The “black-and-white mural” in Polytechneio : Meaning-making, Materiality, and Heritagization Of Contemporary Street Art in Athens

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Abstract

The campus of the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens has been a significant cornerstone in the socio-political landscape of the city. Within the history of modern Greece, Polytechneio is regarded as a symbol of resistance against the Greek military dictatorship (junta) in 1973. In March 2015 and during times of austerity politics, the west façades of the Polytechneio were covered by a “black-and-white mural” (Tziovas 2017: 45). This paper examines how and why this black-and-white mural has been discussed often controversially from different kinds of recipients, leading to an ardent public debate within Greek society from a cross disciplinary point of view: 1) semiotics, 2) design, and 3) cultural studies. For our analysis, we use data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data sources include photographic documentation of the field. Secondary data sources include photographic material and newspaper articles circulated online, as well as, relevant academic literature.
First, we examine how this mural was integrated into the constructions and intersubjective experiences of public space from the perspective of semiotization of space. Second, we discuss the practicalities involved for the fulfilment of this mural from the perspective of design-scope. And third, we advance the discussion around the issues of cultural preservation and heritagization of street art and graffiti. Our goal in this paper is to avoid binary interpretations, and instead, to induce in an intermediary way the significance of public dialogue, which this mural achieved to trigger.

Keywords: semiotics, design, cultural studies, Athens crisis, street art

1. Introduction

In Greece, as in other countries of the world, street art, graffiti, and urban art as expressive and worldwide phenomena are often used as different types of urban creativity (an umbrella term), encompassing several types of art in urban space either under legal assignment or not. As a number of studies have shown (namely Avramidis, 2015; Bengtsen, 2014; Blanché, 2015; Chmielewska, 2008; MacDowall, 2006; Pangalos, 2014; Philipps, 2015), the notions of graffiti, street art, post-graffiti, and urban art are heavily cross labelled and interpretatively rich with authors from different disciplines approaching such concepts in different ways.[1] In other words, such complex and meaningful phenomena of human sociocultural consciousness have been discussed for quite a long time, often controversially by various disciplines – namely anthropology, architecture, art history, criminology, design, internet ethnography, political and cultural studies, social media and urban ethnography, and most recently (cognitive) semiotics. In fact, this proves the strong inter-trans-cross-multidisciplinary nature of the scholarly field of these art movements (Ross et al., 2017) and the necessity for more street art and graffiti research beyond the crossovers. This paper traces the exemplary case of a "black-and-white mural" (Tziovas, 2017: 45) in Polytechnic School of Athens from a synergistically oriented approach: 1) semiotics, 2) design, and 3) cultural studies. To this extent, the notions of graffiti and street art are used interchangeably throughout the text.

Although, the scope of this study does not allow for a detailed description of the crisis and times of austerity in detail, nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind, at least to some extent, the socio-political and cultural context, where the crisis-related street art started emerging. The Athenian walls, as an urban socio-political magazine in the context of crisis and intense socio-political upheavals, suggest that the socio-political changeover, financial crisis, and austerity measures are considered common themes to the encrypted messages of street artworks and interventions displayed in the centre of Athens (Stampoulidis, 2016).

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, we outline the socio-political background of Polytechnic School. On this basis, we argue that the building of Polytechnic School is regarded as a symbol of the Athens Polytechnic uprising against the Greek military dictatorship (1963-1974) due to its historical burden. Section 3 describes the method and empirical material from primary and secondary sources. In section 4 we analyze our case study, which leads us to the discussion in section 5, where we formulate some concluding considerations.

Figure 1 Artwork in Polytechneio. Photography George Fiorakis © in March 2015,

Web Page: https://www.inexarchia.gr/story/local/rotisame-gnomes-gia-terastio-gkrafiti-sto-polytehneio-vandalismos-i-kraygi-aganaktisis

