

# Art and Crisis on the Streets of Athens

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an examination of the complex composition of the subversive counter-institutional art scene which has developed in Athens, Greece throughout a time of crisis. With the emergence of the economic crisis in 2009 and the intensification of the refugee crisis between 2015 and 2016, images of suffering, anarchy, indignation and violence have become synonymous with Athens. Developing in parallel with this has been a cultural revolution led by the city's fast changing arts sector. The thriving art scene has attracted the attention of the international art world leading some to proclaim Athens as 'the new Berlin'. I explore the extent to which times of crisis can be culturally productive by analysing the distinctive spatial, temporal and socio-political conditions that have facilitated the vibrant art scene. This analysis is used to frame the fierce resistance and enduring suspicion directed towards the arrival of major international art institutions within wider perceptions of exploitation and domination at the hands of hegemonic Global Powers. Qualitative data for this project was collected during a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Athens between July 2015 to July 2016, with two short follow-up visits in July 2017 and February 2019. Research included participant observation and interviews with a range of street artists, performance artists, curators and gallery owners.

Throughout the crisis, funding and resources available to the arts have become scarce. In response to these limitations, artists have experimented with alternative and novel ways to produce and present their work. One of the most significant developments has been the move from traditional gallery spaces and art institutions to the more democratic, collaborative and often-chaotic city streets. Key urban spaces in Athens have historically been the sites of occupations, executions, revolutions and political violence which invests them with powerful communicative and political potentialities. Through artistic means, the symbolic content inherent in these spaces is evoked by artists to make sense of, and resist the current crisis. The interconnectedness of urban space, history, symbols, art objects, artists and the public is shown to be central to the development of the unique and



meaningful counter-institutional art scene. By expanding on Gell's (1998) analysis of the social context of art, I explore the way the socio-political, spatial and temporal context of art in Athens actively influences its form, meaning and function. At the same time the creativity and agency of artists is highlighted through their capacity to actively manipulate and engage with their urban and socio-political environment. Ultimately, through the voices of those involved, this thesis portrays the complexity and dynamism of a radical, experimental and heterogeneous art scene during a time of crisis.

## **Thesis Declaration**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Art and Crisis

This thesis explores the emergence of a vibrant, complex and largely anti-institutional art scene in Athens, within the context of the Greek economic crisis. Specifically, I examine the way that artists have attempted to overcome the lack of institutional support and scarce funding by engaging with the urban environment in the production and presentation of their work. Importantly, this has also been accompanied by an increase in experimentation with different means of self-organisation and group collectivity in order to protect the burgeoning scene from what many see as impending institutional exploitation and gentrification.

As is common in Greece, many of my discussions with artists occurred over coffee, beer, ouzo or *tsipouro* (strong distilled spirit) and included *meze* (small sharing dishes). On one such occasion I was invited to meet street artist Alone 98 at a tavern in the outskirts of Gazi; a formerly industrial area converted into a hub of Athenian nightlife. The walk from the metro station to the tavern was characteristic of many central Athenian neighbourhoods. The narrow streets and crumbling pedestrian walkways were lined with multi-story concrete apartment blocks and deteriorated neo-classical houses. The walls were covered with posters, graffiti and street art, eerily illuminated by the orange glow of the street lamps.

I approached the tavern and glanced through the window to see Alone 98 sitting at a small table. He called me in whilst filling two shot glasses with chilled *tsipouro*. I sat down opposite him and we both reached for our glasses. He held his glass up off the table and said “*geia mas*” (to our health) and we took the drink down. That evening our discussion covered an array of topics concerning street art in Athens. During the extended conversation, he eloquently summarised the profound connection between the three key topics I was investigating; the city, the crisis and art:

The wall always gives you the means to express yourself freely. The problems that we deal with in Greece over the last years are numerous, the people don't have food to eat, people commit suicide every day, unemployment has reached a high level and left the young people frustrated, homelessness is increasing, all of this and more, is food for artistic expression.

In this statement, Alone 98 suggested that city walls have afforded artists the opportunity to artistically express themselves within the politicised context of the crisis. Unlike traditional art spaces which are controlled by curators and gallery directors, urban space allows artists to instantaneously respond to unfolding socio-political events whilst still having their work reach a critical mass of people. Alone 98 also highlighted that the social suffering associated with the crisis has been an impetus for creative expression. The connection between art and urban space, and the potential for times of crisis to be culturally productive, emerged as central themes of this dissertation which explores the contemporary art scene in Athens during a precarious temporal moment.

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 it became apparent that Greece's fragile economy would not recover. The financial crisis brought to light the "macroeconomic imbalances and structural weaknesses of the Greek economy", which since the adoption of the Euro currency had been running on "excessive budget deficits" (Kouretas & Vlamis, 2010, p. 3). In 2009 the newly elected prime minister Georgios Papandreou officially announced that Greece had entered into an economic crisis (Kyriakopoulos, 2001). The country's debt had become unmanageable and by 2010 it was clear that without fiscal interventions Greece would have to default on its debts. The severe austerity and structural readjustment policies implemented in Greece ushered in a period of social suffering. This was amplified by the outbreak of the Syrian war and other catastrophic events leading to a refugee crisis the country was not equipped to effectively handle (Green, 2018). Media images of crisis, social breakdown and violent protest such as those in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 (taken



during anti-austerity protests out the front of parliament in 2015) have become synonymous with Greece's often turbulent capital city.



*Figure 1.1 Anti-austerity protest, Syntagma, Athens 2015*



*Figure 1.2 Riot squad in a cloud of tear gas, Syntagma, Athens 2015*

Developing parallel to this has been what many are heralding a contemporary art renaissance. This renaissance has not taken place in traditional art institutions, but instead has flourished amongst the everyday public spaces of urban life. The country's crippling economic crisis has

instigated a radical decline in state funding of contemporary art. Despite this, the tumultuous social and political climate has driven artists to increasingly explore unique ways of art production, presentation and self-organisation. Artists engage the city streets, public spaces and abandoned buildings as their canvases, stages and collaborators. The lack of access to funding and institutional backing has also led artists to experiment with diverse methods of self-governance and community building. This includes practises associated with direct democracy, open-assemblies, squatting and social collectives.

Zoe, a member of Depression Era (an Athens based artist collective) explained how the crisis had worked to bring people together:

Before the crisis it wasn't that united, one artist didn't follow what the other did. There was less, and one person didn't look at the work of another, you didn't see people to be so activated.

She, like many of my interlocutors understood that the stringent conditions of the crisis had created a greater need for artists to collaborate in mutually beneficial ways. Although it is critical not to underestimate the aspects of art that have been negatively impacted by the crisis, many artists felt that it had changed and even enhanced their practise. On this note, Skitsofrenis, a well-known street artist commented:

Here in Greece we don't have a crisis, we have a decay. The economic crisis that came from abroad has just sped up the procedure. Now the artists need to show that they are not part of the rotten body and try to create to stall this. Some artists indeed have changed their approach to things, mine has been enhanced.

In Greece, the crisis is often interpreted and framed through historical experiences of suffering such as famine and foreign occupations (Herzfeld, 1985; Knight, 2012, 2015). As will be further discussed throughout the dissertation, social memories of these events have generated a general

distrust of political authority and financial institutions (both national and international). Amongst many artists, this has translated into a suspicion of the actions and motives of the institutional art world. The contemporary Athens art scene has largely developed in negation of art institutions, through artists' radical engagement with public space, the occupation and squatting of derelict buildings, and the prominence of art forms such as street art and graffiti.

Ironically, these aspects of the art scene are what have attracted the interest of major international art institutions. During my time in the field there was intense debate surrounding the presence of the institutionalised art world in the fiercely democratic and subversive art scene of Athens. Although artists understood the importance of state and institutional support, fears of exploitation, exotification and gentrification rose to the forefront of debate as they attempted to navigate the complexities of the crisis. Within this highly politicised art world, Athens has witnessed an increase in art tourism, not only interested in galleries and museums, but also anarchist neighbourhoods, squats, self-organised spaces and the unique display of street art throughout the city. Within this dissertation I will explore the trials and triumphs of artists who constitute the creative, vibrant, experimental and counter-institutional art scene of Athens.

### **1.1 Thesis Focus: Athens is the New Athens**

This work is based upon a year of ethnographic research between July 2015 and July 2016, with two short follow-up visits in July 2017 and February 2019. Research included participant observation and interviews with a range of street artists, performance artists, curators, gallery owners and other individuals and groups involved in the art scene. To supplement this, regular participation in the art scene and attendance at art events was also used to contextualise the data obtained from participants. This project is not just a study of art, but a study of art within the city. Therefore, research also focused on documenting the influence of the urban context on everyday life through keeping daily field notes, photos and videos. Qualitative research

was used to uncover the central elements that comprise the art scene by investigating the relationship between artists, artworks and their spatial, historical and socio-political context.

Moreover, I examine how the economic crisis has instigated a divergence from traditional art spaces, institutions and organisations, to the more democratic urban spaces of the city. The predominant focus is on street art and graffiti, as well as performance art that makes use of public and/or neglected urban spaces. I also explore artists' experimentation with methods of self-organisation and democratic practices in their efforts to traverse the uncertainty and struggles associated with harsh austerity, unemployment, lack of resources and an ambiguous future. During my fieldwork, I discovered that feelings of uncertainty were amplified by the increased interest and involvement of international art institutions within Athens. Although this provided artists with potential opportunities for funding and international recognition, it also roused suspicions of neo-colonialism and the exploitation of Greek suffering.

Ethnographic research is used to highlight the extent to which times of crisis and uncertainty can be an impetus for urban renewal and increased cultural production in a way that avoids over-fetishising social suffering. On this issue, a well-known graffiti artist told me that he and his peers had begun avoiding interviews because their words would often be manipulated to adhere to the crisis discourse perpetuated by the mass media. This was a common critique participants had of media representations of the Athens art scene, particularly in the work of international commentators. Portrayals of crisis often run the risk of undermining the everyday struggles of those who endure the difficulties and radical changes imposed by years of political mismanagement, corruption and imposed austerity. To overcome this potential restraint, I use the artists words and ideas to guide the examination of the diverse components that have allowed the vibrant and radical counter-institutional art scene to develop as it has. By highlighting the beliefs and perspectives of artists, as well as the specific spatial, historical

and socio-political context in which their work exists, this thesis paints a picture of a burgeoning art scene in a time of uncertainty and struggle.

Fieldwork was situated within a period where discussions regarding the shifting roles of organisation, funding and institutions in the maintenance of a sustainable art scene had risen to the epicentre of discourse. This unfolded as Documenta 14 (one of the world's most significant contemporary art exhibitions) announced that for the first time since its conception in 1955, it would leave its home in Kassel, Germany and be hosted concurrently in Athens and Kassel. The title of Documenta 14 was *Learning from Athens*, but as events transpired Athenian locals began to speculate whether Documenta's real intention was to exploit Athens rather than learn from it. The political nature of the art scene was linked to wider anxieties associated with the crisis, such as the imposition of austerity and social reforms by external foreign institutions. This raised questions regarding the sovereignty of the Greek state and for many reiterated its perceived client status to European powers (Beaton, 2009). In the same way, the art scene had become increasingly wary of the true intentions of both foreign and national institutions, and often met them with fierce resistance.

Throughout the dissertation I elucidate the development of the contemporary art scene in Athens through analysis of the complex social, spatial, symbolic and historical networks of which it is comprised. These networks are skilfully mediated by artists who utilise the urban context to create powerful works full of symbolic meaning and the capacity to influence the social flows of city life. The city itself is explored as an agent construct of agencies, a locus of symbolic meaning and social affectivity that influences the forms and meanings of art in profound ways. Through the examination of urban space and its historically invested symbolic meanings, the city emerges as a key player in the formation of the vibrant art scene. This, along with the resilience and creativity of artists, and their sensitivity to the complexities of urban life has crafted an art world distinctive to the spatial, temporal and social context of Athens.

Many have heralded Athens as the new Berlin and the next locus of European contemporary art. The comparison made between the two cities is based upon the alternative art scene that emerged during the 1990s in Berlin after the fall of the wall. The socio-political turmoil from which the Berlin scene stemmed shares synchronicities with the current art scene developing in Athens within the crisis. However, through careful analysis it becomes clear that Athens should not be considered as the new Berlin but rather “Athens is” as one street artist commented “the new Athens”. Although the two art scenes certainly share similarities, reducing Athens to being the new Berlin is to diminish the unique agency of the city and its inhabitants. Doing so obscures artists’ distinct voices at a critical time where international meddling in politics and finance are also considered to be restricting state and individual sovereignty (Herzfeld, 2011; Knight, 2012; Theodossopoulos, 2013). Figure 1.3 depicts a work by popular Greek street artist Cacao Rocks which satirises the common comparison between Athens and Berlin.



Figure 1.3 'Berlin is the New Athens', street art by Cacao Rocks

Out of respect to the creativity and resilience of my informants, I make efforts to avoid reducing artists to docile subjects of structure. However, the urban context is also considered to be much more than simply a passive canvas upon which artists create. To achieve this balance, the agency and voices of informants remain paramount to the content of this thesis. At the same time, a level of affective agency is attributed to the art, objects, spaces and symbols which constitute the material world, to highlight the profound influence Athens as a city has had on artists and the reception of artworks. In the following section, I develop a theoretical framework to achieve this analytical balance.

## **1.2 Theorising Art and the Urban Experience**

A significant challenge in urban anthropology is effectively dealing with the theoretical and methodological difficulties concerned with maintaining balance between in-depth analysis of the agency and creativity of individuals, and the holistic socio-political, historical context in which social action is framed (Parry, 2012). By bridging the gap between four broad theoretical frameworks I intend to overcome this potential pitfall in my analysis of the Athens contemporary art scene. The first body of work I draw upon concerns the attribution of agency to both human and material (non-human) actors such as in *Art and Agency* (Gell, 1998) as well as the theoretical contributions of non-representational theory and affect (Deleuze, 1978; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Latour, 1987, 2005; Law, 1992; Thrift, 2008). Agent centred approaches emphasise the central role that networks comprised of material objects, spaces and people play in shaping both an art scene and urban life more generally. It also helps avoid the shortcomings of approaches that reduce complex agencies to passive non-entities at the complete mercy of structure.

The second approach builds upon the semiotics of Peirce (1902) and Saussure (1959) to highlight the processes of encoding and decoding symbolic meanings within and around artworks (Barthes, 1977; Bourdieu,

2000; Hall, 1980). Symbolic analysis is not only applied to analysing artworks but also extends to include the way art interacts with urban spaces and history to create meaning. Building on the work of Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1988), spatial theory is used to decipher relations of power and resistance, and reaffirm the centrality of urban space in the production and presentation of art. Finally, the theoretical framework makes use of anthropological and philosophical contributions to temporality and memory as a means of emphasizing the role historical processes play in influencing social action and interpretations of the present (Appadurai, 1981; Fabian, 2002; Gell, 1992; Knight, 2012, 2015).

### **1.3 Expanding Upon Art and Agency: Networks of Human and Material Agencies**

Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998) is a profoundly influential work and has become a seminal text for anthropologists dealing with art (Bowden, 2004). Gell takes on the task of mapping an anthropological theory of art which foregrounds the social function of art objects through the exploration of the social context of art production, circulation and reception. Gell (1998) moves beyond the definition of art objects as passive sign vehicles containing meaning, or objects intended to provoke culturally specific aesthetic responses; to an understanding of art objects as agents entwined in wider social processes. As identified by Bowden (2004, pp. 309-310) in his critique of *Art and Agency*, Gell begins the text with "a frontal attack on existing 'anthropological' studies of art". This attack is developed around the call for anthropologists to abandon aesthetic and semiotic analyses concerned with examining the culturally mediated meanings encoded into works of art. Gell considers these approaches to the study of art as subjective value judgments on behalf of the analysts. He claims that aesthetics and symbolism should be dealt with by art historians and critics, not anthropologists (Gell, 1998).

In place of anthropological approaches where art objects are analysed as "ones with aesthetic and/or semantic attributes (but in most cases both),



that are used for presentational purposes”, Gell proposes an action centred approach (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, p. 12). He views art as something that is able to influence the world rather than as a passive text which makes symbolic propositions about it (Gell, 1998, p. 6). He characterises his broad position by stating that an anthropology of art should be the study of the “social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency” (Gell, 1998, p. 7). A crucial aspect of Gell’s (1998) theory is the attribution of agency to art objects, meaning that the ‘other’ in a social relationship does not have to be a person, as agency can be expressed relative to things and by things. Before expanding Gell’s notions of material agency I will explore the concept within broader theoretical contexts to highlight the benefits of including material agency into the scope of analysis.

To adequately explore the art scene in Athens it is paramount to have an analytical sensitivity to the interrelation of artworks and artists with their historically constituted socio-political urban contexts. Both society and social action need to be seen as relational processes rather than being reduced to object or subject form (Miller, 1987). Meaning emerges through the relational encounters between subjects (people) and the objects which comprise the world around them. When explored relationally, art is a valuable lens through which to study society, as it provides a tangible means of unpacking the complex assemblages of urban life. The theoretical move away from treating material objects and spaces as passive, to understanding them as playing an active role in the production of social relations aids in deciphering the social function of art (Morphy & Perkins, 2006). In the case of Athens, this means exploring the heterogeneous networks of diverse “not simply human” agencies in which artists and art are embedded (Law, 1992, p. 380). These networks expand through social, political, spatial and temporal domains. A relational analysis of art, agency and urban context makes it possible to avoid attributing the realm of social action purely to overarching social structures. Likewise, it also avoids isolating the dynamism of human agency and subjectivity from the complexity of its spatial and temporal environment.

The first step toward achieving this relational analysis requires the attribution of agential potentialities to both human and material (non-human) actors. Material agencies could potentially include artworks, objects, buildings, symbols and spaces. In its simplest form agency can be considered as the capacity to act (Knappett, 2008). Giddens (1979, p. 55) described agency as “a continuous flow of conduct... a stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world”. Through this definition, it is clear that agency can be unproblematically attributed to humans as corporal beings whose interventions affect the ongoing process of life. However, as has been well documented in studies of material culture, objects are active participants in the reproduction of social relations (Latour, 2005; Miller, 1987, 2005; Morphy & Perkins, 2006; Thrift, 2008). Thus, the study of human society should not be detached from its material manifestations, but considered through the relational process that exists between objects and human action (Glassie, 1999; Miller, 1987).

A significant, albeit radical approach to examining this relational process is Latour’s (1987, 1992, 2005) Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT is built upon the premise that society should not be seen through the dualism of subjects and objects (Nimmo, 2011). Rather, ANT is a theory of agency that explores society, structure, organisation and power through the heterogeneous networks of social relations which comprise everyday life; networks comprised of human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992). Objects, tools, technologies, texts, architectures and institutions all qualify as non-human agencies from an ANT perspective (Farías, 2011; Law, 1992; Nimmo, 2011). It suggests that human social relations should not be seen in isolation, but rather as emerging out of a synthesis with these other diverse agencies. Law (1992, p. 384) raises the question of agency to make a case for the treatment of non-humans as active participants in the social domain:

Is an agent an agent primarily because he or she inhabits a body that carries knowledges, skills, values, and all the rest? Or is an agent an agent because he or she inhabits a set of elements (including, of course, a body) that stretches out into the network of materials somatic and otherwise, that surrounds each body?

ANT proposes that there should be no distinction drawn between the capacity of humans and objects to act; instead they should be considered as nodes in networks of action. Latour (1992, p. 160) justifies the need to equally attribute agency to humans and non-humans by asking:

Are they not our brethren? Do they not deserve consideration? With your self-serving and self-righteous social studies of technology, you always plead against machines and for de-skilled workers - are you aware of your discriminatory biases? You discriminate between the human and the inhuman. I do not hold this bias (this one at least) and see only actors-some human, some non-human, some skilled, some unskilled - that exchange their properties.

The equal distribution of agency as a means of overcoming the subject/object dualism has subjected ANT to significant critiques as documented by Sayes (2014). Significantly, the attribution of human interest, purpose, intentionality and life to non-human objects without distinction is considered to overstate the agential capacity of the material world (Amsterdamska, 1990; Schaffer, 1991).

Other agent centred approaches are less radical than ANT, whilst still allowing for the “dissolution of our ‘commonsense’ dualism in which objects and subjects are viewed as separate” (Miller, 2005, p. 14). To avoid overstating material agency whilst still overcoming subject/object dualism, it is important to acknowledge that will and intentionality should not be attributed to non-humans in the same way as it is to humans. Gell’s (1998) approach is able to provide the crucial sensitivity to the social networks

formed by human and material agencies, whilst limiting the intentionality of non-humans.

Gell describes an agent as “one who ‘causes events to happen’ in their vicinity”, even if the result of such events are not what the agent anticipated (1998, p. 16). He differentiates between ‘happenings’ which occur as the result of the physical laws of the universe, and the ‘actions’ of agents, where the agent is the source of causal events (Gell, 1998, p. 16). He is clear about distinguishing the intentionality of human agency from the agency expressed by things and art objects. On this, Gell states “art objects are not ‘self-sufficient’ agents, but only ‘secondary’ agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates” (1998, p. 17). Artefacts possess a second-class agency, but once they are enmeshed in social relations should be theoretically treated as agents (Gell, 1998). Gell’s concept of agency is relational and dependent on context. He argues against classificatory approaches that state something definitively is or is not an agent. Rather he considers things as potential agents with respects to those upon whom they exert an influence (Gell, 1998). As will be discussed shortly, Gell develops his idea of agency through the establishment of what he calls the ‘art nexus’. Before moving on to a discussion of Gell’s (1998) art nexus, I will explore the concept of affect as a means of further analysing material agency.

Affect describes the ephemeral and seemingly idiosyncratic aspects of social life with a foregrounding of the sensuous life over culture and subjectivity (Mazzarella, 2009). It is the “aleatory dynamics of experience, the ‘push’ of life which interrupts, unsettles and haunts persons, places or things” (Anderson & Harrison, 2016, p. 16). Building upon Spinoza’s Ethics (1677/1996), Deleuze (1978) differentiates between affect (what Spinoza called *affectus*) and affection (what Spinoza called *affectio*). Affect (*affectus*) refers to the continuous variation of the power to act corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another, implying an amplification or reduction in the body’s capacity for action (Deleuze, 1978). Affection (*affectio*) is the state of an affected body as it is subject to the

actions of another affecting body (Massumi, 1987). To explain an affection, Deleuze uses the simple example of a ray of sunlight falling upon a body. The affection is not the sun, but the action or effect of the sun on the body (Deleuze, 1978). It is the mixture of two bodies, one acting upon the other, and the other receiving a trace of the affecting body. According to Spinoza, affection says much more about the affected body than it does the affecting body (Deleuze, 1978). Despite Spinoza's references to individual bodies, affects occur in encounters between multiple actors, with the outcome of each encounter dependent on the compositions they enter into (Thrift, 2008).

Although affect and emotion can seem relatable, the two are distinct. I draw on Massumi (1995, p. 88) to define emotion as:

Subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.

Unlike emotion, affect is not the result of interpretive symbolic, linguistic and cultural mediations, rather it is non-discursive and non-semiotic (Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Affect is a felt bodily intensity that may move through human bodies, but does not necessarily emerge from them, rather it operates from the exterior (Deleuze, 1978; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). The fact that emotions also often emerge from external stimuli can be the cause of conceptual confusion regarding the boundaries between affect and emotion (Thrift, 2008). On this point, Thrift (2008) argues that emotions are culturally mediated understandings of affects, which come with their own vocabulary and means of relating to each other. He continues on to explain affects as the property of a particular space soaked in one or a combination of affects which change the properties of the atmosphere (Thrift, 2008). Thus, affect explores the way humans are linked to their material environments allowing

for the atmosphere of a space and time to be understood as an aspect of the social experience.

Affect is a troublesome concept to quantify linguistically due to the limited means through which we can describe felt intensities and atmospheres which act from without the conscious mind (Simpson, 2010). As a result, the experience of affect is subject to being discussed in culturally mediated terms related to emotion. Despite this potential limitation, affect is a useful lens through which the influence of material agencies can be explored without having to attribute total intentionality and will to them. Through affect, material objects, artworks and urban spaces can be considered to exert atmospheric charges which are embodied and experienced by those who come into contact with them. Throughout this dissertation, affect is used to investigate the influence that the urban context of art has over the way it is created and received by the public. To conclude the discussion around agency I will return to Gell's (1998) art nexus as a means of establishing the extent to which art objects actively function within networks of social relations.

Unlike other non-representational theories such as Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and affect (Deleuze, 1978), Gell is not concerned with producing a total philosophical definition of agency. Instead, he concerns himself with what he calls agent/patient relationships within the "fleeting contexts and predicaments of social life" (Gell, 1998, p. 22). Through agent/patient relations, art and other material objects become vessels of agency. Agents act with respect to a patient who is the object/person causally affected by the agent's action. A patient is a potential locus of agency, even if they are temporarily in the patient position. To elucidate this idea, Gell uses the example of a car breaking down whilst driving in the middle of the night. During the breakdown, the car exerts agency by influencing the trajectory of the driver against his will. In this instance, the driver is relegated to the role of a patient being affected by the malfunctioning car. However, if in his fury the driver decides to start shouting and kicking the car, he is transported into the agent position as the car

becomes the patient, subject to the driver's destructive rage (Gell, 1998). Patients themselves are not always passive as they might resist the agency acting upon them. Thus for Gell, agency relates to overcoming the resistance associated with a patient's derivative agency (1998).

To explain the agential capacity of art, Gell (1998) borrows the semiotic concept of abduction. An abduction is a form of semiotic inference which isn't derived from cultural conventions in the same way the literal reading of symbols and signs are (Layton, 2003). Abductions are based on ad hoc hypotheses derived from any specific case under consideration. They cover the grey area where semiotic inference (of meanings from signs) merge with hypothetical inferences of a non-semiotic (or not conventionally semiotic) kind (Gell, 1998). For Gell (1998), the agency of an art object is based on the way it can elicit abductive inferences in the mind of the observer.

To explain how art objects become agents through the concept of abductions, Gell (1998) uses four terms (indexes, artists, recipients, prototypes) which form what he calls the art nexus. The nexus consists of an 'index' (an artefact such as an art object) which instigates the 'receiver' (observer) to make an abduction (causal inference) regarding the intentions and abilities of the 'artist'. The nexus is further complicated by 'prototypes' which refer to the entities held by abduction to be represented by the index (usually, but not necessarily by visual resemblance) (Gell, 1998). Each slot in this matrix can either be engaged as an agent or patient in relation to the others, sometimes doing so simultaneously, or at different points in time (Chua & Elliott, 2013; Gell, 1998). This relational matrix depicted in Figure 1.4 is central to Gell's analysis of the social relationships in which an art object is enmeshed. It highlights the different potential agent/patient relationships between indexes, artists, recipients and prototypes.

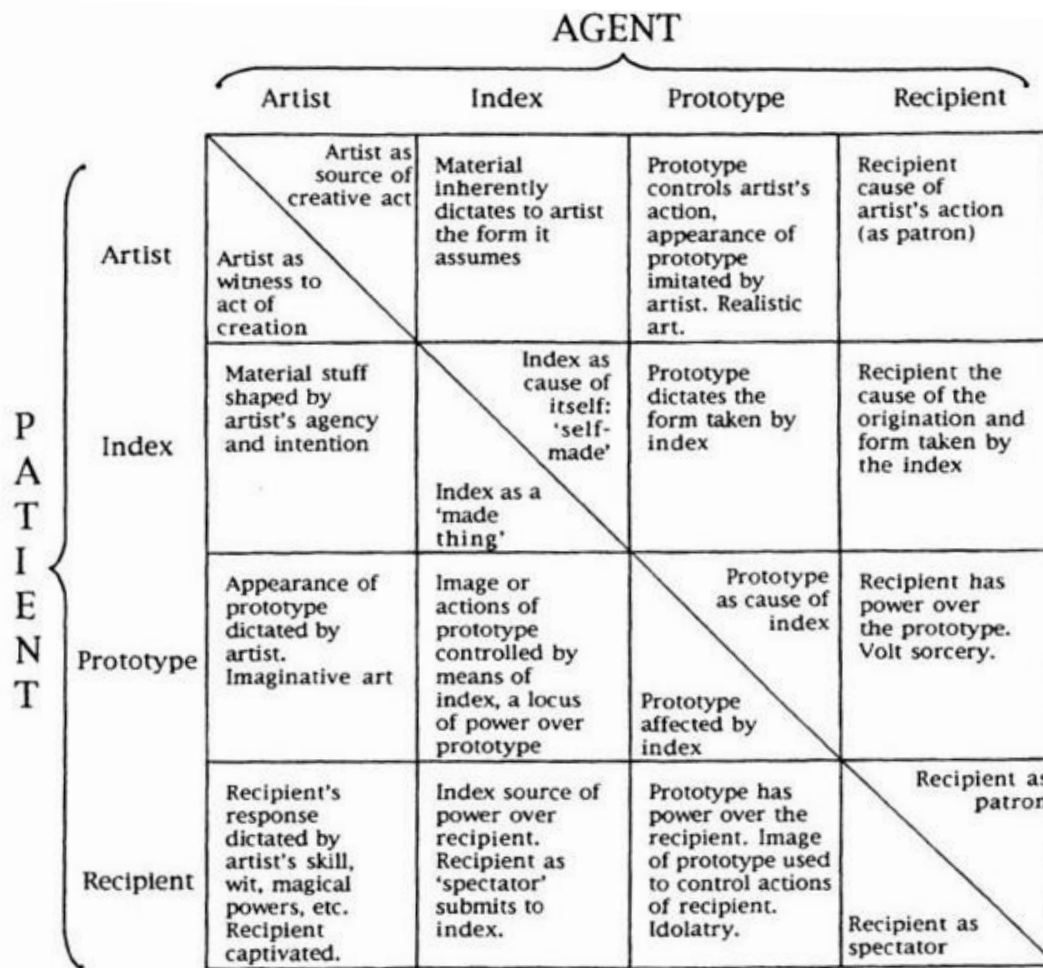


Figure 1.4 The Art Nexus (Gell, 1998, p. 29)

Gell's exploration of art's active function within networks of social relations is a useful analytical tool. I draw influence from Gell's (1998) work, as well as non-representational theories such as affect to examine the extent to which society's material manifestations possess the capacity to influence the social world (Deleuze, 1978; Miller, 2005; Thrift, 2008). These theories help illuminate the vast impact that the material, spatial and temporal composition of Athens has on artists and the social function of their work. Urban networks of material agencies profoundly influence social life, affecting how the world is experienced and navigated by human beings. Despite this, I argue that a major limitation of these theoretical approaches is their call to abandon symbolic analysis. On this Gell states that:



No reasonable person could suppose that art-like relations between people and things do not involve at least some form of semiosis; howsoever one approaches the subject there seems to be something irreducibly semiotic about art. On the other hand, I am particularly anxious to avoid the slightest imputation that (visual) art is 'like language' and that the relevant forms of semiosis are language-like (1998, p. 14).

Although acknowledging that art is symbolic, Gell remains adamant in his attempt to detach the anthropological study of art from analyses based in the semiotic linguistics of scholars such as Barthes (1968, 1977) and de Saussure (1959).

By neglecting the symbolic analysis of art, I argue that the agency of artists who creatively navigate complex symbolic systems is gravely diminished. Likewise, the key historical, political and cultural processes in which an artist and their work are embedded risk being obscured (Bowden, 2004, p. 320; Layton, 2016, p. 214). A sensitivity to art's context is particularly pressing in the analysis of the Athens art scene which has increasingly engaged with urban space. The use of the public domain in the creation and presentation of art provides artists with a wealth of visual and symbolic source material, and the capacity to communicate salient political messages to the broader public (Avramidis, 2012; Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Goldstein, 2013; Irvine, 2012; Miles, 1997; Zaimakis, 2015). As a result, the examination of art's symbolic engagement with the city, elucidates the important elements of its social function and acquisition of meaning. As Gell's (1998) theory is specifically concerned with the examination of art's social function, his choice to denounce symbolic analysis is seemingly contradictory. Morphy (2009) contends that Gell's rejection of symbolic analysis ultimately conceals a vital means through which artworks become indices of agency. In the following section, I highlight how symbols can themselves become vessels through which art and the material world express social agency.

## 1.4 Symbols as Mediums of Agency: Acting Through Zones of Distortion

Symbolic analysis attempts to understand a system of signs of any form whether they be “images, gestures, musical sounds, objects” or “the complex associations of all of these” (Barthes, 1977, p. 9). Semiotic anthropology stems largely from the works of Peirce (1902) and de Saussure (1959). De Saussure viewed linguistic signs as dual entities, the signifier (sound, expression, word or image) and the signified (the concept or meaning represented) (de Saussure, 1959; Linda & Kolomyeytsev, 2014, p. 125; Parmentier, 2016, p. 5). Influenced by the work of de Saussure, Barthes (1968, p. 1) argued that:

Objects, images and patterns of behaviour can signify, and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture. Where there is a visual substance, for example, the meaning is confirmed by being duplicated in a linguistic message.

For Barthes, any system of images and objects that intend to symbolically represent a signified, cannot exist independently of language. In order to perceive what a symbol signifies is to fall back on language as “there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language” (Barthes, 1968, p. 1). It seems that this relegation of symbols to language is precisely what Gell (1998) attempted to avoid by removing symbolic analysis from his agent based approach to art. I argue that this schism between symbolism and non-representational agent based theories is not irreconcilable. By exploring the insights of symbolic anthropology, I will indicate that symbols can act representationally (Barthes, 1968), as well as express agency (Morphy, 2009). To elucidate the latter, I draw upon the notion of distortion (Hall, 1980) and affect (Deleuze, 1978) to specify how symbols can act viscerally in ways that often fall outside of intended signifier and signified relationships.

De Saussure's (1959) signifier and signified dualism inhibits the capacity to account for the more complex and multifaceted nature of symbols. To overcome this, Peirce (1902) established a triadic theory based around three key terms; sign, object and interpretant. A sign is something that "endeavours to represent... an object" (Peirce in Parmentier, 2016, p. 4). As a result, the sign is determined by the object as the object is the cause "of the sign even if the sign represents its object falsely" (Peirce in Parmentier, 2016, p. 4). Here Peirce arrives at a dualistic conceptualisation of symbolism, similar to the signifier (sign) and signified (object) proposed by Saussure. It is at this point that Peirce introduces a third concept which he calls the interpretant. The interpretant refers to the arrived at understanding of the relationship between the sign and the object. For a sign to represent an object means that it affects a mind by determining within that mind, something which is due to the object but immediately caused by the sign. Peirce explains "that determination of which the immediate cause, or determinant, is the sign, and of which the mediate cause is the object may be termed interpretant" (Peirce in Parmentier, 2016, p. 4). For Peirce the signifier (sign) and signified (object) function symbolically through being decoded by an interpretant (Parmentier, 2016). It is between the triadic relationship of sign, object and interpretant that I argue symbols can become vessels of agency that affect the social world.

To demonstrate how art expresses agency through the function of symbols, I build upon Hall's (1980) idea of distortion. In his examination of media messages, Hall indicates that preferred meanings encoded into messages, can often become obscured due to distortions, misunderstandings and oppositional readings through the process of being decoded by an interpretant/receiver. Distortion can be the result of any number of unintended influences such as the different personal experiences of the creator and recipient, and as I argue, the urban context surrounding a work of art (Hall, 1980). Distortions between an artist's encoding of symbolic propositions into their work, and its subsequent decoding by observers relates to the 'abductions' or 'causal inferences' made by 'observers' in Gell's (1998) analysis. However, the interpretation or abduction made by

the observer should not be considered devoid of factors such as their cultural background, experiences, beliefs and social status (Morphy, 2009). The agency of art does not act in isolation of such factors, but in relation and response to them.

The previously discussed concept of affect allows for the analysis of the distortion that occurs between processes of encoding and decoding symbolic meaning. Through distortion, human intentions are altered, and symbolic meanings skewed, allowing artwork to take on an active agential role in social relations. Although a powerful analytical tool, the idea that affect acts only in pre-cognitive, pre-subjective, visceral, non-discursive ways, should be carefully assessed (Mazzarella, 2009). In particular, when observing art, a person's subjective relation to the complex social webs and symbolic systems surrounding the work can elicit responses which fall outside of the artist's symbolic intention.

At the same time, it is important to accept that responses to a work can often be visceral and seemingly irrational. They can be pre-discursive and pre-cognitive in that a viewer of art can have an emotive and embodied response before having the opportunity to consciously rationalise the piece. This point is particularly salient when dealing with street art as often, passers-by do not spend time interpreting works as they might have if they were viewing them in a gallery. Therefore, the response of those walking past graffiti whilst undergoing their daily tasks is often influenced more by the affective ambience of the work and its urban context, rather than its symbolic content.

The affective nature of urban art was made apparent early on in my research. Central Athens is profoundly covered in graffiti, vandalism, stencils, posters and street art. This creates an atmosphere absorbed by locals and visitors alike, albeit often in different ways. In recalling their first impressions of the city most tourists I spoke to described having a kind of instinctual response to the immense conglomeration of urban art. One tourist who was visiting the city with a tour group explained that many of her

fellow travellers were wary about venturing out at night due to the impression that Athens was a dangerous city. When I asked her why they thought this, she explained to me that it was because of the sheer amount of graffiti.

The initial atmospheric response to street art in Athens changes as one becomes increasingly entwined in the social and material networks which form the urban-scape. Non-representational theories and the idea of affect are much more useful when not considered in isolation to the cognitive, discursive and symbolically rich elements of social life. Affective atmospheres and emotions mutate as one's position within the urban configuration alters. Likewise, when walking through the city people oscillate between semiotic cognitive contemplation of their environment and the affective realm of revelry and embodiment. The way street art influences and affects people is relative to their state of mind at any given moment. Art should not be considered as the product of 'one or the other' but the amalgamation of the visceral (non-discursive, emotive, irrational) and the social (symbolic, cognitive, spatial, historical). These diverse elements which constitute social life, all contribute to art's role and meaning within the urban paradigm. By combining symbolic and agent based perspectives it is possible to foreground human and non-human agency, without obscuring the wider socio-political and historical context in which art exists. In the following section I further elaborate on the potential for symbolic analysis to elucidate artists' resistance to the power relations and perceived social inequalities linked to the crisis (Bourdieu, 2000).

### **1.5 Symbols of Domination and Resistance**

Symbolic forms often convey messages of power and domination, making symbolic analysis a useful tool for illuminating the way these messages are resisted (Bourdieu, 2000; Cohen, 1979). According to Bourdieu (2000), symbolic forms influence the sphere of social action through the inculcation of the dominated. Generally, the nation-state is considered to make a decisive contribution towards the construction of social reality and is

therefore a key operator of symbolic forms of power and control. Through the constraints and discipline it enforces, the state exerts a permanent formation of durable dispositions on agents (Bourdieu, 2000). These permanent dispositions that structure the way people experience the world are labelled by Bourdieu as the 'habitus' and it is this that he believes give symbols their influence and power (Bourdieu, 1980, 2000).

Certain symbols ingrained into the habitus compel people to react to them in specific predetermined ways, without the agents needing to consciously calculate their response (Bourdieu, 2000). Bourdieu argues that the habitus is so deeply engrained that symbols are able to be used by the state to exert dominance, repression and control without the population being consciously aware of it. Such symbols are only effective and meaningful to those that have been predisposed to respond to them through the habitus (Bourdieu, 2000). It is because of symbols' ability to function beyond the realm of cognitive calculation that the "established order is not a problem; outside of crisis situations" and therefore "the question of legitimacy of the state does not arise" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 178). However, during times of crisis, state and institutional dominance which tends to operate covertly in most industrialised societies, begins to breakdown and become increasingly visible (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). Symbols, during times of social stress become a means through which people are able to objectify, develop, express and resist the power relations that form society. Symbols of domination can be manipulated, re-appropriated and defiled as a means of symbolic counter violence and resistance to state control (Cohen, 1979).

Throughout the crisis, the legitimacy of the Greek state has come into question with one informant stating, "Greece has been governed by proxy since the beginning" (referring to the formation of the modern Greek state after gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire). He then continued to link the imposed austerity measures and structural readjustment policies of the European Union to a long history of foreign meddling in Greek politics. Similar concerns were expressed visually on the streets of Athens through the reappropriation and desecration of symbols relating to the Greek state

and European Union by street artists. Distrust of politicians and the state have also manifested through the radicalisation of the far left and far right. In some cases, entire neighbourhoods such as Exarchia (an urban hub of anarchist and anti-establishment activity), fight both symbolically and physically to keep police and other manifestations of state power outside of their boundaries.

In Athens, street art and graffiti have become major tools of symbolic resistance and violence. One of the allures of symbolic forms of expression is that they can be highly visible and require little material backing to do so effectively. Artists manipulate symbols to create enduring signs of opposition and resistance without necessitating the need for physical force (Riches, 1986). Street artist Skitsofrenis summarised the formidable capacity of symbols as tools of protest and communication:

From a small age, I have learned to express myself with one picture instead of a thousand words. Instead of screaming in the streets or writing endless articles I chose the way of the picture, in that way everybody can understand what I'm saying, Greek or not, educated or not.

Art as a medium of symbolic resistance is particularly effective as the witnesses do not necessarily have to be those who are being challenged (Riches, 1986). Street art can be used to critique and resist larger geographically dispersed political and economic systems that artists have little physical access to. Targets of symbolic resistance in Athens often include politicians, ideologies, global financial institutions and other individuals and organisations considered as perpetrators of structural violence upon the community. Often what is being resisted is not physical violence, but experiences that are considered violating, such as everyday realities of hunger, sickness, poverty, despair, social exclusion and humiliation ushered in by years of imposed austerity (Bourgois & Schepers-Hughes, 2004; Schepers-Hughes, 1992). Symbols provide individuals and groups who cannot physically fight abstract enemies, an enduring way to

oppose the imposition of structural and everyday violence. The manipulation, re-appropriation and desecration of symbolic systems through art, highlights the agency and creativity of artists working within the crisis. Their symbolic resistance often proves to be more far reaching than physical acts of violence due in part to the capacity for images to proliferate quickly throughout the urban-scape and digital media.

Within this dissertation, symbolic analysis is conducted through the examination of artworks, their context and discursive reception. Based on ethnographic research, insights from artists, as well as the social context of art informs the application of the theoretical framework. I employ symbolic analysis not only to examine the symbolic meanings invested in art works, but also those which exist within the wider socio-political and spatial context. Throughout the dissertation I illustrate that symbols are a key means through which art actively affects the social domain. When discussing art outside of institutionalised settings, symbolic meaning (both preferred and distorted) emerges through the interface of art, the city, and the subjectivity and preconceptions of those interpreting the works. In the following section I further expand the analysis of art to include the exploration of the urban and historical contexts in which it exists. These factors play a profound role in forming the social context and function of an artwork, yet remain absent from Gell's (1998) art nexus.

## **1.6 The Centrality of Urban Space in the Athens Art Scene**

In Athens, the social meaning of art is significantly derived from the locations in which it is found. Public spaces with all their historically structured symbolic values, are central to my analysis of art. Conceptually, public space is the space of interaction outside the control of the private sphere. In the modern city, it is the site where a diverse range of individuals and groups interact, even if reluctantly, to produce common life (Harvey, 2012). Because of this, public space is imbued with meaning and controversy, making it a site of contestation and conflict (Goheen, 1998; Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). Urban artwork such as graffiti, murals, stencils and



public performances draw on the politicised nature of space and make visible the wider social strains and symbolic struggles that the crisis in Athens has brought to the forefront of everyday life. Carefully chosen spaces invest additional symbolic meaning into artworks, as artists skilfully use walls, buildings, roads and neighbourhoods as a form of a politically charged canvas (Avramidis, 2012). The placement of artwork provides a context through which meaning can be generated, allowing even senseless scribble to obtain communicative potential when placed in symbolically saturated spaces (Avramidis, 2012).

I incorporate spatial analysis to understand the profound influence Athens as a city has had in shaping the art scene, whilst also looking at the relationship formed between space and people, through the creative practices of artists. Lefebvre (1991) in *The Production of Space* considered space as a social product fundamentally linked to social reality, instead of simply considering it as a material reality. The use of urban space abounds in subtleties and is intrinsically embedded within networks of social relations (Harvey, 1989). Lefebvre (1991) developed a conceptual triad to distinguish spaces of experience, from those of abstract thought.

The first element of space in Lefebvre's triad is spatial practice, or perceived space. This refers to the spatial practices of everyday life including physical and material flows, transfers and interactions, that occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991). This first aspect of space looks at the practical uses and dynamics of physical space. The second component of the spatial triad refers to representations of space and denotes the signs, significations, codes and knowledge that allow material spatial practices to be understood, discussed and manipulated (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991). This dimension of space deals with abstraction, and power relations embedded into spatial practices. Representations of space are the perceptions and conceptions of space that use signs and codes to enable a common language of space. This is the space of "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers" (Lefebvre, 1991,

p. 38). It involves making maps, verbal and intellectually formulated devices, and hierarchies of space. Importantly Lefebvre (1991) notes that the abstract space which is shaped through schedules, maps and plans is not homogenous, even though homogenisation is its goal. This form of space is what Lefebvre considers to be the dominant space in modern societies.

Finally, representational spaces or spaces of representation are the spaces of inhabitants and users that are directly lived through associated images and symbols (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre describes representational spaces as the spaces of artists who “describe and aspire to do more than describe”, it is the space that the “imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (1991, p. 39). They are mental inversions such as codes, signs, spatial discourses, utopian plans, imaginary landscapes and material constructs such as symbolic spaces and paintings that imagine new meanings and possibilities for spatial practices (Harvey, 1989). This aspect of space deals with transcendence and the desire for new meanings and uses to be attributed to spaces. These are the lived and experienced spaces of everyday life. They are understood through the “associated images, non-verbal communication, appropriation, rituals, riots, markets and other aspects of life in the street” (Miles, 1997, p. 46).

