

Athens Centre is Burning: Political Stencils as Art and Activism in Dystopian Times

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Abstract

Stencil is a work of street art; however, it has strayed from the classic graphics of New York style graffiti and is distinguished for its figurative character and its narrative content. Stencils often serve as alternative political posters and offer a way to awaken the less privileged and encourage them to resist. The directness and graphic simplicity of this unofficial urban iconography and the fact that it may be reproduced quickly make stencil an extremely appropriate means to feature political issues. Political stencilled pieces in the centre of Athens after the outbreak of the financial crisis and the implementation of severe austerity measures, have been turned into experimental, uncensored and collaborative spaces by artists and activists. Stencilled images by PAUL, MAPET, D!, Bleeps and the HIT crew are very characteristic forms of art activism or activism in their ability to maintain a position of consistent opposition against austerity; to raise questions of the European Union itself and its terminal democracy deficits; to interrogate whether Syriza, the ruling party that signifies the most important advance of the Left since the mid-1970s in Greece, has further entrenched the very processes of neoliberal austerity imposed by the earlier memorandums since 2010; to resist against negative opinions and stereotypical images about the “corrupt Greeks”; to bring to the fore the unwritten traumatic history of the city, driven out of the official picture, but prone to erupt at any time.

Keywords: political stencils, urban iconography, activism, neoliberal austerity, trauma.

Introduction

In this paper I will try to analyze through selected stencilled pieces how the medium of political stencil operates recently in the centre of Athens as a kind of protest art that does not simply impel passers-by to reflect upon the one of the deepest postwar recessions of the country; upon the role of the European Union in easing citizens' concerns about stability, democracy and the identity of the EU itself; upon the mismanagement of the immigration issue, its exploitation by far right groups, and the subsequent tension among several countries in Eastern and Central Europe rejecting the obligation to take in immigrants; upon the incapability of the Syriza government to stand up to the European Union and defend living standards of the working class, the poor and immigrants. As every form of political art stencil can contribute to the creation of a wide range of political activists in Greece; it is a tool of building and maintaining political relations with the people. Specifically, political stencils add direct political interventions to struggles established in the streets; they provoke a refreshing debate in

the Greek left and address an immediate plea to citizens for fighting against the cultivation of racist ideology, against a normalized life, and the alienation from their own emotions, creativity and desires. Although I recognize that the ephemerality of this medium metaphorically and literally shows the fragility of the position from which it is critically challenging hegemonic structures, stencilling rooted in social protest and trained in political confrontations as a form of art and activism contributes decisively to the configuration of a new situation and of a better future. A brief sketching of the medium's historiography, technical, iconological and morphological traits should not be omitted. From a methodology point of view, interdisciplinary research borrowing from art theory, political philosophy and concepts such as the agonistic democracy, of the aesthetics of destruction, trauma theory and semantics has proved to be very fruitful.

Stencil is a category of street art that has strayed from the classic graphics of New York-style graffiti and is distinguished by its figurative character and its narrative content. Stencil was

introduced to the traditional New York style graffiti subculture in the 1980s and became, at the same time, another version of post-graffiti with stickers, posters and street installations (MacPhee 2004, 103). While New York style graffiti is completely reliant on the *tag* and revolves around typography and letter formation, stencil is primarily a picture-led graphic art form. Graffiti is a solipsistic, internalized language; as such, the main groups of people who can fully appreciate it are other graffiti writers. On the contrary, stencil templates can be understood by a wider audience, since they involve a narrative content, an element of storytelling. By searching further into the comparisons, one may find even more differences; stencil usually reflects the particularities of the environment. In other words, it is site-specific, while graffiti is standardized and a universal language of signature (Lewisohn 2008, 21-23). Whether they bear a radical political message, or present an interesting graphic design or a single word, stencils claim the space of advertisement boards, walls and pavements, which are turned into experimental, uncensored and collaborative spaces by artists and activists. Stencil also contains the surprise element that comes from the sudden appearance of figurative episodes or obscure items on a wall, and from the fact that these images have been produced in the public arena, where most messages tend to be corporate or functional. There are many visual twists in these appropriations and even the most innocent images contain subversion (Drakopoulou 2009, 100).