2. The contemporary art in Polytechneio and its historical past

The campus of the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens (henceforth *Polytechneio*) located in the specific area of Exarchia district which was constructed in the late 19th century (1862-1876) and designed by the Greek architect Lysandros Kaftantzoglou (1811-1885) has been a significant cornerstone in the socio-political landscape of the city.[2] Within the history of modern Greece, Polytechneio is regarded as a symbol of the Athens Polytechnic uprising against the Greek military dictatorship, *junta* (1963-1974).[3] Polytechneio ever since has been characterized as a "political topos of Hellenism" (Leontis, 2016) which is a historically charged building with various kinds of political ideas and ideals of the renowned Greek past such as freedom and democracy. The surrounding walls, marbles, and even windows of the Polytechneio have functioned as an *unsanctioned canvas* for various kinds of street art and graffiti practices encompassing socio-political messages and artistic interventions. In other words, as Schacter (2014) would have said, the area would have been seen as a 17th century Parisian café for artists in millennial Athens.[4]

In this paper, we discuss an exemplary case of political action and controversial potential of graffiti. In March 2015, the west façades of the Polytechneio were covered by a large scale black-and-white mural, which can partake in the tradition of abstract expressionism with its vague content, painted in black and white patterns. Thus, it may confirm that the lack of content and its ambiguous interpretations give the piece a timeless artistic merit (Figure 1).

More explicitly, this empirical paper focuses on the role of contemporary street art and graffiti within the Athenian urban social milieu. It examines *how* and *why* this black-and-white mural, as being our empirical illustration, has been discussed often irreconcilably from different kinds of recipients, leading to a public debate between local and international street art practitioners and graffiti writers, public and research authorities, communication media, and Greek public opinion. In order to unpack this issue, we advance the discussion about street art and graffiti through a combination of several approaches by focusing on the levels of preparation, implementation, and erasure of this black-and-white mural.

3. Method and research material

This paper draws methodologically on the researchers' own empirical material. For our analysis, we use data from primary and secondary sources. This section describes our data gathering tools, which are: 1) photographic documentation of the field and 2) photographic data and articles from online web blogs, newspapers, free press magazines circulated online, as well as a number of academic literature articles.

More specifically, the pictures were taken by the authors in two different periods: 1) in March 2015, when the artwork was released on the walls of the Polytechneio, and 2) almost three years after its erasure in the winter 2017/spring 2018, in order to compare the walls outside the Polytechneio presently. Based on fieldwork conducted in Athens in the winter 2017/spring 2018, the Polytechnic walls were fully covered by small tags or bigger pieces of graffiti, and not by a big-scale coherent entity of one piece as occurred in March 2015 (see Section 4). This is a confirmation based on the photographic testimony, which could lead us to consider the Polytechnic façades as legal or open graffiti walls (see Footnote 4). We then documented other artworks nearby which presumably could belong to the same graffiti crew.[5] These assumptions were driven by the similarities between the black and white patterns of the pieces (Figure 2, an instantiation from Patission Street in central Athens).

Figure 2 Black and white patterns in Patission Street. Photography Tina Bitouni © in January 2018.

Additionally, a number of pictures associated with the mural in Polytechneio were found in online web archives. We also collected articles from online web blogs and forums, and newspapers free press magazines which show the diversity of the opinions. This would lead us to next where we discuss both press and academic literature review. A number of articles in online web blogs and newspapers debated the specific case of the black-and-white mural in Polytechneio often controversially. Here, we review the main axes of this online discussion because the discussion affords a spherical view of the phenomenon. There are several people, who characterized the mural as an action that involved deliberate destruction and damage to public and private property including the well-known Greek painter Alekos Fassianos in his interview at the *in.gr* web portal. In addition, the rector of the National Metsovian Polytechnic, at that time, Ioannis Golias, also defined graffiti as an act of vandalism. On the other hand, the defenders of the mural in Polytechneio paid their attention mostly to technical characteristics, quality and style. The Athenian street artist, *N_Grams*, noted that the artwork on the façades of the Polytechneio is a mural of epic dimensions and not a graffiti, a large-scale intervention in a historic building. Last but not least, the response of the Greek street artist, *Fikos*, is equally interesting, by spelling out the significance of the artistic style of the black-and-white mural in Polytechneio which obeyed rules of composition and occupied the entire wall, which might mean that there should be an artistic and non-vandalistic mind behind its execution.