Despite the fact that representations of space have come to dominate much of the urban experience, representational spaces have certainly not been eliminated (Miles, 1997). In the case of Athens, most street artists can be considered as making use of representational space. Through the proliferation of works created in the public domain, artists visually alter and reclaim space by subverting institutional and political representations of space. Furthermore, as a result of a politically volatile history and disrupted present, representational space is regularly evoked in Athens through activities such as protests, riots, squatting, guerrilla gardening and urban occupations (Dalakoglou & Poulimenakos, 2018; Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010; Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011; Vradis, 2012a). The spatial triad is useful in establishing an understanding of how artists use space, how

space influences art, and what the spatial dimension of art can tell us about its wider social-political, historical context.

I extend Lefebvre's spatial triad to allow space to be treated with a level of agency through its capacity to influence action within social networks. Lefebvre himself argued against the treatment of space as the "passive locus of social relations" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 11). Instead he sought to "demonstrate the active – the operational or instrumental – role of space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 11). Lefebvre describes the connection between social actions, and the influence of the space within which people live and experience:

Social space 'incorporates' social actions, the actions of subjects both individuals and collective who are born and die, who suffer and who act. From the point of view of these subjects, the behaviour of their space is at once vital and mortal: within it they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions; then they perish and that same space contains their graves (1991, pp. 33-34).

Urban space limits and influences the potential for action through physical interjections such as walls, gates, fences, pathways and traffic lights. Despite this, even the most carefully designed urban spaces can be used in ways that fall outside of the intentions of lawmakers and urban planners. As much as space might restrict action, it also enables a host of unique interactions and collaborations that can at times seem unexpected and seemingly idiosyncratic. Urban space exerts a level of agency and influence over social action, and in the case of Athens, heavily influences the process of art creation and meaning derived from artworks. As a result, space can be considered as playing a central role in the shaping of the burgeoning Athens art scene. Urban spaces and structures are characters and active participants in the social life of the city.

De Certeau states that forgotten urban structures "have character. Or, even better, they are characters on the urban stage. Secret personas... They are

actors, legendary heroes. They organise around them the city saga” (1998, p. 135). The city streets, abandoned and decayed buildings, and public squares of Athens are full of non-human characters which one of my participants called “hidden ghosts”. These phantasms are given a voice to speak through artists’ engagement with space. Many of my participants described the city as an entity. An entity which influences the meaning, form and reception of art. Street artists made constant reference to the “voice” and “screams” of walls and forgotten places. When one street artist was asked about how he chooses where to paint he described feeling as though the “walls were talking” to him. He explained that in return, through the medium of art he gave the walls a “voice to scream”. The walls of Athens become a living canvas with which artists commune to express their ideas and ideals (Avramidis, 2012). Through spatial analysis, the multiplicity of interactions between art, artists, interpretants and the urban context are rendered visible.

### **1.7 Temporality: The Political and Social Dimensions of Time**

To account for the way agency, symbols and spaces interact and generate social meaning, the final angle of analysis I employ is a temporal/ historical perspective. Through this I highlight the way art mediates the collective memory and historically rooted symbolism inherent in certain city spaces. Lefebvre’s (1991) approach to space is in fact derived from a relational concept of space and time. Space stands for simultaneity, the synchronic order of social reality, and time denotes diachronic order and thus the historic process of social production:

Space and time do not exist universally. As they are socially produced, they can only be understood in the context of a specific society. In this sense, space and time are not only relational but fundamentally historical. This calls for an analysis that would include the social constellations, power relations, and conflicts relevant in each situation (Schmid, 2008, p. 29).

Athens is a city in which one is in constant physical proximity to the past. The city centre is the home of ancient architectural marvels such as the Parthenon, neo-classical architecture built between the 1830's and 1920's, and concrete multi-story apartment buildings constructed to overcome population challenges following the World Wars (Chryssostalis, 2007; Dragonas, 2014; Economou, 2014; Katsibokis, 2013; Makas & Conley, 2009). The densely historical spaces of the city have witnessed war, revolution, starvation, poverty, homelessness, murder and oppression. These past events invest buildings, institutions and spaces with highly politicised and symbolically charged meaning. This proximity to the past makes the spaces of Athens highly politicised and symbolic. The contentious history of Athens is used by artists, politicians and other groups to justify, legitimise and give meaning to their actions in the present.

In *Time and the Other* (1983, p. 24), Fabian highlights how crucial it is for time to be included into social analysis, stating that:

Whether one chooses to stress “diachronic” or “synchronic,” historical or systematic approaches, they all are *chronic*, unthinkable without reference to Time. Once Time is recognized as a dimension, not just a measure, of human activity, any attempt to eliminate it from interpretive discourse can only result in distorted and largely meaningless representations.

In Athens, it is clear that “time and space are integral to each other... the two commingle in various ways” and “cannot be disentangled” (Munn, 1992, p. 94). As is the case for space, time is not simply a natural resource, but can function as a socially constituted instrument of power. Although Fabian (1983) acknowledges that the analysis of space as a social construct has overshadowed that of time, control over time remains a significant medium through which power and governance are exercised (Munn, 1992). Control over time implies control over the bodies and actions of social beings; achieved through coordinating the time of persons with the temporal values embedded into the ‘world time’ of overarching power structures (Munn,

1992). Throughout the crisis, control of time has emerged as a critical zone of domination and resistance.

Much of the discourse espoused by Western media has blamed the Greek crisis on the stereotype of the corrupt, lazy and disobedient Greek (Herzfeld, 2016; Tsakalakis, 2016). Although statistical studies conducted by the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* indicate that Greece has the longest formal working hours in Europe, the stereotype prevails and is supported by images of Greeks enjoying themselves at crowded cafes, bars and nightclubs (Herzfeld, 2016, p. 11; Knight, 2015). Greek social life is perceived as wasteful of both time and money by north-western European politicians, institutions and media, who consider it inappropriate and economically unviable behaviour within the context of a financial crisis (Knight, 2015). What this stereotype fails to recognise is that social time is central to Greek life. In Knight's (2015) ethnographic study in Trikala (Central Greece), participants explained to him that having coffee and beers with friends is a fundamental element of Greek culture that most outsiders fail to understand. One of his participants described European backed austerity as an assault not only on the Greek economy, but on Greek culture itself (Knight, 2015). This sentiment was shared by many of my informants who often expressed indignation at the institutional attempt to change "Greek time" into "German time".

The maintenance of social time can be considered as a form of resistance to the declining economic conditions in the country (Knight, 2015). In the context of the crisis, outings with friends serve as a way to cope with stress, and function as a political statement, highlighting that people have not been socially broken by austerity (Knight, 2015). One of Knight's participants explained that the 'Germans' didn't know "how much I spend on a night out. Usually I only have two beers. My ex-girlfriend used to make one vodka-and-coke last all night" (Knight, 2015, p. 128). This tactic was reproduced through many of my experiences in Athens, with one participant explaining how "where (in the past) someone would have had five or six drinks on a night out, now they just make one last".

Perceptions surrounding 'Greek time' can be conceptualised through Fabian's (1983) ideas of typological time and the schizogenic use of time, which both work to differentiate between privileged time frames and that of a less-developed 'other'. Typological time is a temporal understanding that "indulges in grand-scale periodizing" but has "no taste for petty chronologizing" (Fabian, 1983, p. 23). As opposed to being measured chronologically, typological time is measured through socio-culturally significant events and the intervals between them. It is the basis of qualifications such as peasant/industrial, preliterate/literate and rural/urban (Fabian, 1983). This kind of time is devoid of vectoral readings and instead of being a measure of movement, can better be conceived as a quality of states (Fabian, 1983). Such states can inform stereotypical views of the Greek mentality and sense of social time as being too relaxed and lazy, lagging behind the advanced temporal sensibilities of their more 'productive' European neighbours. These processes of temporal differentiation are what Fabian (1983) refers to as schizogenic uses of time, which are ultimately capable of justifying colonial domination.

Fabian's work pertains specifically to the neo-colonial implications of anthropological discourse which historically tended to relegate the 'exotic' ethnographic 'other' to a temporally distant state (1983). He describes this process as the "systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (Fabian, 1983, p. 31). Through a similar process of temporal distancing, discourse structured around the stereotype of the lazy undisciplined Greek has been used as justification for European imposed austerity and structural readjustment policies (Herzfeld, 2016; Knight, 2015). This has provoked fears of foreign exploitation and neo-colonialism within Greek society. Amongst artists, this has manifested in the widespread suspicion of major European art institutions who are perceived as exploiting the crisis through the relegation of Athenian artists to the passive category of an 'exotic' other.

During my time in Athens, I witnessed the resistance to 'European' and 'neoliberal institutional' time take overtly political forms such as the ongoing resistance to Sunday trading hours. In 2017, on a busy Sunday at the peak of the summer tourist season, protesters formed human chains preventing potential customers entering shops. These protests turned violent through the vandalism of shopfronts and clashes with police. The phrase "*Never on a Sunday*" referencing a culturally significant 1960's Greek film, has widely been adopted as a slogan for this cause, and can often be found sprayed on the walls of the central shopping district on Ermou street. The political and social nature of time is further evident through the analysis of historically rooted collective memory as a site of resistance and contestation.

The use of history in interpreting present events raises issues regarding temporal continuity and discontinuity between different eras (Munn, 1992). Instead of being nodes on a linear continuum, past events can be superimposed onto the experience of an unfolding present (Gell, 1992). One significant line of enquiry concerns the way historical and mythical pasts are used to interpret the present (Munn, 1992). This has been widely explored through anthropological studies in the field of collective memory (Appadurai, 1981; Climo & Cattell, 2002; Drinot, 2009; French, 2012; Friedman, 1992; Herzfeld, 1986; Knight, 2015; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Levy, 2011; Roudometof, 2002). These studies examine the ways in which shared memories of past events are manipulated and narrated in the present context (French, 2012). For example, Knight (2015) ethnographically examines how throughout the Greek economic crisis, events such as the famine of 1941-43 are experienced as facets of the present day. Meaningful instances are created where multiple historical moments are superimposed, making chronologically separated events culturally proximate (Knight, 2015).

There is a limit to how malleable the past can be as an interpretive resource because "not any fiction can pass for history" (Trouillot, 2015, p. 29). The production of historically based narratives is linked to power and informed by facts and sources. Despite how menial or grand these narratives might



be, the facts they are constructed around are never meaningless. Yet, these facts are not all equal, some occurrences are recorded immediately, others are not; others leave physical markers “buildings, dead bodies, consensus, monuments, diaries, political boundaries” (Trouillot, 2015, p. 29). The material and recorded elements of history limit the range, significance and legitimacy of historical narratives. History is linked to bodies, spaces and artefacts; the more material mass that remains, the more history lingers in the present (Trouillot, 2015).

In *The Past as a Scarce Resource* (1981), Appadurai defines a cultural framework which limits potential interpretations of the past. Appadurai (1981) considers four constraints that influence the extent to which a substantive historical claim can be made. The first of these referred to as *authority*, requires a level of cultural consensus on the kinds of sources, origins, and guarantors required for a claim to be credible. The second, called *continuity* requires an agreement on the linkage of a proposed past to a source of authority such that it meets minimal credibility. The third element is *depth* which involves a cultural consensus on the relevant time-depth values in the mutual evaluation of a society’s past. The final is *interdependence* which demonstrates how closely a past must be interdependent with other pasts to ensure minimal credibility (Appadurai, 1981). The construction of viable pasts means that they are shared. However, these shared pasts are able to be interpreted in multiple divergent ways by different social groups. The manifold interpretations of past events as expounded by distinct groups exist in a fragile relationship to one another (Appadurai, 1981).

Throughout the dissertation, I indicate that present interpretations of the Greek crisis are composed of multiple temporally disparate events and memories that are assembled into a recognisable present (Knight, 2015). The crisis and the associated perceptions of social breakdown have instigated a profound turn to the past to help make sense of the harsh realities of everyday life. Many Greeks experience the crisis as a form of neo-colonisation by the Western Powers. In particular the current austerity

measures have seen the likes of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble emerge as major antagonists. George, a 36-year-old Athenian local explained that he believed “through economics the Germans have done what they couldn’t achieve in the Second World War”. Memories of the German occupation are often connected to hunger caused by the Nazi seizure of food (Herzfeld, 1985; Knight, 2015). The modern ‘German’ imposed austerity affords itself to being associated with these past memories and experiences of deprivation. Such readings of historical events become a powerful means through which artists and social groups are able to understand the present and both justify and legitimise their actions, whilst resisting those of others (Herzfeld, 1997b).

These shared pasts are reassembled in a host of different ways by social and ideological groups in Greece (Appadurai, 1981). Throughout the crisis, Greece has seen the rise of far right Nationalist groups such as Golden Dawn who use the notion of a glorious historical past tarnished by foreign intervention to justify their actions (cf. Connor, 1989). The crisis has also further mobilized far left antiestablishment and anarchist groups who draw upon histories of oppression and revolution to frame their struggles. A significant example of this is the 1973 student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic which instigated the chain of events that eventually toppled the country’s military dictatorship. The Polytechnic and surrounding neighbourhood Exarchia have since remained symbolic sites of resistance to both the state, nationalism and neo-liberal ideologies.

Outside of the extreme ends of the political spectrum, there is an ongoing and complex use of culturally significant events to understand the rapid social change and struggles linked to the crisis. Historical events are pieced together and reconfigured within the parameters set by ideological, cultural, personal and collective experiences (Appadurai, 1981). This is clearly visible through works of urban art, as will be specifically explored in Chapter Six. Artists skilfully manipulate historical figures, symbols, events and spaces to invest their works with depth of meaning. Artworks, particularly

those found in the streets and derelict buildings of Athens act as mediums through which disparate temporal points are bridged together to comment on, and contest the present, whilst looking towards possible futures.

Another significant temporal quality of art, especially when placed outside of galleries and institutions, is ephemerality. Street art is radically entwined in the present as it is an extremely responsive medium that can be created and displayed almost instantaneously as events unfold (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017). Street art does not need to be selected, curated, reviewed, exhibited or sold in order to reach a critical mass of viewers. This lack of gatekeeping between the creation of a work and its subsequent consumption means that artists are able to respond to social events as they transpire. Beyond the Greek crisis, a recent example of this can be seen through the rapid spread of graffiti messages in Cairo during the Arab Spring (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017). The same properties that make street art dynamic and responsive also make it an inherently ephemeral art form. Art on the street is seldom protected and is subject to weathering, vandalism, removal and being obscured. Some works of street art exist on walls for years, whilst others can disappear within hours of their completion. Notwithstanding the fact that street art and graffiti are pervasively visible throughout Athens, what is actually visible flails in comparison to the works which have been hidden or lost (Ferrell, 2017).

The street and graffiti artists I spoke to were all well aware of the ephemeral nature of their works within the public domain. Many artists took pictures of their creations that would stand in place of the original; which they knew would sooner or later be distorted or destroyed (Hall, 1980). One street artist explained that:

No one respects anything, nothing, nothing, whatever you do, the only certainty is that it won't last long... one I did was dirtied in a week, another in two weeks, another in a month... you learn to accept it, you take a photograph and that is what it is. That is the piece, the photo. It becomes detached from the wall.

In these instances, the photograph that is then usually disseminated online no longer represents a tangible reality, yet “elongates the ephemerality of the action surrounding street art and graffiti” by granting them “a kind of eternal digital life” (Ferrell, 2017, p. 34). Through representing a work that is altered or no longer in existence, the image becomes a simulation which replaces the link between reality and representation. The photograph then stands as its own simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994). The duration of graffiti and street art is often linked to how much the work is respected by other artists, with the highest quality works traditionally lasting on the wall longer. This has changed with the advent of social media where simulacrum inhabit virtual spaces long after the original work has been removed or desecrated (Baudrillard, 1994; Hall, 1980; Macdowell, 2019). Ephemerality and reproduction complicate the meaning of street art as it becomes detached from the space and time in which it was once entangled. This can greatly affect the social meaning of an artwork as it travels through increasingly digitised and spatiotemporally displaced domains.

The multifaceted theoretical approach that I have outlined contributes towards the task of unifying the complex relations between actor/subject, time, and space (Munn, 1992). The placement of artworks in public urban space bridges chronologically disparate past events and superimposes them onto the present. These temporal events are experienced and given meaning through the communicative channels provided by symbols and spaces. Artists use their works to mediate and recompose these complex assemblages of meaning to comment on and affect the present. Artists stumble through the composite agential networks of the urban domain as they creatively mediate and tame the wild characters of the city. Sometimes it can seem as though they traverse this realm blindfolded as the diverse agencies that constitute the urban paradigm, hijack their works, distorting and perverting their intent. Other times it appears as though artists are in deep commune with these urban phantasms, harnessing and organizing them to comment, contest and transcend the present, and possible futures.

## 1.8 Thesis Outline

*Chapter Two* discusses the methodology used to conduct ethnographic fieldwork within the Athens art scene and introduces the primary and secondary participants that constitute the basis of the project. The primary methods used during the research period were participant observation, regular attendance at art events, casual discussions and open-ended interviews. The chapter then explores the specific methodological techniques used to overcome research difficulties associated with qualitative urban research. Such difficulties included the diminished capacity to establish a viable field of enquiry within the urban maelstrom, and blockages in gaining access to (often secretive) street and graffiti artists. Through various proactive approaches, including daily city walks, consistent presence at events, and cold-calling exercises, I explicate how I was able to effectively navigate these initial hurdles.

The second half of the chapter maps the socio-political and economic context in which the contemporary Athens art scene has developed. Here I explain the crisis from the perspectives and experiences of my participants. The aim of this section is to establish an understanding of the social context in which the art scene has developed. The harsh austerity and political turmoil ushered in by the crisis is shown to have influenced artists to move away from art institutions, and experiment with the potentials of urban space and self-organisation. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the 2015 Greek bailout referendum which frames the politically precarious beginning of my fieldwork. The crisis, although tragic, is shown to have had a profound influence on the art scene.

The *Third Chapter* argues that the arrival of graffiti into Athens during the 1980s set the precedent for the radical use of urban space that has now been assumed by wider artistic practices. The chapter begins by exploring distinctions between institutionalised gallery art, and art within the spaces

of everyday life. I trace the roots of modern graffiti culture, and use first-hand accounts to portray the ways that the associated ethos has been reworked into a diverse range of artistic styles. The very nature of art outside of art spaces means that it is subject to a range of (relatively) subjective categorisations. The various social perceptions surrounding the contentious practices of graffiti and street art are explored from the viewpoints of both primary (graffiti and street artists) and secondary (gallery artists, curators, actors, general public) participants. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the contested legitimacy and blurred lines between vandalism and art through the use of a case-study that demonstrates the changing public opinions on the use of public urban space in the creation and presentation of art.

The previous chapters establish the context, history and social perceptions of graffiti and street art in Athens. *Chapter Four* aims to highlight how the historical production of Athenian urban space has created the conditions for what one participant labelled a “*graffiti paradise*”. The use of city streets for the creation and dissemination of art is connected to wider resistance movements that make use of public or disused urban space, such as squats and occupations. To theoretically frame this argument, I draw upon the work of Lefebvre (1991) by linking the proliferation of street art to a prevalence of ‘social space’ in Athens.

The chapter concludes by exploring the connection between urban decay and the proliferation of street art. These spaces are shown to afford artists opportunities to experiment outside of institutional settings, whilst still having their works reach a diverse public. The material agency of the urban context is explored through the work of de Certeau (1988; 1998) and the idea of affect (Deleuze, 1978) to examine the degree to which city structures and spaces can actively influence social action. Overall, this chapter elucidates the prominent role that Athens as a city has played in the formation of the vibrant anti-institutional art scene. This reiterates that although street art and graffiti are global practices, their deep engagement

with urban space means that they remain unique and distinctive to their spatial contexts (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017).

In *Chapter Five* I contest Gell's (1998) call for the anthropology of art to abandon symbolic analysis. I argue that by investigating the function of symbols in and around works of art, we are able to discover significant ways through which they become indices of agency (Morphy, 2009). The chapter begins with the example of 'Phylax', a public sculpture which was subject to distorted symbolic readings that ultimately led to its destruction (Hall, 1980). This case study is used to highlight how artworks are able to actively affect the social world in ways which often extend beyond artists' intentions. I then examine the diverse use and manipulation of symbols by Athenian street and graffiti artists. These artists are well adept at engaging with the symbolics of space which they use to invest their works with powerful social meaning. The active symbolic function of artworks is explored through their capacity to memorialise, stand as threats of physical violence, demarcate space and communicate pertinent political messages. I conclude the chapter with an in-depth analysis of the symbolic function of two related works by B., an Athens based street artist. By using Gell's (1998) art matrix in conjunction with symbolic analysis, I use these works to highlight the central role that symbolism plays in the active social function of art.

*Chapter Six* explores the role of the past in informing interpretations of the current crisis. Greece's tumultuous history of war, foreign occupation, resistance and state oppression is shown to be a powerful symbolic resource that artists employ to contest and make sense of contemporary experiences of suffering (Appadurai, 1981; Knight, 2015). I explore how different street, graffiti and performance artists engage with key historical sites, events and revolutionary movements to legitimise their resistance to the contemporary crisis. Specifically, I explore this through examples associated with the Second World War, the Greek Civil War, the *Klefts* (brigands who played a central role in Greece's liberation from Ottoman occupation) and Rebetiko music (a subversive musical subculture associated with the hash dens of 1920's Athens). The rich history of Greek

resistance to oppression is largely associated with groups that operated on the boundaries of society and legality. Despite this, the state now celebrates these revolutionary movements as symbols of national pride (Herzfeld, 1985). Within this contradiction I trace the development of a Greek spirit of resistance which is at once celebrated and condemned, associated with both national triumph and pervasive civil disobedience. By establishing the historical development of the Greek revolutionary spirit, this chapter sets the scene for *Chapter Seven*, which explores the often-severe responses directed towards the arrival of foreign art institutions in Athens.

The *Seventh Chapter* considers the widespread distrust of major art institutions by Athenian artists. To overcome a lack of funding and institutional support associated with the crisis, self-funded galleries, squats, grassroots organisations and artist collectives have emerged as alternative means of maintaining a sustainable art scene. By investigating the diverse private and public institutions, galleries and initiatives which form the Athens art-scape, I comment on the extent to which the crisis has been culturally productive. In doing so I am careful to avoid undermining the social suffering and struggles associated with being an artist with extremely limited access to funding and institutional support. The chapter then turns to two defining controversies that occurred within the art scene during the course of my fieldwork. The first being the appointment of Belgian artist Jan Faber as artistic director of the Athens and Epidaurus festival and the second being the arrival of German mega-institution Documenta 14. These events and the associated resistance to them act as a lens through which the Athens art scene illuminates wider global inequalities and power relations. The response to the perceived neo-colonial ambitions of these events led to the formation of heterogeneous grassroots resistance movements and the organisation of counter-events. These initiatives, heralded as a success by some, and as overly-reactionary by others, emphasise the contradictions inherent in the Greek spirit of resistance (as established in *Chapter Six*). By examining these controversies, I seek to represent the hopes, ambitions, trials and tribulations of artists living and working in Athens.



Ultimately, through this dissertation I elucidate the diverse range of factors which have given birth to what is an incredibly vibrant, diverse and subversive art scene. Through the words and experiences of those at the helm of this counter-institutional art revolution, I explore the complex connection between times of social crisis and collective artistic rejuvenation. By maintaining a sensitivity to the diverse urban networks comprised of human, material, symbolic, spatial and temporal aggregates, I highlight that the current art renaissance is specifically Athenian, and should not be reduced to statements such as “Athens is the new Berlin”. Although there are certainly synchronicities between art scenes emerging from times of social upheaval, careful examination will uncover a beautifully unique art cosmos specific to its socio-political, material and spatiotemporal context.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology and Context**

My research project is an ethnographic study that focuses on the art scene developing within the context of the Greek financial crisis. Research was conducted primarily with street artists, graffiti artists, artist collectives and other individuals and groups that have critically engaged with urban space in the creation and presentation of their work. This chapter explores the methodology used to conduct ethnographic research, as well as the socio-political context in which the research took place. I begin with a discussion of the definition of art, and how it relates to the establishment of a viable field of ethnographic enquiry. Leading on from this, I detail the diverse range of participants that comprised the core focus of this study. As many of my participants created works illegally throughout the city I highlight some of the key ethical dilemmas that arose whilst researching and writing about these artists.

This chapter then explores some of the research difficulties that arose during the first three months of fieldwork and details the methods used to effectively overcome them. Such methods included cold calling via social media, regular walking (de Certeau, 1988; Hannerz, 1969; Malinowski, 1922) and consistent physical presence at art events. Next, qualitative methods such as participant observation, informal and formal interviews, and long-term engagement in the art scene are discussed in detail, highlighting their benefits and limitations. Finally, the methodological component of this chapter concludes with a discussion of the problems associated with establishing a feasible site of ethnographic enquiry within a complex urban environment. This includes an examination of how research techniques were used to allow for a holistic understanding of art's context, whilst still maintaining a sensitivity to the voices and agency of participants.

The second half of this chapter examines the 'crisis' period during which research took place. I provide an analysis of the crisis and introduce ethnographic material to illuminate how the crisis has been understood and

experienced by artists living, working and creating in Athens. The aim of this section is to highlight the ways in which the crisis has affected the Greek social body with a specific focus on artists. The discourse surrounding the crisis sets the scene for the rest of the thesis which considers how artists, the city and the socio-political context have coalesced in a vibrant, dynamic and radical art scene.

## **2.1 The Precarious Task of Defining Art**

One of the first methodological hurdles to present itself within this project was the need to arrive at a working definition of art. This was important as it had implications in the establishment of a feasible field of ethnographic inquiry. In this project, the difficult task of establishing a definition of art was exacerbated by the highly subjective classifications of street art which exist outside of art spaces (galleries, theatres, art institutions). Morphy and Perkins (2006, p. 12) define art as an “object with aesthetic and/ or semantic attributes... that are used for representational or presentational purposes” (2006, p. 12). Gell (1998, pp. 5-6) questions such definitions which consider art in semiotic and representational terms as though it functions as a language. Instead he views art as “a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (Gell, 1998, p. 6).

Despite Gell and Morphy being significantly at odds with their definition of art, what they both agree upon is that art plays a “mediatory role in the social process” (Gell, 1998, p. 6). Morphy (2009, p. 8) argues that mediation is a fundamental aspect of art objects as “they mediate domains of existence, they mediate between artist and audience, and they mediate between an object that they are an index of and the person interacting with that object”. Both authors also reject the ‘Western’ institutional definition of art which considers it to be anything that is treated as such by members (critics, curators, dealers, collectors) of the institutional art world. As previously discussed in *Chapter One*, I agree with Gell’s theoretical treatment of art as a mediator of social action and as a vessel of social agency. However, this

perspective should not be distinct to the well documented symbolic and representational aspects of art, which constitute a significant means through which art is invested with meaning and the capacity to affect society (Morphy, 2009).

Reaching a standardised cross-cultural definition of art borders on the impossible, which is further complicated when dealing with the diverse and subjective categorisations of artworks outside of art institutions. As my analysis focuses on visual and performance art which is predominately produced and experienced outside of art spaces, the line between what is and isn't art is highly elusive, with different accounts varying significantly (expanded on in *Chapter Three*). This difficulty in definition poses theoretical and methodological issues, as according to both Gell's (1998) and Morphy's (2006) views, a seemingly random scribble of paint could potentially be considered a work of art. As an example, on May 21, 2019 members of the anarchist group *Rouvikonas*, threw red paint bombs on the walls of the Greek parliament building in response to the judicial council's choice to deny Dimitris Koufodinas (a member of far left revolutionary organisation November 17, which have historically carried out political assassinations and bombings aimed at destroying property), furlough from prison (Ekathimerini, 2019; Herzfeld, 2011, p. 24). In this instance using red paint was a symbolic and communicative choice as this colour is well known to be associated with anarchist and revolutionary movements (Avramidis, 2012). Likewise, the choice to hit parliament (a symbol of state power) carries with it obvious representational intentionality, symbolising violent opposition to the state.

Although the act was deemed as vandalism by the state and media, these red splashes of paint carry with them clear representational and semiotic intent. Therefore, according to the definition of art provided by Morphy and Perkins (2006), they can conceivably be considered an artwork. For Gell (1998), an anthropology of art does not require a standardised criterion regarding the status of something as an artwork. Instead the nature of an art object is vaguely defined as whatever is placed in "the slot provided for

art objects” within the social matrix that it is embedded (Gell, 1998, p. 7). This means that “anything whatsoever can, conceivably, be an art object from the anthropological point of view” (Gell, 1998, p. 7). By this definition the markings made by the paint bombs on parliament can also be considered art objects. This example highlights that any definition of art is by no means exclusive. There exists a broad range of phenomena that straddle the lines between art and vandalism, that can be conceivably treated as art objects through both Morphy’s (2006) and Gell’s (1998) account. Many of my participants, both artists and the general public, adhered to their own subjective classifications of what they viewed to be a work of art. Significant distinctions in the categorisation of art were even present between individuals engaged in similar artistic practises, such as street artists.

Thus, in this dissertation I explore the interactions, and porous boundaries between art and vandalism, as they exist on the streets of Athens. Due to the subject matter of this dissertation, there is a significant focus on the blurring of these boundaries, as much art mingles on the borders between legality and illegality, vandalism and professionalism, meaning and perceived senselessness. Through my analysis, I am careful to foreground the views and opinions of participants as opposed to highlighting my own subjective opinions. Nonetheless, this remains a study of ‘artists’ and ‘art’ in the context of the crisis. To move beyond definitional problems, I sought out informants that consciously considered and presented themselves as artists. This allowed me to differentiate artists from others who used the streets to represent themselves visually (such as political activists, ideological groups and self-professed vandals). Despite this, due to the overlap of art, politics and vandalism, they are all analytically explored to indicate how they influence each other, and thus affect the art scene. Ultimately, by relying on my participants I was able to focus my research whilst still exploring the heterogeneity of the alternative and controversial Athens art scene.

## 2.2 Primary and Secondary Research Participants

This project was informed by a range of primary and secondary participants. The primary participants that I spent the most time with were artists for whom art played a central role in their lives and identity. The choice of primary informants was limited to artists who significantly engaged with urban spaces in the creation and presentation of their work. Although some of my primary informants also presented work in galleries and art institutions, they maintained engagement with urban spaces such as city streets, central squares and neglected buildings. This included street and graffiti artists, performance artists and art collectives that experimented with art outside of institutionalised spaces.

Street artists became my primary informants regarding the study of visual art in the city streets. Research amongst street artists included conducting participant observation by attending painting sessions, both in small groups and at larger festivals. It also significantly consisted of conversations and interviews, usually over drinks at bars, taverns and cafes, both one-on-one and in groups. Research was also conducted with a range of street artists who were engaged with as secondary informants. Interaction with these secondary informants often consisted of one-off interviews, conversations and/ or online questionnaires.

Beyond visual street art, primary research also occurred with several art groups and collectives that I had met at the 5<sup>th</sup> Athens Biennale. The Biennale was an art event which focused “on the burning issues such as the emergence of alternative economies, the performative in the political and the establishment of institutions that redefine systems structures and its pre-existing models, while highlighting the current views of contemporary art” (Athens Biennale, 2015). The event took place in the derelict neo-classical hotel Bagkeion, in Omonoia Square, downtown Athens. During the Biennale, different artists and art groups were given rooms to exhibit their work, raise awareness about what they were doing, and collaborate with other temporary inhabitants. The Biennale acted as a central node that

enabled me to develop strong networks and links to art groups and collectives. This included *Urban Dig*, a site-specific performance group, *Contemporary Art Showcase Athens (CASA)*, a group “run by artists for the purpose of creating and maintaining an autonomous platform for... a range of artistic processes” (CASA, 2019), and Depression Era, a collective of artists visually documenting the crisis. As a result of the Biennale I also engaged with a host of individual performance and visual artists, as well as the founding director of the Athens Biennale.

Within the constraints of the crisis, many participants were trialling innovative means of self-organisation, direct democracy, squatting and crowd sourcing within the context of art. I experienced this firsthand through participating in a range of art events, exhibitions and performances that took place in squats, occupied buildings, abandoned factories and public spaces. The move toward the use of public urban space and self-organisation has become a defining attribute of the contemporary Athens art scene and plays a significant role in this dissertation. Beyond the aforementioned participants, research was supplemented and contextualised through time spent with gallery owners, visual artists, curators, actors, art educators, art consumers, and members of the general public. As this analysis focuses on art as intrinsically linked to wider spatial, socio-political and historical processes, it was important that it was not studied in isolation of its context. Including a diverse range of secondary sources allowed for a more holistic insight into the social perceptions of the controversial practise of creating uncommissioned art in public urban spaces.

During my initial meetings with informants I verified the way in which they would like to be referred to within the dissertation. Most graffiti and street artists opted to be represented by their artistic pseudonyms (the identifying monikers used to attribute their work). The main concern expressed by these artists was that I avoided the attribution of illegal works to their ‘official’ identities. The guidelines set out in the Australian Anthropological Society Code of Ethics highlight the importance for personal identities to be kept confidential unless by agreement (AAS, 2019). To ensure adherence to the

code of ethics and the good faith of my participants, I opted to treat informants with a level of anonymity specific to the information being shared. In instances where data could potentially put artists at odds with the law or members of their community, I have avoided using any identifying labels. Through open discussions with participants, this content specific approach proved to be the best way to ethically allow their voices to be heard, whilst best protecting them from any potentially negative outcomes.

### **2.3 Gaining Access to Participants**

One of the initial hurdles in my research was gaining access to, and building relationships with relevant informants (O'Reilly, 2005). Initially, accessing relevant street artists proved to be particularly difficult due to the illegality of their practice and the associated use of pseudonyms. Although online research was conducted prior to entering the field, many of these leads were unfruitful and did not progress any further than the initial contact. The nature of street art is that it is intrinsically linked to its social and geographical environment. Despite the fact that Athens street art has become well documented in online media, eliciting responses from artists online proved to be difficult. As an individual who had no prior associations in the world of street art, I initially struggled to effectively establish contact with participants and locate the time and place of relevant art events and festivals prior to arriving in the field. Many of my online searches led to vague event information which relied on a degree of local knowledge in order to be effectively deciphered. This lack of certainty surrounding time and place was a recurring theme during my early ventures into the Athens art world. As mentioned in *Chapter One*, the ambiguous notion of time was both affectionately and disapprovingly relegated to a social inevitability referred to as 'Greek time'.

Before entering the field and during my first month in Athens, I undertook a cold calling exercise which involved sending a short explanation of my project to a range of prospective participants. I had formulated a generic message that I altered slightly depending on the artist I was contacting. It



was usually sent directly to artists via their Facebook pages. Most street artists had a social media page for their street art personas and a separate disassociated page under their birth names (the latter usually reserved only for friends and family). About 60% of artists did not respond to the message, partially (but not solely) because early versions were written in poor Greek. Out of those who did respond the majority agreed to either undertake an online interview, or to meet in person when I arrived into Athens. From this initial cold calling exercise, three street artists that agreed to meet for face-to-face interviews ended up becoming my first primary informants.

Although this initial foray into the Athens art scene provided some results, it was generally unproductive. It wasn't until I arrived in the field that I discovered opportunities most often arose by simply being present in the city. I dedicated large amounts of time to walking through the streets, and quickly realised that posters, graffiti and street art provided the most valuable resources for finding informants. Athens as a city has a high population density within a compact city centre. Due to a series of historical moments of rapid development (discussed further in *Chapter Four*), it is a labyrinth of thin winding streets broken up by central squares that act as social meeting points. As a result of the city's geography, public urban space is a primary component of social activity and communication (Vradis, 2012a). By being open to the processes of city life, I found numerous events and contacts which eventually led me to the majority of my primary informants.

Walking is a simple and often taken for granted method, rarely reported as a serious qualitative tool, despite the fact that ethnographers carry out a significant amount of their work on foot (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). Walking is a fundamental element of the urban experience, with the myriad footsteps of pedestrians giving shape to the spaces that compose the city (de Certeau, 1988). It was simply by walking through the lively streets of Athens that I gained true insight and access into its art scene. Walking as a method was introduced in classic texts such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 1922) and *Soul Side* (Hannerz, 1969). Malinowski (1922)

emphasised the value of walking through the field site as a means of gaining access to the intimate details of everyday life and better integrating oneself into the lived context of participants. In his study of an African American Ghetto in Washington, D.C., Hannerz (1969) recounted how, prior to having established contacts, he began field research by taking walks through the neighbourhood. Eventually, “after a few fruitless walks” he was called over by a group of men that had gathered on a street corner (Hannerz, 1969, p. 202). This event led him to his initial participants who then provided access to others within the neighbourhood.

During my early days in the field I spent most of my time documenting my walks through the city. This included taking fieldnotes, photos and videos of street art, neighbourhoods, political events and the diverse elements that comprised everyday life in Athens (much of this material has subsequently been utilised within this dissertation). The city centre is full of galleries, street art and public happenings that I often stumbled across by coincidence. Eventually regular attendance at art events, exhibitions and festivals gave me direct access to many informants and became a central aspect of my research. I also found that after spending time in the field my success rate when contacting artists online was significantly improved. Crafting more personalised messages based on relevant data was a much more effective method of eliciting positive responses. By expressing a ‘localised’ knowledge of the art scene and the particularities of an artist’s style, prospective participants were more likely to take both the project and myself as a researcher, seriously. Besides affording greater access to relevant participants, walking remained a critical method for the entire term of fieldwork. By being present in the city I became better attuned to the flow and rhythm of Athens as an urban entity (Lefebvre, 2004). The city in all its complexity became a central protagonist in my research.

The importance of keeping ethnographic method open to the experiential aspects of social life was documented by Fabian (1983, p. 108) who noted that:

No provisions seem to be made for the beat of drums or the blaring of bar music that keep you awake at night; none for the strange taste and texture of food, or the smells and the stench. How does method deal with hours of waiting, with maladroitness and gaffes due to confusion or bad timing? Where does it put the frustrations caused by difference and intransigence, where the joys of purposeless chatter and conviviality?" often all of this is written off as the "human side" of our scientific activity. Method is expected to yield objective knowledge by filtering out experiential "noise" thought to impinge on the quality of information.

The profound influence the city has on art, artists and social life became increasingly clear and prompted my theoretical turn to the capacity of material agencies to influence the social domain (Deleuze, 1978; Latour, 2005; Thrift, 2008). I tried to document the 'experiential noise' of Athens as much as possible through extensive fieldnotes, photographs, videos and ambient sound recordings. Listening back to field recordings, I often encountered nostalgic and familiar sounds such as the distinctive beep of police radios, the hustle and bustle of the *laiki* (farmers markets), the *paliatzi's* (roaming junk collector) abrasive metallic voice ringing through the megaphone, and the carefully scripted speeches given to commuters by beggars on the metro system. Life in the city is a seminal aspect of this thesis as art of the street is affected and distorted by the sights, sounds, smells and shapes of urban life (Hall, 1980; Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

During the first three months of fieldwork as I was still striving to establish contact with artists directly relevant to my project, a host of tangential opportunities presented themselves. Nervous that I was wasting valuable time, I took these opportunities which included interviewing 'traditional' visual artists, graphic designers, musicians, actors, community run theatre groups and a community choir. I was also introduced to an older generation of successful film, theatre and visual artists who had established successful careers prior to the economic crisis. Data from these interviews provided me with an interesting comparative perspective that ultimately informed my

understanding of how the crisis had affected young artists. It also helped highlight some key explanations for the increasing tendency to reject art institutions in favour of self-organisation and the use of urban spaces in the creation and presentation of art. Although many of these artists did not fit within the direct focus of my research project, my time with them reiterated the powerful social role that art plays in times of crisis; not only in the realms of the radical, revolutionary and political, but also in the mundane and everyday lifeworld. Through the crisis, art emerged not only as a communicative tool to contest and resist perceived injustices, but also a way for people to enjoy themselves, laugh and socialise. These early insights helped me establish a discerning and realistic understanding of the more 'radical' art forms that I later encountered.

Once I had started engaging with artists and regularly attending events it was not long till my networks extended to include participants directly relevant to the project. As my presence in the art scene became increasingly normalised, I was able to traverse the art world with greater ease. Having met a diverse range of artists meant that my social media pages were saturated with art events that informants would invite me to. Eventually I began spending significant amounts of time with participants, conducting participant observation at painting sessions, rehearsals, meetings, performances, events and festivals. As time went on, I became more proficient at explaining my project in a manner that was meaningful to potential participants. What was most useful was the capacity to indicate that the research project did not seek to capitalise on, and extort their work, the crisis and the emergent art scene. Rather, I explained how the project hoped to remain true to the voice of participants by examining the art scene and the effects of the crisis from their perspective and through their work. It took around three months to become effectively engaged with relevant informants, and grow accustomed to the environment; a timeframe generally considered commonplace for anthropological field research (Bernard, 2006, p. 351).

## 2.4 Qualitative Methodology

Once I had established myself amongst informants, the predominant methodological approach used to collect data was participant observation; the method considered to be the foundation of anthropological enquiry (Bernard, 2006). Participant observation requires long-term immersion in the field allowing the researcher to become entangled in everyday life as an active partaker (Hannerz, 1974). At the same time the researcher is tasked with maintaining a scientific observational view of the nuances of daily life. The researcher's extended presence in the field allows them to solidify relationships with participants, and eventually stop being a curiosity to them. This ultimately forms the basis of a valid ethnography as informants become less likely to severely alter their behaviour in the researcher's presence (Bernard, 2006). Despite conducting fieldwork over the period of one year, the initial timeframe meant that I would miss out on a critical event that was to take place after my departure. The imminent arrival of Documenta 14 had been looming over the art scene, and for this reason I decided to organise a follow up visit in July and August 2017 to attend the exhibition. By lengthening the temporal span of fieldwork, I was able to see the long-term unfolding of social processes that directly impacted my participants.

Keeping regular fieldnotes was one of the predominant ways that I documented participant observation. Fieldnote entries were usually made immediately after events (handwritten in small journals I carried with me) or at the end of the day in my apartment (electronically typed). I rarely took notes during conversations as it negatively affected the flow of interactions with participants (Bernard, 2006). Fieldnotes usually covered the key themes of conversations, as well as the more experiential elements of life in the field. All interviews, and many conversations and meetings were audio recorded. Participants were generally comfortable with having conversations recorded. To do this, I used a mobile phone and an iPod as the familiarity of the devices meant that their presence was normal and unobtrusive to the natural flow of social life. As many interviews took place

in public spaces, bars and cafes, these devices made the data collection process subtle and more comfortable for participants.

Most interviews were transcribed and translated after I returned from the field. Some of the long conversations were coded thematically for ease of reference, as creating full transcriptions of every conversation (mostly conducted in Greek) would have been extremely time intensive. Photography and video recordings were also used to capture artworks, performances, the creation of art, and significant events. They also allowed me to digitally capture the atmospheres and aesthetics of places and spaces at specific points in time. This photographic data allowed for further reflective analysis during the process of writing the dissertation. All data was stored securely and coded chronologically in a single document, making access to the audio, visual and written documents readily available.

Beyond participant observation this project made use of both structured and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were useful as a means of eliciting focused discussion relating directly to the research topics. Interviews supplemented the data gathered through participant observation by enabling me to have uninterrupted and focused discussions with informants (O'Reilly, 2005). The interviews conducted with participants were of a qualitative nature and utilised open-ended questions, allowing for the interviewee to discuss themes and ideas they felt relevant. This elicited a deeper understanding of the participant's views, as overly structured interviews limit the authenticity of the information gathered through "problems of observer effect and influence" (Barth 1975, p. 225 in Sanjek, 2000, p. 281). For this reason, interviews remained a supplement to participant observation.

As a result of increasing media interest in the art scene, some participants (specifically those involved with street art) had become increasingly wary of granting interviews. One street artist explained to me that as a rule he avoided doing interviews with reporters. He felt that they consciously tried to elicit responses from him that suited their narrative, even if this meant

reappropriating his words. He was referring to the tendency that he described as “reading the crisis into everything”. He explained that he had only agreed to meet with me because he could tell from our initial contact that I was interested in learning “about the way things are”. The interview questions were based around the themes of the thesis but were constantly being readapted as my understanding of the field site developed throughout my time in the city. It is out of participant observation and first-hand experience that interview questions were more carefully crafted with a focus on relevant concepts that prior to being in the field had been somewhat elusive (Hannerz, 1974, p. 143). By allowing informants to guide the lines of inquiry I was able to establish trust and rapport. In turn, this granted me greater access to what was becoming an increasingly ‘media’ suspicious wing of the Athens art scene.

More structured interviews were used in certain situations where time or access didn’t permit for open-ended interviews and discussions. Structured interviews refer to those where the questions are predetermined by the researcher, and may call for more close-ended answers (O’Reilly, 2005). This style of interview was used when artists or relevant individuals were unable or unwilling to meet in person. This method was helpful in gathering secondary data as a supplement to primary research.

Conversations and interviews were predominately conducted in Greek and later transcribed and translated into English. As a second-generation Greek-Australian I spoke Greek conversationally having taken some classes during my schooling in Australia. Early on in fieldwork my Greek language was clumsy, as made apparent by a street artist replying to an email stating “your Greek is incoherent, please send in English”. Successful qualitative research has been predicated on the ability to reach a level of linguistic and social fluency such that “when people laugh at what you say, it will be because you meant it to be a joke” (Bernard, 2006, p. 274). This was something that resonated in my early interactions with participants who considered my poor grammar skills as either annoying, endearing or humorous. Although many Athenians spoke fantastic English, I made an

effort to speak Greek not only during research but also whilst undertaking everyday tasks in the city. By doing this, within two months I had developed my practical language skills to a point that allowed me to overcome linguistic boundaries between participants and myself. This profoundly aided the fluency, depth and scope of my research and participation in the field.

## **2.5 The Difficulties of Conducting Urban Ethnography**

Ethnographic research requires a significant investment of one's time and personal effort, as adapting to new social contexts is inevitably a difficult learning experience (Hannerz, 1974). There were many times during fieldwork that I thrust myself into uncomfortable social situations, often self-consciously feeling like a burden upon my participants. This was especially the case in the first few months where I felt guilty about using participants' time for my own academic benefit. Eventually I came to find that treating informants in a casual and friendly manner made establishing good rapport much easier. I would offer to *kerasi* (pay for) drinks and *meze* (snacks) when we met for conversations at cafes and taverns. This was a sign of respect and friendship that was appreciated by my participants, although often they would not accept it, and themselves offer to *kerasi* me.