Stencil is a simple, low-tech medium: A design is initially made on a hard surface which is cut out in such a way as to allow for the design's reproduction. The gaps, created by the design cut-out, are then coloured in. The only supplies required to create a stencil are a piece of cardboard, a knife, and spray-or any other form of paint. In other words, this is a portable printing press. Hundreds of stencils can be made on streets and sidewalks with only these simple tools. The handmade character of stencil, which fits the punk movement's Do It Yourself philosophy, confirms the popular and democratic dimension of this medium. The uncompromising nature of this medium is of unique significance, since the means of production and distribution are all in the creators' hands. Stencils often serve as alternative political posters. Since the mass media is used to promote products, companies

and political parties, and is only available to those possessing property ownership titles and money guarantees, stencil, as a temporary and low-tech means of expression, offers a way to awaken the less privileged and encourage them to resist. The directness and graphic simplicity of this unofficial urban iconography and the fact that it may be reproduced quickly make stencil an extremely appropriate means to feature political issues (Chaffee 1993, 8-10). Furthermore, rooted in social protest and political propaganda, stencilling evolved by itself to combine the tension of protest art with the aesthetics of decorative arts within the various tradition of urban street ornamentation.

After the Russian Revolution, Ivan Maliutin created a dozen political posters for the Soviet political education department using stencils and gouache (Dickerman 1996, 70). During the same era, Vladimir Majakovski produced similar stencilled posters for ROSTA, the Soviet telegraph agency. Daring and simplified texts and images were stencilled and used mainly to inform a largely illiterate population (MacQuiston, 1993, 17-18). In the 1930s, the more sophisticated stencil process of screen printing was developed as a means of mass-producing artwork. Various chemical and photomechanical processes enabled artists to create more complex designs than was possible with ordinary cut-out stencils. Stencil was placed in the service of political propaganda during World War II, especially in Italy. Posters of political parties in the 1960s and the slogans of the Paris uprising in May 1968 have also affected the iconography of later political stencils. In the service of protest, art uses well-known political symbols, such as the clenched fist, weapons or the rippling flag. These images have their roots in the depictions of historical events, but also in early 20th century revolutionary art. Another frequent theme in protest stencilling is the iconic use of portraiture. The style of various portraits of Lenin, Mao and Che Guevara, who are usually depicted as visionaries, is now appropriated for new heroes and new struggles. Anti-fascism, feminism, the spread of AIDS during the 1980s, problems faced by prisoners, police violence, as well as the claims of various national liberation movements all have constituted the topics of many political stencils (Manco, 2002, 9-10, 60).

Contemporary political stencils, based on the aesthetics of vandalism, should be associated with "terminal culture" and "destruction art", terms introduced by the art

historian Kristine Stiles (Stiles 1987), that signify the sites where social, aesthetic, and political interrelationships and practices collude in the question of survival. In her analysis of destruction art, Stiles (Stiles 2000, 29-50) draws upon the work of psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, and especially that relating to trauma. Lifton identifies a survivor as “one who has encountered, been exposed to, or witnessed death and has himself or herself remained alive” (Lifton 1987, 235; see also Caruth 1995, 128-150). Death here may be literal, as in the actual extinguishing of life, or psychological, as in the destruction of the sense of Self. Whatever the text of survival, it must be read through the discourse of destruction. The struggle to survive also causes “a ‘psychic numbing’ that incapacitates the individual's ability to feel and to confront certain kinds of experiences. However, the survivor, in that case the street artist, feeling a “sense of debt and responsibility to the dead” (Lifton, 236-240) as well as guilty because remained alive despite witnessing death, overcomes the crisis of numbing by utilizing artistic activism as another form of creativity means. The survivor feels obliged to retell the story in a way that we see as more just, to include alternative voices often found only outside official narratives.

Political stencils on the walls of Athens have proven themselves a very useful form of artistic activism or *artivism* that challenges hegemonic interests and encourages an agonistic debate where the voices of democratic citizens can be loudly heard. Public space is where social power relations develop and is always hegemonically structured; it is the terrain where the *political* can be understood “as the ever-present possibility of antagonism” against the fixed structure of power relations (Mouffe 2008, 153). In particular, in *agonistic public spaces*, as Chantal Mouffe put it, critical art practices “will contribute to subverting common sense and to creating new subjectivities” (Mouffe 2014, 72), and this is the reason why today the cultural terrain plays such a strategic role in politics.