Moving forward to the academic literature, a number of recent studies from different fields (i.e., Greek philology, art history, visual and cultural studies) have recently considered the dynamic symbolisms of this black-and-white mural for the history of Greece and its contemporary street art and graffiti scene. More concretely, Leontis (2016) focuses on the site-specificity, socio-political and contextual surroundings of the mural in Polytechneio by discussing political narratives inscribed on the Polytechneio's walls with encapsulated values of the mural's meaning-bearing. In subsequence, both Drakopoulou (2017) and Leontis (2016) advocate the significance of the pictorial material and how this was elaborated in accordance with the building's architecture and peculiarities (as referred to neoclassical "looking") by taking into account the architectural topography of the site itself. Altogether, both have pinpointed the conflictual discourse that was raised from both media and state agencies that mainly interpreted the mural as an act of vandalism and decided its urgent removal (Drakopoulou, 2017; Leontis, 2016). Lastly, Tsilimpounidi (2017) and Tziovas (2017) comment upon the fact that the large scale black-and-white mural in Polytechneio could presumably be seen as critique of the catastrophic consequences of crisis and austerity to the Greek educational system and in particular to Greek universities and campuses. But, another task remains to be accomplished: to process and analyse the information gathered about our empirical illustration from our perspective.

4. Analysis from the perspective of semiotics, design, and cultural studies

4.1. The black-and-white mural as a place-making urban assemblage

After reviewing the relevant pieces from media press and academic literature, it is now time to discuss the black-and-white mural as a place-making urban assemblage.[6] In terms of the walls' symbolic importance, the notion of urban assemblage (Farías, 2010) is quite relevant from the perspective of not only the materiality of the Polytechneio's façades, but mainly, from the perspective of their intangible and symbolic significance. In this section, we explore the ways that the contextual location of graffiti making in Polytechneio made it an urban spatial practice. Therefore, we must turn to urban and spatial semiotics in order to discuss the mural in Polytechneio as a semiotic device. The French philosopher and sociologist Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) clearly states (as cited in Zieleniec, 2016) that the graffiti paintings and wall writings are often to be considered as symptoms and/or signifiers of conflicts and/or hard times in a city.

> The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become 'savage' and by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls (ibid: 10).

With this in mind, graffiti may be considered an instantiation of a return to the city as a living creative work of art, always in the process of being written/painted and/or rewritten/repainted. In this way, the mural we studied may provide

diverse ways of interacting and communicating within the city. This may stand not just for those, who actively wrote or painted the walls, but also for those, who in an intersubjective and active way engaged themselves by reading and interpreting it. In fact, this could explain what Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) argues by saying that what allows society as a collective organism to exist and to function is the cooperative work between senders (graffiti writers) and recipients (graffiti interpreters) (as cited in Zieleniec, 2016). In other words, the mural in Polytechneio may be considered as a *space of representation* in Lefebvre's sense, meaning that its immaterial symbolic meanings make it a space which is to be socially experienced. More precisely, within the city of Athens, the Polytechneio mural was substantially transformed to a common ground, where people with shared concerns and experiences engendered themselves in order to communicate conflicting ideas and messages addressing its "spatial dialectics" (Schmid, 2012: 45), something that it is clearly proven by the media and academic discussion in Section 3.

To this extent, studying the black-and-white mural as a place-making urban assemblage from a semiotic perspective requires us to turn to *intersubjectivity* which is understood as the sharing of experiential content such as feelings, perceptions, and thoughts among a number of subjects (Zlatev et al., 2008). In this case the shared experience about the mural in Polytechneio which was being communicated and circulated through various sociocultural channels may be approached as the human capacity for intersubjectivity. In other words, by taking into account our empirical case study, it could be explained as the way people, who either painted (graffiti artists) or interpreted (graffiti interpreters, including both state authorities and society at large) the mural in Polytechneio, were presumably aware of the experiences of Others through the schema of subject-world interactions and social engagement (see e.g. Zlatev et al., 2008 for extensive reviews in intersubjectivity). On the basis of this argument, we could clarify that for cultural artefacts, such as the mural in Polytechneio, there could be one extra layer of intersubjectivity - that is to say the potential for dialogue and/or action that the mural itself invited recipients by taking into consideration the *subjects* involved (artists-interpreters). To summarize, we have in this section discussed the