A defining moment of my research was when I noticed my status begin to change from that of an extractive observer to an engaged participant within the art scene. I offered to make myself useful by contributing to group meetings, helping host events and performances, and even using my art and musical skills to perform and create alongside artists. This turnaround role occurred during the Athens Biennale which afforded me the opportunity to meaningfully interact with a vast number of individual artists and collectives. During this period, I met many of the artists that became my closest informants. I also found opportunities to collaborate with artists which provided firsthand experience in navigating the urban environment and social contexts in the creation of art and the organisation of events.



This kind of intensive participation can run the risk of the researcher influencing the social world, as they become temporarily part of the context (Hannerz, 1969). Participant observation is based on the premise that an effective researcher can be part of social happenings whilst not influencing them. I noticed this issue during my interactions with an artist collective I had met at the Athens Biennale. Several of the members had explained to me that the group had been disagreeing on certain issues, including members not pulling their weight, leadership (as a collective, the group was intended to function with no hierarchy) and creative differences. One member also had issues with his peers who smoked inside during meetings and were habitually late. During my first meeting with the group I was oblivious to these underlying strains. Although two members of the collective invited me to sit in on a meeting, my presence was generally treated with suspicion. The atmosphere of the meeting was tense and I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. After some debate about the direction of the collective, the two artists who had invited me suggested a new concept for a group exhibition. They knew the 'leader' of the collective wouldn't accept this new idea and were using this opportunity to portray the failure of the members to employ the 'collective' ethos. As predicted, the idea was not well received and the occasion eventually led to the departure of one of these members. In a later conversation, I found out that the two members who had presented the idea wanted me there as an external witness.

These kinds of situations, although rare, were difficult to mediate during fieldwork. They highlighted the fact that the researcher, despite all efforts, is never an entirely detached neutral observer. Rather, sometimes the researcher themselves can become a political object within localised social relations (see Scheper-Hughes, 1995). Despite this issue, for the majority of fieldwork my presence did not seem particularly disruptive. The nature of the art scene is such that it is not isolated, but deeply connected to the complex flows of modern life, both nationally and internationally (Appadurai, 1990). As a result, my presence and participation in the art scene was rarely seen as strange or unusual. In fact, by becoming a 'normal' participant in

events I was able to witness occurrences and phenomena without the associated label of social researcher. In this sense, deep participation allowed me to become less obtrusive, as people became increasingly comfortable with my presence.

At about six months into my research I encountered another methodological problem. As I became increasingly well established in the field, my weekly schedule of commitments rapidly filled up. Although having too much potential data is far better than not having enough, I could see that over commitment was impeding my research. Both the art scene and everyday life in Athens were extremely dynamic and required a level of flexibility on my behalf, to allow me to instantaneously address critical issues as they arose. By having too much time allocated to structured research I was beginning to miss out on the more dynamic aspects of participant observation. As a result, I had to reassess my commitments and make some difficult decisions regarding what was most relevant to the project. Overtime, some of the commitments I had adopted early on in fieldwork had lost a level of relevance to the focus of my research. This meant that I had to carefully mediate my relationships and commitments. Many of my initial informants had been so welcoming and helpful that I felt a level of obligation to them. However, I was honest in explaining my time restraints and changing research focus to them. Along with this I made efforts to stay in touch and continue ongoing friendships beyond fieldwork. The issues involved with limiting the scope of research are linked to the wider methodological dilemmas of conducting fieldwork within complex urban sites.

Conducting qualitative research in the context of cities is complicated by heterogeneous urban assemblages and complex transnational flows prompted by forces of globalisation (Appadurai, 1990). The difficulty of urban studies exists between setting limits which allow standard anthropological qualitative research to be possible, whilst still being able to contribute to a holistic analysis (Parry, 2012). Early anthropology conducted amongst seemingly isolated tribes created a sense of methodological safety

through the notion of a geographically bounded field site in which social life 'happened'. The social sciences have conventionally portrayed and understood space through concepts of break, rupture and disjuncture (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992). This idea of spatial division has long been considered as the basis of cultural and social distinction with societies rooted within geographical boundaries (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992). Belief in the rupture, disjuncture and division of social space laid the organising principles of anthropology by influencing the boundaries and nature of the field as a site of ethnographic research (Coleman & Collins, 2006).

Despite this, it became clear that even villages were not isolated from flows of people, goods and ideas (Sanjek, 2000), as indicated by classic studies of gift exchange (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1990; Thomas, 1991). These flows are further accentuated by the complexity of modern urban centres and their interconnectedness to vast global networks. Objects, identities and social worlds are no longer able to be considered as restricted to single locations due to the acceleration of processes associated with global politics, migration, technology, media, transport and economics (Appadurai, 1990; Ferguson & Gupta, 1992; Marcus, 1998). Because of this the city should not be conceived as bounded and stable, as doing so risks the reduction of complex urban phenomena to restricted social structures.

To deal with the issues associated with conducting qualitative research in the city, I first began by setting geographic boundaries. The project concentrated on artists that were based and significantly operated in the city centre; roughly defined by the neighbourhoods encompassed within the municipality of Athens. Of course, as previously discussed, the construction of arbitrary spatial boundaries can be analytically limiting. The boundaries of the city centre were clearly fluid, with artists, their works and ideas traversing them regularly. For instance, some informants lived near the Port of Piraeus yet frequently operated in the city centre. Others regularly attended international art festivals, whilst many international artists regularly visited the Athens city centre. To account for these factors, I used the spatial boundaries of the city centre as a locus from which I explored the

heterogeneous networks that influenced the art scene. The bounded field site was not treated as a site of disjuncture, rupture and separation, as doing so would neglect the profound connections the art scene had to wider national and global networks (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992). Rather, these spatial parameters were used to help focus the scope of enquiry, and create a vantage point from which complex urban networks could be ethnographically unpacked (Hannerz, 2003; Pardo & Prato, 2013).

The field site was further narrowed and informed by research into the specific kinds of contemporary art that were exemplary of the burgeoning alternative Athens art scene. This was refined during the term of fieldwork as my knowledge of the art world developed. What was immediately evident was that visual street art and graffiti formed a seminal element of both the art scene and the urban experience of Athens. These art forms, visible throughout the entire city, were deeply intertwined with the everyday lived experience of Athenians. Beyond street art and graffiti, I found that one of the most striking elements of the Athens art scene was the move away from institutional art settings towards public urban space. The fiercely independent and grassroots approach to art was what made the Athens art scene distinctive, and effective against the constraints of the crisis. Therefore, the field site was formed to necessitate the enquiry into art within the urban context of central Athens during a time of crisis.

Bottom-up ethnographic understandings of the art scene were also complemented by top-down analysis of the city (Sanjek, 2000). I conducted in-depth research into the historical development of Athens, exploring the social implications of the city's evolution over time and space (see Economou, 2014). Understanding the city's rich and turbulent history provided insight into how significant events, images, symbols and ideas have informed present interpretations of the crisis amongst artists (Knight, 2015). Ultimately, this meant that the field site itself became a key component of the overall analytical perspective adopted by this project. To begin painting a picture of the ethnographic field site, the following section

examines the economic and social crisis within which the research for this project took place.

## **2.6 Research Context: The Crisis in Athens**

*“Art is nourished by every problem. Likewise, the crisis provided food for expression and creation”* – Alone 98 (street artist, Athens).

Following Greece’s 2009 general elections, newly elected Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou officially announced that the country had entered into a state of economic crisis (Kyriakopoulos, 2011). In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, Greece’s debt was revealed to have reached 126.8% of its annual GDP (Gross Domestic Product) (European Statistical System (Eurostat) 2010). The global crisis prompted governments to increase budget deficits in an attempt to avert economic collapse and prevent a depression like that of the 1930s. After the fear of depression had subsided, the world market shifted focus to the question of whether the resultant accumulation of sovereign debts could be paid. It was here that Greece emerged as the focus of bond dealers looking to collect a debt that the country could not afford to pay (Lynn, 2011). Despite the emphasis on Greece, the country was part of a larger series of European sovereign debt crises spurred on by the global financial crisis (Herzfeld, 2011). The victory of Syriza (The Coalition of the Radical Left) in Greece’s 2015 elections, and the Syrian refugee crisis, maintained the country’s image as an epicentre of European instability (Agelopoulos, Dalakoglou, & Poulimenakos, 2018).

Interestingly, the Greek crisis has no distinctive beginning, with varying accounts linking it to different economic, political and social processes (Knight, 2015). Some accounts see the crisis as the continuation of long-term social, political and economic mismanagement, such as the description given to me by Anna (a member of Athens based site-specific theatre group Urban Dig):

From the 80s with the two-party political system (PASOK and New Democracy) Greece, which had been largely agricultural and used to hard labour, suddenly had access to lots of money, particularly through loans. Loans were offered even so you could simply go on holiday. The people had access to lots of money and life became easier, many moved away from the agricultural lifestyle they were used to. This eventually blew up when the crisis hit. People had to relearn how to live with fewer things. This is what is slowly happening now.

Anna considered the crisis to have its roots in poor fiscal mismanagement and the illusion of wealth perpetuated in the 1980s. This perspective was commonly held by many born from the late 1970s onwards. Generations X and Y felt that they had taken on the bill for the past generation's (baby boomer's) excesses. This sentiment is present in the chanting of "we don't owe, we won't pay" by anti-austerity protesters in Athens during 2011 anti-austerity demonstrations (Theodossopoulos, 2013, p. 206). Many of the protesters believed they were suffering because of the actions of "Greek and foreign politicians, bankers, speculators, multinational banks, and corrupted civil servants" (Theodossopoulos, 2013, p. 206).

During a discussion, members of an Athens based music crew known as the 307 squad, elaborated on the "myth" of wealth, and the foreign institutional meddling that underlies the crisis.

We lived a myth here in Greece up till a few years ago. We lived comfortably, everyone had money. There were only few families who didn't live, that lived very hard. And all of that is what drove us to crisis here in Greece. And the global interests always had Greece as an aim. I don't know what is responsible, maybe its placement, the fact it is where it is. We are also a small country.

The origins of the crisis are often traced back to past events and ways of life. However, as seen in the previous comment it is not only associated to

Greek mismanagement, but also the nefarious dealings of foreign political and financial powers. Many interpretations of the crisis consider that to various extents, Greece has been a victim of the meddling of these powerful global forces (Herzfeld, 2011; Theodossopoulos, 2013). The distrust of foreign institutions can be connected back to memories of Ottoman governance and Greece's subsequent history of patron-client relations relative to influential Western nations (Herzfeld, 2016). As highlighted by Herzfeld (2011, 2016) and Panourgia (2018), as well as in many of my discussions with artists, this process was linked to the crisis through the perceived neo-colonisation of Greece enacted by global financial institutions. Knight (2015) examines a host of other common timelines regarding the origins of the crisis, such as Greece's drop in credit rating at the end of 2009, joining the Eurozone in 2001, and the post-dictatorship fast-tracked market liberalisation process associated with Greece's entrance into the European Economic Community in 1981 (Later the European Union). Despite the different timelines and causes, the crisis became experientially real through the austerity measures and structural readjustment policies associated with the three bailout packages; the first being granted in 2010.

After coming into power in October 2009, Papandreou and the PASOK government were unable to fulfil a promise of reducing the country's budget deficit within a 12 month period (Knight, 2015). By 2010 it was clear that without intervention Greece would have to default on its debts. Fear that a Greek default would set a precedent for other indebted European countries to follow resulted in *Troika*, the group comprised of the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB) to negotiate a bailout package and associated austerity measures with the Greek Government (Lynn, 2011). The first bailout package of 110 billion euros was given to Greece in May 2010 and a second worth 130 billion euros in February 2012 (Knight, 2015). Additionally, a third bailout package was signed by Tsipras and the Syriza government on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2015 for 86 billion Euros (Knight & Stewart, 2016; Lapavitsas, 2018). These bailout packages all came with a host of austerity measures that the

respective governments were required to implement. These included job cuts in the public sector, significantly increased taxes, the introduction of new taxes, the raising of the retirement age, a decrease in pension, the improvement of tax collection and privatisation schemes (Knight, 2015).

Since the implementation of structural readjustment policies and austerity measures, the people of Greece have endured a continual worsening of living conditions whilst seeing little improvement in the country's economy (Knight, 2013). The effect of the financial crisis in Greece has had profound implications on the population and has now transformed into a full-scale social crisis. The people of Greece have been financially strained with people losing much of what they had accumulated through their working lives (Dalakoglou & Domoney, 2012). Huge cuts to the public sector and economic stress on the private sector resulted in significant job losses and business closures.

As the financial strain of the crisis intensified it became visible through rows of empty shops lining the streets of central Athens (Herzfeld, 2011). These empty shops and forgotten buildings create ominous black holes within the city-scape that stand as a visual testament to the crisis. High levels of unemployment have led to increasing youth disenfranchisement and little faith in a system which has left them with restricted future prospects (Alexandrakis, 2009). With the implemented austerity measures and lack of public welfare, there has been a marked escalation in social suffering and poverty in Athens. Health issues, homelessness, illicit drug use, hunger, crime and suicide are now realities of everyday of life (Knight, 2013).

During an interview in October 2015, B. a prominent street artist, explained to me the way he witnessed the crisis unfold in three stages; psychological, economic and visual/experiential.

Many people understand a simple thing; that with the economic crisis jobs have been lost, that someone lost a job and consequently his wages. Next to them someone has a problem, family, parents,



friends, all of that is economic, it is psychological, it is social. Slowly slowly, let's say from 2009 you heard "ah that company closed, ah my neighbour doesn't have work, they cut my friends wages" and finally they tell you they are earning very little. You saw all of that happen slowly slowly, the people experienced it psychologically, later it was then also experienced practically. You have to pay taxes that didn't exist previously. I, who have my own business, I am an architect and painter, but now I work alone with painting. previously you wouldn't pay so many taxes, there was a tax exclusion up to a certain amount of money, up to 10,000 Euro per year, clean. That left immediately, tax became 25%, so from where you didn't pay anything, suddenly you had to pay 2,000 Euro. From all of that, you begin to feel the crisis in a practical sense, as do all of your friends. And after all of that, a little from here, a little from there, you see it. I think now you see it also within the city, you feel it whilst walking. I mean the central roads in the city were full of working shops, now it is a desert. Now when you walk in town you see four shops and three are closed. Now you see it in reality, you see it in the city. Many things have changed, it is now six years after it started. Now people see that there should have been so much inflation, the level of life should have been less, as far as it went up, it has now fallen down.

The crisis is something that people experience as part of an ongoing process of change. It has no distinct beginning, but rather is linked to a continuum of assembled factors that over time have increasingly transformed everyday life in Greece. As time progressed, many considered the crisis to be a new state of being, as opposed to an event with a distinct temporal beginning and end. When asked about the crisis one participant scoffed and interjected "crisis? What crisis? this is just the new way of life. A crisis has a beginning and an end, this is not a crisis this is the way things are now". Another participant responded to a question about the crisis, stating that "here in Greece we don't have crisis, we have a decay, the economic crisis that came from abroad has just sped up the procedure". In

these instances, the crisis is seen as being part of a wider endemic socio-political “decay” within the country.

The pressures associated with the crisis have also been further exacerbated by wider global upheavals. The increase in undocumented migration into Greece has intensified the perception of social breakdown through a further straining of the country’s fragile economy (Green, 2018; Herzfeld, 2011). Greece’s geographic location along with its extensive coastline and permeable borders, have resulted in it becoming a gate way into Europe (Kolovos, 2013). Since 2008, the number of undocumented crossings into Greece from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa drastically increased as a result of a series of social and political upheavals (Green, 2018; Kolovos, 2013). Many of the immigrants that enter Greece do so with the intention of moving into other European countries in search of work. It was estimated that in 2010, around 86% of undocumented immigrants entered Europe through Greece (Blomfield & Morehouse, 2011, p. 10).

During the period of fieldwork between 2015-2016, the war in Syria instigated a drastic rise in the number of asylum seekers attempting to enter Europe through Greece. During this time, at the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis, over 850 thousand arrivals by sea were recorded in Greece with the large majority entering via Turkey (UNHCR, 2015). Although many refugees intended to leave Greece to settle in wealthier European countries, a series of boarder closures in Europe and the Balkans meant that many were stuck in crowded refugee camps, whilst others stayed in Athens (Green, 2018). In its struggling economic state, Greece lacked the resources needed to effectively house and process the rising amounts of undocumented migrants. This, along with a lack of employment opportunities have led to homelessness and the increased ghettoisation of certain urban areas, perpetuating problems of poor health, black market activity, crime and violence (Kolovos, 2013).

Despite the dire situation, the refugee crisis in Greece has been an impetus for community groups to self-mobilise in solidarity and support of migrants and the homeless. Innumerable volunteer based initiatives are run throughout the city, including community kitchens, mobile laundering and hygiene services, as well as temporary accommodation. Members of the art scene regularly contributed to this cause through fundraising and donations of supplies usually collected at self-organised festivals and community events. Many of the initiatives organised by community groups focused on providing opportunities for migrants to integrate into Greek society through activities and occasions for social engagement. My interlocutors often commented on the way that the social ills of the crisis have motivated the population to become politically active and engaged. One street artist explained that:

Over the last few years there has been a tendency for people to express themselves politically... for the homeless, for all the social issues the crisis has brought about... and for other matters like the refugees... Greece has a refugee crisis along with the economic crisis... The hope that existed before has been lost, and that created the need to express for people to express themselves politically in whatever they can do.

The crisis is a driving factor in the political activation of younger generations. The use of creative arts as a medium of expression and communication is one powerful means through which this has become evident. From the outset of the crisis, unemployment rates escalated from a national 7.3% in May 2008 to 27.6% in May 2013 (Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) 2019). The unemployment rates have only recently seen improvement, decreasing slightly below 20% as of 2018 (ELSTAT 2019). Zoe, a photographer, explained that the impact of the crisis has allowed individuals to spend more time on their own art, as well as following and collaborating with other artists.

There are now more people activated... many people are jobless at this time, so what are you going to do? sit at home?... Before you had work and it took up lots of your time, now hardly anyone has work, so you do more (referring to creating art).

Despite the fact that the crisis has given people time and opportunity to create art, it is also important not to gloss over the negative impact it has had on the art scene. Painter Thanasis Panagiotou explained that:

After 2009 with the crisis, one of the first things affected was art. Not all forms of contemporary art, that is, let's say theatre, was affected but not as much as other forms. Visual art let's say, finished, finished. There exist exhibitions and events but there is no economic gain. You know that an exhibition will happen simply to show your work. The artist has that need. To show his work, regardless of whether there is or isn't a crisis, you have spent time completing a work and you need to exhibit it. Theatre did not suffer as much because it is a popular art form. Tickets are not very expensive and you can go for two hours and see a performance. With visual art, you can go and see an exhibition, you don't pay to go in, but to buy a work of visual art is extremely expensive. When you spend so much time on a work you can't sell it for 100 Euros.

Grigoris Valtinos, a popular television and theatre actor further clarified the ways in which the crisis has negatively impacted the arts:

With the crisis, the things definitely have become much more difficult... the artist is a person with needs. Many people believe that because you are an artist you don't eat, you don't have kids or a home.

He then sarcastically mimicked the actions of having to reluctantly pay an actor their pittance:

...ah sorry, give him 100 Euro here and there and he will perform.  
It's very ugly. During the crisis, this becomes much uglier.

Grigoris went on to describe how he had money still owed to him from a season of theatre performances that finished over a year prior to our discussion in mid-2015. He then implored me to think about the younger actors and dancers who got paid much less than him, if at all; "how can they live?" he asked. Grigoris was a well-established actor who had carved a successful career for himself, and he acknowledged that:

The biggest issue is the youth, because the crisis has a direct impact on their future. I, until my death am able to only eat bread and water, and live here, and it is very nice, a young person can't. They want to go out, work, marry, start a family, bring new people into the world. Now, the crisis in Greece, took all the work away from our youth.

Grigoris also mentioned that artists are more susceptible to exploitation than other professionals because "they have passion". He gave an example:

The guy who brings the wood to build the set, will say first give me the money or else I will not give you the wood. Therefore, you pay him first to get the wood.

Another established Greek actor, Peggy Stathakopoulou described how there isn't enough money in the arts for the youth to make a sustainable living from it. However, she also noted that artists were particularly resilient and adaptive to crisis situations. "Artists have been used to not having a steady flow of money and being constantly in and out of work". This sentiment is something which is highlighted throughout the dissertation as the creativity and extraordinary resilience of artists becomes apparent through the burgeoning art scene which has developed with little financial and institutional backing.

The drastic economic and social changes ushered in by the crisis have led artists to explore experimental avenues of art production and dissemination. One of my participants noted that if someone is “a creative person, somehow they will express themselves”. On this theme, Grigoris commented:

Within these situations artists attempt to find ways in which to do their art without much money. That doesn't mean that if something is done with less money, it will be inferior, or of a lower standard. Within all of this there are youth teams, kids who here and there create without money, who try and fight within these conditions, to do something more useful, of a higher quality and more reflective. They are the heroes of history.

It is within this context of economic and social crisis that a vibrant and dynamic alternative art scene has come to thrive in Athens. The lack of financial and institutional opportunities has led people to “try to create art with the cheapest means” which as one artist commented, means that “what counts now is not having money, but a strong idea”. The artists I spoke to acknowledged that the crisis forced people to think about art in new and creative ways. This in turn has allowed them to experiment with different mediums, spaces and modes of presentation.

## **2.7 Arrival in the Field: 2015 Greek Bailout Referendum**

I arrived in the field on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2015, a day prior to the national referendum concerning whether or not Greece should accept a third bailout package proposed by Troika. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January that year, Alexis Tsipras led his party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) to victory in the 2015 Greek general elections. Syriza was the first radical left party to be voted into government within the European Union, and marked a departure from the two-party system comprised of New Democracy and PASOK which dominated Greek politics since the reinstatement of democracy after the fall of the military junta in 1973. The party's hard-line left-wing politics, and their

opposition to neo-liberal reforms imposed by Troika, won the favour of austerity weary voters. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, Tsipras in an act of solidarity with the people of Greece, announced a referendum that would allow the populace to vote on whether the country should accept the proposed bailout package and associated austerity measures, or default on their debts (which would have likely meant reverting from the Euro currency back to the Drachma). The question raised to the people of Greece was officially formulated as follows:

Should the agreement plan submitted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund to the Eurogroup of 25 June 2015, and comprised of two parts which make up their joint proposal, be accepted?' The first document is titled *Reforms for the Completion of the Current Program and Beyond* and the second, *Preliminary Debt Sustainability Analysis* (Kivotidis, 2018, pp. 762-763).

The referendum was popularly reinterpreted as 'Yes' (Nai) for Europe or 'No' (Ohi) for European imposed austerity and governance (Kivotidis, 2018, p. 763). Voting 'no' was considered to be a vote in favour of the anti-austerity promises of the Syriza government. Figure 2.1 depicts a poster authorised by Syriza which states that voting "no" is a vote for "democracy and dignity". In contrast, Figure 2.2 is a poster calling for people to vote 'yes', asserting that "we live in Europe, yes to Greece, yes to Europe, yes to the Euro". Voting 'yes' to the third bailout package and reforms proposed by Troika was considered the safer option which would allow Greece to remain within the Eurozone. A significant number of 'yes' voting individuals that I spoke to maintained that they felt exploited by the harsh austerity and structural readjustment imposed by the European Union. Despite this, they feared that a Greek default back to the drachma would lead to a loss of personal savings and have a long lasting negative impact on them and their families.



Figure 2.1 Poster calling for a 'No' vote in the Greek bailout referendum, 2015



Figure 2.2 Poster calling for a 'Yes' vote in the Greek bailout referendum, 2015



On the day I arrived, as I was travelling from the airport to my accommodation in central Athens, the discussion with my taxi driver promptly turned to the referendum. Christos the driver was expressly anxious about the potential outcomes of the vote. His greatest fear was that a 'no' result would mean "the banks will take 70% of our savings"; a fear perpetuated by recently instated capital control measures. As a father of two young children he explained how this outcome would prove to be even more devastating than the stringent austerity measures associated with the 'yes' vote. As we drove through the city he pointed out foreboding images, such as line-ups of anxious Athenians waiting to withdraw their 60 Euro daily limit from ATM machines. In contrast to Christo, many of the locals that I spoke to in the lead up to the referendum wanted Greece to default on its debts and leave the Eurozone. Those who planned on voting 'no' generally saw it as an opportunity for Greece to reclaim a sense of national sovereignty and self-determination. They felt that the only way to end the cycle of debt created by poor governance, corrupt bankers and exploitative neoliberal institutions was to revert back to the Drachma; even if it meant enduring some difficult years.

Upon first arriving into the city centre, what immediately stood out was how prominently the political debate manifested itself throughout the streets and urban spaces of Athens. From my very first moments in the city it was apparent that political discourse was deeply embedded within people's everyday lives. Murmur of the referendum permeated through the entire city; in cafes, taverns, bars, taxis, parks and houses, as well as through electronic mediums such as radio, television and the internet. The debate had also manifested itself visually on the city walls which were saturated with posters, slogans, graffiti and stencils. It became clear that the city streets were alive, intimately and undeniably linked to the social realities of everyday experience. The walls became the canvas where people inscribed their anger, anxieties, aspirations and ideals. At the same time, they acted as mirrors reflecting the political cacophony back onto society. Different areas and neighbourhoods echoed their own discursive ambiance and

political tone, the amalgam of the heterogeneous interpretations of a significant historical moment.

Figures 2.3 to 2.5 are indicative of differing ideological readings of the referendum as visually present in specific neighbourhoods. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 are posters from Exarchia, the first reads “neither the Euro, nor the Drachma, long live the producers, long live the people” and the later states “No to terrorism, No to new memorandums”. The language used in these two examples is closely linked to the radical nature of Exarchia; considered the heart of anarchism and resistance in Athens. Figure 2.3, bearing the international squatters symbol (encircled arrow depicted in the bottom right corner of the sign), rejects both the Euro, as well as the return to the Drachma, consistent with the anti-establishment ambitions of the group’s ideology. The text in Figure 2.5 says “the poor vote no” highlighting the differing socio-economic angles of the vote. Generally, the middle and upper classes were more concerned about the implications that reverting to the drachma would have for their personal finances. Whilst the lower socioeconomic strata felt that they had less to lose and more to gain by voting against crippling austerity. Throughout the city streets, the call for a ‘no’ vote was vastly more visible than that of voting in favour of the bailout, which was only presented in a limited number of posters.



Figure 2.3 'Neither the Euro, nor the Drachma', Exarchia, Athens



Figure 2.4 No to new memorandums, Exarchia, Athens



Figure 2.5 'The poor vote no' graffiti, Central Athens

Voting 'no' to the third bailout was also symbolically framed in relation to a nationally significant event (referred to as *Ohi Day*) that occurred during the Second World War. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1940, Greece famously said *ohi* (no) to Mussolini's ultimatum to either allow Axis forces to occupy strategic areas of the country or face war. The Greek resistance was fierce and held back the invading army until eventually being outflanked by the arrival of German forces. Despite falling under Axis occupation, the Greek resistance is considered to have influenced the course of the war by holding off Axis forces for 219 days, longer than any other invaded country. *Ohi Day* is venerated with a national holiday and annual military parades that take

place on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October. The 2015 referendum appealed to the revolutionary symbolism of saying *ohi* to invading foreign forces. By framing the referendum in this way, Syriza indicated that they were again giving Greece the capacity to say 'no' to an economic occupation imposed on the country by powerful Western European countries, and particularly by Germany. As will be expanded on in *Chapter Six*, memories of war such as the Axis occupation play a significant role in framing present experiences of suffering (Herzfeld, 1985; Knight, 2015). By framing the *ohi* vote as part of a history of resistance to domination, Syriza effectively rallied a population who believed they were on the brink of a revolutionary new start for Greece.

On the morning of the referendum, the city was eerily calm and quiet. As the day progressed, Syntagma square (Constitution Square out front of parliament) slowly began to fill with people, stalls, and news crews. The smell of meat cooking over charcoal emanated from food vans scattered throughout the square and saturated the air. There were a variety of mobile stalls selling an array of items such as Greek flags, hats, shirts, horns and whistles. As night fell, revolutionary music blared through PA speakers as the square filled with voters anxiously awaiting the announcement of the referendum's final result. Members of the country's left-wing political factions marched into the square bearing party insignia, signs and banners. This included supporters of Syriza, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), the Socialist Working Party (SEK) and members of the Anti-Capitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow (ANT.AR.SY.A); All in support of a 'no' outcome.

The United Popular Front (an organization formed out of the 2011 Syntagma anti-austerity protests) had set up a marquee from which they hosted a series of speeches. Revellers chanted "no right, no left, only patriots" as the folk song *Children of Samarinas* (about the guerrilla fighters from the village of Samarina, who lost their lives fighting the Ottomans during the war of independence) played out. They then played contemporary songs such as *When I Return I Will Fuck Them* (the song's title comes from a letter written about the Ottomans by Greek military commander Karaiskakis)



and *Oh, Greece I Love You* (a song by Nikos Papazoglou about a man's bittersweet love for the motherland). All the while people rejoiced and some even danced an assortment of traditional dances. The entire square was alive and it was difficult not to be caught up in the moment. People felt that Greece was finally going to reclaim its freedom by saying 'no' to the socially crippling economic reforms devised by foreign powers. Later that night it was officially announced that 'no' had won a landslide victory. The crowd celebrated what was then considered to be a historic victory for democracy (depicted in Figure 2.6). The collective feeling that Greece had finally taken control of its own destiny rang throughout Syntagma square until after midnight when crowds slowly dissipated.



*Figure 2.6 Celebrating the 'No' vote, Syntagma, Athens July 5, 2015*

Unfortunately, the hope inspired by the result of the referendum was short-lived. Only a few days after the vote, the familiar fog of anxiety and indignation once again settled over the city. After a period of intense negotiations with Troika, the Syriza government failed to deliver on its anti-austerity promises. Within the space of a week the government had pledged to implement further austerity measures in exchange for a three-year bailout package. By the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2015, Tsipras had agreed to a series of economic adjustment policies including pension cuts and tax increases more

stringent than those initially voted against in the referendum. There were certainly no celebrations the next time demonstrators marched on Syntagma on the 15th of July. Feelings of betrayal incited fury directed toward the new government's failure to adhere to the democratic outcome of the referendum. Syntagma once again disappeared into the smoke of exploded Molotov cocktails and teargas. It was within this immediate, highly politicised context that my research in the Athens art scene took place.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined the methodological approaches which have informed this dissertation, as well as highlighted the socio-political context in which research took place. The current Athens art scene has developed within a climate of intense political and social contestation. The European Union's first elected radical-left government, a failed referendum, economic instability and a worsening refugee crisis created a scape of uncertainty and angst. Art became a significant means through which people explored, contested and attempted to overcome the complex historical moment referred to as 'the Greek crisis'. The crisis itself proved to be a multifaceted process that affected the everyday experience of those living in Athens socially, visually, experientially and economically. The crisis context provides an important frame through which to understand the multiplicity of unique and often radical methods of art production and presentation that have been adopted within Athens. The following chapter focuses on visual street art and graffiti, art forms that have emerged as the most visually defining aspects of 'crisis art' within Athens.

## Chapter 3

### Graffiti and Street Art in Athens

*“Art is like seeds. It can leave from India, and if it finds a good climate and good earth, it will grow here as well”* Grigoris Valtinos (Greek television and stage actor), 2015

This chapter explores the controversial practices of street art and graffiti which have become defining features of the Athenian urban landscape. I will focus on developing an understanding of the diverse range of social perceptions surrounding these art forms. By examining the categorisation of urban visual art through labels such as vandalism, graffiti and street art, the chapter adds to the overall thesis by creating a sketch of the conceptual spaces that these art practices occupy in contemporary Athenian society. The very existence of an artwork outside of an ‘art space’ subjects the work to a multitude of different readings and categorisations by those who come into contact with it. In this chapter, the contentious social space that graffiti and street art inhabit, is made visible by investigating the diverse ways art within urban space is perceived by artists, the art public as well as the general public (Lefebvre, 1991).

This chapter traces the historical development of the disjuncture between art within institutionalised settings such as galleries, and art within the spaces of everyday life (such as street art and graffiti). I explore the means through which modern graffiti, beginning primarily in 1960s New York, made its way to Athens in the 1980s as a result of intensified global flows of people, media and ideas (Appadurai, 1990). Based on artist accounts, I highlight some of the prominent ways that graffiti practice was adopted by Athenian youths and later modified to suite their specific social context by incorporating personal and localised influences. These adaptations led many of my participants to begin experimenting outside of the aesthetic confines of graffiti and its associated hip hop influence. These experimentations with different styles, ideas and disciplines transformed many Athenian graffiti artists into street artists. Street artists, whilst inspired

by graffiti, incorporate a wider range of symbolism and artistic techniques into the production and presentation of their urban artworks. Through the use of ethnographic examples, the boundary between street art and graffiti is shown to be subjective and fluid as it is navigated by different individuals.

This indistinct boundary is further elaborated on by analysing the multifarious ways that graffiti and street art are received and interpreted by a range of participants, including artists and local Athenians. I further problematise the concept of static definitions of urban visual art by discussing how street art and graffiti interface with vandalism. Through the desecration of a renowned work of street art called "*Knowledge Speaks, Wisdom Listens*" the chapter concludes by outlining debates surrounding the ephemerality of art on the street. As a whole, this chapter provides an ethnographic overview of the precarious social perceptions of graffiti and street art in Athenian society.

### **3.1 The Ancestry of Graffiti and the Birth of the Modern Art Gallery**

During the crisis, there has been an intensified proliferation of visual art throughout the city's streets and public spaces. Upon arriving into central Athens for the first time, visitors are immediately awestruck by their close proximity to remnants of the ancient Hellenic world such as the Acropolis and the Temple of Olympian Zeus. On a single street in Athens, one can encounter ruins from the ancient city, Byzantine churches and neo-classical architecture nestled between ad hoc concrete apartment blocks. This unique architectural amalgam is something that visitors find both intriguing and hard to reconcile. Yet, perhaps the most visceral response in first time visitors to Athens is elicited by the unfathomable amount of vandalism, tags, graffiti and street art covering the buildings and streets. The images, symbols, words and colours are so pervasively engrained into the visual landscape that it is difficult to conceive of the city without them. These contentious works are fused into the very fabrics of the modern city and, depending on one's subjective positioning, can add vibrancy and life to the



urban landscape, or stand as a visual testament of the social breakdown associated with the crisis.

The act of writing on walls is truly archaic with many of the earliest human images from Palaeolithic France and Spain having been etched into the stone walls of caves (Fowles & Alberti, 2017). Wall writing has been consistent in varying degrees throughout history, with excavations in the ancient Agora (public place of assembly) of Athens revealing informal inscriptions, both painted and engraved on public walls (Lang, 1976). These inscriptions included professions of love, humour and political statements. Engravings such as those found in ancient Greece and throughout the Roman empire are early precursors to modern graffiti. In fact, the word itself comes from the Greek term *graffo* (to write). The Latin version of the term *graphium* was originally used by archaeologists to refer to the markings and etchings found on the walls of Roman archaeological sites (Brown, Brunelle, & Malhotra, 2017, p. 489). Ancient graffiti provides an insight into everyday life in these cities as it deals with common daily experiences that are unique from those captured by official records and grand archaeological findings.

Similarly, modern graffiti and street art in Athens provides a profound insight into the everyday realities of urban life within the Greek crisis. Prehistoric rock art, ancient wall writing and modern graffiti all share an intimate relationship with the socio-political, spatial and temporal contexts in which they are found (Leuthold, 2010). In many ways, modern graffiti is an extension of these ancient modes of human artistic expression. In contrast, modern formalised art spaces prioritise the isolation of art from the external world (Leuthold, 2010). By being created in studios and received in galleries, museums and theatres, the Western art institution has worked to separate art from the everyday experienced lifeworld.

Art galleries as we know them today have their origins in early modern Europe. Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, access to private art displays was usually only available to members of the aristocracy and those with letters of introduction (Paul, 2012). The majority of visual arts that people would

encounter were commissioned by monarchs, the aristocracy and religious establishments. It was not until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century that private art collections began opening up to the public (Paul, 2012). Their emergence around Europe, and particularly in Italy was related closely to the internationalisation of enlightenment values. The social interactions afforded by these early institutions allowed visitors to enact and embody the civility of their enlightenment ideals (Paul, 2014).

The first public collections were closer to what we now consider a museum, with institutions such as the Statuario Pubblico (opened 1596 in Venice) displaying around 200 antiquities, and the Ashmolean Museum (opened in 1683 at the University of Oxford), known for its cabinet of curiosities (Paul, 2012). During the early years of these art institutions, works were usually presented in pre-existing buildings, which had sections adapted to function as exhibit rooms (Paul, 2012). The further development of public art institutions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century instigated the creation of buildings specifically dedicated to housing art. Evolving along with these art spaces were new curatorial practices leading to the increased categorisation and commodification of artworks (Paul, 2012). These institutions and associated practices predicate the formation of what Bourdieu calls 'the field of cultural production' which is constituted of:

Places of exhibit (galleries, museums, etc.), institutions of consecration or sanction (academies, salons, etc.), instances of reproduction of producers and consumers (art schools, etc.), all of whom endowed with the dispositions objectively required by the field and the specific categories of perception and appreciation... which are capable of imposing a specific measure of the value of the artist and of her products (1993, p. 260).

From these early institutions, the totalising space of the modern art gallery was born. The modern art space is dedicated entirely to the creation, presentation and commodification of art. It can be considered a passive space (modelled as though it is a blank canvas), purposefully removed from

the unpredictability of the outside world, such that artists, gallery managers, curators and other agents of the art world have ultimate control over the environment.

Although concerned with music as opposed to visual art, Meintjes' (2017) ethnography of Downtown Studios in Johannesburg provides insight into the way that art spaces are designed to isolate art (in this instance art creation) from the outside world. Meintjes contrasts the insulated inside of a music studio to the social noise of the surrounding city. The material structure of the studio is carefully designed to acoustically seal the space, separating the internal sonic environment from external interference (Meintjes, 2017). Not only are studios designed to block external sounds, but also to insulate the facility as tightly as possible from the sounds of its own internal operations. Studio design focuses on isolation and insulation as a means of achieving clean sound separation (Meintjes, 2017). The control room is constructed to be acoustically neutral and uniform so there is the smallest possible discrepancy between sound as is recorded and as is heard through the monitors (Meintjes, 2017). The studio becomes the centre of the creative process and "the head of the industry" (Meintjes, 2017, p. 81). The author describes how the producer can control "every sound parameter by means of the electronic technology" and can "erase, shift, add, or precisely repeat" any sound sample (Meintjes, 2017, p. 80).

Likewise, the modern art gallery is a carefully sculpted environment which regulates the way art is presented and received by eliminating as many external interferences as possible. Galleries are also designed to control the way that bodies move through them and interface with the art. Foucault's description of complete institutions can help highlight some of the means by which art institutions discipline the bodies of those who enter them:

...maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralised (1979, p. 231).

Here Foucault referred to the discipline exerted on the incarcerated by punitive institutions. Nevertheless, many art spaces also work to create docile bodies through modes of discipline and panoptic observation (Foucault, 1979). Within art spaces one encounters signs imploring visitors to keep noise to a minimum, avoid flash photography, store away bags and belongings and not eat or drink. Likewise, bodies are ushered by barriers, ropes and guards that limit proximity to the artworks and exhibits. These codes of conduct are enforced by human and electronic agents of panoptic surveillance which create a conscious state of continual visibility. Within the context of these institutions, arts' worth is mediated by the tastes and economic rationale of the producers, critics, collectors, middlemen and curators that constitute the field (Bourdieu, 1993). The success of an artwork within this art field is derived from the price it fetches, and the ways in which it can be commodified.

Art forms such as graffiti and street art that are closely linked to practices of everyday life, have generally been marginalised by the art establishment as lacking aesthetic quality (de Certeau, 1988; Miles, 1997). Despite cases such as Banksy (whose street art is often removed from city walls and sold at auctions), unsanctioned works of graffiti and street art have largely been resistant to processes of commodification. Many street artists certainly produce canvases and present works in gallery settings, yet the 'soul' of the practice remains rooted in public urban space. As a result, artists maintain a great deal more freedom and autonomy through their choice to work largely outside of the art field. Street art is not subject to the economic and aesthetic rationales of the agents that arbitrate the art market. In a participant's Facebook post, the artist elucidates this point stating that "street art doesn't have to do with an 'elite' of artists and curators. It has to do with people, cities, communities, the whole world in general" (Fikos, 2019).

It is difficult for young artists to be accepted by the art world without first attending the right art schools and being managed by the right promoters

with access to the right galleries. The graffiti ethos allows artists to bypass this process. The curator of street art is the city itself. Knowledge of the city and its streets is learnt through first-hand experience that is accessible to all who seek it out. By learning to work with the rhythms of the city, street artists are able to successfully have their work reach critical masses of people without the restraints imposed by art institutions (Bourdieu, 1993; Lefebvre, 2004). As opposed to institutionalised art, graffiti preferences the human interconnectedness with the lived environment as a key element of the creation, experience and understanding of art. By being engaged with, rather than isolated from the spaces and practices of everyday life, graffiti and street art tap into the symbolic potentialities inherent in urban spaces (de Certeau, 1988). Although graffiti can conceptually be linked to examples of ancient wall writing, the style of urban street art that is seen in Athens today has its direct roots in 1960s America.

### **3.2 Graffiti: From New York to Athens**

During discussions with graffiti and street artists, the flow of graffiti and hip hop from America was shown to have had a profound influence on the flourishing contemporary art scene in Athens. Participants regularly explained to me that their first exposure to graffiti practice and culture was via hip hop media such as magazines, movies and album covers (cf. Maxwell, 2003). Eventually, participants incorporated their own unique styles to develop their work into what is now generally classified as street art. In order to understand why graffiti and street art have become prominent means of expression during the crisis, it is crucial to first consider how graffiti arrived in Athens; long before the crisis became a reality.

The arrival of graffiti to contemporary Athens is largely linked to a movement that started in America, and in particular New York towards the end of the 1960s (Maxwell, 2003; Pangalos, 2016). One of the forefathers of modern graffiti was in fact a New York based Greek-American boy named Demetrius (Foster, 2005; Pangalos, 2016). Demetrius was from a North Harlem neighbourhood full of Greek, Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican

immigrants. He worked as a delivery boy and began writing his tag *Taki 183* along the walls of his route with marker pens. His tag was taken from the Greek nickname *Taki* derived from *Dimitraki* and the number of the street on which he lived. This form of tagging set the precedent for what developed into a multifaceted cultural movement. On July 21, 1971, The New York Times published an article called *Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals*. Although *Taki 183* was not the very first graffiti writer, it was this article and his prolific tagging that made his works well known throughout the city (Dickinson, 2008).

It was around this time when graffiti culture began to evolve as tags became bigger, and changed from the use of pens and markers to the distinctive aerosol cans (Foster, 2005). Figures 3.1 to 3.3 are indicative of the evolution of graffiti writing in Athens. Figure 3.1 depicts tags (done with felt-tip pens) from a toilet cubicle in a bar located in the neighbourhood of Exarchia. Figure 3.2 portrays the next stage of tagging through the introduction of aerosol cans. Finally, in Figure 3.3, we see the larger and more complex style that has become synonymous with graffiti writing. It is important to note that although these three styles generally followed a temporally linear evolution, they still all exist and are utilised within the graffiti scene.



Figure 3.1 Graffiti tags, Exarchia, Athens



Figure 3.2 Graffiti aerosol can tags, Thiseio, Athens



*Figure 3.3 New York influenced graffiti, Thiseio, Athens*

Graffiti is a controversial form of expression that straddles the lines between vandalism and art and is widely considered to have been a response to the social and political upheavals and living conditions of inner city New York (Dickinson, 2008). By the seventies New York was suffering serious financial difficulties and faced fiscal ruin. In response to this the city implemented a range of policies which instigated the spatial segregation of the upper and middle classes from migrant communities and the impoverished (Dickinson, 2008). Within the city's neglected ghettos, crime rates were high and graffiti was adapted as a tactic for gangs to mark their territories. Within the socio-economic environment of the Bronx, break dance and rap emerged as a reaction of the lower classes to the elitism of 1970s disco culture. Graffiti was adopted by these young migrant and minority groups as an alternative means of artistic visibility. The graffiti style evolved along with hip hop dance and music culture, and became a defining aesthetic of the community (Foster, 2005; Macdonald, 2001; Maxwell, 2003). Graffiti evolved into a complicated communication system which allowed this community to bridge spatial boundaries and manifest themselves visually through the entire city (Dickinson, 2008).

The work of these early pioneers gave form to graffiti as it is known today (Pangalos, 2016). Graffiti artists began referring to themselves as 'writers' and labelled the act of creating graffiti as 'writing'. As time progressed, writers furthered their exploration of the city, moving from walls, to buses and then to subway trains. The writing also began to evolve into bigger and more elaborate pieces, turning graffiti into an art form with its own aesthetic and social codes. Initially the subtleties of graffiti could only be understood by those savvy to its culture, codes, practices and ethics (Pangalos, 2016). The writers developed their own means of artistic evaluation that regarded both quantity and quality of work, often rating works by the risk associated with their spatial positioning. From the beginning, space was a critical element of graffiti writing, with the more dangerous and illegal spots being those that would bring the writers most prestige and notoriety.

The graffiti movement remains closely entwined with the music, community and aesthetics of hip hop. Many Athens based writers explained to me that it was graffiti's relationship to the hip hop style and way of life that helped it spread from New York to Athens in the 1980's (Pangalos, 2016, p. 12). Of this, old school graffiti writer Ser Soras writes:

I started doing graffiti at the end of 1993, influenced by hip hop culture... As soon as I saw graffiti in hip hop video clips and in some movies like Beat Street, Wild Style and Style Wars, I fell in love with it and started doing it non-stop (2011, p. 129).