Stencil has a strong relationship with the city backdrop and its content changes as the times do, I would like to further elaborate on this topic. Its visual manifestation mainly depends on the areas characteristics and special features and whatever various activities take part there. For example, pieces located around the

commercial centre of Athens (Exarcheia and Metaxourgeio) present an intensified socio-political critique, especially after the outbreak of the financial crisis of 2008. In contrast, the ones we come across in the historic centre (Psiri and Monastiraki) seem to have greater emphasis on style, and their messages deal more with the areas spirit, such as modern ways of collective entertainment (see also Karathanasis and Theodosis 2008, 54-55). Stencils are mainly placed on corporate buildings and political targets, such as governmental buildings and embassies. In other words, wherever a protest or a mass demonstration will take place. Other common surfaces for site-specific stencils are stop signs, which are standardized and have a strong pre-existing meaning that can be used to help get a message across. Although there are many repeated themes, such as crossed out bombs, there is also an impressive diversity of imagery. In my view, the works selected can be classified into the particular category of outdoor community murals, as in some cases is implied by the initiative of the surfaces' owners to protect and preserve them. The works illustrate aptly how over the last years Athens' walls have become “witness surfaces” (Chmielewska 2008, 24-29) of the political transformations generated by the crisis; they create other forms of consciousness – not simply lifting false consciousness – but most importantly they do not approach political discourse in moral terms.

In or out of the Eurozone? Financial entrapment and the reproduction of nationalism

PAUL, a renowned stencillist, raises political consciousness and prompts viewers to choose between conflicting narratives. In the same vein we can interpret his latest stencil dedicated to the subversive Greek musician and lyricist Jimmy Panousis, executed on the wall of a shop in the centre of Athens at Metaxourgeio (fig. 1) a few days after Panousis' sudden death (January 2018). The face of the musician, rendered in profile, has been shaped following the frontier contours of Greece and painted blue – an overt allusion to the Greek flag, i.e. to populist patriotism and nationalism. The caption below reads: “WE’ LL NEVER FIND HER WITH EYROPE (SIC), JIM”. The stencil is inspired by the verses of Panousi's song, *Oh Europe*, released in the '80s

to express his dissatisfaction with the uncritical mixture of European and national culture.¹



Figure 1: PAUL, WE' LL NEVER FIND HER WITH EYROPE JIM, stencil on wall, Athens 2018. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou

In this particular moment with Greece being dependent on the European governing elites, in the midst of a borrowing and sovereign debt crisis, the stencil, reminds succinctly the prophetic character of the old song. All aspects of normal life — from the financial-economic to democratic processes — have been heavily disrupted in view of harsh austerity memoranda imposed on Greece in 2010 and 2012 by the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The successive bailout loans have failed and by all accounts and assessments the Greek debt-crisis has not been resolved to date. Prevailing explanations of the Greek crisis (and in more general terms of the so-called “southern problem”) have ignored the uneven relations among social classes, firms, places and institutions especially since the introduction of the Euro. They have thus left the

socially produced uneven geography of Southern Europe and the EU out of the picture (Hadjimichalis 2011, 254-274). Media analysts put the blame for corruption on national monopoly champion companies of the North, on neoliberal policies and on the leading media outlets. They accuse them of representing the Greek crisis in a way that breeds an institutional “intra-European racism and even racial guilt syndromes on the part of the Greeks” (Kaitatzi-Whitlock 2014, 35). In terms of repercussions, the “crisis management” has caused multiple polarisations within the Greek political scene and in the society itself. In particular, a part of the Greek population persists in its commitment to both the Euro and the idea of Europe since they believe that democracy and EU membership are still closely linked — they associate Europe with stability and prosperity (Ruparel and Persson 2012, 17). Syriza political leaders have been staunch remainers in the Eurozone despite the summer referendum of 2015 which revealed that the majority of Greeks were against the drastic new austerity measures stipulated by the European ruling class (Wiesner 2017, 294) and unleashed a more profound and severe challenge: the question of the European Union itself and its terminal democracy deficits. Of course, space limitation does not allow examining in detail potential consequences with regard to “Europeanism” which legitimizes austerity policies today or its alternative advocates an immediate Eurozone exit. Besides, the Greek crisis can be seen as an overall crisis of democracy and of the nation-state. As Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou (2015) have suggested, the crisis has resulted in altering political dynamics, and offering increased electoral opportunities to Golden Dawn. Golden Dawn is an ultra right-wing extremist and racist party that promotes the “nationalist solution” through the employment of a specific argumentation: the emphasis on the everlasting ideological construct of *Greekness*, the politics of violence against the nation’s alleged enemies, the assurance for the dispossessed of an escape from their burdens. The condemnation expressed in the motto “FUCK COLDEN DAWN” written vertically by the artist showcases exactly the danger raised by that political entity. The decision of the store owner to mount a sheet of plexiglass onto the painted surface so as to protect and display the piece is of special importance. Contrary to the usual demonization of illegal artistic interventions in

