The Aesthetics of Global Protest

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

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Archiving Dissent: (Im)material Trajectories of Political Street Art in Istanbul and Athens

Julia Tulke

Abstract

In Athens and Istanbul, two cities that have emerged as epicentres of protest within the broader conjuncture of contemporary political mobilization across the Mediterranean, the transformative potential of political street art has become particularly evident. Staging a dialogic encounter between the two cities, this chapter examines how in each case interventions into public space as well as their circulation in the digital realm create, according to Can Altay, ‘hybrid space[s] of resistance’ that sustain political performances both grounded in the real world and beyond. Attentive to the resonances as well as the differences between the two cities and their respective political configurations, I reflect on manifestations of political street art in the context of contemporary social movements.

Keywords: protest, political street art, urban space, right to the city, Athens, Istanbul

Introduction

As contemporary social movements have come to rely increasingly on visual and performative registers of protest (McGarry et al., this volume; Weibel 2015; Doerr et al. 2013; Firat and Kuryel 2010), political street art has emerged as one of the most important modes of fostering and disseminating a shared aesthetics of resistance.1 Whether graffitied slogans or large murals, stencils

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1 Following the work of Lyman G. Chaffee and its adoption by Holly Eva Ryan, I here take up the term ‘political street art’ as a broad and inclusive concept that encompasses all self-authorized
or posters, creative interventions into public space have the potential to stage meaningful encounters between city dwellers and the urban landscape they inhabit, inscribing alternative histories and possibilities into the very surface of the city. A careful and situated reading of political street art can in turn offer critical insights into the social composition, grievances, and affective ambiance of a given moment of protest (see Ryan, this volume).

As political scientist Lyman G. Chaffee argues in his formative 1993 book *Political Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries*: ‘Street art, in essence, connotes a decentralized, democratic form in which there is universal access, and the real control over messages comes from the social producers. It is a barometer that registers the spectrum of thinking, especially during democratic openings’ (ibid.: 4).

In Athens and Istanbul, two cities that have emerged as epicentres of protest within the broader conjuncture of contemporary political mobilization across the Mediterranean, the transformative potential of political street art has become particularly evident, signalling towards a productive connection between space, politics, and creative intervention. The 2013 Gezi Park uprising in Istanbul was accompanied by a surge of political street art as protestors took to the walls of the city to express their mounting discontent, and claim the urban landscape as a site of participatory democratic encounter. Similarly, the city of Athens witnessed a proliferation of political street art in alignment with the anti-austerity movement that formed in response to the complex state of crisis that Greece has been subjected to since 2010. In both cases, protestors not only performatively engaged the material landscape of the city through paint and paper, ‘animat[ing] and organiz[ing] the architecture’ in an effort to create an embodied public (Butler 2015: 71). As slogans, posters, stencils, and murals were photographed, shared, and circulated through social media infrastructures, these interventions also came to resonate beyond their immediate context as part of a mobile, transnational political aesthetics.²

² Following the trajectory laid out by the editors, the term ‘aesthetics’ is here used not in the sense of a normative (Kantian) judgement of visual qualities, but rather as a political category as described by Jacques Rancière: ‘It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time’ (2004: 8).
Staging a dialogic encounter between Athens and Istanbul, this chapter examines how in each case interventions into public space as well as their circulation in the digital realm create 'hybrid space[s] of resistance' (Altay 2015: 203) that sustain political performances both grounded in the real world and beyond. Attentive to the resonances as well as the differences between the two cities and their respective political configurations, I reflect on manifestations of political street art in the context of contemporary social movements, paying close attention to their material oscillation between physical and digital space.

I will begin my inquiry with a general discussion of the spatial politics of street art within the framework of ‘right to the city’ activism. Following this conceptual framework, I move towards my case studies. A close reading of one specific site in Athens – the memorial for Alexis Grigoropoulos and Berkin Elvan – will serve as my point of departure, establishing the two cities as part of a shared aesthetic landscape of protest. The following two sections will offer brief descriptions of political street art in Istanbul and Athens, attending to both current manifestations and historical precedents. Pulling both cases back together, the final section will then trace material and immaterial trajectories of political street art in Athens and Istanbul and consider some of the broader questions of materiality, erasure and circulation they bring forth.