Although not all writers subscribe to hip hop culture, and both hip hop and graffiti have developed a level of autonomy; it was hip hop and the associated visual and material culture that were disseminated globally (Pangalos, 2016).

Graffiti's global proliferation is closely linked to the production and dissemination of hip hop material via what Appadurai (1990) refers to as *mediascapes*; flows of globally distributed electronic and print media. In the 1980s a series of hip hop CDs with graffiti inspired album covers, and



breakdance films with footage of New York arrived in Greece, introducing the practice to a generation of youths. These youths became proficient in the visual, musical and stylistic culture of hip hop through immersing themselves in the books, films, dance, magazines and other media accessible via global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1990). Graffiti writer Korthios explains that:

Back then, we didn't have smartphones or laptops or Facebook. We were but kids when we first heard the sounds of hip hop and Rap on the radio or from friends who had the first copies of this music in Greece. We were hooked to our TVs watching documentaries about graffiti and those who were lucky enough to own a video recorder could watch them again and again... And so we made our first pieces (2011, p. 139).

Many Athenian graffiti artists who had been exposed to graffiti in the 80s and 90s prior to the development of modern social media platforms stated that access to these kinds of media profoundly inspired their preliminary forays into graffiti.

Tuiyo, a well-known graffiti artist, explained to me that graffiti really began to take off in Athens in 1995, although by then it had been around for a long time. He said that it gained recognition amongst the youth of this period "with Artemis, Terror X Crew, and with hip hop". Artemis was a hip hop MC (rapper) and a prolific graffiti artist along with his Terror X Crew (TXC). Tuiyo described how "suddenly everyone wrote TXC, everyone, even if they weren't in the crew, everyone... TXC was not the first, but the first seen by the people". During an interview at a cafe, Tuiyo pulled out his phone and showed me the film clip for TXC's (1997) song *Hip Hop Hooligan*. The animated film clip encapsulates the distinctive elements of hip hop culture including the music, fashion, aesthetic and rebellious antiauthoritarian ethos. Referring to the film clip, Tuiyo reiterated how closely graffiti and hip hop were connected in the early days, and how old school writers, crews and MCs such as TXC pioneered the scene. These initial practitioners

worked to localise the global dispersion of hip hop, creating a new wave of Greek hip hop media which inspired future generations. Much of the Greek hip hop scene used Greek language to rap over American style beats, increasing local accessibility through the working of the global into the local context (Robertson, 1995). It was not only the consumption of hip hop culture that helped graffiti spread to Greece, but its adaptation, practice and reproduction within the specific contexts provided by Greek urban life during this period.

Another force of globalisation that played a role in the spread of graffiti culture to Greece is what Appadurai refers to as *ethnoscapes*; the flow of people that make up the shifting world (1990). The increased capacity for individuals to travel internationally due to the advancements in technology and transport ushered in by modernity was significant in the global dissemination of graffiti culture (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992; Marcus, 1998). Greece suffered greatly during the Second World War, and the ensuing Civil War. The populous was severely impoverished and the country experienced a massive wave of migration abroad, with a significant amount of the diaspora moving to New York and New Jersey. However, During the late 1970s after the fall of Greece's military Junta and the reinstatement of a democratic government, many returned to their home country. Furthermore, as travel between New York and Greece became faster and more affordable, an increased number of Greeks travelled both to visit family, and for leisure. This helped the graffiti culture, ethos and practice to travel along with the youth and be adapted to their own particular cities and towns in Greece (Pangalos, 2016).

Once graffiti had established itself in Athens, people became increasingly acquainted with the art form through their physical encounters with it in the city. Prior to social media and the internet, graffiti had an amplified level of mystique, meaning that writers' identities and the codes of street writing were not easily decipherable, and only known to the initiated. This created a sense of belonging to a countercultural fringe group that resonated with groups of young Athenians. Young graffiti writers would form groups known

as crews and each crew had its own symbols and markers. The social element of graffiti is something that was very important to my participants with Tuiyo emphasising “that is what graffiti is, it is *parea*” (*parea* translates to company/friendship group). Many of my participants expressed to me that it was through friendship groups that they were taught how to become graffiti writers. Graffiti was a tool by which young Athenians could make themselves visible throughout the city. It was attractive as it had a pre-established mythology associated with being outside of hegemonic social norms. It presented itself as a creative means for individuals to express themselves and resist social standards, whilst still being part of a diverse community (Maxwell, 2003).

### **3.3 From Graffiti to Street Art**

Many street artists followed a similar trajectory; beginning with graffiti, and later transitioning into other forms of visual street art. Some were proud of this progression whilst others, particularly those who had gained international prestige for their street art tended to downplay their past involvement in illegal graffiti writing. The move into street art was described to me as transitional, occurring through the fusion of the graffiti ethos with other art disciplines (often based on skills learnt during studies in fields such as fine arts, graphic design and architecture). Irvine (2012) in his study of graffiti similarly found that the hip hop attitude was merged with the learned skills of wider artistic movements to establish diverse urban networks of artistic knowledge and practice.

In Athens, the development of graffiti into more varied forms of street art has largely resulted from artists’ desire to symbolically express increasingly specific social and political messages; a need that has been greatly accentuated by the crisis. Although graffiti is an inherently political practice that has historically provided a voice to marginalised groups seeking to visually reclaim urban space, the traditional aesthetic and New York style lettering can be symbolically limiting. The need for complex political

expression was described to me during a conversation in street artist, B.'s studio.

The hope that existed before has been lost, and that created the need for artists to express themselves politically in whatever way they can. All this creativity that can't be withheld, it can't help but go outwards.

Within the context of the crisis, street art has arisen as a powerful mode of political expression amongst individual artists and political collectives. The increased disenfranchisement of well-educated youth with few job prospects has influenced a largescale move towards the use of art as a tool of resistance and political protest. By incorporating political commentary and symbolism with the kinds of spatial practice associated with graffiti, artists are able to have their message reach large audiences. B. elaborated on this point:

That is why graffiti has something very powerful, because you come into contact with people within the city. Here in the studio no one sees the work, but if I painted this in the city, I would have heard a thousand things about it.

The move towards politically and socially orientated works, also meant a move away from the encoded language of graffiti (which was aimed predominately at other writers), to a symbolic language ideally decipherable by large portions of the general public. Even though graffiti and street art have symbolically and aesthetically diverged, both appear alongside each other in shared urban spaces. This makes determining where one ends and the other begins problematic. The boundary between the two related art practices presented itself to be fluid and often based on subjective categorisations. Despite this issue of categorisation which will be further explored through ethnographic examples, some key definitional aspects of graffiti and street art will be clarified.

Generally, graffiti refers to letters and images illegally sprayed, painted, drawn, scratched or stuck onto surfaces, usually walls, within the urban landscape. When elaborating on the history of visual street art in Athens, Tuiyo told me that at the start “it was graffiti and it was all illegal”. He then continued, “Graffiti came from America, and is done with spray. Graffiti is letters that evolved with more colour. It doesn’t go into a gallery; that is graffiti”. Here Tuiyo highlights four key elements of graffiti:

1. It has its roots in the specific kind of street writing that occurred in Philadelphia and New York in the late 1960s (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017).
2. Graffiti began as tags that, with the incorporation of spray paint evolved in colour, style and complexity (A tag refers to the stylised lettering that acts as a writer’s unique signature) (Lachmann, 1988).
3. Graffiti is illegal.
4. Graffiti belongs in public space and not an art gallery.

Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi summarise these key points in their definition of graffiti as:

An unsolicited, frequently illegal, act of image-making, usually produced by the use of spray cans. Its focus is usually on words, tags and pseudonyms and their repetitive display on all kinds of surfaces. It is a very loose term, with multiple aesthetic outcomes and practitioners (2017, p. 4).

Another significant trait of graffiti which Tuiyo emphasises is that “the basic person will struggle to understand it, only those involved with graffiti understand”. Graffiti can seem impenetrable to the average person, with most urban dwellers being oblivious to the meanings and social dramas playing out through the “tangled mess of names” crawling across the city walls (Macdonald, 2001, p. 2). For this reason, graffiti is often labelled as senseless vandalism and is considered “dangerous, uninvited and illegal” (Macdonald, 2001, p. 3). Historically graffiti and its associated communities

have been subject to racialisation and criminalisation as detailed in Dickinson's (2008) examination of New York's war on graffiti.

The concept of vandalism has its basis in the French Revolution where it related to the destruction of works of art and monuments. Over time the term experienced a widening of its semantic field and now relates to the destruction and desecration of any object in a way that is considered unreasonable and devoid of meaning. The label of 'vandal' is socially stigmatised and implies "blindness, ignorance, stupidity, baseness or lack of taste" (Gamboni, 2013, p. 18). Graffiti artists are commonly labelled as vandals and deviants by the state, media, law enforcement and the general public. This stigma has only begun to change through the recognition and acclaim of certain artists by the art establishment.

Street art is an artistic practice that makes use of an array of images, symbols and graphic techniques. It can be considered a hybrid genre incorporating elements of graffiti practice with wider artistic styles and methodologies more akin to those found within the art establishment (Irvine, 2012). These can include but are not restricted to, the use of stickers, posters, stencils, paint, pencil, spray and collage. In contrast to graffiti, street art is usually created as a means of conveying symbolic messages to the wider public and is therefore more conceptually accessible than graffiti. In Athens, the general public proved to be more willing to consider street art as a legitimate art form, whilst works of graffiti were often viewed as deviant vandalism (further discussed in *Section 3.5*).

One significant similarity between graffiti and street art is that both thrive in public spaces, on buildings, walls, trains, buses, street signs and other urban structures. Like graffiti, much of the Athenian street art is often created illegally without approval. Globally, anti-graffiti campaigns view both graffiti and unsanctioned street art as vandalism and thus, as crimes (Ferrell, 2017). This similarity makes any exact definition of what is street art or graffiti, a subjective matter. So much so that even the artists themselves had very different conceptions about what each was. Tuiyo

summarised this issue stating that “it is difficult to say exactly what is and what isn’t street art or graffiti because everyone who creates something says, it is” he then gestured holding out his hands and nodding his head as though tacitly accepting the inevitability of such issues. He continued “In the last few years if you see street art on the street, it generally attracts people”. He explained street art as “a style with some political idea, that all people can see and understand”. Another participant who considered the difference between graffiti and street art to be stark, simply stated that “street art is one thing, and graffiti is another”. He continued to explain how during the crisis using the street as a medium of art creation had become a “fad” which “any kid can do with no practice or talent”. For him, street art is a work of art which is well thought out and involves a high level of artistic skill. Although he had started with graffiti, he felt that “the better street artists do more murals, something bigger and cleaner, rather than going out and doing something illegal”, which contributed to the city now looking “like a warzone”.

Over time, the crossover into street art has begun to bridge the gap between the radical art of the city street and the institutionalised art world. Almost all of my participants had their works at some point displayed in exhibitions, or had completed commissioned legal works of street art. Throughout Athens an increasing number of privately-owned street art galleries have opened, whilst traditional art galleries are also beginning to host exhibitions of prominent street artists. The indistinct line between graffiti and street art means that in the same city at the same time, graffiti and street art are instantaneously both “legal and illegal, celebrated and condemned, objects of both fear and infatuation” (Ferrell, 2017, p. 29). I will now use the experiences of four participants to highlight the different ways that artists navigate the contentious boundaries between graffiti and street art.

I came to find that participants viewed their relationship to graffiti and street art under three broad categories. Firstly, there were those participants who considered their art and practice to have emerged from, and subsequently remained firmly within the confines of graffiti. Secondly, the vast majority of

my participants considered themselves to be within a crossover category. Here artists described the common progression of first being introduced to graffiti and later developing their work into street art. Many of these artists were unconcerned with establishing strict distinctions between graffiti and street art and often created and collaborated in ways that visually melded the two practices. Crossover artists usually created both legal (commissioned/ permitted) and illegal (uncommissioned) works throughout the city. These participants were just as likely to be present at graffiti festivals as they were at street art exhibitions. Finally, the third category consists of participants that had consciously cut themselves off from graffiti and considered themselves purely as street artists. These participants generally worked professionally and made a living from their art through commissioned projects, and increasingly through selling canvases and presenting at exhibitions. It was common for the majority of their money and commissions to come from overseas. One artist highlighted this, stating that “here in Athens over the last few years, I have my studio and the city, the business part is overseas”. Another street artist explained that he enjoyed living in Athens and was lucky because he could “live here as a base, and do work overseas”. This third category often bordered with legal works of public art and at times traversed into the formal spaces of the art establishment. Even the artists within this category still maintained a close connection to the creation of work on the city streets. These three categories are not distinct nodes but exist as three general states upon a spectrum. From left to right, the spectrum as depicted in Figure 3.4 represents the movement from graffiti to crossover and then to street art.

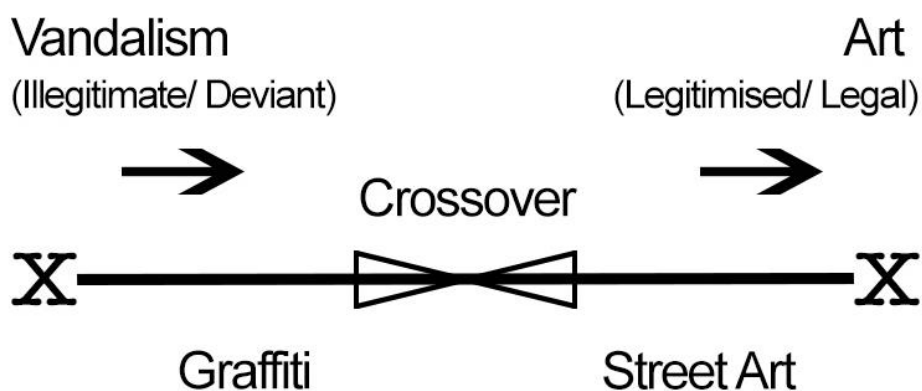


Figure 3.4 Graffiti & street art spectrum (produced by the author)



Artists can position themselves at any given point along the spectrum between these three broad categories. For example, artists that consider themselves as graffiti writers can range from those who create simpler tags (placed further left on the spectrum) to those who create large, colourful and complex works of graffiti lettering (further right towards the crossover with street art). The movement of the spectrum from left to right depicts the common momentum of an artist's development from graffiti into street art. Artists can skip back and forwards such as those who sometimes create graffiti and other times create street art. The vectorial movement indicates that at least in this study, none of the artists started with street art and then moved entirely back into graffiti. Artists can also enter into the spectrum at any given point without having followed the entirety of the common trajectory. However, those who only sporadically experiment with street art were often subject to criticism within the scene. Not having spent adequate time and effort developing within the graffiti/street art world often led to accusations of being inauthentic and simply following a trend (cf. Maxwell, 2003; Rodger, 2011). Macdonald's study of graffiti in London and New York supports this directional pathway through graffiti stating that:

Although some older writers work legally doing gallery or paid commission work, the majority start and sustain illegal careers. Illegality is a natural starting point for a new writer. First of all, their interest in graffiti is usually inspired by seeing other illegal writers' work. Second, the adventure, excitement and release of the illegal exercise play a large part in initially captivating their attention... Suffice it to say graffiti has a steep learning curve which writers follow and complete through practical illegal experience... older writers with developed skills and abilities are more likely to be doing legal work (2001, pp. 72-73).

As street art has become a prominent means of political self-expression throughout the crisis, so too has the international media and art world taken an interest in Athenian 'crisis art'. This has led some artists to condemn the lack of authenticity of works created by those who have taken to street art

as a fad. One artist expressed the opinion that too many people have started using street art as a means of getting “in front of the camera”, calling them “pseudo graffiti prophets”. In a Facebook post, street artist Fikos expressed his opinion on this topic:

The situation on the street art scene sucks... What is going on is that street art became a trend. Instagram fed this trend with fame. And wherever fame is, there are people trying to take a piece of it. Each day more and more artists, graphic designers, graffiti artists, become ‘muralists’ (2019).

In an interview, the street artist Skitsofrenis explained to me that as a result of the current infatuation with street art there was now:

...a lot of imitation. Some believe they are Banksy, some think they live in the subways of New York of the eighties and some that they are the reincarnation of Andy Warhol. I see a few fresh expressions here and there but they are the minority. Athens has the reason to paint but also has the duty to do it inspirationally.

The direction of the trajectory in Figure 3.4 is also indicative of society’s general perceptions of visual art in urban space, with tags considered deviant vandalism, and works of street art increasingly accepted by the art world and general community. The extreme left of the spectrum refers to works that society will generally perceive as having no artistic merit such as senseless scribbles and tagging. The extreme right of the spectrum begins to lead into ‘legitimate’ works of sanctioned public art.

Graffiti, street art and public art all exist in public space which can be conceptually considered as the space that is accessible to people without the need for permission or payment. In the modern city, public spaces are the sites where a diverse range of people interact, even if reluctantly, to produce common life (Harvey, 2012). As it is “the key site of the coming together of different actors and influences” public space becomes “the ‘soul’

of the city and breeding ground of its urban character” (Lehtovuori, 2016, p. 1). The city streets are sites of “social encounters and political protest... domination and resistance, places of pleasure and anxiety” (Fyfe, 1998, p. 1). However, this definition of public space is limited due to ever increasing amounts of control and restrictions imposed in the public sphere within modern cities (Bodnar, 2015). Public space can be considered as becoming segregated, simplified and over sanitised, shaped to encourage orderly movement with little interaction and a lack of friction, eliminating opportunities for deep communication (Lehtovuori, 2016). It is through appealing to different elements of urban spatial practice that graffiti and street art distinguish themselves from public art.

Public art refers to legal and commissioned works, falling within the bounds of urban planning and governance. It is subject to bureaucratic authorisations, spatial planning and city institutions. Like gallery art, public art is calculated and controlled by curatorial forces beyond the artists themselves. As a result, public art falls well inside the conceptual spaces of city planning that Lefebvre refers to as representations of space (1991). This form of spatial practice necessitates ordered engagement between citizens and urban spaces. The differentiating factor between street art and public art is that, street art is grounded in urban operational space, not in the space of urban planning and governance. Street art (as well as graffiti) fits within the element of spatial practice that Lefebvre calls representational space. This is the space of inhabitants and users that “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). It exists within the spaces created by lived experience and “defined by people mapping their own movements” and “daily relationships through the streets, neighbourhoods, and transit networks of the city” (Irvine, 2012, p. 239).

Unsanctioned street art resists the prevailing spatial practices projected by the state and governing bodies. Rather, it is an engagement with public and social issues that relate to the artist’s personal interests and relevant collective values. Through the creative engagement and subversion of urban space and spatial practice, street art is able to subvert the exertion of

power by the dominant cultural producers. Therefore, the distinction between street art and public art exists in the differing ways they engage with the socio-political elements of space. Street art and graffiti act as cultural heterotopias in that they create counter-hegemonic spaces of alternative ordering which challenge the dominant spaces of social order (Hetherington 1997 in Zaimakis, 2015). Where street art and graffiti are heterotopic urban practices, public art can be considered isotopic (existing within the rationalised spatial order of the state) (Harvey, 2012). Like all precarious definitions of art, the distinction between street art and public art is also porous. As street art is gaining recognition within the art world, so too are street artists increasingly traversing boundaries, simultaneously creating illegal, legal and gallery works. To further explore the different ways that artists navigate the spectrum of visual art in public space, I will turn to the experiences of four participants.

The artist Tuiyo's practice is largely representative of those who categorise themselves as graffiti artists. In fact, Tuiyo is an authority on the subject of Greek graffiti, having released a series of books documenting, as suggested by the title, *The History of Graffiti in Greece*. These books chronologically trace the history of Graffiti in Greece through images and the first-hand accounts of early graffiti writers, starting from the 1980s. Tuiyo began painting in 1999, and is now considered to be an 'old school' writer, a label he was quick to dismiss. He was well aware that the initial writers in Greece started working back in the 80s and early 90s, almost a decade before he got a start in the scene. Through our conversations Tuiyo conveyed a keen interest in the historical development of modern graffiti practice in Greece, he explained:

I always wanted to know how it came to Greece? I wanted to know who was before me in the 80's, 90's. It is amazing, it came from breakdance to Greece. They (the early writers) watched videos and listened to music from America, they saw the breakers in photos, and the background was graffiti.

During our first meeting at a cafe in Gazi, he spoke to me about how he was first introduced to graffiti. Tuiyo grew up in Kallithea, a densely populated neighbourhood between the Athens city centre and the port of Piraeus. He recalled that the first types of graffiti he saw in Athens were all related to football clubs and their associated fans:

Back then, and further back, it was the trend to write something and then write the number of your football team. For example, Olympiakos had 7, Panathanaikos had 13, someone would write Argiris 13 or Harris 7... there was lots of it.

He then clarified that when he was growing up he personally knew of two people who did graffiti without football references "I saw it and said what is this? I spoke to them and they told me it was graffiti". These graffiti writers inducted him into the norms of graffiti culture stressing to the young Tuiyo that "if you want to graffiti, no football!". Following this experience, Tuiyo eventually formed a graffiti crew with his friends. The crew named themselves Frogs, and soon became prolific in the Greek graffiti scene. Frogs was formed whilst Tuiyo was still in school with six of his peers, but the group soon grew in size. "It became bigger as we started adding people in". At one stage "It got up to 20 people, but then we cut it back down again and said just friends. It is six people again".

Tuiyo was explicit in labelling himself as a graffiti writer as opposed to a street artist. As seen in Figures 3.5 and 3.6 which depict both Tuiyo's crew tag and his personal tag, his style is distinctively influenced by New York style graffiti lettering. Even so, his extended networks included both graffiti and street artists. He was the main organiser of an annual event called the *Old School Graffiti Meeting* that brought together some of the most well-known 'old school' graffiti writers and street artists (Figure 3.7 was taken at the event in November 2015). The event was an opportunity for artists to reunite, create, collaborate and importantly, to hangout. This was illustrative of the interconnectedness of graffiti and street art, as it brought together artists who all shared a basis in graffiti, regardless of whether or not they

transitioned into street art. The festivals were organised legally and the painting took place on the walls of different urban locations. The result of each year's festival was the creation of a shared urban canvas that portrayed a wide range of works from New York style graffiti to politically orientated street art murals. Tuiyo emphasised that this event was not only for established writers, but also provided an opportunity for young graffiti artists to be exposed to the practice by watching the creative process of the old school writers.



Figure 3.5 Frogs crew tag, Athens



Figure 3.6 Tuiyo tag, Athens



Figure 3.7 Old School Graffiti Meeting, 2015, Neo Faliro, Piraeus

At the 2015 *Old School Graffiti Meeting* I first met Alone 98, a street artist I had previously spoken to via social media but had not yet met in person. Alone 98's journey through graffiti toward street art is indicative of the crossover category, within which the majority of my participants placed themselves. His distinctive style incorporates the embodiment of "one face within the other" to explore psychosocial "contradictions... expression and sentiment" (see Figure 3.9 For an example of Alone 98's work). Alone 98 seamlessly traversed the boundary between street art and graffiti, regularly participating in graffiti, street art and hip hop festivals and painting sessions. During an interview, he explained that he was first introduced to art as a child by learning to sketch, something that he continues to do. His journey into graffiti began at a similar time, and in a similar way to that recalled by Tuiyo. He knew very little about graffiti prior to being exposed to it through his friendship group. He recalled that as he got more involved, he started painting in increasingly illegal and risky places throughout the city. For young graffiti writers the audacity of the act itself played a central role in the practice, with writers confronting the "uncertain safety of neighbourhoods, the conditions of buildings, and the policing of property" (Irvine, 2012, p. 5). As previously mentioned, the more visual and riskier a spot, the more prestige was associated with the work and the writer. As he further developed his practice, most of his painting remained illegal but he no



longer worked in the kinds of high-risk spots that gave young graffiti writers notoriety and status.

Alone 98 studied and worked in graphic design and began incorporating these skills into his street art. During a painting session, I was able to witness his artistic process which included the reworking of digital images using graffiti spray painting techniques. The combination of the two printouts from Figure 3.8 were used as references for creating the work depicted on the far right of Figure 3.9. Like many of the street artists in Athens, his practice was informed by multiple disciplines, yet still closely connected to graffiti. For Alone 98, graffiti was appealing not only as a form of expression but as a social experience. I regularly found him collaborating on works with friends (both graffiti and street artists) at painting sessions. Sessions that were either legal or illegal, but always included *parea*, beer and plenty of joking around. Figure 3.9 is a collaborative work in progress being crafted by Alone 98 and graffiti artist Spant; responsible for the graffiti lettering on the left-hand side of the photo.



*Figure 3.8 Aerosol cans and prints, abandoned factory in Perissos, Athens*





*Figure 3.9 Alone 98 and Spant creating street art in an abandoned factory, Perissos, Athens*

Within the street art category of the previously established spectrum (Figure 3.4) are those who like B., have their roots in graffiti, but eventually moved exclusively into street art and visual art (which he created in his studio). Like others, B. also recalled that prior to New York style graffiti appearing in Athens, wall writings related to football:

...when I started in 96 in Athens, it didn't exist (Graffiti and street art), it was a virgin, completely, you didn't see anything, you might have seen something for a football team, but it might be one here, and one 10km away.

During a conversation in his studio he described that:

Back in the day I used to do graffiti, letters and all that, but slowly slowly, I shifted towards street art. I wrote my tag within the city, I knew where it was and how I could move through the city, but no concept existed. It was just leave your mark, write your name, and I have been there.

B. studied architecture at university which influenced the development of his style and methodology:

Between 18 years old to 20, I began seeing the city with a different eye... Within architecture I began to understand art's worth within public space, I discovered the concept, the message. You can say something above and beyond writing your name.

Through the fusion of the graffiti ethos and his architectural studies, B. developed a unique style which incorporated the contrast created by painting vibrant colours and playful images on dilapidated urban walls. He described his style as:

...very bright, sharp. It is a style that through the years I have developed. From the beginning, I liked bright colours and sharpness... The important thing for me is the choice of the wall... When I choose a wall, I want it to be old and dirty, to have that contrast. I never go to a clean white wall because the contrast will not show.

Figures 3.10 and 3.11 indicate the stark contrast created between B.'s works and their decrepit urban contexts.



Figure 3.10 A work created by B. in his distinctive collage style, Central Athens



Figure 3.11 A work created by B. in Central Athens

B. has established himself as an internationally acclaimed artist and regularly travels to create commissioned street art murals. He also creates visual art in a variety of mediums from his studio located in Athens. B. is a street artist who creates both commissioned and uncommissioned works within public space, as well as being a studio and gallery artist. As a result, B.'s works straddle the boundary between street art, public art and 'institutional' gallery art.

Fikos is another artist that had made a distinctive move away from graffiti to street art, and developed a career creating commissioned murals both in Greece and overseas. Like my other informants, he was first exposed to the potential of street art through graffiti. Of this, Fikos explained:

Look, I started from graffiti and then I saw what street artists did. It had started after 2000, from 2005/ 2006 there were five or six people who did very good street art in areas like Psirri.

Fikos developed his unique approach to street art not only through the influence of these other artists, but also through his study of traditional Byzantine iconography. Over a coffee at a café overlooking the Parthenon, he elaborated on his studies in art, relaying to me his time studying iconography with the distinguished artist George Kordis. Under Kordis' unique guidance Fikos was encouraged to adapt and incorporate the Byzantine style in his works. As major adaptations to Byzantine iconography is a contentious topic within Orthodox teachings, Fikos' studies with Kordis were particularly influential in allowing him to experiment with the usually strict style. His street art murals utilise historical and mythological Greek events and stories with meanings that he feels are diachronic and equally relevant to the modern world. The ability to bridge vast temporally dispersed events and assemble them into a commentary of the present make Fikos' works highly distinctive and conceptually evocative (Appadurai, 1981; Knight, 2015). Figure 3.12 is a mural created by Fikos that depicts the formation of the *demos* (municipality) of ancient Athens.





Figure 3.12 *The Formation of the Demos*, by Fikos 2012, Iera Odos, Athens. Picture courtesy of artist

Fikos moved away entirely from the illegal works of graffiti with which he had commenced his journey into urban art. Whilst discussing the creation of illegal works of graffiti and overtly political street art within Athens, he noted that:

They do it more to say something instead of wanting to create art. I think the younger artists do that, but the better ones have thrown that out of their art. What I have seen is that the better street artists do more murals, something bigger, cleaner, instead of going out and doing illegal works.

Despite having been a graffiti writer in the past, Fikos was critical of the amount of graffiti tags in Athens and considered them intrinsically linked to a cultural lack of respect prevalent amongst the youth:

Many people come who have not worked on something at home, and they make a stupidity and they do that everywhere, they have filled up the entire place. I worked for many years in my house until I developed my art, and in the last few years in which I started to do it on the street it is more mature.

As a result of his widely acclaimed street art murals and integration into public and institutional art, Fikos' practice falls on the right of the

graffiti/street art spectrum. His placement is further solidified by his choice to distinctly separate himself from his graffiti antecedents.

The individual journeys of these four artists highlight the profound role graffiti has played in the development of the diverse range of art that now exists in the urban spaces of Athens. Artists traverse the graffiti/street art spectrum, often moving through graffiti and toward street art in their own unique ways which mediate the fluid boundaries both linking and distinguishing aspects of their artistic practice. Beyond the insights of urban artists, I will now explore the labelling of art as either vandalism, graffiti or street art through the broader social perceptions surrounding these contentious works.

### **3.4 Contested Legitimacy: The Slippery Slope Between Art and Vandalism**

Through conversations and interviews with a wide range of artists and art enthusiasts (including painters, actors, musicians, curators and educators) I was exposed to many differing opinions on vandalism, graffiti and street art. Due to the fact that the full spectrum of vandalism through to art is so profoundly entangled within the urban spaces of Athens, it was rare for people not to have a strong opinion about it. I found that many older generation artists who had established careers well prior to the crisis generally disliked unsanctioned urban art and tended to view vandalism and graffiti as a singular category. Even so, many still considered specific street art murals as perfectly valid works of artistic expression. These opinions were supported by aesthetic and symbolic assessments and were predicated on the work not damaging or obscuring any historic or meaningful urban structures. During an interview with Dafni, a teacher at the Athens School of Fine Arts, she described a clear distinction between graffiti, which she considered vandalism, and street art. She remarked that “there is some amazing street art in Athens, but very little”. Dafni viewed the vast majority of street painting as vandalism, citing soccer hooligans who paint *Olympiakos* (Greek soccer team) slogans in the street.

Similarly, Kosta Spyriounis, a well-known artist who worked as the curator of the Athens War Museum, expressed a disdain towards graffiti and street art. Whilst talking about art in his office beneath the museum, he described street art as:

...very freaky, I don't like it at all, they dirty everything. I want to see the old houses as old houses, why do they have to draw on them? I don't like that at all, it is very ugly and annoying. They dirty everything, whatever they can find. If they find an electricity box they will draw on it, why do they have to do that?

Kosta's opinions of street art didn't come as a great surprise due to my familiarity with his body of work. A central theme present through much of his painting is the visual rejuvenation of neo-classical buildings and houses from around Greece. Kosta would seek inspiration from within the architecture of forgotten, abandoned, derelict and vandalised structures which he then painted as he imagined they would have been in their prime. When visually recreating these structures Kosta would often paint them outside of their usual contexts, detaching them from their often-bleak urban surroundings. One exemplary work depicts a pristine neo-classical building removed from its chaotic urban context, and instead surrounded by a serene beach. His artworks create dream like atmospheres, drawing attention to the 'soul' of urban structures uninhibited and unobscured by urban reality (de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998). During our conversation, Kosta explained a seminal moment that informed his view of aesthetics; a view which is seemingly at odds with street art:

I had a radiator in my house and I had put what I needed to hide it. A teacher of mine saw it and said, 'that is the body of a radiator, why would you change it and make it a cupboard?' He told me to always leave it as it is, because that is its beauty.

Kosta described that this is precisely what graffiti and street art seek to do, they hide the city beneath layers of tags, stencils and paint.

Some individuals felt that graffiti and street art were indicative of wider endemic social and cultural issues within the country; often linking the practices to a lack of respect amongst the youth. This idea was conveyed to me passionately during a conversation with video artist Tassos, at the Benaki Museum cafe. The place was chosen by Tassos specifically because museums are some of the rare places in Athens where smoking prohibition is enforced. As we spoke, he explained that the lack of adherence to smoking laws, was related to the proliferation of vandalism, graffiti and street art throughout the city. Tassos expressed a view which echoed the presupposition that prevalent signs of crime, vandalism and disrepair embolden further acts of crime and vandalism (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). He rationalised that because “the council doesn’t look after the streets, the youth feel entitled to graffiti and scribble over everything”. Fikos similarly condemned what he described in an online statement as:

...the emergence of the damaged, over-painted cities phenomenon. Cities with literally hundreds of murals, painted on buildings with nice architecture, buildings full of windows, columns, doors etc. Structures that never meant to be painted, become canvases for the new, thirsty wave of graffiti writers and artists who became ‘muralists’ (2019).

Here Fikos reiterated the belief that architecturally significant buildings should not be painted over. Even so, he still acknowledged that street art was one of the most significant artistic developments in recent history, but lamented the direction it had recently taken. Some artists, such as actress Peggy Stathakopoulou blamed the perceived culturally imbued lack of respect on the failings of corrupt politicians and a broken education system.

Contrary to negative perceptions, there were also a range of artists that, although they did not participate in graffiti and street art, saw the value in



these styles. This was particularly prevalent amongst artists who were in their own ways experimenting with non-institutionalised art formats. One such example is Anna, a set designer and member of site-specific theatre group Urban Dig. During a conversation at a popular cafe in the trendy neighbourhood of Psirri, Anna shared her views on street art. She was quick to state that although she was not against it, and in fact thought that there were some amazing works, she observed distinct boundaries separating what should and shouldn't be considered art. She felt that the increasingly political nature of street art had the potential to turn it from art into ideological "propaganda". She disliked the use of public space as a means of forcefully presenting personal political ideals to the public. She believed artists should carefully "look and listen, to express what is happening. Otherwise they are just pushing an agenda like a political party". Other artists shared the view that using the streets as a mode of ideological expression was offensive, with one stating that "people know the political issues, they know the crisis, art doesn't always have to remind them of that, it should take them away from the reality of their issues". Another denounced the use of public space by graffiti artists as he considered it to be "shameless self-advertisement".

Outside of artists, diverse opinions about graffiti and street art abounded within the general public. There were certainly those who considered all forms of illegal street art as vandalism. However, the vast majority of people had their own ideas about what constitutes the boundaries between vandalism and art. As the crisis increasingly took its toll on the city through business closures, forced evictions, and urban decay, many citizens expressed the view that street art added colour, beauty and vibrancy to an otherwise dreary urban reality. During a graffiti and hip hop festival, an elderly woman and her middle-aged daughter walked past Alone 98 as he was painting. We were in a neighbourhood that, although once considered upper-class had suffered a significant drop in value and quality of life throughout the crisis. Scattered through the streets were foreclosed businesses, abandoned buildings, migrant quarters and squats. The festival was held in what remained of a burnt down building, which had been converted into what looked resembled a post-apocalyptic public space. The

pair stopped their walk to watch Alone 98 as he worked on one of his distinctive creations. Greek hip hop music blared over the speakers set up for the festival as two child migrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo danced, imitating their favourite American hip hop artists. It was early in the afternoon and the majority of attendees hadn't yet arrived at the festival. Alone 98 noticed the women and said, "sorry for all the noise" in a friendly, yet semi-apologetic tone. The younger of the two replied "no not at all it is great, we like having life in the neighbourhood". The older woman then said, "I have lived here my whole life, this is art not graffiti" as she pointed to the works being created. They appreciated what the artists were doing and the way their work brought a renewed vibrancy to their neighbourhood. Within the city, the reception of art in public space was heterogeneous, with even the artists themselves presenting conflicting ideas about what constituted art and vandalism.

When I asked one street artist what he thought of the amount of street art in Athens, he voiced the opinion that:

It looks like a warzone, I don't know how it looks to you, someone from somewhere else? but to me it looks ugly, filthy, I don't like it at all. I go to other countries in Europe, America and I don't know where else, and it is clean and I like it, you don't see tags like this at all.

My other participants were generally subtler in their aesthetic judgment of the works of fellow street artists. Yet they still shared a similar sentiment regarding the differentiation between 'senseless' vandalism and street art. This kind of 'senseless' vandalism was usually attributed to soccer gangs, young 'wannabe' anarchists, and occasionally to members of far-right organisations (although they generally had much less of a visual presence on the streets). This category of vandalism was generally occupied by written words, political symbols, acts of desecration and scribbles. Vandalism often constituted sprayed statements that functioned linguistically without a focus on artistic and aesthetic function (Barthes, 1968; Gell, 1998). Likewise, blatantly obvious political symbols were rarely

considered by street artists as constituting works of art. Many artists complained about anarchist taggers turning everything into the anarchist encircled 'A' symbol. One participant explained that whenever he painted the 'O' in his name, after a few days there would be an 'A' painted inside of it. These kinds of taggers "don't think, they just write over anything they see" he said as he laughed. The majority of graffiti writers and street artists that I spoke to had complained about having their work vandalised. Although most participants accepted the ephemeral nature of street art, they still expressed a level of aggravation with the inevitability and speed of random acts of desecration.

Figure 3.13 (following page) is a mural painted by Alone 98 in the coastal neighbourhood of Palaio Faliro that depicts a young girl draped in a Greek flag surrounded by sharks. On the top left corner of the mural the artist writes "I am a European ally with superpowers! Go and get fucked (*re*) you are tyrants". The work is a statement about the precarious relationship between Greece as represented by the female faces and the flag, and its "European allies" symbolised by the sharks. This is a critique of the crisis and the predatory nature of the European institutions, that disguised as friends have exploited Greece through cycles of debt and austerity. I had first seen photographs of this mural circulating online, and eventually had the opportunity to see it in person. Immediately I noticed an Anarchist 'A' and ACAB (all cops are bastards) painted over the Greek flag.

During a conversation with another street artist, I brought up what I had seen happen to Alone 98's work. To this he replied, "vandals don't see the art... they don't take the time to understand it, they see a Greek flag and they draw over it". What tended to annoy street artists was senseless desecration that showed no engagement with the work and its preferred symbolically encoded message (Hall, 1980). In this instance, the work was not intended to be nationalistic, but instead a commentary on the crisis and European power structures; despite this the flag was desecrated as an attack on a symbol of the state (Riches, 1986).



Figure 3.13 Street art created by Alone 98, Palaio Faliro

Participants also felt that vandalism was especially “a shame when done on marble and old buildings”. The space in which something was placed significantly influenced its classification as art or vandalism. The defacement of historical buildings and monuments was met with widespread disapproval amongst the artistic communities that I had spent time with. Interestingly, none of the artists expressed any concern at their work being painted over by other street and graffiti artists, when replaced with another ‘work of art’. Controversy over the distinction between vandalism and street art was particularly salient in cases where the work in question was of widespread cultural significance, such as in the following example.

### 3.5 “Knowledge speaks – Wisdom listens” Lessons from the Owl

In October 2016, an impressive piece of art depicting an owl appeared on the ramshackle walls of a corner building in Metaxourgio, a central neighbourhood that is exemplary of the dichotomies present in modern Athens. It is an area with high levels of destitution, addiction and prostitution. Concurrently, it hosts thriving bars, nightclubs, taverns, galleries and unsanctioned arts centres. Many refugee, community and art groups have taken up residence in Metaxourgio, making use of the area’s empty buildings, by striking good faith deals with owners, cheaply renting, or illegally occupying them. It was in this neighbourhood that the renowned street artist WD created his well-known work *Knowledge Speaks - Wisdom Listens* (Figure 3.14).



Figure 3.14 *Knowledge Speaks-Wisdom Listens* by WD, Metaxourgio, Athens

During a brief conversation with WD on the final night of his solo exhibition at the Sarri 12 street art gallery, he explained how he always sought “to create art that has a meaning”. Many of his works produced in Greece and internationally, were highly symbolic and dealt with both current and

diachronic social issues. The artist described the intended meaning of this particular work on his website:

The owl symbolizes wisdom and at the same time is the symbol of the goddess Athena, who gave her name to the city of Athens. On the other hand, owl as a bird famous for its extremely good vision of the long distances especially in low light. Today, Greece, and not only, experiences a very dark phase and I think it's time for us to remember the wisdom of this creature (WD, 2016).

This work of art melds seamlessly into its urban canvas, playing with the contours of the crumbling building, it enmeshes itself into the urban flow as opposed to resisting it (Lefebvre, 2004). The picture transforms the aesthetic of the wall, but does not interrupt its urban function, leaving visible the street name markers and adhering to the architecture's neoclassical style. This work was met with wide acclaim and quickly went viral over social media.

Not long after the artwork was completed new divisive images appeared online showing that it had been vandalised with pink spray-paint. The vandal wrote the word viral (perhaps mocking the work going viral over social media and predicting the ensuing viral nature of the vandalism), along with scribbles all over the original piece. Early images of the vandalism appeared on a Greek Facebook page called *Stories of Graphic Madness*. The page condemned the act calling the vandal "the idiot with the pink spray" and "the asshole of the day". The post spread swiftly over social media being shared 645 times, with an additional 3000 comments and responses. The ensuing online dialogue delved deep into the philosophical debate surrounding the ephemeral nature of street art and graffiti.

No one contested the opinion that the owl was an exceptional work of art that added positively to the culture of the city. The owl was painted as part of the *The Little Paris of Athens* festival organised by *The Athens Art Network*, a collective of independent art groups. Therefore, although the owl

was a work of street art, it was legitimised not only by the quality of the work, but also by it being created within the context of an art festival (the work thus straddles between the realms of street art and public art). Although there was a collective agreement on the work's artistic merit, the actions of the vandal became the subject of intense debate and disagreement. Most of the comments condemned the act labelling it as the very definition of vandalism. This highlighted how the response to vandalism was significantly influenced by the cultural value attributed to the object being vandalised.

One commenter described the vandal as being an expression of modern Greek society; once again linking vandalism to wider issues of disrespect endemic in the social body. This opinion was symbolically supported by the owl's mythological association with the goddess Athena, the namesake of the city. The desecration of the owl which represents both wisdom and the city itself, was connected directly to the social and moral decay perceived to be tearing at the city's fabrics. In contrast to these opinions, some expressed the sentiment that ephemerality is at the very centre of graffiti and street art practice. Certain individuals noted that street art gains meaning because you can never be sure about how long it will remain. They claimed that this is what makes street art a powerful reactionary and rebellious art form. Others questioned why people were so upset about the owl, and not about the 'idiotic' tags and graffiti written over everyone's houses and shops. One commentator simply stated that "art on the street is ephemeral".

In this instance, the owl was considered so important that a group of art conservationists called St.a.co (Street Art Conservators), took it upon themselves to restore the work to its initial form. Figure 3.14 is an image I took in 2019 after the restoration of the owl; only very faint remnants of the pink vandalism remain. Most street art is not so lucky and suffers at the whims of the elements present in its public urban context. Street art is inherently ephemeral due to the nature of public space and is subject to vandalism, removal, decay and the host of agential forces that affect all life within the city. Graffiti and street art exist outside the protection provided by

the art establishment which seeks to ensure the safety and value of its works. However, what makes street art vulnerable, is also what give it its ultimate power. Namely, the ability to react and comment on the instantaneous unfolding of social and political drama. Arts of the street, ephemeral as they are, remain free of the gatekeeping and bureaucratic practices that control and shape institutionalised and formalised art.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the arrival of graffiti into Athens, its profound influence on street art, and the social perceptions surrounding these contentious practices. Although the graffiti style, ethos and method has spread globally, its intimate engagement with public urban space makes it unique to the locality in which it exists. One of the key tensions in processes of globalisation is the struggle between cultural homogenisation and heterogenisation (Appadurai, 1990). The case of graffiti emphasises that the flows of globalisation do not produce totalising global uniformity and homogeneity (Eriksen, 2007). In Greece, the New York influenced graffiti style was localised to meet the expressive and creative needs of artists. Early practitioners in Athens learnt the methods, styles, codes and signs associated with graffiti, and have increasingly incorporated elements derived from their own personal and social backgrounds. The individuality and creativity of practitioners is a crucial element in the meaningful development of an art form, and one of the driving factors behind the vibrancy of the Athens art scene.

The ethos and unique spatial engagement associated with graffiti and street art have subsequently impacted the wider art scene. The capacity to work autonomously outside of art institutions has been adapted by a broad range of artists and art collectives as a means of presenting their works within the economic constraints of the crisis. The following chapter moves on to examine the role that the unique spatial and social conditions of Athens have played in allowing the art scene to thrive in the distinctive way it has.



## **Chapter 4**

### **The Spatial Composition of a Street Art Paradise**

This chapter explores the role that Athens and its urban spaces have played in the formation of what Tuiyo described to me as a “graffiti paradise”. In Athens, art is entangled with the public urban spaces which constitute the sites of social interaction and everyday life. These spaces afford artists unique opportunities to create and present works ranging from graffiti, street art, site-specific performance, public interventions and outdoor concerts. In place of galleries and theatres, spaces such as city streets, central squares, squats, and abandoned buildings (factories, old apartments, decrepit neo-classical houses) have emerged as central sites of the developing Athens art scene.

In this chapter I trace the historical factors that have instigated the development of the physical, conceptual and social spaces of the modern city. Specifically, I examine how the Greek state, by tacitly encouraging questionable building practices as a means of dealing with rapid population growth, unintentionally set the precedent for the establishment of highly contested public urban spaces. High-density living and a lack of private outdoor space means public space is a site of regular everyday interaction, socialisation and political debate. The centrality of public space in everyday life has meant that both historically, and throughout the crisis it has emerged as a zone of oppression, resistance and violence. I explore the significant social practices that have evolved within this contested space, such as occupation movements and illegal squatting. These counter-state spatial practices are closely linked to the proliferation of street art, graffiti and other anti-institutional art forms throughout the city. The highly political and social nature of public urban space in Athens, has provided a fertile context for a radical and experimental art scene to take root and flourish.