Figure 3 Artwork in Polytechneio. Photography George Fiorakis © in March 2015,

Web Page: https://www.inexarchia.gr/story/local/rotisame-gnomes-gia-terastio-gkrafiti-sto-polytehneio-vandalismos-i-kraygi-aganaktisis

immaterial symbolic significance of graffiti along with its intersubjective nuances. More precisely, the intense public debate that followed the mural creation unveiled the spatial and urban dynamics of graffiti as a means of public expression and democratization. Nevertheless, in relation to the present purposes, we argue that the mural in Polytechneio, as an embodied act of settling the Greek urban space, managed to create new ways of utilizing the Polytechneio's façades for diverse aesthetic meanings and cultural and political messages. This gave rise to alternative, often contradictory, discourses among subjects which encouraged an ardent public debate and active intersubjective participation in the everyday urban life of the Greek lived experienced milieu.

4.2. Graffiti art or pre-designed mural?

Is the artwork in Polytechneio graffiti or a mural, and to what extent? This question may be partially answered if we turn to design-scope. The walls of the historic building were painted from the ground up to the entablatures in black and white patterns. This invited diametrically opposed interpretations, since it was perceived either as a contemporary work of art or as a vile act of vandalism (Section 3).

At this point, from the perspective of design, it should be noted that this action was not under legitimate assignment by a private or public sector, which creates awe for the speed in which the project was executed in relation to its size and other technical requirements. Looking at the pictures of the black-and-white mural in Polytechneio one could only wonder how a group of people managed to perform something so big and coherent in such a short period of time illegally (Figure 3). While exact data have not yet been released, it may be safe to assume that the people who were involved in this intervention numbered two or more working for at least three or more days.

As a result, reasonable questions arise through the prism of design about project preparation, implementation of a draft sketch (if it existed), organization of the time, execution methods, guidelines and requirements. The artwork in Polytechneio is described either as graffiti or as a mural. In an effort to clarify and relate these concepts, it is necessary to emphasize that both graffiti and mural art are processes governed by specific methodology and technical features,

Figure 4 Artwork in Polytechneio. Photography George Fiorakis © in March 2015,
Web Page: https://www.kar.org.gr/2015/03/10/ρωτήσαμε-γνώμες-για-το-τεράστιο-γκραφ/

elements that may judge what is graffiti and what is mural. Graffiti writers, as supported by Lewisohn (2008) do not want to be called artists, but on the contrary, many of them prefer to be called vandals, giving graffiti the definition of "anti-art" with the characterization of solipsistic practice. The fact that graffiti serves no other purpose than its own existence supports this case (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-19). The discourse on the purpose and meaning of graffiti and street art (mural-making for example), the use of specific techniques, tools and methodologies for each one, but also whether they are separate or related art forms, is vast and, at times, confusing. In fact, it's one of the grey areas within the academic literature. What we might note is that, in most parts of the world, graffiti art is produced mainly illegally, and production is devoted to the transmission of an individual or a crew name to the urban landscape, having as a basic tool the spray can and presenting a kind of egotistic character, as it has been aforementioned. On the other hand, street art, in most cases, is a practice made by the use of various tools, presenting many different forms and techniques, and can be made either illegally or falling within the legal framework (as a commissioned practice). However, we must make clear that this distinction between these two forms of artistic practices is heavily simplified, and also context-dependent serving the needs and goals of this paper.

Therefore, our approach may be explained by the fact that the bordures of the Doric entablatures and the marble signs with the street names remained seemingly untouched and deliberately uncovered (Figure 4). On the other hand, as we have highlighted throughout the text, it is difficult to trace a clear line in-between; and that is not our present concern either.

More concretely, the artwork in Polytechneio has been painted with a brush and roller. Also, it is quite possible, almost undeniable, that for the creation of the highest parts they used sticks on which the brush or roller was attached. This fact may be indicated by the distinguishing trace that the paint leaves on the wall, sometimes thinner and sometimes thicker, as well as by the black and white blending, which can only happen using roller and brush and not aerosol spray can (Figure 4). Even if we do not know if there was a draft sketch followed by the executors, we can assume that the length of their arms and roll sticks and their bodily movements were the main, and perhaps the only guidelines, for the realization of the artwork. These guidelines could be traced on the "canvas" of the Polytechneio. Golden et al. (2002) and Verel (2015) argue that in the realization of murals, the local community as well as the inhabitants' desires play an important role for the artists' selection before, during, and after the end of any intervention project. In other words, even if an artist ought to work freely and spontaneously, sometimes social rules and constraints in the form of design methodology allow for better communication and understanding between the stakeholders.