Reclaiming the City and Beyond: The Spatial Politics of Street Art

As a medium whose significance is fundamentally dependent on its claim to public space, political street art must be understood as part of a broader ecology of ‘right to the city’ activism (Tulke 2013: 12; see also Zieleniec 2016). Coined by the French theorist Henri Lefebvre, the ‘right to the city’ denotes the right of urban citizens to collectively participate in the creation of cities according to their own needs and desires – a notion that has gained considerable currency in contemporary city-based social movements (Harvey 2012: 4). The concept relies on an understanding of space as mutable and socially constructed, a product of the dialogic interaction between institutions, planning paradigms, and city dwellers. According to Lefebvre, this social production of space assumes the shape of a triad, consisting of spatial practice (espace perçu), the organizing principle of a society, representations of space (espace conçu) expressed in patterns of planning and design, and representational space (espace vecu), the lived and imagined everyday experience of urban dwellers (Lefebvre 2009). Urban space is thus at the
same time deeply permeated by power relations and technocratic governance, but also open to appropriation and reinterpretation; the unstable trialectic of spatial production constantly produces ruptures in the urban fabric that have the potential to become strategic sites of appropriation for marginalized actors.

Based on this understanding of space, the political significance of street art as a cultural practice unfolds on three interrelated levels. On the most basic level, all self-authorized works of street art, regardless of their explicit intent or underlying political motivation, represent a semantic intervention into the visual configuration of the city that implicitly contests dominant notions of what urban space should look like, questioning public ownership and representational regimes. On a more concrete level, street art may become politically significant through its encrypted messages and the strategic contextualization by the artist. Finally, as the work on the wall circulates beyond the embodied performance of the artist (Pabón-Colón 2018: 20) it also generates alternative channels of communication and fosters meaningful encounters between urban dwellers and the material landscapes they inhabit – a function that is potentially amplified when photographic traces of political street art are circulated digitally.

Political street art is thus never merely a static representation of its given sociocultural context but has the potential to actively transform urban space and reimagine everyday life by inscribing alternative histories and possibilities into the very surface of the city. The imperative for social transformation is always already latent in any visual expression or performance in public space, constituting what social theorist Michael Warner would call acts of poetic world-making, that is, ‘all discourse and performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and liveable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address’ (Warner 2002: 81). It follows that analyses of political street art must always operate dialectically, engaging with methodologies that are object-based – looking at visual artefacts and the historical, political, and affective narratives and iconographies they contain – as well as in ones that attend to the performative, affective, and embodied aspects of the practice (see Ryan, this volume).

My typology of the political significance of street art, first laid out in Tulke (2013), is influenced by and indebted to a number of interdisciplinary contributions to the emerging field of graffiti and street art studies, most notably, Baudrillard (1993), Chaffee (1993), Deutsche (1992), Dickens (2008), and Schacter (2014).
From Alexandros to Berkin: Memory, Space, and Belonging

At the heart of Exarcheia, the ‘anarchist fortress’ (Vradis 2012: 88) of Athens, lies Tzavella Street, a pedestrian road measuring the length of three blocks, enclosed by walls densely saturated with posters, slogans, and portraits of struggle, all of which appear to trace back to one corner. Here, at the intersection of Tzavella and Mesologgiou, two black plaques are mounted onto the thick layers of paint and paper (fig. 5.1). The one on the left shows the photo of a young boy in a black sweatshirt, his gaze inquisitively directed back at the photographer. Next to his likeness, an inscription in Greek letters reads: ‘Here, on 6 December 2008 without any purpose, the innocent child’s smile of fifteen-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos was extinguished by the bullets of unrepentant murderers.’ To his right, another plaque is adorned with the photograph of a teenage boy seemingly in the midst of a demonstration, a red scarf wrapped around his mouth and nose, his hands forming victory signs in the air. Next to the image, first in Greek, then in English, is written:

Berkin Elvan. During the June Uprising in Istanbul, fourteen-year-old Berkın Elvan was seriously wounded by police [...]. He received a head injury from a tear gas canister and was in a coma for 269 days. Every day there were actions to announce his situation to the world. When he died, three million people took part in his funeral. [...] Alex and Berkın are symbols of the struggle. Their memory lives on in our struggle!