To theoretically frame these ideas about the production of Athenian urban space I turn to the spatial triad developed by Lefebvre (1991). By drawing upon this work I examine how the cultural and economic ‘fringe’ positioning of Athens (administratively and conceptually European, yet socially closer to the ‘exotic’ other) has manifested a “social life far more intense” than that which exists within the ‘Global North’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 373). To support this idea, I evaluate the way the historical development of social space in Athens challenges the conceived spaces of urban planning. The prevalence of art throughout the city streets is indicative of the prevalence of social space; the space which contests homogenisation and facilitates deviations, diversity and individuality (Watkins, 2005). To further highlight this idea, the Athens art scene is considered in relation to those of Berlin, New York and Melbourne. Here a tension becomes visible between the forces of gentrification which seek to incorporate anti-institutional art practises into the conceived and controlled spaces of urban planning and governance. This emerged as a pertinent point of discussion and debate within the Athens art scene during the period of fieldwork (expanded on further in *Chapter Seven*).

Finally, the chapter explores one of the starkest visual indicators of the crisis in Athens; the vast amount of abandoned, forgotten and decaying buildings scattered through the city centre. These spaces, largely products of the crisis and long-term mismanagement haunt physical and perceived urban space. Artists described these spaces as “characters” and “ghosts”, treating them with a degree of agency as a result of their influence and affectivity (de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998; Deleuze, 1978). These spaces are the key sites in which practices such as squatting, illegal occupations and collective self-organisation have thrived. They also afford artists the opportunity to experiment outside of the confines of institutional settings. Through the communion that exists between artists, activists and decaying urbanity, these buildings and their ghosts are shown to actively influence the social world. The agential capacity of decaying urban space is explored through the idea of affect to show how

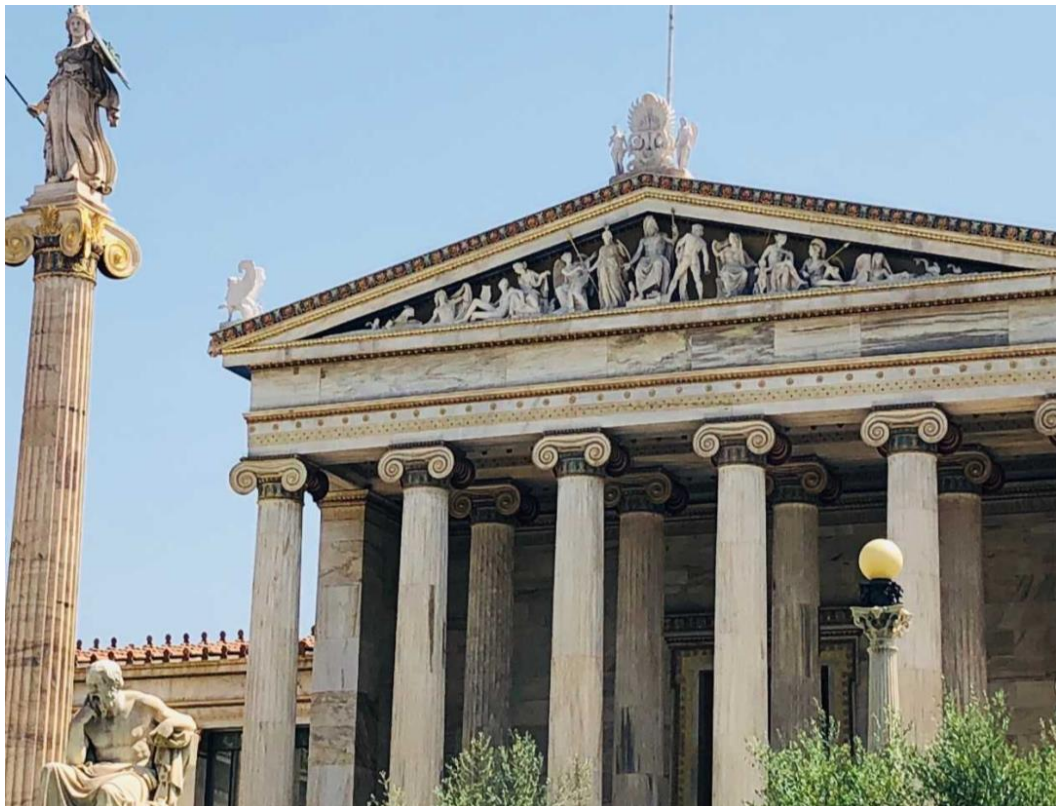
material agencies influence the social world through affordances and atmospheres. Overall, this chapter seeks to highlight the prominent role that Athens as a city has played in the formation of a radical and vibrant art scene.

#### **4.1 The Historical Production of Contested Space**

To explore the extent to which the city has helped shape the art scene, I will first trace the history of the polykatoikia (multi-story apartment block); a defining aspect of the Athenian urban landscape. Historical periods of uncontained urban expansion, and the rampant construction outside of formal city planning, have turned Athens into a distinctive, yet seemingly chaotic metropolis. It is in this context that artists have turned to public space as a means of creating and presenting their artworks. In this section, the city's development will be traced from the time of its rebuilding following liberation from Ottoman occupation; which began in 1453 after the fall of Constantinople and lasted until the Greek Revolution of 1821-1832.

During the War for Independence Athens had become a battleground, and following the siege of the Acropolis in 1827, most of the town's buildings were left either completely destroyed or severely damaged (Chryssostalis, 2007). Although the exact number is difficult to determine, the population of Athens after the war was only somewhere around 12,000 (Leontidou, 2010), with some estimates even lower; between 10,000 (Kallivretakis, 2009) and 6000 (Marmaras, 1989). Although the war led to the formation of an independent Greek state, its sovereignty was compromised due to the influence that England, Russia and France played in Greek affairs during and after the war (Tucker, 2018). In 1831, Ioannis Kapodistrias, the first head of state in post-Ottoman Greece was assassinated whilst attending church in Nafplion (the original Greek capital).

Although Kapodistrias was briefly superseded by his brother, the three Great Powers, seeking to establish a stable government, eventually appointed Bavarian prince Otto as the King of Greece in 1832 (Sarbanes, 2006). In 1833, Athens was declared as the new capital city of the Greek State encouraging an initial wave of population movement (Marmaras, 1989). Bavarian technocrats and the newly appointed King Otto took to rebuilding the city that had been devastated by violent sieges and battles (Katsibokis, 2013). German artists who were infatuated with the ideals and architecture of ancient Greece were employed to redesign the city in a neoclassical style influenced by its glorious Hellenic past. This initially involved the construction of impressive public premises (Such as the Athens Academy in Figure 4.1), but was soon also adapted into the general building of private residences (Katsibokis, 2013). Between 1833 to 1922, the devastated post-Ottoman Athens was transformed into a bustling neo-classical capital (Chryssostalis, 2007).



*Figure 4.1 The Athens Academy built between the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, picture as of 2018*

As time progressed the population of Athens began to rapidly expand. The demand for housing became clear in the wake of the First World War with the arrival of Greek refugees from Asia Minor and the Black Sea resulting from the Greek-Turkish population exchange (Marmaras, 1989). Between 1922-1923 more than 1,600,000 refugees arrived into Greece, with some 500,000 arriving directly into Athens (Katsibokis, 2013, p. 135). During the period 1916-1926 the number of new houses in Athens increased by 30 percent whilst the population had increased by 138 percent (an official number that did not account for refugees) (Marmaras, 1989, p. 49). Prior to the arrival of the refugees, Athens was already facing a dire housing shortage as city planning did not meet the demands of the increasing number of people arriving to seek work in the urban centre (Chryssostalis, 2007). The refugees were settled in satellite communities in the urban fringes of the existing city as part of a town planning policy passed in 1924. Low cost housing complexes were built on the outskirts of Athens and Piraeus, and new suburbs were constructed for refugees with the financial means to purchase property (Chryssostalis, 2007). However, these housing projects did not meet the needs of the vast number of refugees and makeshift camps eventually transformed into long-term settlements, creating districts outside of city plans. This contributed to increased urban sprawl throughout the 1920's which eventually saw Athens and Piraeus meld into a single urban entity (Chryssostalis, 2007; Marmaras, 1989).

The city had a low gross density which was considered to be an economic burden due to the expensive infrastructural work in way of water supply, sewage, electric power and telecommunications required to meet the needs of the expanding population (Marmaras, 1989). To overcome this, politicians and urban planners decided that the urban area needed to be restricted and its height extended; a thesis that led to the introduction of multi-story building to solve issues associated with modernisation and population growth (Marmaras, 1989). These problems were the impetus for the law of horizontal property that was adopted by Athens in 1929 (Vronti, 2016). Law 3741/1929, *On Horizontal*

*Ownership* made it possible to own part of a multi-story building, thus legalising apartment ownership and encouraging land development and real estate profit (Chryssostalis, 2007; Makas & Conley, 2009). The result of this law saw many single-family houses demolished and replaced with apartments. Between 1930 and 1940 approximately 450 new apartment buildings had been constructed in Athens (Makas & Conley, 2009).

The next major changes in the city's design occurred between 1950 and 1975 in the aftermath of the Second World War and resulting Civil War (Chryssostalis, 2007; Economou, 2014). After the withdrawal of Axis forces from Greece, hostilities broke out between government forces backed by the United Kingdom and the United States, and the Communist Party of Greece. The brutal fighting throughout the course of the Civil War (1946 to 1949) once again reduced Athens to ruins (Katsibokis, 2013). After the victory of government forces, the state encouraged private building, and ushered in a period of urban development which drastically changed the city (Katsibokis, 2013). The population of Athens more than doubled between 1951-1981 due to mass movements of people from rural areas into the city in search of employment; particularly in construction and the industrial sector (Dragonas, 2014; Economou, 2014). This era of rapid population growth was largely responsible for the shape of the city as it is today. During this period, many houses were built illegally outside of city plans, or legally based on the Antiparochi system introduced in 1959 (Chryssostalis, 2007; Dragonas, 2014; Economou, 2014).

Once again, unable to cope with housing requirements, the government introduced the Antiparochi system as a form of welfare policy in place of state funded housing. The system encouraged landowners to exchange their houses (many still single-family) to make way for multiple story apartment complexes. The Antiparochi system allowed landowners to turn their plot over to developers who would then fund the construction. In return, developers would

compensate landowners by giving them a number of agreed upon apartments in the finished building (Dragonas, 2014). This agreement allowed the owners of the plot to not only secure housing for their family, but also provided the opportunity for steady revenue through rental of unused apartments. For developers, this system meant they could obtain land without having to purchase it. Their share of the apartments was commonly sold in advance based on the preliminary plans which further minimised their initial investment (Chrysostalis, 2007).

The system was supported by the state through tax privileges incentivising development, as well as a leniency towards illegal building practices and blasé quality control; which made the system particularly lucrative for small construction companies (Vronti, 2016). New concrete technology was appropriated by inexperienced workers and building materials were generally locally produced, leading to a flexible building industry (Dragonas, 2014). The state anticipated that the promotion of the construction sector would have a positive effect on the economy (Vronti, 2016). The plan also capitalised on land by creating more floor area ratio and surplus value out of existing plots. Ultimately the government's strategy of tolerance towards unlicensed building led to the development of extensive proletarian neighbourhoods and, combined with pre-existing refugee neighbourhoods, contributed to the development of slums (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011).

The polykatoikia that came from this period still line the city streets and are a distinctive constituent of Athenian urban space (Vronti, 2016). These buildings are on average around four to five stories high, constructed in irregular plots in discontinuous grids, and made of "labour-intensive concrete frames, filled with bricks, plastered... with rather continuous balconies" (Issaias, 2016, p. 223). As can be seen in Figure 4.2, the repetition of the polykatoikia produces a "form-less, border-less and placeless urban landscape" (Aesopos & Simeoforidis, 2001 in Dragonas, 2014). The polykatoikia and their loose regulatory

frameworks came to define modes of living in Athens (Issaias, 2016). A single building often hosts an array of businesses and offices, as well as residents of differing social classes. The basements are usually occupied by those on low incomes, the first floor is regularly used for shops and offices, the intermediate floors for middle-class homes and the top floors for the more affluent (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). Throughout the crisis, many of the commercial offices and businesses on the first floor of these apartments have closed down.



*Figure 4.2 A view of the polykatoikia from a rooftop in Kolonaki, Athens*

Due to the apartment style of living, Athens has a relatively high population density of 17,040 people per square kilometre (World Population Review, 2017). The city's irregular design, due to periods of spontaneous and mainly haphazard urban growth has resulted in few public green spaces and extremely limited access to private outdoor space (usually only a small balcony) (Vradis, 2012a). Consequently, the streets and squares comprise the main sites of public social interaction in Athens. These public spaces are used at all hours for a multitude of reasons ranging from meeting, hanging out with friends,



finding jobs, trading, and protesting (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). Athenians of all ages regularly meet with their *parea* (friendship groups) and spend nights chatting, drinking and smoking in their neighbourhood squares. Public space is also the site of group activities such as musical jamming, dancing and skateboarding. On a regular Athens night, you can find African drummers near Monastiraki Metro Station, hip hop, rap and breakdance near Syntagma, buskers and jammers along the cobblestone path surrounding the Acropolis, and 'alternative' youths in Exarchia square smoking marijuana and drinking (usually alcohol purchased from the surrounding affordable liquor stores). A lack of economic resources means that a large proportion of the youth have limited capacity to frequent formal spaces of consumption such as bars and nightclubs (Martin, 2012). Although bars and clubs are still an important element of Athenian social life, public space affords a range of opportunities for diverse forms of socialisation. Public space is also the site of more formalised free events such as public theatre, concerts and movie screenings, organised both by the council and community initiatives.

The central role that public space plays in everyday life has turned it into a crucial zone of contestation and conflict. Due to the social importance of the limited public spaces, control over them is symbolic of dominance in both political and everyday life (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). These spaces have thus emerged as politicised sites of oppression, resistance and protest as evident through the regular clashes that occur between protesters and authorities. The density and irregularity of the city's urban layout has had a profound influence over the way these clashes take place. The spatial analysis of the December 2008 revolt (in response to the police shooting of fifteen year old Alexandros Grigoropoulos in Exarchia) undertaken by Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou (2011) explicates this point. The authors highlight how the physical and geometrical characteristics of urban space influence "factors such as visibility, ambushes" and "the ability to communicate" (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011, p. 36). They attribute the rapid proliferation of the

December 2008 protest throughout the city to the frequent street intersections and small sized blocks of areas such as Exarchia. Radicalised areas such as Exarchia, have the smallest distances between streets, with intersections every 45m as opposed to the larger blocks in the city's more affluent suburbs (Chatzidakis, 2018; Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). This situation indicates that urban space has a direct impact on both the techniques of resistance, as well as the speed at which protests proliferate throughout the city.

The socio-political importance of public space as well as its influence over the social domain was made clear through discussions with my participants. During a conversation with Anna Tzakou, an Athens based theatre director, writer and performer, she explained that the growing desire to reclaim public space has inspired the formation of social collectives:

Athens is a city that hasn't really organised its public space. There was a time, like seven years ago where groups started happening for reclaiming public space... Athens as a city was never designed to have its parks, it kind of just happened as it was happening. It has no design, no urban planning. There was a point where people said we live here we need spaces outside, public spaces.

One example of the reclaiming of public space is the case of Navarinou park; a parking lot which was turned into an open squat and garden by residents of Exarchia in March 2009 (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010). The parking lot became an enduring site of spatial resistance after the property's lease had run out and the mayor had expressed the intention to develop it into commercial offices (Bettany, Bradshaw, Chatzidakis, & Maclaran, 2011). On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2009, residents of Exarchia along with other social groups, descended on the parking lot with tools and broke apart the asphalt, brought soil in trucks and planted flowers and trees, turning the once grey space into a green urban oasis

(Chatzidakis, 2014). The newly established park was intended to be self-managed, anti-hierarchical and anti-commercial (Chatzidakis, 2014; Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010). A sign placed at the entrance of the park described the history, ethics and ethos of the self-managed space (as of 2019, this same sign has been completely vandalised, see Figure 4.3):

On March 7, 2009, the self-managed park *Parko Navarinou* was born in the heart of Exarchia when hundreds of residents and comrades occupied the area with the vision to transform it into a communal green space for all to meet and play. On day one, we created the open assembly of the park, through which all participants collectively decide on its form and operations, as well as its political characteristics... The park is self-managed... The park is anti-hierarchical... The park is anti-commercial.... The special characteristic of the park – an open, occupied space – makes solidarity, self-organisations and mutual respect indispensable for its existence and functioning. Participation, physical presence and contribution to the common effort are crucial (Statement from the Navarino Park sign, 2009).



Figure 4.3 The vandalised sign at the entrance to Navarino Park, 2019

The occupied park was linked to the radical practices inspired by the mass riots and occupations incited by the 2008 police shooting of Alexandros Grigoropoulos (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010). In the years succeeding the shooting, citizens increasingly sought to stake a claim to the city and its spaces, often through the subversion of authority and the state's influence over urban space (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010). The park which began as a spatial manifestation of the December revolt (located close to the site of the Grigoropoulos shooting and sometimes referred to as December's park) has endured as an urban green space, indicative of the success of community organisation and resistance. The park which is now the site of a playground, vegetable gardens and trees, is regularly used to host community events such as concerts, movie screenings, meetings, exhibitions and festivals (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010). Figure 4.4 shows the park as of January 2019; the shipping crates (right of the image) are often used during events as a backstage, storage and bar.



*Figure 4.4 Navarino Park, 2019*

Similarly to guerrilla gardening and civic reclamations of public space, street art also works to reclaim, denote and appropriate space (Bettany et al., 2011). In Athens, mediums such as graffiti, wall paintings, stencils, public outdoor



concerts and street theatre have been used by artists as a means of reaching large crowds in order to make their claim to space, and publicly comment on socio-political issues (Avramidis, 2012). It is not uncommon for art to be integrated into the actions, movements and spaces of wider self-organised social movements. Figure 4.5 depicts a work of street art by Italian artist BLU which looks over Navarino Park. The work depicts a green renewal of concrete urbanisation in line with the efforts put into the establishment of the space. This is indicative of street art's connection to social and political movements concerned with the reclamation of space or the constitution of counterhegemonic space. During a conversation with Platonas, a street artist, he commented that places like Exarchia (where space is contested and reappropriated), are “the parts of Athens that are really alive”. Lefebvre refers to the kinds of spaces that are evoked “when a community fights construction of urban motorways or housing-developments, when it demands ‘amenities’ or empty spaces for play and encounter” as counter-spaces (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 381-382). In *Chapter Five*, I will further examine the way in which art plays a symbolic role in the reclamation of urban space. For now, I will turn to Lefebvre's spatial triad (1991), to further investigate the relationship between the city's form, counter-hegemonic spatial practices and street art.



Figure 4.5 Work of street art by Italian artist BLU, taken in Navarino Park, Athens, 2019

## **4.2 Examining the Primacy of Social Space in the Fringes of Homogeny**

The relationship between the city's design and the development of the art scene can be explored through the spatial triad developed by Lefebvre (1991). Through the application of the spatial triad, I will show that street art is connected to the same dimension of spatial practice as occupy movements, squats and guerrilla gardening initiatives (such as seen in the case of Navarino Park). I will highlight how these kinds of alternative spatial practices thrive on the fringes of cultural hegemony. To reiterate, the spatial triad consists of three interconnected dimensions of space; spatial practice (physical/ perceived space), representations of space (mental/ conceived space) and representational spaces (social/ lived space). Each aspect of the triad informs the other, and thus should be considered as a relational process when exploring the spatial dimensions of society. Spatial practice refers to the physical and perceived space of everyday life and encompasses the lived reality of physical and material flows, transfers and interactions that occur in and across space (Harvey, 1989). It is comprised of the locations that constitute the characteristics of a given social formation, and implies a level of social cohesion and competence amongst users (Lefebvre, 1991).

In modern society, spatial practice is significantly informed by representations of space, referring to the signs, significations, codes and knowledge that allow material spatial practices to be understood, discussed and manipulated (Harvey, 1989). This dimension of space deals with the abstractions of power relations embedded into spatial practices. This is the dimension where scientists, planners, urbanists and social engineers seek to create social homogeny. This element of space seeks to ensure that city streets are "regulated, policed, and even privately managed", influenced by state power and public administration (Harvey, 2012, pp. 71-72). Due to policing, surveillance and management, the modern city is realistically devoid of any purely public space, however there are continual struggles over how the

production of, and access to, public space is regulated (Harvey, 2012). Lefebvre notes that although homogenisation is the goal of abstract space, it is in fact not homogenous (Lefebvre, 1991). The modellers of space and agents of the state persist in trying to reduce difference, despite the fact that the production of space is a complex and contradictory process (Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz, 2011).

Generally, spatial practice in modern cities has increasingly become dominated by representations of space in order to suppress conflict and contradiction (Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz, 2011; Miles, 1997; Watkins, 2005). This is particularly visible through the dissolution of the 'traditional' conceptualisation of public space for a more regulated and generic kind of urbanity, done to limit the political nature of cities (Bodnar, 2015). Public spaces can be conceptualised as places of interaction, outside of the private sphere, with a key characteristic being the ability for access without the need for permission. This definition is limited by the fact that movement through almost all public spaces in modern cities is regulated and restricted (Bodnar, 2015). Representations of space give birth to these restrictions through imposing limits and control over the access and movement through the public sphere. Through policing practices, fines, surveillance technologies, fences, gates, signs and defensive architecture, contemporary public space has emerged as site of social control. Thus representations of space are the dominant space of society as they are concerned primarily with imposing order and codes of conduct (Kindynis, 2018; Lefebvre, 1991).

Finally, representational spaces are the spaces of inhabitants and users that are directly lived through associated images and symbols. It overlays purely physical space and makes symbolic use of its objects (Lefebvre, 1991). Within this dimension of space, we can consider the work of artists as well as the actions surrounding revolutionary movements seeking to reclaim space. This is the space that the "imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre,

1991, p. 39). It deals with transcendence and the desire for new meanings and uses to be attributed to urban spaces. These are the lived and experienced spaces of everyday life. They are understood through the “associated images, non-verbal communication, appropriation, rituals, riots, markets and other aspects of life in the street” (Miles, 1997, p. 46). The production of space is built of the relational tension between processes of homogenisation and differentiation. Urbanisation spatially connects people in a way that is necessary for the reproduction of social relations, but that also exacerbates the heterogeneity and contradictions inherent in conceived space. By bringing different people together, dialogues are opened which can work to contradict and undermine the homogenisation of space (Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz, 2011). Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou note that urban spaces as places of coexistence, regularly become “fields of resistance and sites where everyday life can be reclaimed” (2011, p. 30).

The rebuilding of post-Ottoman Athens guided by Bavarian technocrats, is distinctive of the attempt to turn conceived space (representations of space) into spatial practice. The intent was to reconstruct a Greek capital in a neo-classical style, creating a spatiotemporal link between the present and the country’s ancient Hellenic past. This effort was considered necessary in establishing a coherent Greek ethnos (ethnic group/ nation) in the wake of centuries of Ottoman occupation. Importantly, it was also an attempt to create an unproblematic link between Enlightenment Europe and the Ancient Athenian ideals upon which it was based. Despite these efforts, the ideals held by early city planners and urban designers soon gave way to the social strains and practical needs of a fast-expanding urban centre.

In the precarious conditions following the World Wars, the vision of the ‘conceived’ city gave way to a series of haphazard attempts to deal with pressing spatial and socio-economic issues (Economou, 2014). During these periods, representations of space weaken as can be seen through the state’s



leniency to questionable building practises. Laws such as the Antiparochi system, although falling within the realms of conceived space, in fact contradict it through their tacit necessitation of illegal and ad hoc construction. In this instance representations of space and the associated building laws, influenced deviation from the creation of a controlled and homogenous urban space. Due to this, spatial practice; the perceived space of everyday Athenian life, has significantly been informed by the lived and social, representational spaces of urban users.

The implications of this have led to a host of contemporary social practices which challenge and resist state attempts at controlling space. These acts of resistance are present throughout the city, from the prevalence of seemingly mundane, yet telling acts, such as endemic disobedience to antismoking laws, and an often-humorous interpretation of parking signage. Through the narrow city streets, cars can be found nestled into inconceivably tight spots with a lack of regard for parking enforcement, and the surrounding vehicles. Often, hazard lights are left on to give the appearance of a necessary quick stop, which in reality, might mean meeting a friend for coffee. Through the historical development of Athenian urban space, the city has engendered spatial practices that continue to elude the intentions of homogenising abstract space. In this instance space:

...has taken on, within the present modes of production, within society as it actually is, a sort of reality of its own... In addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26).

The political forces which influenced the development of this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; those who inadvertently ushered spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strive to shackle and enslave it

(Lefebvre, 1991). This highlights that space is not a “dead, inert thing or object, but... organic, fluid and alive; it has a pulse, it palpitates, it flows and collides with other spaces” (Watkins, 2005, p. 211).

The Greek governmental mechanisms and tolerance of certain illegal practises have cumulatively worked to undermine the authoritative control of public space (Vousinas, 2017). The Greek Government has historically provided the grounds for a grey economy, particularly when such practices serve specific interests or provide short term solutions to issues of socioeconomic policy. When the state is seen as a hindrance to productivity, citizens are more willing to engage in shadow economies, evade tax and reclaim space (Vousinas, 2017). Acts of civil disobedience in Greece are often connected to the populace’s lack of faith in authority (Herzfeld, 1985). This suspicion of authority has links to the beginnings of the modern Greek nation and the murder of the first head of state and the imprisonment of many revolutionary military leaders (Sarbanes, 2006). The distrust of authority has recently been exacerbated by the crisis and perceived injustices perpetuated by Troika (Winter, Korbiel, Koukou, & Sarikakis, 2018). Questions surrounding Greek sovereignty and the legitimacy of state governance and policy-making have been brought to the forefront of public collective consciousness (Winter et al., 2018). The 2015 referendum, and the government’s failure to deliver on the people’s vote stood as a further testament to the state’s lack of self-determination. These questions of state legitimacy have manifested through the spatial practices of the people, with many individuals and groups beginning to find alternative ways to compensate for the state’s lack of productive social action. This has included a rise in anti-migrant violence and vigilante policing by the far-right, and an intensification of riots and illegal occupations by proponents of the radical left.

Athenians have negotiated the tension between the imposition of authoritative European austerity and a lack of faith in their government by superimposing a lived space over the failed spaces of official urban planning (Kindynis, 2018).

Representational spaces have come to prominence, with citizens reclaiming urban space through self-organisation, solidarity networks, squats, guerrilla interventions and cooperatives (Lefebvre, 1991). Such collective action functions to protect the vulnerable where the state is seen to have failed. Public urban space plays a central role in these social movements, providing sites for group mobilisation to those who have few resources available to take political action (Winter et al., 2018).

Greece's precarious fringe position; administratively European, whilst geographically, politically and economically, closer to the exotic 'other' can also be linked to the prevalence of social space over homogenous space (Herzfeld, 1987). During a discussion with James (Athens based artist and curator) at the 2016 synapse of the Athens Biennale, he explained his views on Greece's peripheral political and economic positioning within Europe:

I equate what is happening now between the periphery of Europe and the centre, a lot like what happened with Germany when it unified. There were two different economical systems, different modes of production completely, and they were made by force to unify, there was a committee that was in charge to make the economies in tune with each other so they could function as one country. But what that actually meant was bringing the East into the West... They made sure that they brought all the infrastructure of East Germany for nothing... I think exactly the same thing is happening here. Then you saw a boom of investment in East Germany, development and gentrification and then the big explosion of Berlin happened, and suddenly it is an international destination for culture. I think this is exactly what is happening now between Greece and Germany... That's what they are trying to do, they are trying to turn Greece into the West in a sense.

As highlighted through the examples of Berlin and Athens, “differences endure and arise on the margins of the homogenised realm” such as “the edges of the city, shanty towns, the spaces of forbidden games, of guerrilla war, of war” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 373). Lefebvre notes that the favelas, barrios and ranchos of Latin America “manifest a social life far more intense than the bourgeois districts of the cities” (1991, p. 373). The spontaneous architecture and ad hoc planning of these areas prompts a deeper level of social engagement than the organised spaces of formal urban planning. This is relatable to the influence that haphazard urban development, marginal positioning (on the fringes of Europe) and the crisis have had on the social dynamics of space in Athens. Peggy Stathakopoulou, a renowned screen and theatre actress, commented on the disjuncture between centre and periphery through the concept of North and South European mentalities. She explained:

The Southern culture is more about enjoying yourself, being free to do what you want, which although can be good in some ways, it stops the cogs in the machine from functioning as they do in Northern European countries like Germany.

Lefebvre (1991) believed that eventually, power will seek to consolidate and homogenise these differences, ultimately destroying what has transgressed. As stated by James, many consider the current crisis as an attempt for Greece (periphery) to be integrated into Northern European (centre) economies and politics. In the case of art, through forces of gentrification, commercialisation and commodification social control is imposed in order to neutralise the differences inherent in the subversive practices of the periphery. Outside of Athens, examples of this abound, such as the previously discussed case of Berlin, and the scene in Greenwich Village, New York, which during the mid-twentieth century attracted artists due to the cheap rent of studio apartments and lofts. Due to extreme levels of gentrification, real estate in Greenwich Village is now up with the most expensive in the country. Prices in Athens have

dropped as a result of the crisis making it an appealing opportunity for investment, whilst prompting artists to be wary of gentrification and displacement. For this reason, the art scene in Athens has become increasingly suspicious of institutions and economic bodies seeking to dominate space through mechanisms of gentrification.

The nature of representational space in Athens has made it far more resilient to gentrification than other renowned street art cities such as Melbourne, Australia. In Melbourne, distinctive laneways such as Hosier Lane have become cultural attractions due to the range of creative graffiti and street art that grace their walls. However, the strict enforcement of law and regulation in Australia has produced a very different kind of space to that of Athens. In Australia, we witness the full force of representations of space, where urban planners, bureaucrats and agents of the state impose rigid grids structuring engagement in public space through noise restrictions, lock out laws, licensing, surveillance and policing (Lefebvre, 1991).

The Australian model of ordered and policed space also makes urban art more susceptible to gentrification, with Melbourne's thought provoking political artworks being colonised and integrated into the realms of homogenous space. Figure 4.6 depicts the culture that has developed around Hosier Lane, where artworks function predominately as backdrops for Instagram selfies and travel bloggers. Athens has proven more resilient to these forces as a result of the historical production of space, the rebellious Greek spirit (further discussed in *Chapter Six*) and a deep-seated suspicion of authority. As I walked with John (a Melbourne born Greek) through the graffiti covered street of Exarchia, he commented "this is so much more powerful than the art in Melbourne, it is all hipsters there". I pressed him on this point, and on further reflection he concluded that it wasn't just the content of the art that differentiated it, but its context and connection to "the freedom here in Greece". This was a sentiment shared by many young Australian Greeks who were obsessed with the social

freedoms of Greece, including the simple things like being able to have “beers in public and not be hassled by police”.



Figure 4.6 Hosier Lane in Melbourne, Australia and the associated Instagram culture, 2019

With regard to art in public space, Tuiyo stated that, “here in Greece we have huge freedom”, a sentiment that was expressed by many Athenian artists. B. expressed that in Athens “the police have so many problems, that it (street art) doesn’t bother them, especially if it is an old building”. Although artists understood the value of the freedom afforded by urban space in Greece, not all felt that it was necessarily a good thing. On this Fikos noted:

Here is complete anarchy. Whatever you want you write, everywhere. It is easy to do it, and if they (the police) catch you they leave you. Essentially, nothing happens to you. They had caught a kid I knew painting a train and they let him go, and because of that everyone does it, on the trains and the subway that we have here, people go and paint. They have painted everything... In other countries, they might respect others simply out of fear of the law, but I’d still prefer that to this anarchy.

The precipitous relationship between gentrification (representations of space) and anti-hegemonic spatial practices (representational space) such as seen in

the Athens art scene provides an insight into a key contradiction within abstractions of space. On this, Lefebvre notes in regard to Paris:

Paris has not completely lost the excitement that characterised it as a city of festival in earlier times.... There is an acute contradiction here: it is not in the interests of the political establishment and the hegemonic class to extinguish this spark, for to do so would effectively destroy the city's worldwide reputation – based, precisely, on its daring, its willingness to expose the possible and the impossible and the impossible, its so-called cultural development, and its panoply of actions and actors (working class, intelligentsia, students, artists, writers, and others). Yet at the same time the political powers and the bourgeoisie controlling the economy are afraid of all such ferment, and have a strong urge to crush it under suffocating central decision-making (1991, p. 386).

This contradiction is prevalent in Greece where the radical anti-institutional stance of the art scene has attracted the attention of the commercial international art world; evident through the choice for Documenta 14 to split its exhibitions between its home in Kassel, Germany and Athens (discussed further in *Chapter Seven*). The art emerging throughout the crisis has contributed positively to Greece's cultural sector despite the subversive nature of the art scene being inherently at odds with mechanisms of social control. Nowhere is this contradiction more present than in areas such as Exarchia, which is a hub for those who fall outside of state ideology. It is renowned for its active anarchist communities and associated squats and self-organised cultural centres. Limited state control in the neighbourhood has made it a popular area for artists to illegally use city streets and buildings to create and present their works. As a result, it is now one of the most renowned urban areas for viewing graffiti and street art.

To understand the contradiction between the social 'spark' instigated by Exarchia's subversive spatial practice, and the political establishment's desire to contain and homogenise, but not entirely extinguish it, I will briefly turn to the recent history of the area (Lefebvre, 1991). The Athens Polytechnic in Exarchia was the site of the student uprising against Greece's military dictatorship between November 14 - 17, 1973. During this time, students barricaded themselves inside the university and broadcasted a call for the people of Athens to rebel against the military junta. This all came to a head on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November after a military tank broke through the gates on orders from the junta, resulting in the death of 23 students. Although this did not immediately topple the military coup, it severely swayed public opinion and prompted its popular overthrow in 1974. Till this day the 17<sup>th</sup> of November is celebrated by many in Greece as a triumph of democracy and freedom (Vradis, 2012b). Even former Prime Minister Tsipras had attended the event whilst I was present in 2015 to lay a wreath on the gates that had been toppled by the tanks.

The Polytechnic now stands as a collective symbol of Greek resistance against totalitarianism, but is also a site of resistance against broader state ideologies. As a result Exarchia embodies a contradictory status within democratic Greece (Vradis, 2012a). In order to separate from the military regime, democratic society needed to show restraint and a degree of tolerance towards Exarchia and its subversive ethos. Exarchia has thus emerged as a space of exception in which the state seeks to contain radical counter-hegemonic practices, as a turbulent Exarchia ensures a peaceful Athens (Vradis, 2012a). This containment is visible through the round-the-clock riot police placed strategically around the neighbourhood's perimeter (Chatzidakis, 2018). Despite these largely symbolic efforts by the state, boundaries and borders are traversed by both people and ideas, and the entire centre of Athens has an undercurrent of radical and anarchic potentiality. Evidence of this can be seen through the regularity at which protests cross neighbourhood boundaries, and



through political street art seeping out of the confines of 'radical' neighbourhoods into the city at large.

It is within representational space, the anti-hegemonic social space of urban users, that the Athens art scene has thrived. Art has emerged as a cultural heterotopia through its connection to counter-hegemonic spaces of alternative ordering that challenge and contest the dominant spaces of social order (Hetherington 1997 in Chatzidakis, 2018; Zaimakis, 2015, p. 375). Many artists and art collectives are linked to wider social movements that seek to reclaim public urban space through the creation of social and lived spaces, in place of the conceived spaces of urban planning which attempt to limit human agency. The historical socio-spatial development of Athens created the necessary conditions for the collective 'heterotopic' reclamation of urban space. As will be explored in the following section, the mixture of opportunities afforded by urban spaces, and the creativity and resilience of artists have instigated unique interactions between art and space. I will specifically explore how the forgotten, abandoned and neglected urban spaces of Athens have found new life through art.

#### **4.3 Giving Voice to The Spirits of Decaying Urbanity Through Art**

Leading up to the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 the city was subject to an array of infrastructural development including, but not limited to the subway system, airport, highways, suburban railway, tram and new Acropolis museum (Dalakoglou, 2012). This transformed Athens into a construction site and saw the extensive destruction of the cityscape for its redevelopment (Dalakoglou, 2012). During this period, commissioned works of street art were invited to both beautify the city centre by combating the greyness of certain areas, and to relay a series of messages to the residents and visiting audiences (Leventis, 2013). The messages, influenced by those who commissioned the works, sought to present Athens as a modern cultured city by incorporating themes of

sustainability, public transport, culture and peace (Leventis, 2013). This was the first time in Athens that graffiti had been commissioned on such a grand scale. It began legitimising the controversial art practice in the eyes of the general public.

After this impressive period of rejuvenation, economic strain and the boom and bust of the real estate market resulted in many vacant buildings. The effects of the financial crisis instigated significant business closures creating ‘black holes’ throughout central urban areas (Belavilas & Prentou, 2015). Much of the repair to old and disused buildings leading up to the Olympics was superficial and these vacant structures now stand in varying states of decay and disrepair. Along Syngrou Avenue which connects the city centre to many Olympic sites, unsightly buildings were simply covered with huge sheets. Urban planners were interested in erasing the unsightly elements and traces of its more recent memories, providing Olympic audiences with a carefully curated image of the city (Chatzidakis, 2018; Micu, 2018). Based on fieldwork with Athenian graffiti writers, Alexandrakis (2016) describes his participants painting a mural on the side of an old apartment block that had been “one of many buildings hastily repaired in the lead up to the 2004 Olympic Games that were now, a mere four years later, crumbling once again” (Alexandrakis, 2016). The contemporary city hosts an immense amount of derelict space, including many of the Olympic buildings and arenas themselves. As astutely noted, it is often modern buildings that age quickly, bringing people back to the past which has “often aged less than that which is new” (de Certeau et al., 1998, p. 134).

The host of abandoned neoclassical houses, and crumbling buildings scattered throughout the urban centre are another defining element of the Athens cityscape. Due to the expense and convoluted bureaucratic processes involved with restoration, many of these heritage buildings have been left in disrepair. Demolishing and building from scratch often proves to be a more cost effective task than restoring them (O’Sullivan, 2016). As many neoclassical buildings are

heritage listed, their demolition is rarely an option. As a result, these structures are left to stand as a bleak testament to a past time; a haunting shadow of what the central neighbourhoods once were. Artist Kostas Spiriounis, who often used neoclassical architecture as inspiration for his works, passionately described the buildings and their ill fate:

They are beautiful, they are the story of architecture here in Athens, we have to save them, but there is a lack of specialist builders who can restore these buildings. I wish they could find money to maintain the old buildings that still exist, but it is expensive to restore an old house or an old building.

Figures 4.7 and 4.8 taken in Exarchia, are examples of the various states of disrepair that much of the city's neoclassical heritage can be found in.



Figure 4.7 Derelict neoclassical house in Exarchia





*Figure 4.8 Derelict neoclassical building covered in street art, Exarchia*

Areas with the most abandoned buildings are those that have been severely affected by the social and economic issues plaguing the country. Central neighbourhoods such as Metaxourgio, Omonoia, Exarchia and Keramikos are host to the vast majority of derelict buildings. To further explore this issue,

architect Fanis Kafandaris organised a workshop called *Speleo* within the context of the Fifth Athens Biennale. The project focused on the mapping of abandoned buildings, shops and houses within the central neighbourhood of Omonoia. The ultimate goal of the project was to identify and map disused buildings in order to elicit dialogue on their social potential. Figure 4.9 is a photograph of a map produced during the workshops, indicating the prevalence of disused buildings in areas such as Omonoia (at the time of the photo in November 2015 the map was still in progress).



Figure 4.9 Mapping the unused urban space in Omonoia during the *Speleo* work shop, November 2015

The use of derelict urban structures and their restoration was often at the centre of discourse within the art scene. Beyond the *Speleo* workshop, discussions about space permeated through Synapse 1 of the Fifth Athens Biennale in November 2015. During an open assembly (Figure 4.10), participants from



Greece and abroad considered the potential uses and affordances of urban space within the arts. The Biennale itself was hosted in Bangeion, a neoclassical hotel that had remained unoccupied since 1993. The building was disused due to a lack of interest in investment, and the gradual socioeconomic decline of Omonoia as an area. Eventually, it was decided that it would open for certain events, such as the Biennale, which would help to slowly restore the space without the need for immediate funding and major investment.



*Figure 4.10 The open assembly at the Athens Biennale, Omonoia*

Whilst in conversation with B., he explained both the importance of these central (yet neglected) areas to the city's heritage and their importance to the development of street art. He also highlighted some of the bureaucratic obstructions hindering the redevelopment of derelict neoclassical buildings:

For example, in the neighbourhood Keramikos... there are lots of occupied buildings. Aesthetically they have something that I like, back in the day these areas had many nice buildings that have become run-down. People went to other neighbourhoods to live in apartments... neoclassical buildings have amazing architectural interest, but we pass

them just like that (he motioned to indicate someone absent-mindedly passing by such buildings). The people and the state need to show interest and fix that piece of Athens, because in Athens it would have a good result for the city and for tourism. Tourists aren't interested in going to see an apartment block which isn't an architectural miracle, they are interested in seeing the ancient Athens, the old Athens, buildings from the 20's and the 50's.

If you respect your past, and Greece, Athens is a city that needs to give priority to the preservation of its history, and these neighbourhoods have many ancient ruins. This is another reason why nothing much has happened in these neighbourhoods, because they have lots of ancient ruins and when someone goes to fix something there, they dig and find ruins. They then stop them, and in essence to continue you have to pay a great sum of money to archaeologists to dig and find the ancient ruins, and for a building or somewhere for the artefacts to go. They might dig for two or three years, and you pay lots and lots, because the archaeologists won't get all the money from the state, and if they do, it will take ten years, and the project gets lost. Therefore, they don't want anything to happen in these neighbourhoods. But these neighbourhoods have a great amount of interest, and the street art scene has essentially started from these neighbourhoods. They have great architectural and artistic interest. Tourists still, despite the dilapidation go and see these neighbourhoods, they see the street art and the way Athens used to be before 100 years. Athens is a city that has all of that layering. There doesn't exist the ancient Greece and then today. It is not as though there was the Parthenon and then the present, and all the in-between doesn't interest us.

As described by my participant B., these spaces of decay have been an impetus for the emergent art scene, and are prominent zones for counter-

hegemonic spatial practices such as occupations and squats. Artists utilise such spaces to their advantage by incorporating them into the creation and presentation of their work, and by using cheaply rented or illegally occupied derelict buildings as centres of operation and creative exploration. This is linked to artists' evolving understanding of the potential for architecture to play an active role in the artistic process. B. further elaborated on the way that dilapidated urban spaces lend themselves to the creation of street art:

If you go to Tokyo, I went in 2009, and the city has perfect buildings, it made it very difficult for me to find somewhere to paint. I don't like to do things on new buildings. Here you can find 1000's of places to create, old dilapidated buildings, occupied buildings, old walls and all that. In other cities, there aren't any. You have to search a lot. New York was a little easier, but it was still difficult. It is much more difficult to do it there than here, although it still does have that old building element. Every city has its own character, it has what you can do and what you can't do, you know.

Here B. refers to the 'character' of the city and the way urban space both suggests and prohibits different kinds of social action (Lefebvre, 1991). The attribution of character and by extension, agency to city spaces permeated through artists' discourse. Social space in Athens was shown to emerge through the interrelationships between human interactions with their material environment, their coexistence and relative order/ disorder (Lefebvre, 1991). Similar to B., de Certeau attributes character and agency to old urban buildings:

They have character. Or, even better, they are characters: on the urban stage. Secret personas... By eluding the law of the present, these inanimate objects acquire a certain autonomy. They are actors, legendary heroes. They organise around them the city saga (1998, p. 135).



These timeworn spaces act as a medium through which artists commune with the material agency of the city. George Sachinis, the founder of site-specific Athens theatre company *Oxi Paizoume*, described the process of site-specific theatre as an engagement with “the ghosts of the city”. Statements such as this highlighted the active relational process between the ‘ghosts’, or agencies of urban space and artists. Returning to Gell’s (1998) proposal that the anthropological study of art should consider art objects as agents entwined in a matrix of social agencies, and examine the context of art production and reception; the need to consider the agential capacities of space becomes clear. This is further accentuated when focusing on art forms which are directly engaged with the urban context and sites of everyday life.

The fact that decaying urbanity is not highly regulated and tamed by formal state representations of space, means that the communion between human and material agencies is largely unhindered by the forces of conceived and controlled space (Latour, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991). These spaces, at once forgotten, but not gone, have found new life through the commitment of different social groups, artists and art collectives. With artistic, social and political intervention, derelict spaces have emerged in Athens as vibrant hubs of cultural activity. The medium of art has given these spaces a voice through which to affect the social domain (Deleuze, 1978). Street artist Skitsofrenis described the agency of space to me as “magical... it almost feels like the place is talking to me”. He felt drawn to spaces “forgotten by men” as his art worked to “give these places a voice to scream”.

De Certeau (1998) refers to the city as the stage for a war of narratives. He describes aspects of urban renewal and renovation as an attempt to tame the historical stories of aging urbanity by conforming them to the laws and narratives of modernisation. These old places, or the city’s ‘ghosts’ are tamed and rehabilitated by urban planners, particularly when they can be framed as

national treasures (de Certeau et al., 1998). However, the conservative ideology of national heritage is not always obeyed by the spaces it seeks to manipulate. These ruins, crumbling buildings and forgotten hotels are not only restored and renovated to fit the idioms of the state, but as seen in Athens, can also be engaged with by artists, squatters and other urban dwellers, to provide the structures with the capacity to communicate again. This engenders a collage of use resulting from the ever changing needs of each building and its inhabitants (de Certeau et al., 1998).

These spaces function as a history, a portal creating a sense of depth within the present (de Certeau et al., 1998). Left to the devices of time and decay, they no longer:

...tame the strangeness of the past with meaning. Their histories cease to be pedagogical; they are no longer 'pacified', nor colonised by semantics – as if returned to their existence, wild, delinquent. These wild objects, stemming from indecipherable pasts, are for us the equivalent of what the gods of antiquity were, the "spirits" of the place. Like their divine ancestors, these objects play the roles of actors in the city, not because of what they do or say but because their strangeness is silent as well as their existence concealed from actuality (de Certeau et al., 1998, pp. 135-136).