¹ The song *Oh Europe* (Ah Evropi) was released by Columbia, Athens, in May 1985 when Jimmy Panousis still collaborated with the band *Mousikes Taxiarchies*. The stencil refers to the following strophe: “I can’t, I can’t find it / with computers and buttons. / New Wave, Jazz, Rock, Sex, Drugs, Rock’n’ Roll / with tzatziki and souvlakia.”

public space as means of aggressive vandalism and dissolution of the urban fabric, the unique politically charged piece seems to be understood and therefore positively received. I believe that the piece constitutes an example of outdoor community murals; it belongs to the long history of stencil graffiti and murals executed without permission in the specific district, usually rendered in a photorealistic manner. It is equally important, of course, to clarify what community murals are, especially in Greece, a country with limited mural art history. The conservators' perspective may prove to be very useful, since they often have to face conflicting interests and practices by the governmental agents and other involved parties related to illegal community murals. According to Timothy Drescher, "[w]e use the word *community* for this social field in which community murals exist. It refers to the daily audience of the mural as well as to its producers and to the painting itself. [...] This determination requires a complex interaction with the people who live or work with the mural on a daily basis. If the mural's meaning is not discussed and debated in the community, then the mural is not really public" (Drescher, 2003). The determinant sociopolitical context surrounding the piece in Metaxourgeio has been excessively discussed. It demonstrates the ideological stance of the majority of contemporary Greeks who "do not find it" with Europe, and in particular with imported life styles and technology elites on the one hand and national popular culture on the other. Why Western European cars, *tzatziki* and *souvlaki* are here to buy while the country totters on the verge of the abyss?



Figure 2: MAPET, *FIFI FOLA STOUS FASISTES*, stencil on wall, Athens 2014. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou

The piece *Fifi fola stous fasistes* (Φίλη φύλα στους φασίστες) (fig. 2) executed by the stencillist MAPET in 2015 borrows the cover illustration of the *Alfavitari*, the Alphabet Book, first published in 1949 and used for over 30 years in Greek primary schools. The text was by Epaminondas Gerantonis, while the illustrations engraved by Kostas Grammatopoulos (1916-2003) in 1955 are regarded as a classic example of Greek graphic design in the 1950s. (Christou, 1994) The children on the cover are embraced and immersed in reading; they are dressed in a characteristic school apron typical of the time in blue and white — the colours of the Greek flag. The simplified re-rendering by MAPET, in black and white, includes below a text which, though difficult to translate into English, is a denunciation of racism, as this is expressed by the Greek extreme-right Golden Dawn party. The repeated consonant sound F, a usual mnemonic for children to learn the letters of the alphabet, is here a playful phonics that simultaneously renders metonymically the regime of fascism and its dictatorial vocabulary. The interesting feature of this piece is that the coherence between image and word breaks down: The innocence of the children comes in sharp contrast to a major political problem facing Greece, namely the increasing number of *sans-papiers* immigrants currently held in detention centres, now called "concentration camps". Image and word co-operate to heighten the awareness of the passer-by, since the cultivation of racist ideology and indifference to the unbearable conditions suffered by the "unnecessary ones", "people without rights", allow no kind of naïveté and tolerance.