The impromptu memorials dedicated to the deaths of Alexandros Grigoropoulos in Athens 2008 and Berkin Elvan in Istanbul 2014 not only index two of the most important moments in the recent political history of both cities, they also connect them across spatial and temporal boundaries through a shared iconography of protest. Due to the uncanny (and unfortunate) similarities in the circumstances of the two incidents – both boys were killed at the hands of police at about the age of fifteen during times of political rupture – protestors in Athens and Istanbul have performatively woven together their image in solidarity and support of each other’s struggle (Taş and Taş 2014b: 343).

The killing of Grigoropoulos on 6 December 2008 in Athens – the self-identified anarchist was shot during a scuffle with two police at the very site of the memorial – launched the biggest uprising in the post-dictatorial era (Vradis 2009). Riots erupting out of the urban core of Exarcheia unfolded along pre-existing structures and geographies of resistance, and over the
course of a few days spread to include the whole city. Demonstrations and clashes continued well into 2009. The repertoire of the uprising did not only include rioting and protest marches, but also creative modes of spatial occupation, notably political street art. The walls of the city emerged as a space for negotiating collective responses to the death of Grigoropoulos. Expressions of anger and outrage, mostly assuming the form of anarchist and anti-police slogans, were joined by displays of mourning and memorialization (Stavrides 2017). While the uprisings of 2008 and 2009 eventually receded, the ‘December spirit’ and aesthetics forged during those months carried over into the anti-austerity movement that gathered momentum during the following years. The angry and raw slogans of 2008 and 2009 expanded into a complex visual economy, which I have elsewhere described as ‘aesthetics of crisis’: a palimpsest of poetic scribbles, portraits of protest and struggle, and expressive depictions of everyday life under the prolonged state of emergency (Tulke 2013, 2016).

Whereas in Athens it was the death of Alexis Grigoropoulos that sparked an uprising, several years later the Gezi Park movement in Istanbul was already in motion when Berkin Elvan sustained the injury that eventually took his life. He was out buying bread during the protests when he was struck
in the head by a tear gas canister. As one of several ‘martyrs’ of the Gezi uprising, Elvan became one of the most recognizable icons of the movement, his name and image painted on banners and surfacing repeatedly on city walls in Turkey and beyond (Gruber 2017).

While it is not my intention here to offer a detailed reading of Alexis Grigoropoulos and Berkin Elvan as icons of protest, I recognize in the wall memorial described above a meaningful point of departure for reflecting on political street art in Athens and Istanbul. Not only does it explicitly establish a connection between the two cities, it also illustrates the potential of political street art to imbue public space with new meanings and transformative potentials. Mounting the memorial of Alexis at the site of his killing serves to sustain the spirit of resistance at its very point of origin, keeping the struggle visible beyond the temporal boundaries of the actual uprisings. It also prompts questions of collective belonging and ownership of public space as Exarcheia is reclaimed as a site of mourning and resistance, but ‘as a space for meeting and ‘doing’ life in the city, [rather than] a place of death for its inhabitants’ (Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou 2011: 45). The later juxtaposition of a memorial for Berkin Elvan in the same space emphasizes the continued relevance and resonance of Alexis’ death within a transnational landscape of protest and struggle, gesturing towards a political aesthetics rooted in mutual solidarity in which affectively imbued images are both deeply embedded into space, but also attain new meanings through constant circulation. Departing from the image of Berkin and Alexis, the following two sections will trace the emergence and significance of political street art in contemporary Athens and Istanbul.

Of Tear Gas and Penguins: The Political Street Art of the Gezi Park Uprising

When in summer 2013, a small environmental protest against the destruction of Istanbul’s Gezi Park for the sake of a monumental project of neoliberal urban renewal exploded into the most forceful uprising of modern Turkish history (Aytekin 2017: 192), political street art immediately emerged as one of the most powerful mediums of expression for the protestors. Spreading laterally from Taksim Square, which quickly manifested as the focal point of protests and finally a ten-day occupation, slogans and stencils densely

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4 The narrative of the ‘innocent boy’ has been actively contested, as both the police and Erdoğan have accused Elvan of being affiliated with violent terrorist groups (see BBC 2014).
covered the walls and floors of central Istanbul within just a matter of days (see figure 5.2), collectively laying a claim to public space, acting as what art historian Christiane Gruber has called ‘highly visible agents for resistant place-making’ (Gruber 2018: 84). Barricades that were erected around the square using appropriated materials such as bricks, police barriers, and burned out trucks, equally became canvases for political expression (Ertür 2016).