These spaces are not only given a voice through art, but are also able to influence the social domain through the exertion of affect (Deleuze, 1978). Material agencies, such as these decaying buildings, exert an atmospheric force that is experienced as embodied and emotive charges on those who come into contact with them. The affective forces emanating from the material world have a profound influence over the atmosphere of any particular space-time nexus (Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

In Athens, decaying urban spaces have a powerful impact on perceptions of space, society and art, contributing to the composition of the social world through affects, hauntings and atmospheres (Anderson & Harrison, 2016). The social domain is vastly populated by manifold networks of non-human agencies and entities that exist interdependently of each other (Latour, 2005). Everything takes part and in so doing takes place, happens and acts within the social domain (Anderson & Harrison, 2016). I will note here, that I maintain Gell's position that material agencies "are not 'self-sufficient' agents, but 'secondary' agents in conjunction with... (human) associates" (1998, p. 17). Nonetheless, as they act and influence the realm of social relations, they still need to be treated as agencies (Gell, 1998).

The affective atmosphere of these spaces became clear to me through my many walks with friends, locals and visitors, through neighbourhoods such as Omonoia, Exarchia, Metaxourgio and Keramikos; all of which host an abundance of derelict buildings and street art. On these occasions, I witnessed the relationship between space and art incite reactions that were not the result of interpretive symbolic and linguistic mediations, but to differing extents, resultant of non-semiotic atmospheric charges (Navaro-Yashin, 2012). The power of affective atmospheres was especially present amongst those less attuned to the symbolic elements of Athenian street art. On one occasion, I took a first-time (Australian) visitor through the grounds of the Athens Polytechnic. The environment and vast amounts of graffiti (indicated in Figure 4.11) exerted an atmosphere that incited a foreboding sense of being on "the wrong side of the tracks". Similarly, Chatzidakis (2018, p. 152) noted that Exarchia produced a range of affective experiences felt by locals and visitors, who described a sense of "tension" and "urgency" in contrast to more affluent surrounding neighbourhoods. In these cases affect acts as a felt atmospheric intensity operating and emerging from the exterior of the human body (Deleuze, 1978; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Atmospheres created through the communion of space and art was ever present, yet these atmospheres elicited different

responses depending on the social positioning and relevant semiotic competence of the individual experiencing them. Affective space, although atmospheric intermingles with socio-cultural mediations to formulate people's subjective urban experiences.



Figure 4.11 The grounds of the Athens Polytechnic

I had taken a walk past the Polytechnic with Koula; (a proud grandmother that had spent the majority of her life in Athens), who reminisced about the institution's past. Her sentiments capture the intermingling of affective atmospheres and socially mediated subjectivity. Glancing over at the institution covered in graffiti, Koula expressed disdain towards those who had disrespected the university's neoclassical facade with vandalism. For her, the relevance of the polytechnic as a historical institution influenced her experience of the affective atmosphere that emerged through the interface of space and art. Still, the symbols and signs of the graffiti and street art faded into an a-symbolic ambience, which she interpreted with a general sense of malaise.

A final example occurred during another visit to the institution with a young man who was a staunch proponent of the ideological left and a resident of Exarchia. In this instance, the significance of the Polytechnic as a site of resistance, and the knowledge of the symbols and codes of the anti-state street art informed his experience to a greater extent than affective ambience. For him, the atmosphere of the space was informed by his sociocultural and interpretive competence within that specific spatiotemporal setting. Thus, these spaces actively participate in complex processes of social exchange with those who pass through them, able to elicit different affective/semiotic responses from different people. For some, graffiti and urban decay conjure emotive atmospheres of fear, some like Koula lamented the destruction inflicted by “disrespectful youths”, whilst others engaged with these spaces semiotically as havens of resistance. As will be discussed further in the following chapters, affective experiences regularly coalesce with the sociocultural domains of representation and politics, ultimately influencing the discursive field (Laketa, 2016).

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to provide insight into why and how, Athens has engendered the emergent art scene. I highlighted the ways in which the historical development of wild and delinquent spaces presented artists with opportunities to express themselves outside of the homogenising constraints of conceived space (de Certeau et al., 1998; Lefebvre, 1991). Beyond this, I examined the potential for space to affect the social domain, contributing to an understanding of the ways urban art is incorporated into an expanded social which encompasses affects and material entities (Anderson & Harrison, 2016; Thrift, 2008). The urban space of Athens emerges as a fundamental driver of the largely anti-institutional art scene. In the city and its spaces, artists and social movements have found a partner with which they can contest and

overcome the constraints and suffering associated with political mismanagement, global inequality and the economic crisis.

So far, this dissertation has covered the 'crisis' context in which the art scene developed. I then explained the social history of graffiti practice in Athens and its subsequent influence on myriad counter-institutional art forms. Following this, I outlined the diverse range of social perceptions surrounding the contentious art practices of street art and graffiti which have proliferated throughout the city. This chapter has explored the extent to which the spatial composition of Athens has prompted the development of a "street art paradise". In the following chapter I will elaborate on the diverse ways artists invest meaning into their works through the manipulation of symbols. I am not only concerned with the symbols that exists within the works themselves, but also the symbolic potential offered by the spatial and temporal context which surrounds urban art.

## Chapter 5

### Symbolism, Space and Art

Symbols are a means through which artists invest discernible meaning into their works. Through the manipulation of symbolic forms, art can take on a series of powerful social functions which foreground its ability to act in the social world. In Athens, urban artworks can be used as mediums of political commentary, professions of solidarity, demarcations of space, modes of resistance and potent forms of symbolic violence (Avramidis, 2012; Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Bourdieu, 1980, 2000; Riches, 1986; Zaimakis, 2015). This chapter examines the various ways that street artists and political activists incorporate communicative symbolism into their art objects.

I begin by exploring the relationship between art, public space, symbols and the construction of meaning. By examining the violent response that locals had to Phylax (a public art sculpture erected in 2017), I highlight the complex relationship between the urban context and the symbolic decoding of art. Building upon the work of Hall (1980), zones of distortion are shown to exist between the three nodes which compose the Peircean (1902) triadic function of symbols. Zones of distortion affect the way art is received, and ultimately impact its social function and meaning. In the case of Phylax, I demonstrate that the distortion of an artist's preferred symbolic meaning is indicative of art's ability to express agency and influence social action.

Following this, I emphasise distinctions between commissioned public art and works of illegal street art through an analysis of the different ways they respectively engage with the semiotics of space. Street artists are shown to be highly adept at mediating the symbols invested in their urban surroundings. Through the intentional interface of art, symbols and meaningful spaces, artists use their work to memorialise events, honour significant individuals, demarcate space and contest opposing ideological groups. However, it is also noted that due to the nature of street art's placement outside of formal art spaces, not all who encounter it consciously

attempt to decipher its symbolic meaning. Street art often acts affectively through an accumulative ambience it assumes when it fades into vast urban atmospheres (Deleuze, 1978; Thrift, 2008).

Finally, the chapter investigates street artists' use of intricate political symbolism to comment on the complex social impacts of the crisis. I take an example of a socially conscious work of street art to theoretically examine the role of symbols in meaning making. The work by street artist B., is used to indicate that despite Gell's (1998) rejection of symbolic analysis; his art matrix can be expanded to incorporate symbolic analysis, whilst still contributing to the understanding of the agential capacity of art.

### **5.1 Public Space, Symbols and Distortion: The Case of Phylax**

As previously highlighted, public spaces in Athens are central to social life, and as such have emerged as sites of political contestation. Due to their important role in everyday life, the symbols invested in public spaces provide artists a rich source of material to draw from. The manipulation of symbols is central to the process of investing artworks with meaning. For those viewing art, the intentional symbolic meaning embedded in a work can be complemented or distorted by the symbolic meanings imbued in the spaces surrounding it (Hall, 1980). Sometimes, unexpected and hidden interpretations of art can emerge as a result of a work's entanglement within the social dimensions of space (Lefebvre, 1991). In Athens, the diverse and often unforeseen ways in which symbolic messages are derived from art and its context, have led to public works of art becoming centres of scandal and controversy. Works of street art and public art open channels of omnidirectional dialogue with the symbolics of their surroundings. This symbolic exchange can drastically alter the social meaning and function of art.

Prior to delving into an example of this, I will briefly expand on some distinctions between street art and public art. Simply put, public art refers to legal works created in the public sphere, usually funded and commissioned



by the state, public/private institutions or other organisational bodies. Public art can be used effectively by the state to add vibrancy, rejuvenate spaces, reaffirm national identity, honour national heroes, and increase the cultural capital of a city. In Athens, the numerous statues and busts of historical figures, along with the city's growing catalogue of state commissioned contemporary works and murals, are all examples of public art. This makes public art a broad category that encompasses many forms of legal art in public spaces. Public art in Athens includes not only visual art, but extends to include open-air concerts and performances, such as those commonly held during the busy summer tourist season.

Public art is entangled with bureaucracy, spatial planning and civic institutions. Like gallery art, public art is curated, usually by those who have commissioned it, and is thus influenced by state, investor or institutional control (Bengtson, 2013). This 'gatekeeping' also limits which artists will be displayed, what message the work communicates and where it will be placed. The navigation of the convoluted bureaucratic processes associated with public art is vividly described by Phillips (1988, p. 93) as a:

...labyrinth network of proposal submissions to appropriate agencies, filings and refilings of budget estimates, presentations to juries, and negotiations with government or corporate sponsors, [which] requires a variety of skills that are frequently antithetical to the production of a potent work of art.

Public art predominately falls into representations of space, as it is considerably shaped through the schedules, maps and plans of urbanists, bureaucrats and the state (Lefebvre, 1991). A key differentiation between public art and the kinds of graffiti, street art and street performance that inform this dissertation, exists in the different ways that these practices engage with space. Whereas commissioned works fall into conceptual space, uncommissioned and illegal works engage with social representational space (Lefebvre, 1991). Once again, returning to the spectrum developed in *Chapter Three* (Figure 3.4), distinctions can become further blurred

where street artists (who often create illegal works) are commissioned to create murals. Over recent years elements of street art have drifted from their subcultural roots toward the mainstream art world (Bengtson, 2013).

A shared characteristic of public art and street art is that they are both presented in the city streets where they are encountered by a diverse public, including those who have little to no contact with art in galleries (Miles, 1997). Unlike gallery art, all art in public space is influenced and affected by the heterogeneity of its urban context, subjecting it to the idiosyncratic characteristics of everyday lived spaces. However, unlike street art, works of public art are often created outside of their final context (in a studio or workshop) and are then taken to the place where they will be displayed. These artworks initially exist in and of themselves, distinct from the urban environment in which they will later reside. Therefore, commissioned public art can at times be devoid of the intentional relationship to urban space that is present in most street art and graffiti. As will be further discussed in this chapter, works of illegal street art intentionally engage with the symbolic meanings invested in the surrounding space to bolster the communicative impact of the works. This is not to say that all commissioned public art is created without thought given to the specifics of the space in which it will be displayed. Instead, I argue that due to the institutional influence over public art “much of the art found in public space cannot really be conceived of as public” (Bengtson, 2013, p. 65).

Regardless of whether a work is legal or illegal, when placed in the public domain, the meaning invested in artwork can drastically change, and as will be seen in the forthcoming example, can even incite protest and vandalism (indicative of the active social function of art). The public spaces of Athens, with their embedded social practices, history, politics and symbolic values distort the preferred symbolic meaning of art through the coming together of diverse agencies (Hall, 1980; Latour, 2005). The spatiotemporal placement of a work, along with the sociocultural background and subjectivity of viewers can lead to a range of oppositional readings. Hall summarises this stating that:

The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions (1980, p. 56).

To highlight the potential for public space to prompt unintended symbolic readings of art, I turn to the events surrounding the installation of a public art sculpture in the coastal suburb of Palaio Faliro.

In 2017, a bright red sculpture with wings, a human body and serpent-like head was privately donated to the local municipality and was placed perched upon a tall, shimmering silver pole. The sculpture named Phylax (an ancient Greek term meaning guardian) was created by world renowned Greek artist Kostis Georgiou. Subsequent to the installation of the work, it was proclaimed by the municipality as the suburb's new guardian angel. According to the mayor, the sculpture was symbolic of Talos, a giant bronze mythical guardian of Crete. The choice to connect the sculpture to Talos was linked to its placement in Palaio Faliro. In Greek mythology, the port was the point from which Theseus set sail for Crete to kill the Minotaur and free Athens from human tribute to King Minos. Based on these mythical connotations, the mayor claimed that the concept of guardianship associated with Phylax was unrelated to that of Christian belief (Papanikolaou, 2018). Despite the mayor's statements, shortly after being unveiled the sculpture became the centre of controversy based around oppositional symbolic interpretations which considered it to be satanic. This ultimately led to the sculpture being vandalised, and torn down by rope. Throughout the controversy, Georgiou maintained that he "did not intend to symbolise something in particular" but just "wanted to add this bright red strike of colour to this beautiful environment" (Spiliopoulou & Anagnostopoulou, 2018).

To indicate how such a work of art can be rapidly transfigured into a site of public dispute, I elaborate on the concept of ‘distortion’ within the process of decoding symbolic meaning (Hall, 1980). Peirce’s (1902) triadic exploration of the functioning of symbols considers meaning to be derived through a signifier (sign/ symbol) and signified (the represented object/ idea) as decoded by an interpretant; namely the person deciphering the symbolic message (Parmentier, 2016). For a sign to represent an object or idea, it has to affect a mind in a way which helps that mind determine something which is due to the signified, but immediately caused by the signifier (Peirce, 1902). I argue that between each node of the symbolic triad there exists the potential for distortion (Figure 5.1) which can ultimately influence the meaning decoded by an interpretant. To elaborate this idea, I have visually charted the triadic function of symbols, and indicated three axes along which distortions of meaning can occur. The example is based upon an interpretant (person) viewing a work of art (signifier) which is intended to represent an object or idea (signified).

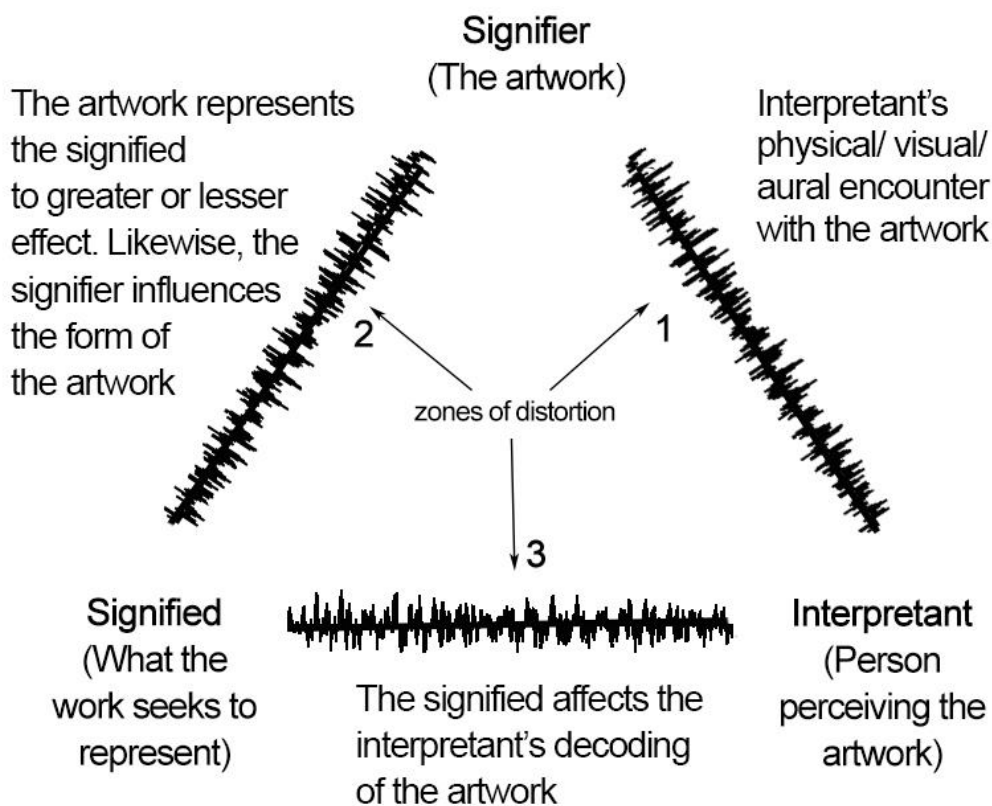


Figure 5.1 Distortion between the triadic function of symbols (author's diagram)

Axis 1 in Figure 5.1 is the physical interaction between an interpretant and an artwork. If it is a work of visual art, this is where the work is perceived and physically encountered. Distortion through this interaction can occur as the result of the interpretant's subjective aesthetic tastes as well as the context in which the work is being observed. Through this zone of distortion, the symbolic meaning inherent in the space surrounding the artwork, can also enter into the symbolic triad and further obfuscate the work's preferred symbolic meaning (Hall, 1980). As I will demonstrate in the case of Phylax, the nature of the urban space in which an artwork is encountered can drastically alter the way it is perceived and received by an interpretant.

Distortions can exist along axis 2 between the signifier and signified as a result of factors which may (intentionally or unintentionally) obscure the link between the artwork and what it seeks to represent. This could be the result of an artist's intentional choice to represent complex ideas in abstract ways that are not easily decipherable. However, unintended distortions can arise here based on factors such as an artist's technical competence at visually representing the desired object or idea they intended to symbolise.

Finally, axis 3 between the signified and the interpretant is subject to distortion based on an interpretant's relevant cultural competency; they may be unfamiliar or unaware of the concept being signified by the artist. Distortion can also be instigated by an art object's closeness/likeness to the culturally mediated concept it seeks to represent. In the case of Phylax, many of those who responded negatively to the work, related it to Christian iconography as opposed to the mythical Talos. Thus axis 3 largely refers to the capacity for the interpretant to decode the preferred messages, meanings and symbolic codes imbued into the artwork by the artist. Numerous factors such as differing cultural backgrounds, beliefs, social status and personal experiences, may result in distortions, misunderstandings or oppositional readings on behalf of the interpretant (Hall, 1980; Morphy, 2009).

These zones of distortion further complicate the function of symbols as they open the triad to interference from surrounding symbolic processes. In this instance, I have only covered a small number of arbitrary ways in which distortion can enter into the functioning of symbols. The potential for distortion is boundless and contingent on the amalgamation of heterogeneous subjective, social, spatial and temporal factors. These zones of distortion are significant areas through which artworks can express secondary agency; as something that “causes events to happen in their vicinity”, especially when the result of such events are not what the artist anticipated (Gell, 1998, p. 16).

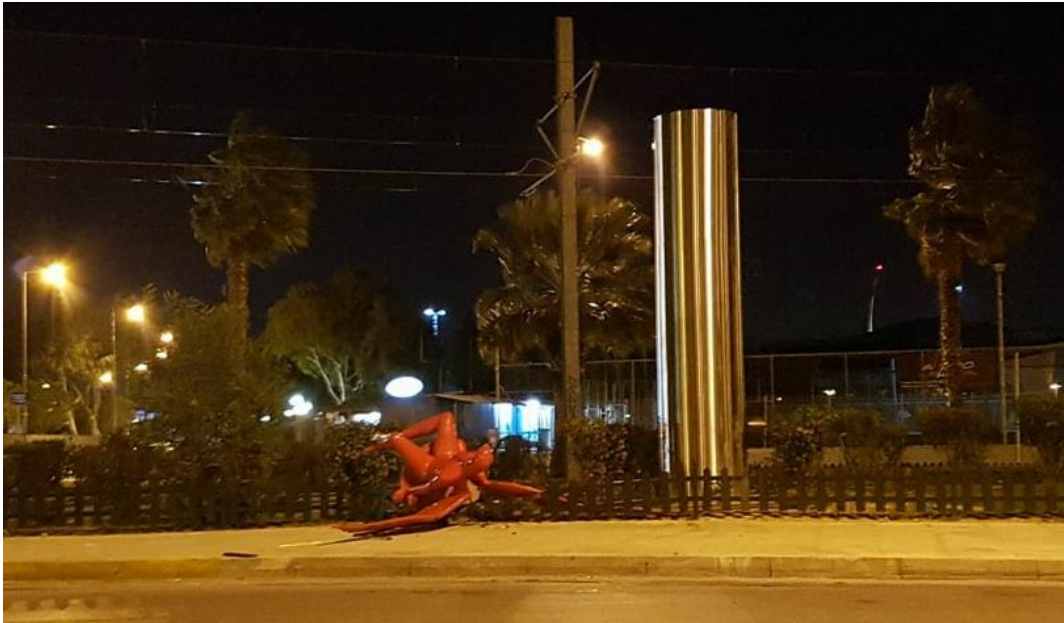
The distortion within symbolic processes can be thought of as an affect as it occurs through encounters between multiple actors (human and non-human), with the outcome of each encounter dependent on the compositions they enter into (Thrift, 2008). These encounters of heterogeneous agencies (artists, art, viewers, curators, space, time) can produce potentially unpredictable social outcomes. The level of distortion within the symbolic process influences how much the final function of an artwork will differ from the artist’s preferred meaning (Hall, 1980). The combination of factors pertaining to the artwork’s spatiotemporal placement, its social political context and the relationship between the signifier, signified and interpretant all determine the extent of the distortion (de Saussure, 1959; Peirce, 1902). By viewing oppositional and distorted symbolic readings as the result of heterogeneous assemblages of affective human and material agencies, it is possible to avoid capriciously making hierarchical judgments regarding preferred and distorted meanings. The fusion of the diverse readings of an artwork all contribute to its social function, and as in the case of Phylax, its fate.

Through Phylax we witness an example of the multifarious agential factors that influence semiotic readings of artwork. In this instance, the spatial and temporal context of the sculpture mixed with its aesthetic and symbolic properties radically influenced its social function and the public’s violent response. A significant factor that played into the sculpture’s demise was its

geographical placement between the Orthodox churches of *Agios Georgios* and *Agia Skepi*. This along with its widely-perceived satanic aesthetic (red, winged, serpent-headed angel) and labelling as 'the guardian angel' was considered by many parishioners as a direct and intentional mockery of their faith. These sentiments are captured in a letter sent to the mayor by a local cleric:

I will not refer to the aesthetics of this particular work of art, which can also be controversial. I will refer, however, to the spirit that this statue exudes in every passer-by facing it. It is a statue that affects the orthodox mind and attacks the Christian faith. We all know that a statue is placed in a public space in order to honour a person for his offering or to inspire an ideal among the citizens. This particular statue, Mr. Mayor, honours who? What he depicts is a demon, regardless of the misleading name "PHYLAX" (guardian) that the sculptor gave him. He is a demon, a soldier of Satan, who not only is not to be honoured but must be mocked and despised as a blasphemous creature ("Ενορίτες Έκαναν Πορεία Και Ράντισαν Με Αγιασμό Το Γλυπτό «Phylax» Στο Π.Φάληρο Πηγγή," 2018).

On the last day of 2017, led by a local priest, a group of parishioners surrounded the statue with orthodox flags and icons. They performed a religious cleansing ceremony and doused the work with holy water. The sculpture was also vandalised with white paint thrown over it, and was the subject of a local petition to have it removed. Others that did not take a religious stance on the matter, expressed that they considered the bright red sculpture aesthetically incompatible with the green and blue of the coastal area. Ultimately, the statue was forcibly torn down with ropes by a masked group in the middle of the night on January 17, 2018 (see Figure 5.2).



*Figure 5.2 Phylax torn from its perch (Thema Newsroom, 2018)*

After the destruction of Phylax, the ministry of culture, local council and the artist made statements expressing disbelief and condemnation towards the violent response to the work. In an interview, the artist expressed his surprise “that there was such a distorted reading of the sculpture”. He claimed that “the work was interpreted in a wrong manner”, and that its perception as something satanic was entirely opposite to his beliefs (Spiliopoulou & Anagnostopoulou, 2018). In a public statement the ministry of culture commented that:

Freedom of expression and creation are basic preconditions for any democracy. Public debate, peaceful disagreement, and the dialectic relationship of opposites are key pillars of Greek culture and a legacy to the whole of mankind. We will not allow anyone to spoil this unique offering to world heritage (Athens Voice, 2018).

This statement makes reference to the ancient Hellenistic legacy of democratic ideals against which the radical iconoclastic destruction of Phylax is condemned. Historically, public spaces such as the ancient Agora have been the sites where democracy and citizenship were actualised through debates and the transaction of ideas (Leontidou, 2010; Miles, 1997). In many ways, the destruction of the Phylax sculpture is a



contemporary, albeit precarious manifestation of the highly social and contested nature of Athenian public space (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). As will be expanded on in *Chapter Six*, these kinds of reactionary behaviours inhabit a curious position within Greek culture and politics. The tenacity of the people has been formalised and celebrated as a national trait associated with the heroism of events such as the War of Independence, resistance to Axis occupation, and the student uprising against the military junta (Herzfeld, 1985). Yet, this same celebrated tenacity, is also considered a root cause of civil disobedience and extreme reactionary responses, such as those targeted at Phylax.

Following the Phylax event, the spatial contest that played out in Palaio Faliro was transported into the media and the internet, with a vast array of commentary from individual artists, artist groups, journalists, and the general populace. Many of my participants denounced the act and considered it an indication that a portion of the population was, as one street artist put it, “still in the dark ages”. *The Chamber of Fine Arts of Greece* made a statement expressing that they were:

Deeply saddened that even a small portion of society can be manipulated by arbitrary interpretations of a work of art” and that “attacks carried out in such a brutally practical manner on art... are an extremely dangerous phenomenon pointing to our society’s increasing turn to fascism. (“Artists React to Vandalism of Controversial Statue on Southern Athens Coast,” 2018)

Others simply blamed the mayor for failing to appropriately curate a work of art suited to the context of the coastal neighbourhood. From the outset, it was immediately clear that the aesthetics of the statue played a central role in the controversy. The elements that constituted the aesthetic character of the sculpture were associated with symbolic representations of evil in the Orthodox Christian tradition. The bright red colour, the winged human body, and the serpent head are all distinct visual manifestations of biblical evil. The choice to proclaim the work as the ‘guardian angel’, when many felt it

looked more like the fallen angel, further increased the potency of religious readings of Phylax. Even so, during the previous summer similar sculptures by Georgiou were placed around Mykonos and did not receive the same negative reactions, indicating that there was something specifically affective about Phylax's placement in Palaio Faliro.

The most significant spatial factor influencing symbolic interpretations of the sculpture was its placement between the two churches; leading many to consider the work blasphemous. In a temporal sense, Phylax was erected during a time of increased strain between the Orthodox Church and the Greek state, which have historically had close ties. The left-wing and openly atheistic Prime Minister Tsipras was the first in Greece to be sworn into office with a civil oath as opposed to a religious one. The government's subsequent push to remove religious teachings from the schooling system, and to implement new national identification cards without recorded religious affiliations was met with resistance by many Orthodox Christians. Figure 5.3 was taken during a demonstration by members of the Orthodox community on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2016. The protest was organised in response to the proposed new identification cards. Within this temporal context, the statue was perceived as part of a wider conspiracy against the church. These multiple factors all contributed to the distortion of the works preferred meaning, and eventually led to its destruction.



Figure 5.3 Orthodox demonstration in Athens

In the case of Phylax we are able to observe the agency of art through the social action instigated by distorted readings of the work. In contrast to the case made by Gell (1998) and other non-representational theories such as ANT and affect, material agency should not be considered in negation to the symbolic aspects of social life (Deleuze, 1978; Latour, 2005; Thrift, 2008). In this instance, the agency expressed by the artwork is clearly shown to be intrinsically linked to the amalgam of social, symbolic, aesthetic, spatial and temporal factors. The aesthetic nature of the work symbolically entrenched by its surrounding context, was considered by demonstrators as anti-Christian. It is through symbolic distortions that art becomes a vessel of agency (Morphy, 2009).

All of these diverse factors contribute to the agency of art and its capacity to influence the social domain in ways that extend beyond the intentions of artists, councils and urban planners. This example highlights that, although Phylax was a work of commissioned public art falling within the conceived spaces of representation, heterogeneous distorted readings resulted in the vandalism of the work. This is further indicative of the fact that both the function of symbols, and production of space are not homogenous, but complex and contradictory (Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991; Peirce, 1902).

Contrary to the case of Phylax, examples abound where the unruly symbolic nature of public urban space is tamed (relatively, but never completely) and effectively employed within the creation of art. Although there will always be an element of distortion and subjectivity in the decoding of complex symbols, many street artists are “adept masters of the semiotics of space, and engage with the city itself as a collage or assemblage of visual environments and source material” (Irvine, 2012, p. 4). The spatial context of street art is inseparable from the work and artists skilfully navigate and commune with the vast agencies that constitute meaning within the city. Given this, my analysis now turns to the way street artists intentionally interact with the symbolics of urban space.

## 5.2 Harnessing the Symbols of the Urban Context

Street art and graffiti are an appeal to the democratic and heterotopic elements of public space. They exist amongst the urban landscape and are imbedded within the realms of public debate. The illegal production of these works on publically accessible surfaces throughout the city make them an inherently political action on behalf of the writer (Zaimakis, 2015). This was well known by many of my participants, with one noting that “when you take the step and suggest something on a public wall it is by itself a political action”. When creating politically symbolic works, street art and graffiti endow artists with a high level of autonomy as they predominately function outside the restrictive curatorial practices and commercial logics of art institutions, urban planning and bureaucracy. As a result, street art is extremely responsive to changing socio-political conditions as it can be created by anyone at any time, with limited resources.

It is important to note that, as is true for all users of urban space, movement through the city is constrained by physical interdictions such as walls, fences, gates, locks, surveillance technologies and agents of social control (de Certeau, 1988). Street artists are not exempt from these restrictions but, through improvisational and subversive tactics, they regularly transform or abandon elements of spatial order and control. In so doing, the city streets are transformed into lived spaces and sites of resistance (de Certeau, 1988). Although limited by the geography and governance of public urban space, street artists in Athens exemplify the improvisational counter practices that De Certeau examines through his analysis of city walkers (de Certeau, 1988; Irvine, 2012). Street art exists within the spaces created by lived experience and “defined by people mapping their own movements” and “daily relationships through the streets, neighbourhoods, and transit networks of the city” (Irvine, 2012, p. 239). Artists purposefully engage with their urban environment and intentionally manipulate the symbolic values invested within it (Irvine, 2012).

Throughout history, Athenian urban space has witnessed political protests, occupations, riots, battles and revolutions. The city's turbulent history and uncertain present have turned its spaces into symbolic sites of collective memory (French, 2012). Athenian street artists were acutely aware of the symbolic potency of urban space and well adept at incorporating it into their art. Their knowledge of the symbolic and political potential of public space presented itself as a central aspect of street and graffiti artists' practice. Street artists described the deliberate opening of reciprocal communicative channels between their artworks and the urban context. In this section I will use a series of ethnographic examples to elucidate some of the common ways that artists in Athens manipulate symbols to invest their work with communicative power.

During a conversation at a tavern in central Athens, street artist Alone 98 explained the symbolic nature of space and its influence on his work:

Where you paint, is a part of the process of graffiti. Where you paint can constitute the symbolic characteristics of the work. Recently I did a piece concerning refugees and chose to create it in Nea Ionia (Figure 5.4). The choice was not random, Nea Ionia was created by refugees who came to Greece after the Asia Minor catastrophe of 1922.



Figure 5.4 Street art by Alone 98 in solidarity with the refugees, Nea Ionia, Athens

This example highlights the diachronic symbolic potential of space, particularly the way that through art, temporal bridges are able to be created between the past and present (Knight, 2012). The Asian Minor catastrophe refers to the outcome of the post-WWI Greco-Turkish war, including the burning of the Greek and Armenian quarters during the great fire of Smyrna in 1922, and the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. The exchange saw more than 1,600,000 refugees arrive into Greece with many settling in ramshackle conditions in areas such as Nea Ionia (Katsibokis, 2013). Here the artist connects this historical event to the modern Syrian refugee crisis. In an act of solidarity, the artist draws a symbolic link between the Greek refugees of the 1920's and the modern Syrian refugees, foregrounding the continuing plight of the dispossessed regardless of ethnicity. By engaging with the symbolic nature of space Alone 98 was able to express what he called a “fundamental respect for fellow man”.

The symbolics of space are often engaged to commemorate the past and memorialise relevant individuals. An example of this can be seen in the Athens Polytechnic, where art obtains a level of meaning as a result of the political and social history of the space. As discussed previously, The Athens Polytechnic was the site of the student uprising against Greece's military dictatorship. Till this day the 17th of November (the day when the tank broke through the gates killing 23 students in 1973) is celebrated in Greece as a triumph of democracy and freedom, as the events eventually ushered in the end of the junta. As a consequence of this, the Polytechnic plays a highly symbolic role in the modern history of Athens and is a hotspot for radical political activity, including graffiti and street art. The artworks in such politically charged environments exist in a symbiotic relationship with space; the works visually demarcate spaces as sites of revolution and resistance, whilst spaces symbolically invest works with radical tones. Figure 5.5 painted on the grounds of the Polytechnic is a homage to anti-fascist activist and rapper Pavlos Fyssas (known by the stage name Killah P). Fyssas was stabbed to death whilst at a cafe, by a supporter of the far-right political organisation Golden Dawn in 2013. The image, rendered in red, black and white (symbolic of anarchist and anti-fascist movements)



links the memory of Fyssas to the revolutionary ideals represented by the Polytechnic.



Figure 5.5 Memorial to Killah P in the Athens Polytechnic

Exarchia, the neighbourhood surrounding the polytechnic is itself an epicentre of anarchist and anti-state activity. As a result, it is imbued with potent symbolic meaning. The streets of Exarchia are covered in street art and graffiti which signify the radical nature of the neighbourhood, demarcate significant spaces and memorialise past events. For example, Figure 5.6 depicts the place that 15 year old Alexandros Grigoropoulos was shot by a police officer on the 6th of December 2008 whilst out with friends (Astrinaki, 2009). The shooting of Alexandros resulted in the almost instantaneous proliferation of riots throughout Athens which were the largest and most violent since the student uprising in 1973 (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2011). The day is still commemorated annually with riots in Exarchia. December 6 sees the neighbourhood transformed into an urban battle ground, covered in a dense noxious haze consisting of exploded tear gas canisters and smoke from flaming barricades constructed of bins and debris. Both the memorials to Killah P and Alexandros are significantly placed within spaces that symbolically contribute to the revolutionary significance of the two individuals. Likewise, both Killah P and Alexandros have themselves become symbolic of the neighbourhood's anti-state ethos. This again indicates the bidirectional relationship between the symbolics of space and art as both contribute to the process of meaning making.



Figure 5.6 The memorial to Alexandros, Exarchia, Athens

Street art memorials are an example of just one way that art and space are symbolically engaged by artists. Different artists used symbols and space in unique ways depending on the work they wanted to create and the messages they intended to portray. Yet, as articulated by many of my participants, the understanding that “the wall influences the art and the way it turns out” remained a core mantra of street art practice. Beyond influencing the symbolic meaning of artworks, the physical shape of the walls also influences the aesthetic properties of the work. During a discussion on this topic, B. explained:

I think that 50% has to do with where you will paint, the wall. I don't think you would say my work is so clean if you saw it on a white wall. Because the wall behind is grey and broken, and strange, and there is a rundown building around it, it makes it seem super clean. It's a trick.

B. creates works using vibrant pastel colours which when placed upon old walls stand in fantastic contrast to their surroundings. The artist Fikos, takes an opposite approach by seeking out clean walls, describing that:



I like it to be clean, to have a beginning and an end. But it can be older and you know, have an atmosphere. Basically, I have to see it and it makes me click, I see it and think ah perfect. But, it is hard for me to find a wall, very hard, if it is old it can't have tags and things on it, it has to be a virgin. I have to see it, and be the first to see it, which is difficult now because everything has tags on it.

In this statement Fikos further reiterates the affective, atmospheric and agential aspects of urban structures (Deleuze, 1978). Artists often creatively manipulate the contours and geometry of urban spaces to create depth within their works. The shapes of the urban environment profoundly influence the way art melds into its surfaces. An example of this can be seen in Figure 5.7, where a brooding character stands imprisoned by the window bars. Prolific Athenian street artist Achilles, masterfully uses the geometry of urban space to create anamorphic works integrated into the urban environment. This can be seen in Figures 5.8 and 5.9, both painted on separate walls such that they form a single female head when viewed from a specific vantage point (note the fangs on the woman are not part of the original artwork).



Figure 5.7 Street art embedded in the urban architecture, Psirri, Athens



Figure 5.8 Street art by Achilles depicting the artist's use of the urban environment, Athens



Figure 5.9 Street art by Achilles viewed from a distance, Athens

In this section I have depicted the close relationship street artists share with their spatial surroundings. The artists are well adept at engaging with the

semiotics and geometry of space to heighten the meaning, form and function of their works. The very shapes and contours of urban space influence the aesthetic properties of work by providing artists with opportunities to meld their art into the forms of the city streets. Urban art exists in a perpetual symbiotic exchange with its spatial context, informed by, and informing the meaning and atmosphere of specific areas. I will now move on to analyse how space is contested and fought for through symbolic means.

### **5.3 Symbolic Battles Within the City**

As previously explained, urban space in Athens has become an increasingly contested domain and site of civil unrest. Significantly, urban space is fought for and demarcated through visual symbolic means. To explore how symbols and artworks are used to contest and demarcate space, I will briefly turn to Bourdieu's (1980) notion of the habitus. For Bourdieu (2000), symbols function as vessels of social action through their capacity to exert dominance through the inculcation of the dominated. In modern societies, symbolic oppression is predominately exercised by the state. As an organisational structure which regulates practices, the state decisively contributes towards the symbolic construction of social reality. It exerts a permanent formation of durable dispositions on agents through the constraints and disciplines it enforces (Bourdieu, 2000). These permanent and durable dispositions, which are at the very core of people's experience of the world, are labelled by Bourdieu (1980) as the habitus. Certain symbols ingrained into the habitus instigate reactions to them in specific predetermined ways, without the agents needing to consciously calculate their response. It is the habitus which gives symbolic forms of dominance their power and potency (Bourdieu, 2000).

Bourdieu's (2000) concept of symbolic oppression brings to light the underlying structures and symbolic forms which influence the social experience. It is particularly salient in the analysis of state and institutional violence which tends to operate covertly in most urban societies (cf.

Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 221). However, during times of increased social strain, state control and its symbolic modes of oppression become increasingly visible as the established systems break down and lose legitimacy in the eyes of the people. During times of social stress and crisis, symbolism becomes a means through which groups and individuals objectify and resist the power relations that inform social reality. As symbolic forms of state domination break down, they lend themselves to being manipulated, intentionally distorted, re-appropriated and defiled as a mode of symbolic counter violence and resistance to state control (Hall, 1980; Herzfeld, 1997b; Riches, 1986).

The decline of state legitimacy has a long history in Greece, but has been greatly exacerbated throughout the crisis (Kallianos, 2018). As the state loses legitimacy, symbols of dominance become increasingly contestable, turning the symbolic realm into a site of resistance and social action. Symbols can be used as threats of physical violence, and as a means of attacking, resisting and questioning without the need of physical assaults (Riches, 1986). In this way, symbolic violence, as it needs few resources (particularly when carried out through mediums such as street art and graffiti) is effective in allowing individuals to actively resist wider institutions, groups and ideologies which they would be physically incapable of doing. Artists estimate the limits of social tolerance for symbolic acts of violence, and tailor their works to fall within or without, for more or less communicative effect (Riches, 1986). For these aforementioned reasons, it is important not to underestimate the competency, moral processes, ethical judgements and creativity of agents as they traverse their social contexts (Das & Kleinman, 2000). Through analysing the ways that agents manipulate symbols in Athens, street art is shown to serve multiple symbolic functions ranging from violence and resistance to the visual demarcation of space (cf. Jarman, 2005).

Throughout the crisis there has been an increased interest and participation in the extreme ends of the political spectrum, exemplified through anarchist and anti-establishment groups on the left, and ultranationalist groups such



as Golden Dawn on the right. As the people of Greece have become increasingly disenfranchised and desperate, these radical groups have offered immediate action in place of the system that people have become increasingly isolated from (Alexandrakis, 2009). Both the radical left and right have provided a tangible means for people to resist the violence imposed on their everyday lives by larger state and international institutions (Herzfeld, 2011). Although some of these political groups have established themselves as official parties and even gained seats in parliament, they also double as hands-on street level organisations. This has turned public space into a symbolic site of intense political and ideological conflict.

Violence between these groups is linked to establishing control over urban spaces through physical and symbolical means; as control over space represents dominance in the socio-political domain (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011). Clashes between opposing ideological groups have at times been fatal, eliciting equally violent retaliations. One such event took place in the early hours of the 11th of May 2011, when Manolis Kantaris, a Greek citizen, was stabbed to death during a mugging by two Afghan migrants. In response to this, Greece's ultranationalists organised a coordinated attack against immigrants, anarchists and leftists (Dalakoglou, 2013). This turned out to be one of the largest and most violent anti-immigrant rallies the country had ever seen. The event lasted for several days and resulted in numerous immigrants and radical leftists being beaten and stabbed (Dalakoglou, 2013). Another fatal event linked to ideological conflict is the previously discussed murder of Killah P by a known supporter of Golden Dawn (Bampilis, 2018). This murder instigated a wave of retaliations by radical antifascist organisations, culminating in a drive by shooting of the Golden Dawn offices in the neighbourhood of New Heraklion, killing two young party members (Bampilis, 2018). Although this kind of fatal physical violence is by no means the norm in Greece, the battle for control over space is constantly being waged through acts such as protests, riots, occupations, illegal squatting and of course, art.

Vandalism, graffiti and street art have emerged as useful tools of communicative violence and resistance, as they are highly visible and require little material backing to do effectively (Riches, 1986). The use of symbols to demarcate space is also appealing as they continue to function even when actors are not physically present. These kinds of urban art and vandalism can indicate which group controls a space at any given time. In this way, the fight for space has become as much a symbolic battle as it is a physical battle. The walls of Athens stand as a testament to this symbolic warfare being played out day by day. One of the most notable examples of the symbolic battle for space can be seen in Exarchia. As soon as one crosses into the borders of Exarchia, the quantity, content and aesthetic treatment of the street art and graffiti make the area's revolutionary tone immediately perceptible. The revolutionary aesthetic and symbolism of the area is regularly policed by self-organised locals, with incompatible graffiti and vandalism being promptly covered, removed or destroyed. On one such occasion, I witnessed a local mohawk sporting punk removing fascist stickers that had been brazenly placed throughout the area the previous night. These kinds of physical patrols ensured that the atmosphere of the area remained consistent with its overarching anti-establishment ideology. Figure 5.10 is indicative of the politicised nature of much of the graffiti encountered when walking through Exarchia.



Figure 5.10 Fuck the police graffiti in Exarchia (ACAB surrounding the skull stands for All Cops Are Bastards)

The most widespread political symbols used to demarcate space are designed to have obvious meanings with the intention that they will be understood by a wide cross-section of the population. For example, Golden Dawn use either the white supremacist version of the Celtic Cross (Figure 5.11), or their own logo adapted from the ancient Greek key pattern. Greek anarchists regularly use symbolism associated with global anarchist movements; the predominant symbol being the circle-A seen in Figure 5.12. These spatial marking symbols are simple so they can be drawn with little expertise allowing for easy proliferation throughout the city. Unlike the more complex symbolism used by street artists, these symbols speak on a straightforward level and work on the assumption that they will be understood by the majority of both local and international audiences (Riches, 1986). Certain symbolic forms are preferred over others dependant on the circumstances of their use. In the case of marking space, group identity and ideology is compressed into simple, clear and effective symbolic forms minimising the potential for distorted readings (Hall, 1980).



Figure 5.11 Nationalist Celtic Cross



Figure 5.12 Anarchist symbols in Exarchia

These kinds of symbols can also be visually treated in ways which allow for maximum communicative impact. Such visual treatment includes the use of certain colour schemes symbolic of specific political movements. In Athens,



proponents of the radical left colour code their images with red, black and white which endow the works with the ability to convey revolutionary, oppositional and subversive ideologies (Avramidis, 2012). In revolutionary spaces such as Exarchia, the colour schemes compose the 'aesthetic palette' of the area and stand in stark contrast to the emergent cafe culture and attempts at gentrification (Chatzidakis, 2018, p. 151).

Figures 5.13 and 5.14 are examples of the aesthetic treatment of images of the radical left. The use of red, black and white create a revolutionary tone to the works, as well as contributes to the atmosphere of the surrounding area. Symbols such as the gas mask in Figure 5.13 are also closely associated with protest movements as they are used by rioters to withstand police tear gas. These visual and symbolic cues are employed by artists and activists to demarcate territory and establish visibility within the city.



Figure 5.13 Black & red masked anarchist, Athens





Figure 5.14 Artwork indicative of the revolutionary aesthetics of art on the ground of the Athens Polytechnic

It is also important to note that visual markings in urban space exist in the everyday lived context of those moving through the city. Often people's encounters with the works are reduced to fleeting interactions as they pass by focused on their daily tasks. As a result, not all in the vicinity of urban art will consciously attempt to interpret its symbolically imbued meanings. The diversity of urban dwellers also means not everyone will be equally adept at interpreting the symbolic composites of artworks, resulting in distortion between the interpretant and signified, as previously depicted by axis 3 in Figure 5.1 (Hall, 1980). In instances like this, the symbolic, interpretive and discursive aspects of art fade into the background of human consciousness. Culture, subjectivity and the habitus give way to the sensuous, non-discursive and non-semiotic aspects of social life (Bourdieu, 1980; Mazzarella, 2009; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). The vast symbolic potency of urban art fades into affective ambience, side-lined, but not silenced. Street art, even when disengaged from semiotic meaning making, remains an active participant in the social world. As these works are passed by commuters, revellers, students, cyclists, drivers, shoppers and other urban characters, they contribute to the ever-present ambience of city life. They comprise part of the atmosphere of a specific space-time juncture,

emanating from the external material world to influence the human experience as felt intensities (Deleuze, 1978; Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

I witnessed an example of this affective phenomenon in those who were visiting the city for the first time. One of the most visceral early responses people described to me related to the sheer amount of graffiti and street art in central Athens. In these instances, it was not the symbolic nature of the street art which people described, but rather the intangible ambience that it emitted. I encountered a diverse range of ways that this affective ambience was felt, experienced and described by these first-time visitors. For some, the sheer amount of graffiti incited a sense of awe, with one tourist describing the way they were immediately attracted to the “freedom of expression” afforded by the city. For others, the atmosphere incited a sense of danger and anarchy, making them wary of venturing too far out of the tourist hotspots.