Writing/speech constitutes a central practice to D' activity (fig. 3). Stencilled verbal text usually mounted on metal gates has emerged since 2008. Blocky, monochrome, uppercase letters elaborated with arrows to direct energy outwards occupy metal backgrounds. The decorative effects lay inside the lettering as each letter's bowl is formatted through zigzag lines unifying the work and lending it at the same time aggressiveness. Differences in shapes and the uneven organization of the lettering on the material support create spatial tension. Calculated colour, texture and light correspondences allow to capture the viewer's gaze and impose the work in the surrounding landscape. By exploiting this prior knowledge of how images were

produced, positioned, and consumed D! has continued to experiment with different techniques - paste-ups and digitally edited pictures- in the series *Their True ID* (2011-onward) consisting of illegal works in the streets, and *The "Crisis" Fabricators* his first solo exhibition (2017), both combining text and images.



Figure 3: D!, *Four D!'s*, stencil on metal, Athens, Thisio District, 2009. Photo by D!

By similarly employing the linguistic device of consonance D! creates a visual-verbal hybrid not unlike conceptual works. More specifically, selected verbs that begin with the letter "D", a clear reference to the artist's chosen pseudonym, such as *derail*, *decode*, *defy*, *dare*, *demand*, *debunk* etc, exploit phonological analogy to serve a number of functions: as an attention-seeking device that enhances emphasis, as a challenge to spectators to evaluate critically disastrous political choices and practices, as a comment on the insufficiency or even corruption of political leaders, as autobiographical fragments to express the artist's attitude to today's reality. The artist claims: "I do have a message - or perhaps a series of messages - I'd like to pass to the world. To do so, I have selected a number of rules that combine in creating my work.

Conceptually, that breaks down to verbs that start with the letter "D". The verbs I select, are usually autobiographic. "Dare", "Demand", "Defy", "Devise". They express my stance in today's reality. They give a hint about the principles I follow in order to cope successfully on a day to day basis in a highly corrupt state with a legislation that not only cannot be implemented, but often benefits the wrong parties, be it billionaires, small crooks and anything in between. The majority of my pieces are open to different and multiple interpretations. One viewer may see nothing but typography in an urban context, while another may see signs of a political manifesto with a social goal and of course, anything in between".² Of course, a general meaning of *open work* is not contested since different individuals arrive at different understanding of an artwork. But in my view, Umberto Eco's (1962) particular definition of open work as an "artwork in motion" (*opera in movimento*) - as a work that has temporal and multiple meanings can prove very useful to fully understand D! intention. D! prompts audiences' involvement in the meaning production in a way that fabricates the work. This shift from possible interpretations anticipated by the artist himself to the audience's authorship of meaning - being in a constant change - can successfully fulfill Eco's main criteria of open work.

No inspiring options for Greece

Hope Wanted (fig. 4) was created by Bleeps in March 2015, a few months after the left-wing party Syriza won the elections for the first time in the political history of Greece. The work belongs to the *Windows Series* (2014 - onward),³ and it was made a few weeks after the referendum of the 6th of July 2015. The series consists of interventions in the windows of abandoned, dilapidated neoclassic buildings in the centre of Athens. Syriza's main campaign slogan "Hope is coming", as well as the book of short stories entitled *Wanted: Hope* (1954), by the Greek author Antonis Samarakis (1919-2003), were the artist's sources of inspiration. The structure of the image affirms that the message is transmitted by the incorporation of an image accompanied by text.

² Extract from an interview with the artist, Athens, 14 March 2018.

³ For a thorough analysis see Konstantina Drakopoulou, *BLEEPS: THE WINDOWS SERIES 2014-2018 INTERVENTIONS IN NEOCLASSICAL BUILDINGS IN ATHENS* (forthcoming 2018, Futura Publications)



Figure 4: Bleeps, *Hope Wanted*, mixed media on wall, Athens 2015. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou

From a semiotic approach, the difference between uppercase and lowercase writing, as a typographical feature, should also be underlined. KATAZHTEITAI-WANTED is written with capital letters without intonation, declaring dynamism and vivid emotions, while the second word of the message, *elpis-hope*, is written with lower case to stress probably the necessity of hope. The work is surrounded by surfaces with extensive graffiti letterings in a variety of colours. This dialogue among different visual and textual elements and the fact that the work's caption is conceivably intersected with other texts showcase "a remarkable intertextuality that extends the sociopolitical implications to contemporary life" (Stampoulidis 2016, 86-87). In the first paradigm, the rhetoric of hope has proved false and Syriza disappointed its electorate, as the Greek government reached agreement with the creditors for the latest bailout, conditional upon the implementation of just the type of austerity measures that the party had long campaigned against. In the stories by Samarakis on the other hand, protagonist is a former resistance fighter and now disenchanted communist. The association is overt, but the stencilled figures of the image conceal a more complex interpretation. Morphologically and thematically the picture allows us to draw comparisons with the *New Objectivity* (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), the artistic avant-garde in Germany in the interwar years. Bleeps similarly attacks political and social wrongs by using subdued colours, smooth paint application, cool objectivity, to the degree of dissecting his subject with uninflected surfaces, and tense clear lines; he places the figures in a tight space,

and conveys them as frozen in time, thus cultivating a sense of tranquility, which results in a disquieting effect. Behind the young woman in the foreground, who is dressed in black and wearing dark glasses, we discern a middle-aged man in traditionally bourgeois masculine attire. The man has been rendered as a machine, with the anonymity of the machinery registering every detail with equal exactitude, which is especially evident in his fingers gripping the woman's breast and arm. The male as predator is not lurking, not waiting to attack his unsuspecting but sexually available victim, as would be the case with New Objectivity practitioners. To the contrary, having secured the woman's will, the man guides her arm with the knife to kill the dove, no longer a symbol of purity and innocence but of naiveté and ignorance. The unmatched pair serves here as an allegory of how the newly acquired power of a radical left-wing party can be subjugated, and therefore educated to conform to the neoliberal dictates of the EU. According to the activist Paul D' Amato (2015) "In an extremely short period of time, Syriza has morphed from a party linked to mass movements and committed to resisting austerity to a party that is either on the verge of a split, collapse or, what amounts to the same thing, a left party in name only". Indeed, in the political scene there is no hope of a true reform agenda, and the word-game of the title alluding to criminals 'wanted' by the police shows clearly that the scenario of a permanent crisis state, with political uncertainty and economic depression, does not seem that remote.

Playful activism: spatial disobedience and disobedient places

The HIT graffiti crew was formed around 1997-1998, under a name that directly refers to the practices of "bombing" in the urban space, as the members of the crew preferred a distinct reference to the action of bombing itself, rather than a common letter- or number-based name. Very characteristic is that since the early 2000s their lettering design features strong contrasts in basic colours, mostly black and white, and strict geometrical shapes, with a distinctive extension of the upper, horizontal part, i.e. in terms of typography *the arm* of the last letter "T" over the letters "H" and "I" which encloses the design in a rectangular frame (fig. 5).

Besides the graffiti pieces, HIT began bombing in a larger scale using stencils, a rather

innovative practice in the Greek graffiti scene of that time (Drakopoulou 2017, 230). HIT members are mainly interested in how best to display and incorporate their tag into the city, taking into consideration its particular architectural and urban character, and the relationship between public built-up areas and private houses. Borrowing from the aesthetics and the jargon of advertising, HIT have seen graffiti moving towards a logo-based tag (Drakopoulou, Papathanasiou 2017). As practitioners of *détournement*⁴ or *culture jamming* (Klein, 2000; Tietchen 2001, 107-130), a term more familiar among contemporary radicals, HIT members intervene particularly in the three main axes connecting the center of Athens with the northern suburbs with their *détourned* stencilled logos, executed with technical mastery and mounted on new or time-worn billboards on highways, in order to create a semiotic parody of corporate capitalism.

In cases like the centre of Athens and most of its suburbs, the cityscape appears extremely homogeneous, not only in colours but also in terms of architectural forms. This, of course, is our distant picture of the cityscape, which changes radically as we move closer to the structural elements of the urban space. By examining the distant look, that of the pedestrians and the drivers in the streets and highways walking or driving in the same street, day after day, we recognize that our perception's initial holistic image is being repeated and finally recorded to our memory, in order to protect us from being flooded with the same optical messages again and again. However, habit seems to conceal the city. The components that form the urban landscape disappear because we have already seen them so many times that they no longer draw our attention but remain as recorded memories in our visual field. At this point, I would like to recall Walter Benjamin's thought with regard to the preponderance of the tactile or actively lived appreciation of space over the optical or contemplative side. And the tactile appreciation occurs not consciously, but through habit (Benjamin 1928 and Benjamin 1936).