Early on, the mobilization had to contend with heavy police repression, resulting in a broad solidarization of Turkish society:

Public places were occupied in 79 cities; police used 3,000 tons of pressurized water and 150,000 tear gas grenades to disperse the protestors. As a result, six protestors and a police officer lost their lives and around 7,500 people were injured – 200 severely; the number of people taken into custody exceeded 3,000. (Aytekin 2017: 192)

As has been widely documented, the cultural practice of political street art, mostly assuming the shape of anonymous inscriptions, flourished in response to this exceptional level of state opposition, a hallmark of what would be dubbed the ‘Gezi spirit’ – a new type of collectivity based on ‘the enactment of solidarity rather than a collective identity’ (McGarry et al.,
This spontaneous street-level discourse thrived on a distinct use of tactical humour (Kaptan 2016: 568). Rather than posting collective demands, or performing their allegiance to specific political ideologies, protestors subverted and parodied the status quo through witty messages. Countless slogans mocked the excessive use of tear gas by the police force, proclaiming: ‘Oh, Biber!’ (biber being the Turkish word for tear gas); ‘Dude, this gas is awesome!’ (Bu gaz bir harika dostum!); ‘Another serving of gas, please’ (Bir porsiyon gaz, luften); ‘Bro, you are really making us tear up’ (Polis kardeş gerçekten gözlerimizi yaşartıyorsunuz); ‘If we were scared of gas, we wouldn’t fart’ (Gazdan korksaydik osurmazdık); or ‘Tear gas beautifies’ (Biber gazi cildi güzellestirir) (see Kaptan 2016; Morva 2016; Gruber 2013; Bektas 2013). Other slogans made light of the inadequate response by the then prime minister (now the president) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the Gezi Park movement. After he pejoratively referred to the protestors as çapulcu (marauders), the term was immediately appropriated and inspired several wall writings, the most prominent of which was ‘Every day I’m çapuling.’ Similarly, Erdoğan’s dismissal of the protestors as marjinal (marginal) members of Turkish society triggered a slogan as a response: ‘Marginal is your mother, Tayyip!’ (Marjinal anandır, Tayyip!) (Gruber 2018: 88). In another strategic act of appropriation, protestors elevated the penguin to an icon of resistance after CNN Turkey had aired a penguin documentary instead of reporting on the unfolding struggle at Gezi Park at a moment where violent clashes between protestors and police were covered extensively by international media. Stencils and murals of penguins, at times joined by inscriptions such as ‘Antarctica Resists’ (Antarktika Direniyor), came to occupy the city walls as a humorous reminder of the inadequate coverage of Turkish national television.

The majority of the humorous slogans were written in Turkish, often containing subtle intertextual references to national culture and history. Others relied on Anglophone cultural texts. ‘Tayyip, winter is coming’ or ‘Down with Lannister’ (Kahrolsun Lannister), for example, gesture towards the popular fantasy TV series Game of Thrones, implying an aesthetic connection between the medieval power struggles depicted in the series and the demeanour of Erdoğan. Others yet play on phonetic resonances between the Turkish and English language. ‘The Incredible Halk’ was a popular slogan that capitalized on the similarity between the Turkish halk (people) and the Marvel comic book character Hulk.

Several authors have examined this political humour of the Gezi Park protests through the work of linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, and particularly his concept of ‘carnivalesque humour’ (Tunali 2018; Kaptan 2016). Carnival, for
Bakhtin, denotes a ‘social space in which social and political hierarchies are temporarily suspended and people are liberated from social sanctions’ (Kaptan 2016: 571-572). In this reading, seemingly benign humorous slogans and images have the capacity to produce ruptures in the status quo that are imbued with a sense of possibility of change.