Nonetheless, the artwork in Polytechneio was certainly uncommon in many respects. Graffiti-ists usually employ special characters and symbols that can be understood only by members of other graffiti communities or subcultures, involving the spread of their tag into the urban landscape.[7] In the artwork in Polytechneio, no legible or illegible signature (tag) seems to exist, which makes the process and final outcome even more different from the existing graffiti practices. We can only assume that it is the particular style and black-and-white patterns employed by the artists that makes their crew recognisable when their work spreads into the urban landscape. As a consequence, the executors behind the black-and-white mural in Polytechneio might have followed the solipsistic graffiti-making practice combined with a pre-planned time schedule and equipment organization which are often used by large-scale mural artists. In that sense, we argue that this artwork managed to apply in practice the grey zone of delimitations between street art and graffiti.

4.3 The frameworks of cultural heritage and the question of the heritagization of street art

This section discusses our empirical case study from the perspective of cultural studies and heritage. According to a Greek law, this neoclassical edifice is included in the list of recent monuments built after 1830.[8] However, throughout the entire city of Athens, vandalism and graffiti writing on such monuments is a very common phenomenon especially during the periods of intense socio-political upheavals. The immediate reaction against the mural, especially enhanced by mainstream media, stood in contradiction not only with the previous plight of the wall, but also with its aftermath condition, after the mural's erasure (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Polytechneio at present.
Photography Tina Bitouni © in December 2017.

This asserts for the state of oblivion that the building has suffered and that both opponents and supporters of the mural referred to. In this state of oblivion, "an object is no longer noticed, and its meaning is no longer present or important for the society" (Gamboni, 1997). But, this time, the black-and-white mural, as a conspicuous and ambiguous visual utterance and as an artistic defiance drew everyone's attention.

The surged debate was structured according to the fundamental contestation between vandalism and iconoclasm. The oscillation between vandalism, as an action involving deliberate destruction and/or damage to public and/or private property, and iconoclasm, as an action of attacking established values and practices, relies upon the eyes of the beholder. Therefore, due to the difficult of tracing a clear line, we approach the mural in Polytechneio as both and neither of the two. More concretely, our standpoint, here, is that this mural may constitute a consummate example of the notion of *Iconoclash*, as coined by Latour and Weibel (2002).

> *Iconoclasm* is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking and what the motivations for what appears as a clear project of destruction are. *Iconoclash*, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive (ibid: 16).

The notion of Iconoclash encapsulates the triggering of the intense public debate due to the mural, which widened the gap between its opponents and supporters. Its removal was accompanied by no more than a dozen of supporters of the mural, mainly middle-aged women, members of the leftish self-organized theatre *EMPROS*. Like a reminiscent of the conflict between the iconoclasts and iconophiles in byzantine times, the supporters of the mural were protesting its removal and they had shaped a human chain encircling most part of the wall, hindering the process of erasure (Figure 6). In this unsettling and conflicting environment, we engage the concepts of heritage disinheritance and of ephemerality for a better elaboration of this case.

The recent establishment of street art as one of the most popular cultural movements of our era amounts to a growing institutionalization of this form of art. Academic interest, the inconceivably rising street art market, the implementation of street artworks in museums, and their process of heritagization testifies to the above statement. While some graffiti pieces are laying in unexpected nooks of the boulevard and left to be worn out by the rain or damaged by the wind, there are others which stand in the white cube carefully preserved or even guarded. In the mural's case in Polytechneio, would it be possible to think about graffiti as heritage upon the already pre-existing heritage site of the neoclassical monument built in 1871? If we are willing to accept the heritagization process of the street art world, how many layers of heritage could be applied and remain meaningful and consistent? A patchwork of many different competitive narratives would indicate that there cannot or should not be only one collective identity. Instead, the friction between a popular, local collective identity and a public

collective memory is what describes best the spirit of the surrounding environment of the Exarchia district, including the Polytechneio building.