Beyond the atmospheric elements of street art, it is not difficult for one to quickly decipher that the symbolic battle for space in Athens is dominated by the radical left. This is particularly clear to locals and foreigners alike, as the symbolic and aesthetic treatment of political works are often associated with global anti-authoritarian and left-wing *mediascapes* (Appadurai, 1990). Significant sites are symbolically treated as a means of ideologically and visually colonising the space. The Polytechnic is exemplary of this with the campus, both inside and out being almost entirely covered in radical graffiti and street art (see Figure 5.15 which depicts one of the institution’s stairwells). During a discussion on this topic, a politically moderate street artist expressed his belief that “95% of artists here are leftists”. He then explained that within the crisis people shouldn’t be constantly reminded of ideology and politics, “art should help them transcend”. Another artist described the use of city spaces to express overtly political messages as “blatant propaganda”.



Figure 5.15 Athens Polytechnic stairwell

The fact that the political symbols used to demarcate space are contestable in terms of legitimacy is precisely what gives them their communicative potency (Riches, 1986). As a result of the contested legitimacy of symbols, iconoclastic acts of defilement are a compelling means through which the symbolic battle for space plays out in Athens. The relatively simple political symbols used by ideological groups are at the mercy of being reappropriated, destroyed and desecrated. Iconoclasm has its origins in the destruction of religious imagery in the Byzantine Empire. The term is now used to refer more generally to the meaningful destruction of images or artworks (Gamboni, 2013). Unlike vandalism which is often perceived as senseless, iconoclasm implies a meaningful and communicative act intentionally carried out by a perpetrator (Gamboni, 2013). By desecrating a symbol, iconoclastic actions are not only aimed at the signifier (the visual symbol), but also function as a direct threat to the signified (political/ social group associated with the defiled symbol). Symbolic battles over space in Athens have taken on iconoclastic properties through the defilement of symbols as a means of attacking and threatening opposing political groups and individuals. Figures 5.16 to 5.19 are indicative of the iconoclastic battles

for visibility and space that are regularly played out in the urban spaces of Athens.



Figure 5.16 Symbolic battle between anarchists and ultranationalists



Figure 5.17 Layering effect of iconoclastic battles





Figure 5.18 Dispute over the Macedonian name, Syntagma, Athens



Figure 5.19 Symbolic battle being fought at the construction site of a mosque, Votanikos, Athens

Figures 5.16 to 5.18 depict the symbolic battle that took place within the context of the *Prespa Agreement* which sought to address the long-term disagreement over the Macedonian naming issue. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, the dispute centred around objections to FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) adopting the Macedonian name; related to the ancient Hellenic kingdom of Macedon, and the Northern Greek region of the same name. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, Greece's Syriza government along with the government of FYROM reached an agreement which aimed to end the 27-year dispute, allowing FYROM to officially adopt the name Northern Macedonia. The agreement was approved by both countries in January 2019, and came into full effect by February. For nationalists in both countries, the succession of the *Prespa Agreement* was considered as the ultimate act of treason. The agreement was met in Athens with protests and clashes between police and rioters. At the same time, counter-demonstrations were set up by anarchists and other proponents of statelessness who were calling for the dissolution of political and ethnic boundaries.

Figures 5.16 and 5.17 depict graffiti that occurred throughout this period, with the key symbols of anarchist and ultranationalist groups engaged in an iconoclastic battle over space and visibility. We see the Celtic Cross and anarchist symbols involved in a seemingly cyclical conflict, each being used to obscure and distort the other. In these instances, signs are superimposed over the initial images to stimulate distorted and oppositional readings (Hall, 1980). In Figure 5.17, the words 'antifa zone' (antifascist zone) have been painted over with a swastika, which was then crossed out with a prohibition sign. The prohibition sign was finally transformed into XA (Greek abbreviation for nationalist group Golden Dawn) as depicted at the time of the photograph. Figure 5.18 depicts the statement 'Macedonia is Greek Land' (in black spray paint) which was then painted over numerous times. The letter A was transformed into an anarchist symbol, and the subsequent letters erased with red. The original statement was then repainted in black shortly prior to the photograph being taken. In Figure 5.19 a similar scenario played out on the fence surrounding the construction site of a mosque in

Athens. During times of increased social strain, such iconoclastic symbolic battles become prominent means through which ideological tensions are manifested.

It is also common that acts of symbolic violence are carried out through invoking the symbols of opposing ideological groups to threaten and attack them without the need of physical assault (Riches, 1986). Figures 5.20 to 5.22 are indicative of this kind of symbolic act, through the use of the swastika. The image of the swastika is rarely invoked openly by formalised nationalist groups (particularly those represented in parliament) as its historical implications make it far too contentious to be effectively used to gain political legitimacy. Instead, the most common open use of the swastika throughout the city is by anti-fascist groups who manipulate the symbol as a means of displaying a lack of tolerance towards neo-Nazism. As a result, the swastika is most prevalent within works of symbolic violence that are levied against ultranationalists, in areas controlled by the radical left. This can be seen in the caricature of the Nazi being stomped (Figure 5.20), painted in an Exarchia parking lot, and the 'prohibited' swastika on the grounds of the Polytechnic (Figure 5.21).



*Figure 5.20 Stomp fascism street art, Exarchia, Athens*





Figure 5.21 Swastika prohibition, Athens Polytechnic

Whilst setting up for a surrealist theatrical performance at a squat in the Petroupoli Botanical Gardens, a participant and collaborating artist pointed out a large swastika painted with a prohibition sign over it (Figure 5.22). The gardens and derelict buildings which had been completely abandoned by the state in 2009, had been occupied by a group of locals who turned them into a “free, public and social space” (Votanikos Kipos, 2009). During my visit to the squat, the collective was using the main building to temporarily house Syrian refugees. Knowing this, the artist turned and whispered to me “I don’t understand why they have swastikas here, I don’t like it, it seems strange to me. Instead of painting one and crossing it out, they should just not have them”.



Figure 5.22 Swastika prohibition, botanical gardens squat in Petroupoli, Athens



Outside of the ideological extremes, the crisis has necessitated a need for political expression amongst much of the population. Many of the artists I spent time with held strong political views, yet resisted being labelled and categorised as part of wider ideological movements. In early discussions, I asked participants if they associated with any political groups or ideology to which street artist Skitsofrenis replied:

no, absolutely not. I can find bits and pieces of something here and there but nothing satisfies me towards a revolutionary solution to our problems here.

Alone 98 responded to the same question affirming that:

I am not a member of any faction and that is not going to change. The factions do not express me. I am expressed only by solidarity groups, by free expression, with respect for fellow man and the free spirit.

By moving away from ideology and towards self-expression, street artists have prompted the production of more nuanced and individualised forms of politically evocative art.

#### **5.4 The Symbolic Function of Art as Socio-Political Commentary**

Art is a means through which individuals and groups are able to symbolically represent their views on the social, political and economic struggles associated with the crisis. Although many of my participants avoided defining themselves through inflexible ideological labels, they regularly created works which commented on the broad set of socio-political issues they considered to be afflicting Greek and global society. The artworks they created covered a broad range of themes including oppression, economic exploitation, homelessness, social isolation, discrimination, racism, hunger and consumerism. A well-known example of a socially conscious work of this kind, is "*No Land for the Poor*" (Figure 5.23), created by street artist WD

in Exarchia. To the left of the work (not pictured) is an inscription which reads “Dedicated to the poor and homeless here and around the globe”. On his website, the artist explains that by making the vulnerable and socially excluded visible, the work symbolises the amplified impact the Eurozone crisis had upon society’s dispossessed (WD, 2015).



Figure 5.23 'No Land for the Poor' by WD, Exarchia, Athens, 2015

Figure 5.24 satirically depicts what appears to be an intimate moment shared between former Greek Prime Minister Tsipras and German Chancellor Merkel. This piece references the famous 1989 work by artist Dmitri Vrubel on the east side of the Berlin Wall, portraying a similar 'intimate' moment shared between Soviet President Brezhnev and East German President Honecker (which was itself based on a photograph of the pair taken in 1979). The Greek 'crisis' version of this work appeared in central Athens in the wake of the controversial outcome of the 2015 referendum. As covered in *Chapter Two*, during the negotiations between the Syriza government and their European counterparts, the 'no' result of the Greek Bailout Referendum was abandoned for harsher austerity terms proposed by Troika. The 'apparent' kiss between the two (supposedly

opposing political figures) is symbolic of the controversial deal struck during this contentious period of contemporary Greek history.



Figure 5.24 'The Kiss of Discord' by Jupiterfab, Psirri, Athens, 2015

I will now return to the established conceptual framework to further elaborate on how symbols function within works of politically evocative street art. Through the following example, the artist's thoughtful assemblage of multiple symbolic forms is shown to effectively encode his work with socio-political meaning. The analysis will explore two related works created by street artist B. in the neighbourhood of Keramikos. These works (Figures 5.25 and 5.26) were created in 2015, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis. During an interview with B., he explained that he "did two paintings for the Syrian refugees in Keramikos", and continued on to described these works and their symbolic meaning:

In essence, these people don't have a country, they don't have a flag, so this flag is representative of them. It shows what they are



going through as they try to pass from Turkey to Greece; they drown. It shows their experiences of trying to enter Northern Europe. It is these experiences that I have tried to capture with this flag. I want to show that here is a flag, but really flags shouldn't exist, these people are having such a hard time, because we all have a country that we believe belongs to us, and only we can be here, and we don't let others in. You know we create these borders and we don't consider that there are children and people who are leaving the war because they are going to be killed. For us to think, 'ok I was born in this country and it doesn't bother me what the others do, here we will live, so long as we are super and have money, it will be a closed society and it's fine' It doesn't work like that. Obviously, there should be thought put into it, countries that have more economic power can take on more people, others less. Ok, we aren't saying one country can take everyone, but definitely, something can happen and we are able to help.



Figure 5.25 Drowning flag by B. Keramikos, Athens 2015. Picture courtesy of the artist



Figure 5.26 Barbed wire flag by B. Keramikos, Athens 2015. Picture courtesy of the artist

Beyond describing the intended symbolic function of the works, B. was also able to provide some insight into the ways in which they were received by passers-by. He mentioned that as he was painting the flags, locals would often stop to have a look. The people he spoke with, or overheard talking, deduced that the images were created in solidarity with the refugees. In this instance B.'s preferred meaning was effectively transmitted to the observers. To understand why this was the case, I will break down the interconnectedness and function of the relevant signifiers (symbolic forms) utilised by the artist. It is the amalgam of these symbolic forms which allow these artworks to function as commentary on the refugee crisis; which had reached a peak during August 2015 when the works were created.

The hand reaching from the water on the flag depicted in Figure 5.25, represents incidences of drowning during the perilous journey undertaken by refugees crossing from Turkey to Greece. The flag in Figure 5.26 depicts barbed wire, symbolic of the closed border policies hindering migrants' capacity to pass through to Northern Europe. Individually, each symbol is generally self-explanatory and unproblematic; for instance, it can be assumed that a viewer will know what a hand is, what water is and what barbed wire is. In these works the artist's use of simple symbolism creates a direct connection between signifier and signified (de Saussure, 1959; Peirce, 1902). Despite this, in order to derive the full meaning of the artworks, an interpretant needs to invest effort into the decoding process; the success of which is contingent upon their capacity to decipher the relationships between the different symbolic forms. Arriving at the preferred meaning also presupposes a level of prior knowledge about the refugee crisis in Greece. If these works are considered outside of their spatiotemporal context, the symbols could conceivably be interpreted to mean any number of things. For example, if placed in Northern Ireland the hand in Figure 5.25 would likely be read as a Protestant representation of the Red Hand of Ulster (see Jarman, 1992).

I will further examine Figure 5.25 to clarify how meaning is constructed through the assemblage of symbols. To do this I will begin by breaking down the individual symbolic components of the work. The image consists of five predominant symbolic forms: a flag, a sea, a sky, a sun and a hand. Each one of these symbols functions through its capacity to represent a signified object; analogous to what Gell (1998) refers to as a prototype in his art nexus (Parmentier, 2016). Although Gell (1998, p. 27) purports to have abandoned symbolic analysis, his concept of an *index* defined as the "material entities which motivate abductive inferences, cognitive interpretation, etc." seems to function as what would otherwise be considered, a symbol (Morphy, 2009). In Figure 5.25, the symbols, although rendered in the artist's own unique style, relate clearly to the prototypes/signifieds that they respectively seek to represent. In many instances, an index/symbol, only requires few visual similarities with the

prototype/signified it refers to in order to be effectively recognised (Gell, 1998). When viewing the work, interpretants successfully inferred the resemblance of the symbols to their respective prototypes, thus ascertaining what each sought to represent. However, the meaning of the artwork as a whole is not based solely on individual signified/signifier relationships, but their conceptual integration into a coherent holistic message, namely the dangerous journey faced by Syrian refugees. To better understand the process through which art mediates social meaning, Gell's (1998) art nexus (artist, index, prototype, recipient) needs to be extended to incorporate an analysis of the spatial and temporal context of art.

B.'s work shows its true communicative potential when the various symbolic components are interpreted as a single work within the wider socio-political context of Athens. During the peak of the refugee crisis, images and stories of Syrian children drowning whilst travelling with people smugglers proliferated through the national, and international media. The spatiotemporal context of this work symbolically linked it to the emotive and distressing images of drowned children, unseaworthy vessels, and overcrowded refugee camps present in Greece's collective psyche. The five symbolic forms used in Figure 5.25, when arranged by the artist and painted onto a derelict Athens wall during the height of the refugee crisis, effectively guided the decoding of the preferred meaning (Hall, 1980). The vibrant sun, sky and water evoked the Aegean Sea during the Greek summer. The hand reaching from the sea denoted drowning and desperation. Finally, the flag as described by the artist represented nation states and closed borders (what the artist considered a significant cause of the refugees' precarious situation). Even though the aesthetic of this work, with its vibrant cartoon like imagery is in contrast to the dire message it portrayed; the assemblage of the five symbolic forms, within the spatial and temporal context of Athens, allowed viewers to arrive at its essential significance. This example highlights that successful street artists are able to effectively manipulate symbolic forms and their spatiotemporal contexts as a means of communicating complex ideas through their artworks.

The categorisation of a work as 'street art' or 'graffiti' also influences the way it is interpreted and received. Specifically, when dealing with social issues such as the refugee crisis, street artists, self-organised art collectives and other grassroots movements, were often viewed as being more authentic than their counterparts working from within the 'commercialised' art world. This authenticity was actualised through events organised to fundraise and provide refugees with opportunities for social participation, as well as through collectives working to provide informal housing and services for them. In contrast, expensive, institutionalised works of art dealing with the refugee crisis, were considered by my participants to be indulgent and detached from the needs of the refugees. For example, within the context of Documenta 14, Canadian artist Rebecca Belmore created a marble tent that was placed on the historic Filopappou Hill overlooking the Athens Acropolis (Yalouri, 2018). The work titled *From Inside* symbolised the refugee crisis by signifying the tents which had become synonymous with Europe's refugee camps. Belmore also framed the work within her own cultural heritage, relating it to the traditional homes of the Anishinaabe indigenous people of Canada (Yalouri, 2018). By Documenta's official account, the work was intended to represent the humanitarian issues associated with the refugee crisis by stimulating a conversation between the artwork and the adjacent Parthenon (Yalouri, 2018). Although the tent was received well in some instances, it was also met with cynicism by certain artists, critics and locals.

In one instance the piece was criticised as being part of Documenta's catalogue of "overly literal duds" (Russeth, 2017). The Documenta team's staunch yet troublesome proclamation of the exhibition's supposedly anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist ideology, led some to view it as "a \$40 million sprawl of a show... self-indulgent" and in "painful excess" (Russeth, 2017). One Greek art critic hoped that the dialogue Documenta 14 promised to prompt would go further than "descriptive gestures... like putting a marble tent on Philopappou Hill, opposite the Acropolis to raise awareness on the refugees crisis" (Zefkili, 2017). Documenta's perceived economic excess was at apparent odds with the anti-capitalist ethos the institution asserted.



This formed the basis of a significant amount of commentary surrounding Belmore's work. One writer stated that "the tent felt like a crypt, and rather than actually evoking the experience of refugees, I saw it as a wasteful object that sought to consecrate the refugee crisis with an expensive monument" (Batycka, 2017). The tent was shipped to Greece and lifted into place by a crane at significant expense; the exact price is a matter of debate with Documenta claiming costs of 6,560 euros, and other sources estimating a six-figure sum (Sutton, 2017).

In this example, the temporal moment in which the work was placed created a tangible symbolic link between the tent and the refugee crisis. Furthermore, the fact that the tent was made of marble, and placed opposite the Parthenon; arguably Greece's most important marble building, was also decidedly symbolic. This again highlights the potent symbolic potential of art's spatiotemporal context. One of my participants explained to me that, being a sculptor he was able to appreciate the technical aspects of the work, but took issue with its placement. This artist considered the marble tent opposite the Parthenon (a symbol of Hellenism) as audacious virtue signalling by a wealthy foreign institution. He expressed annoyance at what he saw as Documenta blaming the impoverished populace of Greece for the turmoil experienced by refugees. "I don't know" he mused during a conversation, "it seems strange to spend that much money on placing a tent there. What meaning does it have for refugees?". As a marble worker himself, he attempted to estimate the cost of the work. He wondered if Documenta could have better used the money to contribute to the welfare of the dispossessed it claimed to represent, rather than to make banal artistic conjectures about them. In contrast to this critique of commercialised 'humanitarian' art, works of street art dealing with the same issues afflicting the socially disposed (such as the flags created by B.) although still contestable, generally eluded these kinds of critiques.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted how the manipulation of symbolic forms within the urban context provided by Athens, profoundly influences the decoding of artworks (Hall, 1980). In the case of Phylax distortions of symbolic interpretation occurred as the result of the work's spatiotemporal placement leading to its ultimate destruction. This example emphasises the powerful agential capacity for art to affect social action which can exist outside the intentions of artists and urban planners (Gell, 1998; Latour, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Morphy, 2009; Peirce, 1902; Thrift, 2008).

I then underscored the various social functions that art serves in the city streets. Within the turbulent context of the crisis, street art, graffiti and symbolism have emerged as extremely effective ways through which the social struggles of the population are made visible. The chapter analyses the various symbolically driven social functions of art including memorialisation, spatial demarcation, iconoclastic violence and political commentary. I have also furthered the argument calling for material agencies to be included within the scope of social analysis through the examination of distortion between the function of symbols and affective atmospheres (Deleuze, 1978; Gell, 1998; Hall, 1980). Ultimately, in this chapter, art is revealed to play an active role within society as evident through the controversial readings of, and responses to street art, and even public art.

The following chapter builds upon the current symbolic analysis to more carefully examine the temporal aspects of artworks. Art will be shown to be a means through which temporally detached historical moments are made proximate to symbolically order and interpret the present crisis condition. This is then linked to the historical constitution of a 'Greek spirit of resistance' and used to analyse the widespread suspicion and resentment of the increased presence of international art institutions in Athens.

## Chapter 6

### Bridging the Past and the Present Through Art

This chapter explores the varied ways that the past is used to interpret contemporary experiences of the Greek crisis. Athens is an ancient city steeped in history that provides artists with a rich pool of symbolic material to draw inspiration from. By building upon historical narratives and images, artists legitimate their present beliefs and actions, whilst contesting those of others (Herzfeld, 1997b). The nation's ancient Hellenic past, Byzantine period, 19<sup>th</sup> century revolution, World Wars and contemporary political upheavals constitute the temporally dispersed symbolic palette used by artists. These segmented pasts although culturally shared, exist in delicate relation to each other and are susceptible to being reconfigured to meet the specific needs of distinct socio-political groups (Appadurai, 1981).

Through the analysis of *Anaparastasi*, a 2016 site-specific performance which took place in the Athens city centre, I indicate how significant past events are used to make sense of the contemporary crisis (Appadurai, 1981). The performance made use of in situ re-enactments of the final days of Nazi occupation and the events preceding the Greek Civil War. By exploring these themes within the modern city, the artists provocatively crafted spatiotemporal links between past and present experiences of oppression and suffering. Through the analysis of this work I further emphasise the communicative capacity of historically significant spaces, symbols and memories.

Greece's long and tumultuous history is then shown to have engendered an ethos of resistance that is both nationally celebrated and condemned (Herzfeld, 1985). Although the state plays a major role in the symbolic construction of social reality, the state's representation of the Greek ethnos is rarely agreed upon by the people (Bourdieu, 2000; Herzfeld, 1985). The disjuncture between state, individual and group constructions of social reality and national identity, has its roots in the widespread suspicion of authority and state motives (Herzfeld, 1985). These sentiments have been

profoundly accentuated during the financial crisis as a political history of institutionalised corruption, cronyism and greed is associated with the country's worsening economic situation. Within this context, national history has become a major site of contestation with the past being re-evaluated in all cultural spheres in attempts to find meaning in the present (Kennedy, 2018). Through an analysis of street art, I demonstrate how artists engage history to frame the present crisis in ways that are expressive, and politically evocative (Knight, 2012). The specific artworks dealt with in this section relate to the *Klefts* (brigands) of the War for Independence, and the subversive 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Rebetiko subculture. Through these examples, the central role that the past plays in framing the crisis is shown not only to be present in art, but within Greek society more generally.

### **6.1 Using the Tragic Past to Interpret the Crisis**

On a cold and still November night, I met with Giorgios (a musician and friend) at a rock bar in the outskirts of Athens. After a few beers, conversation turned to a discussion of the crisis. He expressed the somewhat conspiratorial yet not entirely unfounded belief that the crisis was ushered in by elite bankers and corrupt politicians who for years, had exploited the Greek people. It was not uncommon for my discussions with participants to cover 'who and what' they perceived to be responsible for the crisis. This particular discussion began in a similar way to many I was involved in, as well as those described in ethnographic accounts where "responsibility was traced externally: among wasteful politicians, inefficient civil servants... and inequalities in the global financial system" (Theodossopoulos, 2013, p. 208). Much of the discourse surrounding the crisis placed blame predominately on outsiders such as foreign banks, financial institutions, Western European nations, and to a lesser extent migrants (Herzfeld, 2011; Theodossopoulos, 2013).

The increase in asylum seekers arriving into Greece throughout the crisis has been considered by certain social groups to have further strained the country's weak economy (Green, 2018; Herzfeld, 2011). This issue

worsened with the outset of the Syrian War and the mass population flow of refugees between Turkey and Greece's porous borders; labelled by the media as the "European refugee crisis" (Cabot, 2016b). Despite certain far-right groups placing blame directly on migrants and refugees, most of my participants considered the refugee situation as related to the systemic injustices of Europeanisation and asylum politics (Cabot, 2016a; Green, 2018). The vast majority of artists I met operating within the Athens scene had centre-left or far-left political ideals; with most openly denouncing the anti-migrant sentiment of conservative and ultranationalist groups.

Discourse surrounding blame was also framed and interpreted through the reconstruction of past events. During the crisis, temporally detached historical moments were regularly recounted as though they possessed a contemporary quality (Knight, 2012). Greece's turbulent past has long played an active role in framing the present, and although not specific to the crisis it is a process which has been amplified by this time of social strain. In *The Poetics of Manhood* (1985) Herzfeld demonstrated that ideological discourse amongst Cretan men was often built around notions of hunger inherited from the days of Ottoman (1453-1821) and Axis (1941-1944) occupation. Similarly, within the context of the crisis, Knight (2012, p. 350) notes that the Great Famine suffered under the Axis occupation was once again "felt and feared" by the people of Trikala in central Greece. Due to a broad and long standing social consensus surrounding the suffering experienced under Nazi occupation, the events of the Second World War were regularly alluded to when framing modern 'crisis' discourse (Appadurai, 1981).

An example of the fluid connection between the past and present can be seen in the suicide note left by 77-year-old retired pharmacist Dimitris Christoulas, who shot himself in Syntagma square on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2012:

The Tsolakoglou government has annihilated all traces for my survival, which was based on a very dignified pension that I alone paid for thirty-five years with no help from the state. And since my

advanced age does not allow me a way of dynamically reacting (although if a fellow Greek were to grab a Kalashnikov, I would be right behind him), I see no other solution than this dignified end to my life, so I don't find myself fishing through garbage cans for my sustenance. I believe that young people with no future, will one day take up arms and hang the traitors of this country at Syntagma square, just like the Italians did to Mussolini in 1945 (Christoulas in Papasimakopoulos & Uladh, 2012).

The Tsolakoglou government referred to by Christoulas was the collaborative occupation government instated in Greece by the Nazis. By relating the present Greek government to the past Tsolakoglou government, Christoulas draws upon the widespread notion that Germany is again attempting to dominate Greece; this time “financially rather than militarily” as my interlocutor Giorgios put it during our conversation. This sentiment is visually articulated in Figure 6.1, a 2015 work by street artist Cacao Rocks. The caption, written in Gringlish (combination of Greek and English characters and words) translates to “then with tanks, now with banks”. The communicative power of this artwork is intensified by the real experience of social suffering encapsulated by the destitute individual sleeping in the foreground of the image. Here the powerful symbolic connection between street art, social memory and spatial context again becomes evident.



Figure 6.1 'Then with Tanks, Now with Banks' street art by Cacao Rocks (InExarchia, 2015)

The hard-line approach to Greek austerity and social reform supported by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schauble validated the connection of the crisis to the Axis occupation, in the eyes of many Greek commentators. This is particularly salient through memories of hunger related to the Nazi requisition of Greek food and fuel, which led to famine and the death of 300,000 people (Lynn, 2011). Hunger forms an integral part of Greek discourse surrounding experiences of oppression and deprivation and is often appealed to when discussing foreign domination (Herzfeld, 1985). Within the current crisis, externally imposed austerity and social suffering are likened to collective memories of the temporally disparate experience of famine (Knight, 2012). This was especially prominent during my conversations with the older generation of artists whose parents had directly experienced the trauma, hunger and deprivation of WWII and the Civil War. During a conversation with Grigoris (an established screen and theatre actor) he explained that as an older man he could “eat only bread and water until (his) death”. Yet, he lamented that this was no way for young people to live as deprivation has a “direct impact on the future generations”. He feared that the youth and the vulnerable would once again experience the trauma of past hunger and deprivation.

The use of the Second World War within modern ‘crisis’ discourse indicates that social time functions beyond the concept of a linear past which extends through a present ‘now’ towards the future (Gell, 1992). More specifically, multiple fragmented pasts are reassembled within the present by distinct social groups, and are communicatively effective so far as they adhere to the minimal parameters set by cultural, ideological and collective experiences (Appadurai, 1981; Trouillot, 2015). To further analyse the use of the past in interpreting the present I will examine *Anaparastasi*, a work of site-specific performance art created by theatre practitioner Anna Tzakou.

Influenced by graffiti and street art, many performance artists in Athens are currently experimenting with urban space in the production and presentation of their works. In so doing, performance artists now engage with the same

kind of representational social space that I have previously explored in relation to the practice of unsanctioned street art (Lefebvre, 1991). One such example is *Anaparastasi* which took place throughout the city centre and made use of the historic and symbolic potency of urban space to link contemporary experiences to those of WWII and the Greek Civil War. The 2016 performance involved a long walk with eleven stops at the precise sites where historic events had unfolded. Through interpretive performance, live re-enactments and spoken word, the actors evoked the past within the context of relevant urban spaces. Anna described the underlying philosophy of this work as “creating a theatre story through the body landscape relationship”. By actively engaging the symbolic urban spaces where tragic past events unfolded, the performers masterfully created temporal bridges between the troubled past, present and uncertain future. The symbolic engagement with the historicity of space and its connection to the present was a crucial element of the performance. Anna described that what she had “chosen to give as information from that event (WWII and the Civil War) were the elements that will bring links with today”. She explained that the perceived synchronicities between these past events and the present crisis guided the historical framework, spaces and movements around which she created the performance.

*Anaparastasi* made use of historical first-hand accounts which were read to the audience, and associated archival photographs that were displayed and physically re-enacted by the performers within the city. The blending of historical media and site-specific performance allowed audiences to experience past, present and future within a single moment (Knight, 2015). These temporal leaps occurred by moving audiences seamlessly between the World War, Great Famine, Civil War and the current crisis. The performance peaked in Syntagma square overlooking Greek parliament, where on December 3, 1944, shortly after gaining independence from Axis occupation, a popular rally organised by the National Liberation Front (EAM, founded by the Greek Communist Party) was quelled by government and allied gunfire (Leontidou, 2010). The fatal incident was supported by Winston Churchill in a bid to deter the influence of Communism in the wake



of Nazi rule. The events of December 1944, known as the *Dekemvriana* are seen as the antecedents to the brutal Civil War fought between government forces (backed by the UK and US) and the armed wing of the Greek Communist Party, which lasted from 1946 till 1949. Figure 6.2 is a 2016 theatrical recreation of the events of December 3, 1944 by the *Anaparastasi* performers. The scene in question is reminiscent of a historically significant photograph taken by Dmitri Kessel which portrays the demonstrators who had been shot at the EAM rally, surrounded by panicked onlookers. Significantly the recreation took place in the same space where the past event had transpired.



Figure 6.2 *Anaparastasi* performance re-enactment, photo by Karol Jarek, courtesy of Anna Tzakou – *Geopoetics*, 2016

The use of the Civil War was particularly thought-provoking as it was often not a salient part of publically discussed Greek collective memory (Knight, 2015). During a conversation, Anna explained to me that “this part of history is not so familiar, especially for the young generations, you have to go on your own and dig it out, even in school the books stop at the Second World War”. A street artist also echoed this sentiment, confessing to me that he

(in his late-twenties) had only recently 'properly' read about "EAM and how two days after the Germans left, the Greeks began fighting amongst themselves and there was a Civil War". In contrast, the Second World War and Axis occupation were less sensitive points of discussion and existed as a prominent shared reference point within Greek collective memory and crisis discourse (Appadurai, 1981; Knight, 2015). The Civil War remains a delicate subject in Greece, particularly as a result of opposing sympathies between the right and left wing that continue to endure within society (Hart, 1992). Anna understood the contentious position that the Civil War played in collective memory stating, "that part of history is usually very sentimentally remembered, particularly by the left... for the right side, the more official side, it's half given, some things remain hidden".

The absence of the Civil War as a conventional collective resource, highlights the limited malleability of the past, and the influence that hegemonic power has over the symbolic construction of social reality (Appadurai, 1981; Bourdieu, 1980; Trouillot, 2015). The period following the Civil War was one of open client status for Greece under British and then US influence. As a result, dominant discourse was manufactured around the "self-justificatory 'history' of the protecting powers" insisting "that their interventions were for the sake of saving Greece from a communist take-over by force of arms" (Saraphē & Eve, 1990, pp. 145-146). It was this 'official' perspective which was perpetuated through the media and education system, with access to wider viewpoints surrounding the Civil War and the Communists' critical role in WWII resistance only beginning to come into circulation after the fall of the junta in 1974 (Saraphē & Eve, 1990). As the legitimacy of the state and its symbolic construction of social reality has come under increased scrutiny due to the social pressures associated with the crisis, 'official' accounts of history are emerging as sites of symbolic contestation (Bourdieu, 2000; Cohen, 1979). This is particularly prominent in the arts, where history has come under scrutiny with the increased focus on unofficial and non-normative accounts of Greece's turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century (Papanikolaou, 2011).

In *Anaparastasi*, the site-specific nature of the work allowed actors to summon the dormant memories concealed within physical urban space and give them a voice within the present (French, 2012). The memories of the Civil War as enacted by the performers, significantly related to foreign meddling in Greek politics, something which resounded within contemporary discourse regarding blame for the crisis. This notion harks back to the post-Ottoman creation of the sovereign Greek nation where after the assassination of the first head of state, Greece took on the position of a client state under the European Powers (Saraphē & Eve, 1990). It is often understood that “ever since the early 1830s, the Great Powers had effectively taken away with one hand what they had granted with the other” (Beaton, 2009, p. 2). Greece’s historically rooted client status was something that many of my participants considered a driving factor behind the social suffering inflicted by the crisis. After witnessing the performance, Anna told me that one audience member had commented, “different story same shit”. In particular they were referring to the re-enacted lead up to the protest of December 3, 1944 which included firsthand testimonials from people involved in different sides of the political spectrum. The broad vantage point presented within the performance emphasised the devastating effects that competing foreign interests had on the rebuilding of a sovereign Greek state following the Axis occupation. The consequence of which was the opening of gunfire on a civilian protest, and a civil war that rivalled the World War in its brutality. The audience member recognised this foreign intervention within the contemporary crisis, this time imposed by foreign banks, investors and politicians working through the Eurozone (Lapavitsas, 2018).

As evident through the *Anaparastasi* performance, Greece’s rich, complex and turbulent history has produced evocative and contestable collective memories through which different groups and individuals are able to interpret the crisis (Appadurai, 1981). The performance brings to light the historical manipulation of Greece by foreign powers, and links this to the current experience of externally imposed austerity and social suffering. Greece’s precarious history of betrayal by foreign powers, has been a

catalyst for a deep-seated propensity for fierce resistance and civil disobedience.

## 6.2 The Greek Spirit of Resistance

Many of my participants understood the crisis as another tribulation that would eventually be overcome, despite admitting that they could not identify a clear and realistically achievable solution. During an interview B. explained:

The hope that existed before has been lost, and that created the need for the youth to express themselves politically in whatever way they can. All this creativity can't be withheld, it can't help but work its way out. I am an optimist, I believe that things will get better. It is pessimistic to say that the country is a catastrophe and will never function. I may have lost my hope in some things, but I also say I will still try.

Despite the ambiguity of any immediate solutions to the issues posed by the crisis, interpretations of it often appealed to a spirit of Greek resistance. During an impromptu discussion at a coffee house (*kafeneio*), an elderly man, between drags of his cigarette told me that “even if they take our country and there are only Greeks left in foreign lands, they will never destroy Hellenismos (Greekness/ Greek spirit)”. He then stared pensively into his coffee as he spun his worry beads (*komboloi*), eventually making eye contact to proclaim “*eleftheria i thanatos*” literally translating to “freedom or death”. This statement was the revolutionary motto used by the Greeks during the War for Independence from Ottoman rule. It was subsequently adopted as the official motto of the Greek state. The construction of Greeks as inherently anti-authoritarian and willing to fight for freedom at any cost, is a notion celebrated and perpetuated by the state, whilst also used by authorities as a means of elucidating the disobedience of the masses (Herzfeld, 2004). Those who are most threatened by the challenges and possibility of change posed by resistance often work to undermine it by

labelling it as irrational and impulsive behaviour (Theodossopoulos, 2014). In Greece, the same trait which is attributed to the Greek capacity to resist external oppression, is also cited as the cause of constant, vicious and irrational internal conflict. One street artist highlighted this issue stating that “Greeks don’t respect anyone or anything. Just like in the old days they didn’t respect Plato, and in Byzantium the one didn’t respect the other. It is always like this, one doesn’t respect the other, throughout history”.

The contradictions inherent in the Greek spirit of resistance are elucidated by the role of the *Klefts* (brigands) in the fight for independence and subsequently in national memory. Many of the most revered national heroes of the Greek War for Independence were originally *Klefts* (Herzfeld, 1985). During Ottoman occupation, the *Klefts* carried out raids and robberies and were responsible for the majority of revolts during the four-century period. After the war, many of the revolutionary heroes were imprisoned, neglected or killed by the newly established state, as their potential political influence was feared (similar to previously discussed Western fears of EAM and communism in Greece after WWII). The image of the *Kleft* has emerged as a powerful symbol to which different resistance groups have attached themselves as a means of legitimising their present actions (Appadurai, 1981). The *Klefts* operated on the boundaries of society and largely outside legality, but despite this they are now celebrated as national heroes by the state (Herzfeld, 1985). They are symbolic of Hellenic patriotism and national pride, whilst also symbolic of the Greek history of resistance and the distrust of the state. The *Klefts* represent the fragile link between the state constructed shared past and the past expounded by different social and ideological groups (Appadurai, 1981). This contested legitimacy is what makes historical symbols such as the *Klefts* powerful symbolic resources which artists can use to portray a diverse range of contemporary political messages.

One of the most prominent figures in the Greek War for Independence was Theodoros Kolokotronis. The street art depicted in Figure 6.3 is reminiscent of the revolutionary image of Kolokotronis as a modern resistance figure,

ready to throw a 'Euro' shaped Molotov cocktail. Figure 6.4 is the memorial statue of Kolokotronis next to the old parliament building in Athens, which emphasises the resemblance between the artwork and monument. In the highly symbolic work, the revolutionary figure is rendered in black, red and white (subversive colours as discussed in *Chapter Five*) and depicted throwing a 'Euro' Molotov (Avramidis, 2012). The Molotov cocktail has become a prominent global symbol of contemporary radical resistance movements. In this image, it is used to bridge the temporal divide between the revolution of the *Klefts* and that of modern resistance to the oppressive structural forces imposed by the European Union.



Figure 6.3 'The Revolt' street art by Absent, 2012. Picture courtesy of the artist



Figure 6.4 Monument to Kolokotronis, Central Athens

The work in Figure 6.3 was created by an anonymous Greek street artist know as Absent. It went viral on social media and was also regularly cited in mainstream media relating to the Greek crisis. In an interview, Absent explained to me that the work became popular because “the message is clear in every culture that ever heard about the Greek Crisis, and that is its uniqueness”. The rendering of the Molotov, the Euro and a revolutionary aesthetic, appeal to global symbolic processes, allows the preferred meaning of the work to be decoded even if interpretants only have a basic knowledge of the crisis in Greece (Hall, 1980). However, as Absent further explained, the symbolic meaning of the work synchronously functions on a more localised level:

The timing also played a less universal role, since it was made on the 21 of March 2012, only 4 days prior to the festivities in commemoration of the revolution from the Ottoman empire. Festivities in which Greek people were excluded (with iron fences everywhere) since the political elite were afraid of possible riots on

the base of the exacerbation of (deteriorating) living and working conditions of the people.

The unparalleled security measures implemented during the 2012 annual Independence Day Parade constituted the political and temporal context within which the work was symbolically embedded. In an unprecedented move by the state, the public was banned from significant areas of the parade as a means of suppressing potential anti-austerity protests. Having described the relevance of the work's temporal placement, the artist commented "I think the link between the past and the present is more obvious now". In this work, the revolutionary figure of Kolokotronis is conjured to represent the modern struggle against both state oppression and the economic and political domination at the hands of European Powers. Absent noted that "there are roots in our culture that spread beneath every political or social comment we make". He also stated the opinion that in Greece, "history's role has been in the sole direction of (the people's) oppression". This statement is reminiscent of Kolokotronis' fate, who although revered as a national hero, was imprisoned after the war in a bid to subdue his political influence. This oppression at the hands of the state, is related to modern resistance at a time where the people are again being repressed and silenced. Like the aftermath of the revolutionary war, the Greek state is once again depicted as subduing what Absent referred to as the "democratic way of participation in the decision-making process" at a critical historical moment.

National images such as that of the *Klefts* have played a prominent role in the formation of Greek identity. Although the state plays a significant part in extrapolating present narratives from temporally disparate and complex historical events, these narratives are often contested by a social body suspicious of state intentions (Bourdieu, 2000; Herzfeld, 1985). This suspicion is principally founded on the state's problematic validity related to its historical susceptibility to foreign meddling. As a result, the authority required to create credible interpretations of the past is questionable in terms of legitimacy, creating a malleable and contestable past (Appadurai,



1981). Through my time with participants, it became evident that the historically rooted suspicion of authority transmuted into a suspicion of foreign art institutions. There was also historical precedent for this, as times of oppression have often included the outlawing and condemnation of subversive art forms. One notable example of this is *Rebetiko* music that first appeared in the urban margins of Greece during the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Economou, 2011). Rebetiko is a musical genre and subculture that took root amongst the urban underclasses residing in the slum communities of Athens, Piraeus and Thessaloniki (Sarbanes, 2006).

The emergence of Rebetiko music and culture is largely attributed to the migration of Greeks from Asia Minor, which intensified with the forced population exchange of 1922 (Green, 2018; Shields, 2013). The music became associated with a distinctive subculture that developed amongst the thousands of uprooted and unemployed refugees, dwelling in slum communities (Sarbanes, 2006). The subculture was based around the *Manga* (male urban outlaw) whose identity was composed of attitude, toughness, knife fights, frequent imprisonment, hashish smoking and the distinctive music and instruments that came with them from Asia Minor (Koglin, 2008; Sarbanes, 2006). Rebetiko music was performed at *Teledes* (hash dens) such as those established around the port of Piraeus. The subjects of early Rebetiko songs explored themes of pleasure, masculine aggression, resistance to the law, drug use, love, pain and the harsh realities of poverty (Economou, 2011).

During the post-Ottoman period, the Greek state made a conscious effort to remove oriental influences and identify Greece with 'enlightened' European ideals and educational values (Tragaki, 2007). As Rebetiko was considered a remnant of Ottoman influence it was treated as a relic of a prior, 'pre-European' state of being (Fabian, 1983). Furthermore, Rebetiko music and the Teke engendered the socially eschewed mixing of "men and women, East and West, altered consciousness and everyday life" and as a result became a target of repression by the establishment (Sarbanes, 2006, p. 25). Up until, and largely through the 1930s Rebetiko was widely considered

to be a vulgar practice associated with the corrupting social influences of the seedy urban underworld (Economou, 2011). Tekedes were outlawed in Greece as early as the 1890s, but this was not stringently enforced until the mass migration of 1922 and the Metaxas dictatorship of 1936-1941 (Sarbanes, 2006). Along with this, the associated Rebetiko songs, dances and instruments (Bouzouki and Baglama) were also outlawed. Under the Metaxas dictatorship Rebetiko was subjected to strict state surveillance, censorship and prohibition (Economou, 2011). Musicians' instruments were regularly destroyed when found by authorities, making the Bouzouki and Baglama (Greek stringed instruments) enduring symbols of resistance (Sarbanes, 2006).

It wasn't until the 1930s when Rebetiko music was able to be recorded that it began to escape from its closed underground circles and permeate through wider society (Economou, 2011; Sarbanes, 2006). Eventually the Rebetiko scene was integrated into mainstream culture with musicians increasingly performing in taverns and cafes (Economou, 2011). Vinyl recordings travelled around the globe with the Greek diaspora, making the musical style commercially viable and creating new professional career prospects for musicians and singers. The music was subject to commodification following the Second World War and many artists began to write songs that conformed to bourgeois society. These factors, along with the emergence of *Laiko* (popular Greek music emerging from Rebetiko) prompted Rebetiko's gradual transition into cultural obscurity. Despite this, due to the importance Rebetiko assumed during times of oppression it remained a symbol of resistance for intellectuals, artists and social dissidents. The Manga's refusal to be disciplined throughout the Metaxas regime (1936-1941) and the Axis occupation (1941-1944) became a romanticised symbol of subcultural resistance. From the 1960s onwards the forgotten and marginalised pre-war Rebetiko was rediscovered by new generations, and eventually became considered an important aspect of contemporary Greek culture (Economou, 2011). Throughout the current crisis the symbol of the Manga and Rebetiko music has again resurfaced as a symbol of resistance to the economic crisis.

During a modern ethnographic study in an Athenian Rebetiko club named *Rebetiki Istoría*, left-wing working-class patrons were shown to be typically opposed to Greece's membership in the Eurozone (Stamatis, 2016). Participants of the study used Rebetiko as a form of resistance to what they considered to be the crypto-colonial ambitions of the 'neoliberal' West (Herzfeld, 2002). During interviews with her participants, Stamatis (2016) highlights that the crisis in Greece was widely perceived as being part of the country's historical exploitation by external economic and political forces. The case of *Rebetiki Istoría* is a testament to the fact that Rebetiko music remains a relevant means of resistance within the context of the crisis. The lyrics, Eastern modes and instruments used within the music allow the practitioners to symbolically resist and subvert hegemonic European influence (Stamatis, 2016).

Rebetiko is an art form that, similar to street art, thrives outside of institutionalised settings and forges heterotopic representational spaces in resistance to hegemonic control (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991; Zaimakis, 2015). Recently, Rebetiko has seen a resurgence as it provides an alternative to the extravagant and expensive nightlife of fashionable clubs and upscale bars. The music's innate spirit of resistance resonates with the harsh social realities of everyday life in 'crisis' Athens. On a night-out at a Rebetiko tavern, one of my interlocutors described the large clubs down the road (playing English dance music and contemporary Greek music) as being for "bad Greeks" calling them "inauthentic, trashy and wasteful". I spent many nights with participants at Rebetiko clubs, enjoying a full night of music, food, drink and atmosphere whilst engaged in everyday resistance to cultural hegemony (Scott, 1985).

My participants often compared Rebetiko to African American blues music, and sometimes even underground hip hop. These seemingly diverse musical styles, were all at the outset considered within their respective social contexts to be 'folk devils' by the establishment (cf. Cohen, 1972). Greek graffiti writers and street artists have long inhabited a similar subversive position within society and have thus associated with both hip

hop and Rebetiko. The interconnectedness of these disparate subcultures is encapsulated in Figure 6.5; a work of street art depicting a hip hop break-dancer, graffiti and Rebetiko musicians (based on a famous 1933 photo taken in Piraeus, Figure 6.6).



