre of Athens, are only a few of them which cultivated a sense of a neighborhood in ‘independent state’.

\(^{22}\) It is important here to point out that the wider centre of Athens, as opposed to other European city centres, is not inhabited by upper social classes. This fact, along with the present decline of living standards, consists an extraordinary mixture of high politicization (Kotronaki&Seferiades, 2010).

\(^{23}\) Three employees have been killed inside Bank Brach at Stadiou str., Athens in 5th May 2010 during a general strike and riotous protests over planned austerity measures, when hardcore protesters set fire to the branch with petrol bombs.
where serious struggles often start, depicts a protester wearing a gas mask referring to the struggles between protesters and police (Picture 2).

To sum up, in emergency situations, which tend to become the norm in contemporary Athens, it is crucial for collective events and public demands to be voiced. These marks, whether oppositional or informative, operate as newspaper headlines, where mass communication comes from bottom up, and walls in the city centre become the newspaper's cover.

Picture 2. Left: Political graffiti at Solomou str. Artists: Kize, Sidron (Author's Photo)
Right: Political graffiti at Tzortz str., next to National Technical University of Athens. Artists: Sidron, Jnor (Author's Photo)
Picture 3. Mapping political graffiti in Athens, 2011

1. National Technical University of Athens, where riots often take place
2. Tsirela st, where a boy was killed by two policemen in 2008
3. Stadou st, Bank Branch, where three people were killed during a protest in 2010
4. Greek Parliament, Syntagma Square, where the indignant citizens movement protests
5. Space at stake: Walls as public forums

Spraycans, posters, markers and so on, are only the means; walls are the medium of politicized urban art. The medium is a crucial spatial prerequisite since it creates its own environments, which are either beneficial to some messages or hostile to others. Besides, no message or image reaches us unmediated. Message and medium are conflated and “we cannot make clear the definition between the graffiti and the wall” (Schacter, 2008:39). Walls are one of the oldest mediums of mass communication. Even if their communicational power has been gradually neglected, walls still remain a valuable alternative mainly in authoritarian regimes, where oppositional viewpoints are suppressed. Walls have been historically interpreted through a symbolic point of view. This is why walls are perceived as artifacts of imposed order, exclusion, power and fear. Within this broad frame, it is not surprising that the wall, from a strategic point of view, is often considered to be a gesture of delimitation, as it regulates both social and spatial relations. However, walls are also subject to tactical uses (Certeau, 1984) and, as Brighenti argues, “whereas strategy aims at naturalising walls, pushing them to the background, tactics re-thematize them in various guises, pulling them towards new foregrounds” (Brighenti, 2009:67). This means that walls have the ability to be constantly contested maintaining, at the same time, their potentiality to operate as “spaces of social life” (Brighenti, 2009).

Walls may be introduced strategically, but, from a tactical point of view, wall writing constantly challenges and re-invents their meaning. Thus, politicized urban art might be observed as a “tactical spatial practice” (Iveson, 2007:115) which has its own special way of using, manipulating and interpreting urban walls and the city. It is a public communication; a mediated one. Producers overcome the fear of “public exposure” (Sennett, 1992) by communicating in a virtual world. This virtual world, though, lives in the actual world, namely on urban walls. These messages, however, “do not exist by themselves, but they happen … via transmission and perception” (Belting, 2005: 303). This, in turn, presupposes a public. Walls, as visible surfaces, provide the necessary space “which controls the perception of the man and creates the viewer’s attention” (ibid., 304). This emergence of public attention upon wall writing, which is followed by reactions, constitutes what Iveson calls “public address” (Iveson, 2007). These series of micro-tactical practices drives as to understand walls as arenas of mediated public interaction.

The concept of wall, as described here, cannot be examined merely through a spatial lens or a social one, as it refers to both spaces and relations and subsequently it has both...
material and immaterial hypostasis. Urban art challenges the very concept of wall, since space is not constituted by a simple sum of material data, but is the social activities that it hosts. Besides, space, as Massey suggests, is “always under construction … in the process of being made” (Massey 2005:9). Space ‘happens’, does not univocally exist. So, urban artists as they write the city, they ‘invent’ space. These ‘performed spaces’, in our case Athenian walls, as they ‘happen’, acquire totally different and distinctive meaning (Avramidis&Drakopoulou, 2011:68). In this respect, since there are potentials in any spatial practice, wall writing, by its marginal position, should be considered to be a valuable and creative alternative to reconsider space’s communication potentialities.

Politicized urban artists swing between real and imaginary space; they get their messages across through a symbolic reorganization and subversion of space. In the context of the recent urban protests in Athens, walls have lost their conceptual simplicity and became loose and volatile (Weizman, 2006). Athenian walls can be seen, on different scales, as adaptable elements, which respond to politically changing environments, and as communicational channels, through which demands of citizenship are transmitted. Walls have turned into public forums where citizens share mutual anxiety and anger, express demands and discuss alternatives, exchange ideas, knowledge and information. As such, Athens’ walls must be understood not simply as the backdrop of struggles but as complex and dynamic elements that enhance the forces which operate within them.

It is clear that a full interpretation of the recent urban turmoil in Athens is difficult to grasp. During these struggles there was a widespread creative anxiety to claim the widest possible space; to open as many fields as possible for collective action and communication. It became apparent that a new culture emerged, one that contained forms of reclaiming the city. Participating in activities like politicized urban art, or even thinking of their occurrence, is not only a matter of expressing an opinion or an opposition; it is a matter of helping to “produce both the spaces for public use and a new culture of public use” (Stavrides, 2010:15). Besides, urban art turns out to be an energizer of social relationships because it “connects bodies known and unknown through the proliferation of images” (Hasley&Young, 2006:278). Athenian walls were, and still are, under a ‘contested state’ and Athenian urban artists ‘win’ this urban ‘contest’ by opening up spaces that permit their voices to be heard.

The emergence and the widespread usage of politicized urban art on Athens’ walls, as a physical, visual and conceptual border, could be seen as one of the most emblematic manifestations of the “state of exception”. In its writing, each group or individual displays its demands, needs and hopes, and, in the process, transforms walls into a living communication
venue. These messages are doomed to pass into oblivion, losing their communicative dimension over time. Nonetheless, by envisioning new worlds and adumbrating new potential ways of experiencing the existing, they provide a revealing glimpse into the communities which produce them (Rolston, 1994). Politicized urban art is a testament to how creativity can occur in difficult times. As Chaffee (1993: 4) argues, “it is a barometer that registers the spectrum of thinking”. Graffiti are thus fragments of a very special ongoing conversation and a record of our popular history. Politicized urban art is, as the Athenian graffiti writer Bleeps argues, “a social diary in public display”.  

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24 Source: <http://bleeps.gr/>