The empirical case of this mural resonates a dissonance between the heritage status of the neoclassical monument and the street art scene in Athens. According to Graham et al. (2000: 24) "the lack of agreement is intrinsic to the very nature of heritage." The students and youth who have been the main and daily users of the university building are appropriating the Wall and deciding a different fate for it than the one initially designed by the authorities. Therefore, in this case appears to be a "deliberate self-inheritance, whereby, to varying degrees, a population challenges or denies its own heritage as changing circumstances destroy its relevance or utility" (Graham et al., 2000: 34). The recent painting over of a large scale monument immediately put forward the contestation between the myth of ancient Greece as the cradle of western civilisation, represented in the neoclassical design, and the present reality of wretchedness caused by the levelling wave of crisis, imprinted in the abandonment of the curation of the building due to the lack of finances.

Therefore, we argue that unlike the content of the mural itself, the act of conservation of the mural would have rendered the piece as a street artwork vicarious of the Greek crisis. The conservation could have happened only outside institutional frameworks, relied only on grassroots curation, since so far there is no municipal systematic interest in the street art scene in Athens (Chatzidakis, 2016). However, the conservation of the mural does not equate to its plain remaining. In the latter case, the mural would be left exposed to all kinds of interaction, weather and time wear. With either the remaining or the conservation of the mural, an action of maintenance would advocate the uncomfortable ascertainment that the debt crisis is an irreversible part of the recent Greek history. The Doric entablatures and neoclassical design imply the renowned past of the ancient Greek civilisation, while the black and white features of the contemporary mural connote an uncertain indiscernible future. This mural constituted an excellent sample of hybridisation not only between high art and popular culture but also between a distant renowned and memorable past and a repelling poor present. Be it for its indecipherable dark content or for the withering of the neoclassical building, the remaining of the mural participates in the collective narrative of the contemporary Greek identity and represents the unglamorous conditions of debt and decay.

Figure 6 Human chain during the process of the artwork's erasure. Photography Unknown in March 2015,

Web Page: http://www.athensmagazine.gr/article/weird/171837-ayth-einai-h-diamartyria-epos-kata-ths-afaireshs-toy-gkrafiti-sto-polytexneio-photos

However, in order to avoid any misunderstanding of our being supportive for the conservation of the mural, it is important to highlight the notion of *ephemerality*. The ephemeral nature of an artwork in public space is perceived as contradictory to the potential heritagization process. Holtorf (2006: 108) supports the argument that the "destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage, but part of its very substance […] if heritage is said to contribute to people's identities, the loss of heritage can contribute to people's identities even more." Based on this, we fairly believe that Holtorf's affirmation can be applied both on heritage monuments and artworks in public space. Independently of the aesthetic pleasure and beyond the discourse of its artistic merit, interventions in "publicly accessible spaces" (Bengtsen, 2018: 125) can sometimes be seen as pure vandalistic practices, and sometimes as precursors of street art.[9] Thus, our intermediary approach leads us to consider them as instantiations that balance between two ends of the spectrum "vandalism - art" in accordance with the people's interaction and social engagement with the urban environment.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

In Greece, street art and graffiti aesthetic expressions usually constitute practices of protest and artfulness across the country by people of different ages working either under legal assignment or illegaly. Although a number of previous studies have discussed the large scale black-and-white mural in Polytechneio, this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first case study which considers this specific artwork from a cross disciplinary point of departure between semiotics, design, and cultural studies.

The street art world of Athens is regarded as the cultural bearer of the daily experience of the years of austerity. Therefore, it can illuminate many socio-political and cultural displacements which occurred. However, we believe that it is methodologically misusing to attribute an overly political burden to every instantiation of art in "publicly accessible spaces" (Bengtsen, 2018: 125),which has been created in Athens during the years of crisis (from 2008 onwards). In other words, we rather say that street art may not be always crisis-related. Without knowing the explicit intentions and motivations of the artists themselves, the only implied reason that would allow us to conclude that this artwork should be classified as crisis-related street artwork is the date of its production (March 2015). Therefore, it may be an oversimplification to describe every street artwork located in Athens as crisis-related based only on the date of its production.