Alongside expressions based in humour and wit, the walls of Istanbul also sustained more sombre messages, many of which were written in response to the excessive police repression protestors were confronted with. One popular slogan resurfacing repeatedly in several areas of the city read: ‘Don’t forget the police beat the people here last night’ (Egemen 2015). As violent clashes claimed the life of several protestors – five young men were killed during the early weeks of the uprising alone – another visual discourse emerged paying tribute to the so-called Gezi martyrs (Gezi şehitleri) through stencils, stickers, and murals (Gruber 2017). Other icons that would frequently resurface on the walls of Istanbul included the ‘woman in the red dress’, modelled after a viral photograph taken by Reuters photographer Osman Orsal of a young woman in a red dress defiantly standing her ground despite getting sprayed with tear gas by police from an extremely short distance.

While the proliferation of political street art in Istanbul is often perceived to be a contemporary development, Turkey has a rich historical lineage of ‘oppositional aesthetics’ (Taş and Taş 2014a) that traces back to the 1968 student movement. Going out to write on walls (yaziya cikma) was an integral part of the protest repertoires of political groups at the time. In fact, ‘[b]efore the military coup in 1980, all the street walls in big cities such as Istanbul and Ankara were covered with political posters and graffiti’ (Taş and Taş 2014a; see also Taş and Taş 2014b: 329-330). Particularly, the work of the Atelier of Revolutionary Posters, formed at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara during the 1968 student movement has been extensively documented. In 2008 Yılmaz Aysan himself a founding member of the collective, published an essay collection devoted entirely to work of revolutionary poster-makers at the time.

However, it is not only the political practice of appropriating public space creatively that has several historical precedents, but also the use of humour as a medium of dissent. As activist Ali Bektas has noted, the Gezi humour can be traced back to satirical magazines published during the 1970s:

Faced with the iron fist and gaze of military rule, these magazines developed a way of criticizing power under the cover of satire. […] Noteworthy
is that most of these magazines have their offices in Taksim and are intertwined with the cultural life of those streets. (Bektas 2013: 14; see also Altay 2015: 202)

In a similar vein, the Turkish folk hero Nasreddin Hoca has been cited as a point of reference for the protestors’ sense of political humour. Set in thirteenth-century Anatolia, popular stories featuring the figure of Nasreddin Hoca provide a model in which ‘the hierarchical social structure between the powerful and powerless [is turned] upside down, by ridiculing and despising authority figures such as tyrants, despotic sultans, and kings’ (Kaptan 2016: 575).

**Aesthetics of Crisis: Political Street Art in Athens**

In the city of Athens, fuelled by a forceful anti-austerity movement that has formed in response to the ongoing crisis, political street art has gained enormous significance as an unsanctioned medium of public expression, rendering the city ‘one of the most “stained” and “saturated” [...] in the world’ (Pangalos 2014: 154). Due to a lack of municipal funding, street art is only sporadically removed from the walls of the city, allowing it to sprawl unhindered and, even on highly representative public buildings, to remain visible for long periods of time (Pangalos 2014: 162). The resulting dense accumulation and elongated lifespan of public artworks have allowed for elaborate dialogues and interactions to unfold on the walls of the city over time. Ruptures created in urban space by disinvestment, austerity, and years of political struggle constantly produce new surfaces and spaces – boarded-up urban ruins, abandoned construction sites, vacant shop windows, and decaying billboards – that have become highly significant sites for creative appropriation. Moreover, the proliferation of street art is catalyzed by the un- and underemployment of large parts of the productive population, particularly the young and highly educated, which has set free a vast amount of creative potential and fostered a creative renewal in both formal and informal cultural production (Tziovas 2017).

As the context of crisis and austerity permeates all aspects of everyday life in the city, it also fundamentally shapes the form and content of the artworks that can be found on the walls of Athens. According to sociologist Myrto Tsilimpoundi, ‘street art becomes a visual history of non-hegemonic voices [...] that points towards the wider sociopolitical tensions in the era of austerity and crisis’ (2015: 72). The walls of the city are thus transformed
into a living archive of the current historical conjuncture, and at the same time becoming a site for imagining new political possibilities.

Other than Istanbul, where anonymous slogans dominate the visual field, political street art in Athens encompasses a broad spectrum of formal approaches, from graffitied slogans and stencils, to paste-ups, posters, and large-scale murals. The thematic range of artworks is similarly complex. Confrontational messages written by activists affiliated with the anarchist, antifascist, and squatter movements coexist with more poetic textual interventions. Iconic portraits of gas mask-clad protestors sit next to powerful depictions of the urban precariat. Collectively these works constitute an unfolding visual body and ongoing dialogue that is constantly being rewritten. Artworks are animated and imbued with significance only through interaction with one another and with the urban dwellers that make their everyday lives among them. They offer no stable belonging. Rather, they inscribe a multitude of alternative imageries and positionalities into the urban fabric, thereby, claiming public space as a significant site for negotiating the crisis as a context for everyday life.