Figure 5: HIT, HIT, acrylic paint and rollers on wall, rooftop, Athens 2004. Photo by ERON

However, the *détourned* stencilled logos by HIT constitute a radical intervention in the cityscape. By using vivid colours they create strong visual contrasts in angular geometrical shapes in rooftops and throw-ups on large buildings, billboards, or on highways challenging in a rather profound way the glance of passers-by. In that way, graffiti writers manage to confuse passers-by and make them feel unsettled. The passers-by feel uncomfortable because they expect the logos to be an advertisement, and what they find is a subverted advertising. Therefore it is hard to make sense of what it is there. As a consequence the pieces reawaken someone's curiosity about the urban environment and make him/her question certain values such as corporate commercialism and the manufacture of consent. This occurs because HIT have themselves realized that speed and reduced concentration are elements predetermined by habit and official aesthetics.

⁴ For the concept of *détournement* see "Définitions: *détournement*," Constant, Asger Jorn, Helmut Sturm, Maurice Wyckaert. Available at https://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/text/si/Internationale_situationniste_1.pdf. (accessed 20/03/ 2015).

These notions give structure to the passers-by visual perception while they commute to their workplace or go to their sleeping area. The exploration of these components enables them to transform surfaces of the cityscape into a new language with its own signs and referents. And they offer the passers-by something easy to digest, but not consumable (JNOR 2010: 33).



Figure 6: HIT, *HIT*, stencil on road sign, Olympia Street (Attica) 2003. Photo by ERON

To illustrate the above, I have chosen to analyze the stencilled piece *HIT* (fig. 6) executed by the homonymous crew in the early 2000s on the Toll Road signs placed on the bridge above the toll booths of Olympia Street. The standardized design of the road sign, namely the white male silhouette on blue background with the extended hand — an attribute of toll collectors — seems to bear the stencilled tag. The overt and playful symbolism may recall actions of spatial disobedience, practices of producing images of capitalism under threat within the international movement of the 1990s *Reclaim the Streets* (Blanco 2013). HIT have conducted civil disobedience and taken direct action to criticize the existing order that prioritizes profit above people. They have also exposed in Foucauldian terms how disciplinary power is concentrated on “human bodies and their operations” (Foucault 1980: 151) in the form of surveillance and control in Western society. By symbolically questioning the regularity of optical paths on large avenues HIT undermine,

simultaneously, the rigidity of everyday life. They reveal the paradox of presentation and display by which surface, space and the frontal view are gestures of respect towards a generalized order, a normalized life, and normative aesthetics. Above all, it is essential to see their action as exemplary in the struggle to reinstate the streets, and in a broader sense land, time and imagination to collective use as a commons.

Final remarks

To sum up, I believe that the selected pieces attempt to appropriate part of the urban landscape and project a free and ephemeral form of political and artistic expression on it; to gain access to a traumatic history; to speak out against a crisis encompassing not the experiences of the individual suffering, but the suffering of the community as a whole; to promote a new dialogue on political and social issues. I believe that the stencils under discussion can be classified into the particular category of outdoor community murals, as implied by the initiative to protect and preserve the work *WE’ LL NEVER FIND HER WITH EYROPE JIM*. Stencilled pieces contribute to the general stance of the majority of contemporary Greeks who are confronted by fear and hope, guilt and a spirit of resistance. I argue that illegal artworks can be characterized as public and communal when they refer to the everyday audience, and their meaning is hotly discussed and debated in the community. Additionally, they should be placed within the broader tradition of existing politicized murals (graffiti and stencilled pieces) in the centre of the city, which preserve marginalized or devalued narratives specific to these particular neighbourhoods. Moreover, unlike the monuments that reify moments in “official history”, stencils are transient: in their movement through the urban landscape, in their use as language (whether communicating to a “public” or between subcultural associates/ antagonists), and in their disappearance, either by being defined as vandalism and deliberately erased, or through weather, wear and the passage of time. Ultimately, the pieces will become monuments of a dangerous and turbulent period preserved only in our memory.

Author's note

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