Regarding the mural's instant erasure, we argue that this mural still carries a historical dimension due to the debate it triggered and the media attention it managed to attract (Section 3). However, the question still remains, if it would be possible to consider the artwork in Polytechneio as one more contributions to the intangible heritage based on the definition of intangible heritage provided by the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This definition encloses among others "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills [...] and cultural spaces that are constantly recreated by groups in response to their environment and history, whilst providing a sense of identity and continuity" (UNESCO 2003, 2).

In general, the impact of street art and graffiti lies in their ability to depict the invisible protagonists of everyday life in the city. We have argued, then, that the empirical case of this mural, as an act of artistic defiance, sheds light to the ability of street art and graffiti to encapsulate living cultures with historical value and significance, and to contribute challengingly into the contestation between the past and the future, and into the debate about collective memory and preservation ethics.

To summarize, the precedent discussion has manifested that the artwork in Polytechneio balances between the notions of graffiti and mural. It was certainly not created under legal code. If this were the case, this paper would refer to a totally different (fictional) scenaro, where state initiatives would contact the artists proposing them to redesign the façades of the historic building of the Polytechneio. However, the spontaneous and independent expression of street art and graffiti's artfulness as being imprinted in the case of the black-and-white mural in Polytechneio continues until today to motivate further discussions about its "spatial dialectics." In fact, this might have been the intention of the Polytechneio's executors; to (re-)create social bonds within society, to prompt constant dialogue about street art and graffiti, to encourage people's thoughts about how public space is being used and last, but not least, to engage people with the everyday environment in a participatory, intersubjective, and critical way.

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Endnotes

1 - Taking into consideration the cross disciplinary nature of the present paper - notably from semiotics, design, and cultural studies - we do not suggest a definitive and deterministic division of all these notions. Rather, the terms of street art and graffiti are used interchangeably throughout the text, although we are aware of the long discussions about these definitional issues in the academic literature.

2 - Exarchia is geographically located very close to the National Metsovian Polytechnic in central Athens. It is a renowned neighbourhood of Athens for its libertarian character and resistance against state repression by many autonomous and/or anarchist groups, who choose this neighbourhood as a place of residence, work and social activity, but also notorious for its degraded urban landscape.

3 - On November 17th, 1973, the Greek army evacuated the occupation of the Polytechnic building by using a tank, which crashed the rail gate of the campus, causing the death of numerous people. This fact pointed to the beginning of the end of the most recent Greek military dictatorship and it is annually commemorated until today.

4 - In Greece, there is no major anti-graffiti policy. Consequently, there are no officially declared legal or open graffiti walls (a practice applied to many other cities of the world - European or not). However, given the frequency of painting, the multitude of artists and versatile verbo-pictorial outcomes, it could be assumed that the Polytechnic façades could constitute the “open” graffiti walls of Athens, not officially declared though. As for our case study, the artwork in Polytechneio is estimated that it took three days for its completion and less than a week for its total removal, marking an unprecedented phenomenon for the zero anti-graffiti policy in Athens.

5 - Without the artists’ signature, we cannot confirm the identity of the creator(s). Nevertheless, the places, where the other artworks have been found are: (1) Patission Street, which is one of the major streets in central Athens, (2) Agia Irini square in the historical centre of Athens, (3) Dafni, Chaidari, which is an inner suburb of Athens and (4) Koumoundourou Street, which is close to Omonia square in central Athens. The first instantiation from Patission Street (Figure 2) is an exterior wall of an abandoned building, which is located just a few blocks away from Polytechneio. This mural still exists until today and it is being treated with care by the pedestrians and residents, and thus, it remains uncovered by posters and/or tagging.

6 - Assemblage as an “alternative ontology for the city” (Farías, 2010: 13).

7 - The creators of the mural in Polytechneio had no aspirations to become known, following at the same time the dominant, but implicit rule of anonymity in graffiti *subculture*. The definition and meaning of subculture, as it is given by Hebdige (1979: 2-3) includes the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups “[…] the meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force”. The meaning-makings within graffiti subculture could be an interesting case study from the perspective of cultural semiotics.

8 - https://norwinst.w.uib.no/files/2017/03/Antiquities-Law-of-Greece_3028en.pdf (retrieved 2018/04/03).

9 - “It should be noted that the term ‘public space’ [...] is taken to include so-called ‘publicly accessible spaces’, which is to say spaces that appear to be public but there are in fact privately owned” (Bengtsen, 2018: 125).