Several authors have traced and analysed different aspects of Athenian street art vis-à-vis the discursive and material landscapes of the crisis (see Boletsi 2016; Stampoulidis 2016; Alexandrakis 2016; Tsilimpounidi 2012, 2015; Avramidis 2012). In my own work, I have argued that what distinguishes the political street art of Athens is the prevalence of expressive depictions of human figures, which are mobilized as a site of display for the everyday effects of crisis and austerity (Tulke 2019). Such artworks depart from representations of the crisis as an abstract and disembodied economic dynamic that are characteristic of most mainstream media depictions, framing it instead as a deeply corporeal experience. By directing the viewer towards the body visibly rendered in vulnerable states – fragmented, injured, and imbued with affective negativity – they also prompt questions about subjectivity in/of crisis.

A mural painted in Exarcheia by street artist WD, for instance, shows the body of a sleeping man spanning the entire width of an apartment building. His legs are defensively drawn towards the body, while his hands are folded and directed upwards as if in prayer. There is a distinct heavi-ness, a certain weight to his posture, which is only emphasized by lines of dripping paint at the bottom of the piece. He is quite literally dissolving. His weathered face rests without emotion. To the left a small inscription reads: ‘Dedicated to the poor and homeless here and around the globe’ – a powerful commentary on the humanitarian dimension of the crisis as well as the need for transnational solidarity (see Kaika 2012).
By making visible the shared affective condition of the crisis, political street art in Athens opens it up for interrogation. Through realistic portrayals of the corporeal and affective impact of crisis and austerity on everyday life, artists and activists claim the walls of the city as a space for emotionally processing the continuous state of exception. The task of dealing with this deeply felt precarity is typically relegated to the privacy of the domestic sphere, as demanded by what Athena Athanasiou calls the truth regime of crisis and austerity, that is, ‘not only do people have to engage in a daily struggle against economic hardship and humiliation, but they are also called upon to bear all this without any sign of outrage or dissent’ (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 149). By visualizing this collective vulnerability of the everyday in public space, works of street art may eventually become a meaningful basis and resource for political solidarity and community formation.

Much like Istanbul, there are several historical precedents for the contemporary proliferation of political street art in Athens, which architect Konstantinos Avramidis attributes to the city’s ‘turbulent past and its tolerant citizens’ (Avramidis 2012: 4). Although such lineages are not consistently documented, evidence can be found scattered throughout popular culture and archival bodies. The work of documentary film-maker Alinda Dimitriou offers an unusually explicit account of the significance of political writing for resistance movements throughout the twentieth century. Between 2009 and 2012 Dimitriou directed a three-part series of oral history-style documentaries that chronicled the role of women in political activism between the 1940s and 1970s. As the protagonists tell their stories of disobedience, struggle, and detention they often recall strategically engaging in wall writing as a political practice, either to communicate and coordinate with other underground groups via a sort of encrypted language or to spread subversive messages of encouragement, hope and strength to their fellow people. Particularly in the first film of the series, *Birds in the Mire* (Πουλιά στο βάλτο, 2009), which deals with the resistance against the occupation of Greece by Nazi Germany, women gleefully recount sneaking out after curfew to scrawl slogans such as ‘Liberty or Death’ on the walls of Athens. Similar to Istanbul, political street art is deeply woven into the fabric of collective memory and continues to reverberate through the present aesthetics of protest with slogans, vocabularies and aesthetic references excavated from history and adapted to the current context.5

5 Similar historical resonances have emerged in the case of Argentina, where political street art created during the 2001 crisis ‘invoked the memory and betrayal of the Dirty War, with allusions to the year “1976”’ (Ryan, this volume).
Conclusion: (Im)material Trajectories and Hybrid Spaces of Resistance

Though distinct in its respective formal and thematic articulations, the political street art of Athens and Istanbul described above forms part of a broader, transnational project of radical political imagination, sustained by a relationship to the social world that is poetic and performative rather than mimetic and representational. Autonomous interventions into public space – be they humorous scrawls or expressive murals – weave a sense of political potentiality into the very fabric of everyday life. Contingent encounters between city dwellers and the walls that they inhabit may then carry this political ambience over into collective forms of solidarity and resistance (Butler 2015). Yet, although political street art is fundamentally site-specific, encounters with it are not limited to the material landscape of the city. Photographs of the walls of Athens and Istanbul circulate through digital space by the thousands, posted and collected on social media where they are compounded into mobile archives of creative protest. When presented in this manner, artworks are generally stripped of their specific spatial embedding – information about location, significance of location, scale, and surrounding artworks are rarely provided and generally left to the viewer to decipher. Photographs of political street art may yet function as potent tools of political mobilization as they document the visual emergence of social movements and enable their work to circulate transnationally (Vatikiotis and Yörük 2016: 2). Indeed, my own engagement with the walls of Istanbul relies entirely on its extensive digital documentation.

Digital traces of political street art become particularly important in cases where its already ephemeral material presence is subject to censorship and erasure. In contrast to Athens, where artworks are for the most part left to freely accumulate in public space, in the wake of the Gezi Park uprising Istanbul has seen active campaigns directed against political wall writing. As early as June 2013, with active protests still ongoing, maintenance crews descended upon Taksim Square and the surrounding streets. As geographer Kyle T. Evered observed at the time, they

> cleaned debris, sowed grass and flowers in the park, and painted most surfaces, vertical and horizontal. New graffiti would appear each night and workers returned each day; the district looked progressively more like a document undergoing extreme redaction than restoration. (2018: 2)

In an effort to exert a sense of control over public space and collective memory, public service workers covered the city in ‘patches of institutional
beige, blue, grey, green, and yellow’ (Evered 2018: 2), betraying just how seriously the government took the presence of political street art. Protestors, of course, were quick to register the irony of the situation, countering: ‘Until you run out of grey paint!’ (Gri boyaniz bitene kadar!). Five years later, at the writing of this book chapter, no instances of political street art hailing back to the Gezi movement appear to have survived in the streets of Istanbul. With censorship and state control tightened in light of the attempted 2016 military coup, political street art is, for the time being, being effectively suppressed. Photographs showing the walls of Istanbul during the Gezi Park uprising that still circulate through the digital realm, in this context, take on a new significance as artefacts of collective memory that gesture towards a spirit of resistance still latent in the urban landscape, buried under layers of paint. This dynamic interplay of the physical and digital spheres, in Istanbul as in Athens, constitutes a ‘hybrid space of resistance’ (Altay 2015: 203) that has the potential to sustain political performances both grounded in the real world and networked beyond.

As political street art is gaining traction as an interdisciplinary field of study, the questions of materiality, erasure, and circulation that emerge from the two case studies discussed in this chapter point to the need for more complex methodological and conceptual approaches. For although there is a growing body of empirical work offering sophisticated analyses of content and production of political street art within different political contexts (Campos et al. 2019; Ryan 2017; Tolonen 2016; Tsilimpounidi 2015; Hamdy and Karl 2014; Waldner and Dobratz 2013; Borriello and Ruggiero 2013), such accounts rarely address the material and immaterial trajectories different works assume as they are archived, copied, shared, erased, and remade over time. Approaching the complex (im)material trajectories of contemporary political street art, as Lachlan MacDowall has suggested in his research on the image-sharing platform Instagram, requires recalibrating the notion of ‘the street’ in a way that addresses its dual role ‘as a set or backdrop for the production of digital content and a site of globally connected political action’ (MacDowall 2017: 232). Methodologically, this means shifting towards lateral modes of engagement that document and analyse how traces of political street art move through time and space, accumulating into living archives of dissent across material and digital worlds. With contemporary social movement theory shifting increasingly towards aesthetic and performative modes of inquiry – as the editors of this volume suggest – such nuanced readings of political street art can offer broader insights about how protestors articulate a shared expression of visual dissent in times of political crisis.
References


**About the Author**

Julia Tulke is a PhD student in the Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester, NY. Her work focuses on material landscapes of urban crisis as sites of cultural production and political intervention. In this context, she has conducted extensive research on street art and graffiti as mediums of expression and dissent in the context of an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork project in Athens, Greece.