Figure 6.5 Street art by Mortes Crew depicting the connection between Hip-hop, graffiti and Rebetiko



Figure 6.6 'Rembetes 1933 in Karaiskaki, Piraeus'

In Figure 6.5 the break-dancer, vinyl record and graffiti are all symbolically associated with urban hip hop culture. The clever rendering of the graffiti in

the sepia tone of the original Rebetiko photo (Figure 6.6), with patches of vibrant blue (matching the break-dancer's t-shirt) artistically bridges the temporal divide between Rebetiko and graffiti/hip hop culture. This work is exemplary of street artists' capacity to make chronologically disparate events, concepts and social movements culturally proximate by reassembling them into a recognisable present (Knight, 2015). Through the use of superimposition and clever aesthetic rendering, the creators of this work symbolically link the subversive subcultures of Rebetiko, hip hop and graffiti to create a mural in veneration of the diachronic nature of countercultural resistance. The mix of past and present images, symbols and aesthetics indicates a rupturing of space and linear time, as historic and spatially displaced resistance to oppression is reimagined within the present context of 'crisis' Athens.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have analysed the diverse ways that the past is reassembled by artists to make sense of, and comment on the precarious present. The past is a powerful resource which, although requiring a minimal level of cultural consensus to be legitimated, can be rearranged to different ends by distinct socio-political groups (Appadurai, 1981). The Second World War is shown to be a significant event within Greek collective memory from which contemporary crisis discourse is regularly extracted. Memories of famine and oppression associated with Nazi occupation are made proximate to current experiences of suffering associated with Germany's influential role in European politics and economics (Knight, 2012). I further elucidate the capacity for artists to make the past symbolically relevant through the example of the site-specific performance *Anaparastasi*. Within this work, the use of historically significant urban sites, archival photographs, first-hand testimonials and theatrical performances collaboratively function to bring the past to life within the present. By theatrically evoking the lead up to the Greek Civil War, the performance connects a past of nefarious foreign meddling in Greek politics, to the country's current economic instability.

Building on from this I have indicated how the contested nature of state representations of the past have worked to create a diachronic Greek spirit of resistance (Herzfeld, 1985). The imprisonment of past revolutionary fighters who are now revered as national heroes is indicative of the contradiction that this spirit of resistance poses to official Greek constructs of identity and social reality. By reconfiguring the image of revolutionary hero Kolokotronis as a modern subversive, Absent's work of street art draws attention to the celebrated and condemned role that resistance plays within dominant national discourse (Herzfeld, 2004). Finally, I examine the musical style known as Rebetiko to further highlight how movements which have once suffered at the hands of state oppression are later revered as national treasures. The past subjugation of Rebetiko music due to its Eastern influences was predicated on the ideal of eliminating traces of a pre-European Greece (Fabian, 1983). The practitioners of Rebetiko who were well adept at living outside of the law, overcame numerous attempts of violent prohibition. Consequently, Rebetiko music encapsulates a style and ethos which appeals to subversive art forms of the present. In particular it has been integrated with hip hop and graffiti culture, and affords artists the capacity to align themselves with a diachronic spirit of resistance.

Resistance emerged as a central theme throughout my analysis of the alternative and largely anti-institutional Athens art scene. The following chapter examines how major international art institutions have been met with resistance and suspicion in Athens, as they are reminiscent of the historical process of past and present foreign domination and exploitation. Before exploring the most significant examples of large scale resistance to the actions of neo-liberal institutions, I first map the fragile state of Athens' local art institutions. This allows for an understanding of how the void of funding and state support has influenced artists to develop experimental modes of self-organisation and democratic decision-making processes. By examining the art-scape of Athens I work to elucidate the key factors driving the resistance directed towards art institutions, with a focus on the arrival of German mega-institution Documenta 14.

## Chapter 7

### Institutions, Experimentation and Discord

*“One of the most interesting things happening in Athens at the moment is ground up approaches and grassroots movements with inverted power structures”* George Sachinis, (site-specific theatre director), 2015

The crisis in Greece has led to a decrease in public funding of the arts and a greater financial strain on private art institutions. This chapter begins with mapping out the significant public and private institutions, galleries and initiatives that constitute the Athens art-scape. Through this analysis it becomes evident that many artists have taken to experimentation with innovative methods of self-organisation and collectivism to deal with the absence of state funding and support. Participants described the economic restraints associated with the crisis as an impetus for the collaboration of formerly disparate artists and social movements. Within this context, individuals, their social networks and their creativity have emerged as valuable resources and the driving forces behind the burgeoning art scene. This is highlighted through examples of grassroots organisational structures, open-assemblies and direct democracy being used as means of productively mobilising the art community. Likewise, numerous non-profit initiatives, art spaces and squats are shown to have aided in filling the void of public support within the contemporary Athens art scene. Through this analysis, this chapter assesses the extent to which the crisis has been culturally productive.

I then investigate the provocative ways that certain proponents of the Athens art scene have responded to the increased presence of foreign art institutions. I do this by exploring two highly controversial events. The first occurred in 2016 when the Athens and Epidaurus Festival (one of the few contemporary art events significantly sponsored by the state) revealed that Greek artists would be exempt from the program. This decision was made by the newly appointed artistic director Jan Fabre who announced that the festival would be a homage to art and artists from his home in Belgium. This

pronouncement elicited an aggressive response from the Athens art community, which used methods of self-organisation and direct-democracy to rapidly react to the perceived injustice. The outcome of this led to Fabre's resignation from the festival. Many considered this a triumph of subjugated artists whilst others, viewed it as indicative of the overly reactionary nature of the Greek art scene. These conflicting views of Greek resistance related to the contested nature of the historically rooted 'Greek spirit of resistance' discussed in the preceding chapter (Herzfeld, 1985, 2004; Theodossopoulos, 2014).

The chapter concludes with an analysis of what is arguably the single most significant and controversial event to have taken place within the timeframe of my fieldwork. Nowhere was the discord between the institutional art world and the Athens scene more visible than in the divisive lead up to the opening of Documenta 14. The arrival of Documenta was met in Athens with both enthusiasm and fierce resistance. Many members of the Athens art community considered the decision by Documenta's curatorial team to align themselves with the oppressed 'other', incompatible with the ethos of the neoliberal mega-institution. The uneasy relationship between Documenta and Athens further stressed the inherent dissonance between international art institutions, and a largely anti-institutional art scene. Through my analysis of Documenta I foreground the immensely stimulating debates and events that were organised in response to the institution's presence. Ultimately, the heterogeneity of the voices and artistic responses incited by Documenta demonstrates the collision of the diverse spatial, symbolic, historical and agential networks which comprise the Athens art scene.

## **7.1 Exploring the Athens Art-Scape**

In Athens, the vast majority of art institutions are dedicated to preserving and displaying treasures of the city's past and promoting the cultural heritage of Ancient Greece (Tsantila, 2017). Of these, the most notable is the Acropolis Museum opened in 2009, and the National Archaeological Museum completed in 1889, situated next to the Athens Polytechnic. As far



as contemporary art is concerned, the main institution responsible for the collection and display of Greek and international works is the National Gallery of Contemporary Art (EMST). To compensate for the lack of public institutions focusing specifically on contemporary art, EMST was officially established on paper in 1997, but was not actioned until Anna Kafetsi was appointed as director in 2000 (Barka, 2016). The decision was made to renovate the iconic but derelict 1957 FIX brewery building to accommodate the gallery, with plans to be operational by 2004 to coincide with the Athens Olympics (Barka, 2016). A series of long-term issues stunted completion, during which the gallery sporadically opened up in a series of temporary locations. The renovations and thus the opening, was delayed due to a host of financial, bureaucratic, legal and political reasons, resulting in the institution being closed for most of the last decade. It wasn't until 2013 that the scaffolding was finally removed, giving the impression that something significant had been successfully completed during the crisis (Barka, 2016). Despite this, it wasn't until the last half of 2016 that EMST opened its doors to the public with a temporary exhibition entitled "Urgent Conversations: Athens – Antwerp". Shortly after this EMST acted as the main Athens location for Documenta 14's exhibition. As of 2019 the museum is still working towards full functionality and opening its permanent collection, with the official website stating in bold red lettering: "Work is underway to prepare EMST to be fully operational. No exhibitions or other activities will be held at the Museum during this time" (EMST, 2019).

In the absence of a consistent national 'space' for contemporary art, the state's contribution is predominantly enacted through the funding of a limited number of events. The Hellenic Festival of Athens and Epidaurus established in 1955, is the major state funded event that gives contemporary artists and performers an opportunity to access large international crowds. Due to cuts to state funding of the arts, the festival which runs throughout the Greek summer to coincide with peak tourist season is essentially the only major state backed contemporary art event of the year (Ioannidou & Siouzouli, 2014). Originally the festival focused on the reconstruction of ancient Greek tragedy and drama, as well as classical music (Kennedy,

2018). However, in 2006 under the guidance of artistic director Giorgos Loukos, the event adopted a new set of priorities including an enhancement of its international appeal and profile through collaborating with European festivals and renowned international theatre companies (Ioannidou & Siouzouli, 2014). Coinciding with this, the festival incorporated a wide range of contemporary artworks and performances. Loukos' work was generally seen as contributing positively to the arena of Greek culture, and from 2006 the festival funded numerous high-budget contemporary productions.

As a result of the lack of financial resources, the Municipality of Athens has generally taken a positive stance towards do-it-yourself (DIY) art projects and has even collaborated with numerous grassroots urban initiatives (Koukoura, 2016). Even so, many artists still acknowledged the strains associated with the absences of substantive state funding and support. During a conversation with Evi a member of site-specific theatre company Urban Dig, we discussed Athens' potential to emerge as a European hub of art. She stated, "I would be so happy for that to happen... however, unfortunately without the support of the state, it cannot happen". This sentiment is corroborated by qualitative accounts presented in Koukoura's (2016) study of urban DIY initiatives in Athens. Her informants saw the lack of state support as not only having its basis within the crisis, but as being linked to the indifference of officials and a convoluted bureaucratic system. This made it exceedingly difficult for groups to seek support for their projects, forcing many to work independently of the state (Koukoura, 2016). It should be noted that this view was not shared by all of my participants. Those involved with the intentionally illicit creation of art (such as graffiti and street art), consciously chose to keep their art practice outside of state and bureaucratic influence. In lieu of this, most artists understood the need for commercial viability and government support in order to establish a career as a professional artist.

Even prior to the crisis, contemporary art was not a high priority in Greece, and until the mid 1990's it received no sustained funding, with major cultural institutions hesitant to incorporate any regular contemporary exhibitions

(Kuhnt, 2012; Tsantila, 2017). Because of this, the contemporary art scene in Athens has relied heavily on the private sector and individual donors (Tsantila, 2017). When describing the current contemporary Athens art-scene, participants first named the big four privately funded institutions, the *Onassis Cultural Centre*, the *Stavros Niarchos Foundation*, collector Dimitris Daskalopoulos' *Neon* and *Benaki*. These institutions are responsible for a considerable amount of the funding, scholarships, grants and institutional performance spaces available to Greek artists. A member of the photography collective *Depression Era* explained to me that:

Putting on a solo exhibition requires funding, now there is no way I could do it myself, because that money doesn't exist. In this case some people get help from the institutions, Niarchos, Stegi (Onassis) and Neon. They give a lot of funding, but mainly to teams. That is something else that has changed within the crisis, before you couldn't get anything. Not privately or from the state.

Private institutions such as the aforementioned, support the majority of Athens' largescale exhibitions, performances and art events. Despite the efforts of these institutions, as site-specific theatre director George Sachinis noted, "the pie is small in Greece, but those interested are very many".

A number of my informants expressed disdain towards these institutions and the kind of artworks that they funded. As we drove past the Onassis Cultural Centre on the way home from an exhibition in the southwestern neighbourhood of Nikaia, a particularly vocal artist pointed to the building and said, "It's a Skiladiko, I fucking can't stand it". *Skiladiko* roughly translates to "dog house" and describes a particular kind of popular Greek nightclub and music which rose to prominence in the 1980s. Skiladiko music is associated with whisky drinking, dancing on tables and partying to live music. The songs regularly deal with themes of forbidden love, alcohol, money and sin (Economou, 2010). Many artists considered Skiladiko as lowbrow entertainment which attracted unsavoury characters. Nonetheless, when attending these kinds of music venues with participants, any cultural

standards seemed to give way to drinking and dancing till sunrise. By calling the Onassis Centre a Skiladiko, my interlocutor made a value judgment about the kind of work and ideas funded by the institution. He believed that the primary concern of such establishments was to promote works with mass commercial appeal over works of substance.

Artists were wary of being exploited by the major Greek art institutions, a sentiment linked to the wider distrust of authority and the motives of the powerful (Herzfeld, 1985, 2004; Theodossopoulos, 2010, 2013). Many participants expressed indignation toward the tendency for art institutions to disguise unpaid labour and participation as an 'opportunity for exposure'. This issue presented itself whilst I was planning a collaborative performance work with another artist. One day as we were brainstorming ideas for a potential venue to host the performance, my interlocutor mentioned that he had recently been asked to put on a show at the Benaki Museum of Contemporary Art. Although it was a well renowned venue, he remained hesitant to accept this offer based on two previous experiences of exhibiting unpaid work there. He told me that in his opinion, "the only benefit of performing in these places is to fill up your resume". He felt that the institutions were exploitative and used their status to elicit volunteer labour from local artists. This discussion took place during early April of 2016 whilst the Benaki museum, supported by Neon, hosted an interactive exhibition by world-renowned Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic. Along with Abramovic's work the venue also hosted a series of concurrent long endurance performances. These performances, inspired by Abramovic's methodology, were created and enacted by a range of Greek artists (including some living abroad). My participant was highly sceptical of this, musing about how much Abramovic might be earning compared to her Greek collaborators. Whilst discussing the potential of us performing at Benaki, he stated:

For me that which counts in art, is when, where, what and why. The 'where' is very important for me. The only way I will perform there

(Benaki) is if we do something to sabotage it. Something that will piss them off and probably gets us kicked out.

This statement exemplifies the resistance to institutionalisation which the wider art world has broadly interpreted as being unreasonable and reactionary. In pathologising the resistance of Greek artists, there has been a tendency to reduce the complexity of artist's ideals and actions to "uncivilised or impulsive behaviour" (Theodossopoulos, 2014, p. 419). This concept will be further elaborated later in the chapter through the examples of the Sfendoni movement and resistance to Documenta 14.

Beyond these major art institutions, smaller private galleries have played a critical role in bringing art to the Greek public and filling the gap left by the lack of state funded contemporary art venues. Like all aspects of the commercial art scene, the private sector has also suffered throughout the crisis and the number of local galleries and the extent of their activities have been limited in recent years (Zefkili, 2016). Of the galleries that still exist, the art public can find venues which host both international and Greek works. The Breeder is one notable example of such a gallery, and has been a significant space in the development of the Athens' contemporary art scene since its opening in 2002. The gallery's principle intention is to provide Greek artists a chance to be received on an international scale (Doyle, 2018). In 2008 The Breeder opened in its current location, on a seedy street of Metaxourgio, surrounded by makeshift brothels housed in collapsing neoclassical buildings. Amongst this, the gallery is found behind an imposing steel door which opens only by pushing a button and being 'buzzed' in. The inside of the gallery has been designed to look fresh yet industrial, with white walls, black railing and grey concrete open plan floors. The interior stands in stark contrast to its surroundings, leading it to be described as a "world within a world" (Doyle, 2018). Nadia Gerazouni, the director of the Breeder stated in an interview that despite increased international interest in Greece, the Breeder continues "to promote contemporary Greek artists in the big art centres of the world, and at the

same time... showcase cutting-edge contemporary art in our Athens gallery for the Athenian public” (Doyle, 2018).

Scattered throughout the city centre are other private art galleries that differ in subject matter, organisational structure, budget and size. During fieldwork, I was able to speak with numerous artists, gallery owners, curators and art enthusiasts about the importance of private galleries in Athens, and the devastating effects that the crisis has had on the art market. One such gallery (on a much smaller scale than the Breeder) is *Eikastikes Anazitiseis* ‘visual pursuits’ opened by Meletis Fikiorgis in December 2008, in the upper-class central Athenian suburb of Kolonaki. He opened the gallery with two predominant intentions, one was to display art that appealed to him as an art critic and collector, and more importantly to provide a platform for emerging Greek artists to present and sell their works. In an interview, he explained to me that even prior to the crisis “there has never been enough places for all the young artists to present their work” and this was a driving factor behind his choice to open a gallery. His gallery focused exclusively on Greek artists, many whom he found from local art schools. He told me that artists who present and sell their works in his gallery are not indebted to him, and that the gallery is based on “*philoxenia*”, a Greek term for hospitality and an openness to strangers. He explained that “the space is more open to artists because it doesn’t look at all at the business side”.

These kinds of small altruistic galleries have been crucial in providing emerging artists with a stepping stone into the art world. Meletis regularly hosted exhibitions as a means of granting aspiring artists access to the network of consumers, curators and fellow creatives that he had established over his time in the art world. Despite the efforts of artists and galleries, the crisis has had a profoundly negative influence on the commercialisation of artworks. Meletis noted that the majority of art is purchased by high-end collectors who only look for specific well-established names when making purchases. This in turn makes it incredibly difficult for young artists to see financial returns on the time and resources invested into their works. Even though he attempted to keep the prices at his gallery very low, he admitted

that art still did not sell well. Most artists who aspired to sell their works and make a living through art agreed that the sale of visual art (which struggled even before the crisis) had suffered during the recent years of harsh austerity.

Due to the limited potential for receiving government grants and the financial struggles of commercial galleries, Athens has seen a vast rise in non-profit artist run spaces that were almost non-existent prior to the crisis (Kuhnt, 2012; Yalouri & Rikou, 2019; Zefkili, 2016). The success of these spaces is predominately reliant on unpaid labour, private capital and attempts to raise money through artistic activities and fundraising (Kuhnt, 2012). Many of these spaces have shifted from solely hosting exhibitions, to the organisation of discursive events exploring tactics to overcome the myriad socio-economic challenges faced by contemporary artists (Kuhnt, 2012). This new approach has created dynamic art spaces that are receptive to the changing socio-political climate of the city. Such spaces have also acted as mediators between the formalised art world, and the thriving graffiti and street art scene of Athens. Artists, curators and gallery owners have drawn upon the street art ethos as inspiration for the capacity of art to function with minimum expenditure and maximum social impact. Likewise, street and graffiti artists have also become receptive to the benefits of incorporating formalised art spaces and exhibitions into their art careers. In Athens, certain galleries have emerged which are specifically dedicated to presenting street art and graffiti, such as Alibi Gallery (Sarri 12) which was started by art collective Lathos, and Fullcolor Gallery run by graffiti artist Spike69. Galleries like Fullcolor maintain a strong ethic of social engagement, enacted through organising collaborative graffiti events, festivals and competitions. Beyond this Spike69 and the Fullcolor gallery is currently working on developing and crowd funding a dedicated youth hip hop centre, which he aims to complete by 2026.

Another effective method of presenting art within the constraints imposed by the crisis has been the use of pop-up and temporary installations. Such events and exhibitions can be run in a formalised manner with permits from

local councils and property owners, or informally and illegally. The use of forgotten, abandoned and industrial urban space in presenting temporary art exhibitions draws from street art and graffiti practice, as well as social movements associated with squatting and urban occupations. This practice is particularly inspired by the creation of social spaces outside of the intended spatial order imposed by state urban planning (Lefebvre, 1991). The ephemerality of these spaces allows artists and curators to organise events without being inhibited by the long-term investment of time and money. Like street art and street performance, the use of urban space in the presentation of general art exhibitions engages with the symbolic affordances and affectivity of significant sites and structures (de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). These spaces, although not initially intended to display art, are temporarily activated through artistic engagement, providing them with a voice and the agential capacity to influence the social function of the artworks (Gell, 1998).

An example of such a temporary art exhibition was *NICE! A Poetic Exploration About the Possibility of Return, of Memory, Homeland and Loss*, which presented the works of twenty-four artists between March 16, 2016 and April 4, 2016. The exhibition took place in a historic factory significantly located in the Western Athenian neighbourhood of Nikaia. I was invited to the show by Tassos Langis, a videographer and participating artist. During the event, Tassos explained how the show's theme (which focused on the role that past memory played in the construction of contemporary identities) was intimately entangled with the symbolic and historical significance of Nikaia. During the Axis occupation of the Second World War, Nikaia (then called Kokkinia) was an area with strong left-wing resistance networks and the site where, on August 17, 1944 at least 350 civilian men were executed by Nazis and their Greek collaborators (Mini, 2016). The works presented at the exhibition related closely to the powerful memories and trauma symbolically invested within the neighbourhood. This again highlights the communicative function of time, which rather than existing as a linear continuum, can be warped to superimpose past events onto an unfolding present (Gell, 1992). In so doing, certain aspects of the collective past are



used by artists to interpret and make sense of the present crisis experience (Appadurai, 1981; Knight, 2012). Like street art, the use of site-specific temporary exhibition spaces experientially links art to the socio-political, and historical environment in which it is received. This allows the symbolic, spatial and temporal dimensions of art to commingle and become an inextricable component of the works' meaning as they are decoded by interpretants (Hall, 1980; Munn, 1992). These kinds of exhibitions have become prominent throughout the crisis as they allow artists to create and present intensely communicative and emotive pieces, whilst also being an economically viable means of hosting successful events.

Due to restricted funding to the arts, there has been a boom in alternative forms of creation, presentation and organisation within the scene. As discussed in *Chapter Four*, a major way that artists have adapted to the social situation in Greece is through the practice of illegal squatting and occupying of urban spaces and structures. In so doing, artists have created vibrant art spaces, such as the famous squat and performance space *Embros*, in the central neighbourhood Psirri. The building which now hosts Embros was initially a 1930s newspaper press which then formally functioned as a theatre between 1988 to 2007. After 2007 the building was abandoned and remained unused for five years until it was illegally occupied by a collective of theatre practitioners in November of 2011, turning it into the now renowned performance space (Embros, 2011). During a conversation with Anna Tzakou, she recounted her early experiences with Embros:

There was this movement that started, in the space Embros, it's an occupation, an artistic squat in Psirri. There was a collective of theatre groups that came together back then, that was like 2010 when the government still was giving funding. Every year the ministry of culture was giving funding to specific theatre groups, so there was a chance of theatre art production through public funding which was great, amazing. These groups came together right before

this finished, right before the boom. They wanted to get more attention from the funding; then this boom happened.

The boom Anna was referring to was the crisis and associated cuts to arts funding. She continued:

They saw Embros, it was a very old. Actually, first it was a printing place and then there was a very important theatre in the 90s, very good quality art and theatre making. It was closed for 5 to 7 years and then this collective of theatre makers created a squat. They went there and opened the place and suddenly there was space, and they made an open call. That was 2011 and they made a ten-day festival with talks, shows, demonstrations, projections etc. Suddenly, I don't know how many people were gathered in the same place, we started looking at each other asking; who are we? what do we want to do? All of us wanted to speak out, asking what the fuck is going on? We wanted to share work, show work, exchange ideas, so that was kind of like the beginning of something new, different.

Anna had gone to the UK to undertake her studies in theatre and performance. She explained how at the time, the new experiments in art production and presentation occurring in Athens, roused in her a longing to return:

What I was afraid of not finding here (in Athens) actually came right in front of me. I remember being in England in November 2011, I was like fuck Embros is happening I need to go back you know! That was like the seeds. Suddenly little by little, there was a different kind of quality of work making, practice based research and experiments. The environment was urging us to find different forms of theatre expression, to integrate what is going on outside with the creative world. So, if you want to speak creatively, then I would say yes what happened with the crisis was a gift; but the struggle is bigger.

She then described the way that the lack of resources available to artists, prompted the rethinking of art production and presentation in Athens. This occurred through the willingness of individuals to contribute whatever they could to help projects be realised within the era of austerity and budget cuts:

The resources became ourselves, we don't have resources we don't have funding, even having a theatre building is too much of a deal, doing a production, with what money? And also ticket wise, who has money to come to theatre? The resources became ourselves; what we know, what we can do, and who can help.

In instances such as Embros, abandoned buildings are occupied illegally and repurposed for art. However, in other cases occupants are able to negotiate unofficial agreements with the owners of disused buildings. For example, Communitism is a team that occupy abandoned buildings which they then use to host art events, performances and exhibitions. The group aim to revive culturally significant (usually neo-classical) buildings that have fallen into dire states of disrepair. At the time of fieldwork, the team were based in an imposing 1200 sq.m. 1930s neoclassical building (pictured in Figure 7.1) within the neighbourhood of Metaxourgeio.



*Figure 7.1 Derelict 1930s building used by Communitism, Metaxourgeio, Athens*

Whilst on my 2017 follow-up field visit, I participated as a live musician and narrator in a work of performance art called *Mporn*. *Mporn* was a collaborative project which took place on the Communitism rooftop, and included another Australian-Greek sound artist, and an Athens based performance artist and sculptor named Filippos. During an organisational meeting which took place at the Communitism building, a member of the team explained to me how they were granted access to the space. The streets surrounding the building are frequented by heroin dealers and users who regularly inject the drug openly in public. Unfortunately, shortly before the group had moved into the building, the body of an overdosed user was discovered in the foyer. Due to the financial and bureaucratic difficulties associated with repairing old neo-classical buildings and plummeting property prices, the owners' options were limited. These issues are amplified in neglected lower socio-economic areas such as Metaxourgeio which, although partially gentrified with trendy bars and cafes, are also sites of brothels, drug use, poor-quality migrant housing, and collapsed buildings. As a result of these issues, the Communitism team was allowed to utilise the space in the belief that having the building occupied would prevent other tragic occurrences. On Communitism's blog the group describes that the:

...process of excavating the beautiful and strong foundations of the past by clearing away the debris, waste, inefficiency and decay, creates new spaces for innovation and experimentation (Communitism, 2018).

The group's primary objectives are to:

Achieve a self-organised, self-sufficient cultural centre adding to a network of social innovators seeking alternative models for sustainable economic independence and artistic creativity.

To build capacity within our community to support organic growth, social entrepreneurship and collective action to resist impending gentrification.

To focus on the revitalization of historic building in the centre of Athens, through renovation (painting, sanding, construction, cleaning) and cultural activities (collective processes, experiments, events, and gatherings), with local resources and support.

To transition the building into cultural commons, entrusted and operated by the community.

The key concept is to develop a methodology and support network to guide future teams reviving similar buildings throughout the city (Communitism, 2018).

Figure 7.2 is a photograph of the performance I took part in on the roof of the Communitism building.



*Figure 7.2 Performance art event on the roof of the Communitism building, Metaxourgeio, 2017*

Entrance into the venue was free, with a collection hat passed around by one of the performers at the conclusion of the show (Figure 7.3); a common method used in place of mandatory ticketing. The money collected from those willing to contribute went back into covering performers' costs, whilst the venue raised money for the Communitism project from the bar set up opposite the performance area (Figure 7.4). The amount raised from the evening did not go much further than contributing to the costs of the event. Once again indicating that although these alternative methods of art making are what give Athens its unique edge, commercial viability still remains elusive.



Figure 7.3 Performer passing around collections hat, *Communitism, Metaxourgeio, 2017*



Figure 7.4 Rooftop bar *Communitism, Metaxourgeio, 2017*



So far in this chapter I have defined the complex network of public and private institutions, galleries, art spaces, collectives, ideas and methodologies that constitute the art-scape in 'crisis' Athens. Although formal art spaces and institutions continue to play an important role in the art scene, what is most notable is the emergence of both semi-formal and informal counter-institutional artist movements. The associated experiments in the production and dissemination of art outside of formal institutional settings set the tone of much of the debate which took place within the context of Athens Biennale 5 (AB5). The Athens Biennale, founded in November 2005, is one of Greece's largest contemporary art events (Biennale, 2018). Organised by the Athens Biennale Non-Profit Organisation, the Biennale:

Functions as an observatory of collective issues and as a platform for the designation of the contemporary culture of the Athenian metropolis, promoting experimental formats and various curatorial approaches as well as connecting the local artistic production with the international art scene of contemporary art (Biennale, 2018).

By bringing together a range of local and global artists, curators, academics and members of the general public, the 5<sup>th</sup> iteration of the Athens Biennale (AB5) entitled *Omonoia* served as a platform where counter-institutional experiments could be analysed, discussed and trialled. During fieldwork, I regularly attended AB5 which was designed to challenge the traditional short-term exhibition format of art biennales. The Biennale was structured to be "a daring and experimental endeavour" which bridged the past, present and future by spanning over a two-year period, with activities beginning in June 2015 and reaching a peak in June 2017 alongside the opening of Documenta 14 (Biennale, 2015).

The Biennale activities were centred around the decaying neo-classical hotel Bangeion located in Omonoia square, with certain other events occurring within the wider Omonoia area. For each synapse of AB5, the dilapidated hotel was opened to the public and its eerie rooms served as

temporary bases for artists, curators, collectives and grass-roots organisations. AB5 had appointed anthropologist Massimiliano Mollona as the program director, which further inspired its experimental long-term format. The proceedings were less concerned with the presentation of art and instead focused on the:

...burning issues such as the emergence of alternative economies, the performative in the political and the establishment of institutions that redefine the systems structures and its pre-existing models, while highlighting the current views of contemporary art (Biennale, 2015).

The first synopsis of AB5 opened with a series of panels at the Rex Theatre (site of the Greek National Theatre) which covered the aforementioned themes. Present at the event was Adam Szymczyk the appointed director of Documenta 14; as at this stage the two institutions had hinted that there would be a collaboration. Throughout the two-year process, the Biennale dealt with a number of unforeseen controversies such as the sudden departure of both Mollona, and long-term co-director Kaplaksoglou. Eventually, it also came to light that Documenta 14 had chosen to exclude the Biennale from its forthcoming activities, leading both institutions to part ways.

Despite these difficulties, the Biennale succeeded in opening dialogue between a diverse range of local and international voices. Athens was well suited to eliciting discussions on the immediacy of global socio-economic crises and their influence on art production, as well as the potential for art to overcome, contest and reimagine experiences of crisis, neo-colonialism and oppression. During a discussion with Poka-Yio, a Greek artist, curator and founding member of the Athens Biennale, we spoke at length about the relationships between the crisis, art, collectivism, institutional failure and the conceptual evolution of the Athens Biennale (I include the following quote in its entirety as Poka Yio eloquently summarises in great detail many of the



significant themes which have arisen through my analysis of the Athens art-scape).

There have been no state funds for the artists, no support, no grants, therefore the artists per se didn't lose much, what they did lose is the surrounding fat around them, this safety net, social net from the families that supported their activities. There has been comforting tissue, social tissue belonging to the families and friends that provided a place to stay, a studio to work, accommodation and food, basic supplies, and internet. That's it, that is what a contemporary artist needs.

In a way, everything a contemporary artist needs, we had. What we did lack was a sense of urgency, I do not mean to make it seem like what happened is a good thing. It has been a slap in the face, an awakening slap in the face that we had to think outside of the bubble. We were thinking in a very rosy way, things seemed not bad, not good. But they were not ok, most of the artists, we believed that in some way and at some point we would come to prominence through our work. We hands down believed in the system of the arts, in the same way that we believed in the other systems that would take care of us, cater for us in the future. But that was a chimera, there was never such thing, or if there was such a thing, it was a huge obstruction.

People put their asses down, came together started thinking about necessities, about priorities, their practice, their means, became more communicative, came together because there was nothing to fight against but there was a lot to fight for. People started collaborating, started coming together for a cause, and this is a good thing because we saw things in a different way and we reprioritised, and that has been fortunate for Biennale itself.

Because of the lack of means, you need to seriously rethink, not only what you have at your disposal but also what you are about to produce, and this reverse-engineers the whole production. You not only re-contextualize your work, but also you change even the prim material. What do you have at your disposal? The 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennale for example we did with no money what so ever and we understood that shifting from money, which can be a metric, people which can also be a metric, can make a difference. So, what if we stop whining about the lack of funds and start seeing the potential of the people around us. We built something that from then onwards was anthropocentric. That was a big shift in our work, and that led to Agora (AB4), which led to Omonoia (AB5).

I can explain the transformation of the Biennale from an exhibition to an experience, from an experience to an engaging event, and from an engaging event to a participatory event. From a participatory event, what we are trying to create now is a collaborative event. So, you see this gradual shift, the difference, because we remain its directors, we set the goals of its activities, you can see the unfolding of these things, as in chapters, with the knowledge of the previous ones used in the next one. This makes a time unfolding story, which is much different than the Biennales which are individual, not episodes, they are individual works.

As described by Poka-Yio, the sense of urgency created by the crisis has led artists to explore the potential of collaboration, collectivism and participation in place of institutional funding. Within this context, the Athens Biennale has emerged as a major counter-institution within the Athenian scene. AB5 turned Bangeion into a collaborative hub where a diverse range of artists were able to explore experimental methodologies, in place of traditional art practices.

In analysing the major components of the contemporary Athens art scene, the crisis is shown to be an impetus that has pushed artists further away

from formal institutions and art spaces. In place of this, artists have leaned towards a range of dynamic and novel methods in the presentation and production of their works. Many of these techniques are linked to wider socio-political movements concerned with the reclamation of urban space, such as seen in the examples of illegal squats and occupations. Instead of quelling the art scene, the economic constraints fostered by the crisis have been resisted through the unbounded creativity and resilience of artists and other individuals involved in the presentation, reception and consumption of alternative contemporary art. In this sense, although the effects of the crisis have been devastating, they have also motivated increased cultural production and intensive intergroup collaboration. It is the resultant flourishing of counter-institutional art in Athens that has attracted the gaze of the international art world. I will now expand upon two significant examples that highlight the precarious socio-political moment in which my fieldwork took place. The first example examines how participatory democratic practice was effectively utilised within the context of the 2016 Athens and Epidaurus Festival, and the second explores the controversy surrounding the arrival of Documenta 14 in Athens.

## **7.2 The Sfondoni Movement: Resistance and Experiments in Self-Organisation**

In this section I examine how artists effectively resisted a significant instance of perceived injustice through self-organisation and the use of direct democracy. Direct democracy, often enacted through open-assemblies allows stakeholders to mobilise and actively participate in, and affect the decision-making process. Over the last decade, social movements have formed around collective demands for democracy, such as evidenced in the various components of the Arab Spring which sought to overthrow authoritarian regimes (Bayat, 2015; Sarihan, 2014). One of the unique factors of such social movements is the ability for swift horizontal self-organisation through informal, participatory and direct democracy groups (Brownlee & Ghiabi, 2016). Concurrently, even within 'democratic' countries, social movements have fought for more participatory forms of

democracy as seen in examples such as the Spanish Indignados, Greek anti-austerity protesters and global Occupy movements (Brownlee & Ghiabi, 2016; Polletta, 2014; Sotirakopoulos & Sotiropoulos, 2013).

The specific example I will examine occurred in response to the appointment of Jan Fabre, a globally famous Belgian artist, as the director of the annual Athens and Epidaurus Festival from 2016 till 2019. The specific controversy was not centred around his Belgian ethnicity, but his call for the 2016 festival to exclusively showcase Belgian art. This meant that many Greek artists would miss out on participating in one of the few major government funded contemporary art events of the year. From the outset of the crisis in 2010 the Athens and Epidaurus Festival's spending and policies were subject to revision due to severe cuts to its public funding (Ioannidou & Siouzouli, 2014). During the crisis years, Greek art festivals were further strained through the reluctance of foreign companies to risk investing in an economically unstable country (Kennedy, 2018). In December of 2015, Loukos the acting director was asked to step down over allegations of overspending (Kennedy, 2018). It was within this context that Fabre was chosen on the proviso that a well-known artist with an established international profile could help the festival and Greek art scene to more generally re-establish connections abroad (Kennedy, 2018).

Initially there was an air of excitement surrounding Fabre's appointment, however this was quickly quelled by the subsequent press release stating his vision for the festival; a vision which excluded Greek productions for at least the following two years. Along with this announcement came Fabre's proposition to change the name of the festival from *The Hellenic Festival of Athens and Epidaurus* to *The International Festival of Athens and Epidaurus* (Kennedy, 2018, p. 31). The response of Greek artists to these announcements was swift and fierce. Needless to say, the notion of having Greece's major publically funded contemporary art festival syphon its funds into displaying Belgian works was not well received within the local art community. The anger was not only directed towards Fabre himself, but

also Aristeidis Baltas, the Greek Minister of Culture, who they felt had necessitated this (Kennedy, 2018).

I was first alerted to the Fabre controversy through the social media posts of prominent members of the Athens art community. Towards the end of March, following Fabre's scandalous announcement an open call was disseminated asking artists to attend an assembly at the Sfondoni Theatre (located in central Athens). The assembly was organised for the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2016, and intended to find a common way for artists to react to the removal of Greek work from the festival schedule. The turnout was immense with artists, curators and journalists completely packing out the theatre. Attendees sat on the ground surrounding the stage, occupied all tiered seating, stood in the back corners of the performance space and spilled through the foyer onto the street. The open assembly was facilitated by a small number of individuals, with actor Argyris Xafis acting as the moderator. Members of the audience who wished to speak were given around three minutes to make their point. Following these speeches, the general agreement would be inferred through audience response and applause. However, as a result of the immense turnout, discussion was often heated and disagreement was rampant. Present in the crowd were high ranking members of the Greek art scene such as the artistic director of the National Theatre, Stathis Livathinos. Emotions ran high amongst audience members who felt neglected by the institutions these directors and curators represented, with the room occasionally erupting into shouting. During the assembly, multiple parallel issues were raised that were not directly related to Fabre. These grievances included general indignation towards the ministry of culture due to their failure to pay Greek artists who had taken part in the previous year's festival; especially in light of the large amounts of Greek public funding they felt was about to go into the promotion of Belgian art. Tensions were particularly visible through the strained relations existent between differing generations of artists who were all present.

Certain participants shared unpopular views in support of Fabre's announcement, with one stating that Greece needed to begin to act more "European" and that as the appointed curator, Fabre had the right to present the festival as he saw fit. Others believed the onus shouldn't be put on Fabre, but the Greek ministers responsible for abandoning young Greek artists. Another simply pronounced "we must take responsibility". Throughout the meeting which lasted for several hours, the curatorial panel often struggled to maintain order and structured debate. After three hours had lapsed attendees grew increasingly agitated at the lack of action and absence of practical outcomes. One older man exploded with rage urging everyone to arrive at an immediate conclusion. The moderator retorted, stating that whoever wanted to leave could leave, and whoever remained could contribute to finishing the letter and associated demands they were collectively addressing to both Fabre and Baltas. The letter was eventually penned based on the day's discussion, with the audience voting for or against the statements that would make it into the final copy (depicted in Figure 7.5). Those who remained by the end of the gruelling four-hour assembly signed the mutually agreed upon letter.



*Figure 7.5 Participants voting on the letter to Fabre and Baltas, Sfendoni Theatre, Athens 2016*

The first half of the letter was addressed to Baltas and ultimately called for his resignation. This section of the letter reiterated Syriza's electoral

promises regarding Greek festivals, in order to indicate the ministry's failure to live up to them:

A radical reorganization of the goals of the festivals, with special support for Greek productions, without excluding European and international dialogue

Connection of the activities of the festivals with the economic, production and cultural activities of the regions where the festivals take place (Stefanidis, 2016).

The minister was considered to have broken these pledges by appointing Fabre at the detriment of Greek productions. The second half of the letter was addressed to Fabre and covered his five "serious transgressions" which were "profound insults" to Greek artists (Stefanidis, 2016). These included the absence of Greek art from the festival, his open admittance of having no idea about contemporary Greek artistic work, his staff of primarily Belgian associates, deception of the populace and his consideration of Greek artists as unworthy (Stefanidis, 2016).

Fabre's vision for the festival was widely viewed as a direct attack on Greek artists, their culture, and their artistic merit (Kennedy, 2018). In response to the letter Fabre promptly resigned, with Baltas subsequently appointing Greek director Vangelis Theodoropoulos (who was present at the Sfondoni meeting) as the festival's new artistic director (Kennedy, 2018). In retort, Fabre openly criticised the Greek artists for failing to open a communicative channel with himself and his team, wondering why he was not invited to the meeting. He also commented on the fact that the letter was written in Greek, making it difficult for his team to translate. Although his first concern is understandable, the issue surrounding the choice of language "is indicative of scandalous cultural asymmetry – and linguistic entitlement" (Kennedy, 2018, p. 32). In Kennedy's (2018) analysis of the Fabre incident, the author attributes Fabre's contempt of the artists' natural language to the dismissal of contemporary Greek art more generally. These attitudes reflect that

Fabre's primary aim could have been his desire to gain access to the historic venues associated with the festival (such as the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in the Acropolis and the famous Epidaurus amphitheatre), rather than to promote Greek contemporary art (Kennedy, 2018). As will be discussed in the following section which deals with Documenta 14, much of the critique of the German institution also focused around the exploitation of Athens as a passive canvas for international art.

The harsh response to Fabre, must be considered within the polarising environment of the crisis and as an extension of anti-austerity sentiment. Fabre and his attitude to Greece, can be viewed as analogous with European economic colonialism, that aims to discipline the so-called rowdy and rebellious Greek subjects (Kennedy, 2018). Through his response, Fabre's derogatory view of Greek artists is made evident:

Apparently, a professional Greek curator had to explain the word and the function of a 'curator.' My position as a curator was clearly from the start 'lost in translation.' While it is an international term that everybody in the art and theatre world in Europe is familiar with. From what I understand, the Greek artists who already have the guarantee that they will perform in the festival this summer, were not present anymore, which is quite significant. I want to express my concern about the nationalistic reflex of a dominant group of mediocre and frustrated Greek artists mainly rejecting new visions and approaches from outside. I hope serious Greek artists will have a positive contribution to the changes that are needed to come to a challenging, new situation for the cultural context of the Hellenic Festival (Fabre in Kennedy, 2018, p. 34).

Like the discourse of political and economic European officials, Fabre evokes 'typological' and 'schizogenic' time to portray Greeks as existing in a less-developed temporal state than the rest of Europe (Fabian, 1983). Through the comparative claim that unlike the European art world, the Greek art world has been unable to adequately comprehend the role of a



curator, Fabre exemplifies what Fabian (1983) calls the ‘denial of coevalness’ (the idea that Europe exists in a temporally advanced state to the regressive Greece). To remove responsibility from himself, Fabre reduces the complex acts of resistance to what he calls a “nationalistic reflex” (Kennedy, 2018). In so doing, he attempts to delegitimise and pathologise resistance by framing it as something which is uncivilised, irrational and impulsive (Theodossopoulos, 2014). Fabre’s statement highlights the inequalities present between the institutionalised European art world and the art scene in Greece, which is often treated through the neo-colonial frame of a disparate ‘other’ (Fabian, 1983; Herzfeld, 2002).

Following these events, I attended an assembly at the Embros theatre where a speaker reviewed what had eventually been labelled the *Sfendoni Movement*. After the success of the initial meeting, a second and far less fruitful assembly was organised with the aim of turning the artistic experiment with direct democracy and self-organisation into an ongoing social movement. However, during the second meeting deep-seated disagreements rose to the forefront of discussion and seemingly suppressed the potential for progress. The speaker at Embros (who was present at both Sfendoni meetings) said that “there were another five Fabres there in attendance”, and then listed some of the prominent figures he had noticed. He was disheartened by the outcome stating that “once they knew they wouldn’t lose money and work, it all ended”. This statement draws attention to a significant limitation that I witnessed in artists’ resistance efforts and experiments with alternative modes of self-organisation. As documented by Theodossopoulos (2014) the initial momentum generated by resistance movements often fades away.

Although many of the resistance movements I witnessed in the Athens art scene engendered swift and effective democratic responses to unfolding events, they regularly struggled with longevity and sustainability. This was often due to the inability of participants to reconcile their personal differences and ambitions. There was also an issue with the exhaustion of participants who eventually fatigued of being an active part of a movement

with no financial gain; often understandably attributed to external life commitments (Theodossopoulos, 2014). One artist who was part of a collective elaborated on this issue when discussing a digital photography exhibition his group had taken part in during the 2015 summer. The exhibition, held in Thessaloniki required members of the collective (even if not physically present) to produce and upload photographs and videos which would be presented on a screen displayed at the venue. My participant explained, “in the end everyone went on summer holiday and didn’t bother. It was only two of us that did it... They all had their computers and gadgets with them, but they didn’t contribute anything”.

Furthermore, resistance takes place within, as opposed to outside of established systems of knowledge, and as a result often reproduces aspects of the hegemonic structures they sincerely attempt to challenge (Theodossopoulos, 2014). For example, many anti-institutional art movements came undone when funding became available, often causing rifts and challenging notions of horizontal collectivity. Whilst talking with an artist who was taking part in the 5<sup>th</sup> Athens Biennale he noted that “they (the curatorial team) express how much they rely on us, the art groups, but as soon as the budget came in, they forgot about the whole process”. This discussion took place prior to an open meeting the artist had organised with the other participating groups in a bid to forge collaborative networks. He looked at his watch, the meeting was meant to have started fifteen minutes ago and no one had arrived “it’s ridiculous” he sighed.

To summarise, the factors that stifled longevity in alternative art movements and collectives were regularly related back to differing amounts of participation, unequal distribution of (scarce) funding, the formation of in-group hierarchies and closed cliques. During a discussion with James, an artist and founder of numerous artist collectives, he commented:

I have seen some groups that try to operate with collectivity and solidarity but they are very closed. You can’t do that it is isolation. No, I think the strategy is to be really open, and then the community

happens in the process, you have to be very open and focused on process at the same time, it is the balance.

The capacity to remain open to community participation, whilst keeping the artistic process productive and forwards moving is incredibly difficult. Although some groups operating as self-organised collectives managed to remain active over extended periods of time, it is important not to undermine the significance of ephemeral social movements. The result of these sporadic acts of resistance may seem as though they only instigate limited change with little consequence to the everyday lives of the resisting subjects (Theodossopoulos, 2014). Changes, such as Fabre's resignation in the aftermath of the first Sfendoni meeting, are often seen to engender the swapping of roles, often the replacement of one elite with another (Theodossopoulos, 2014). Yet accumulatively, the disparate movements and group experiments that are occurring within the Athens art scene, however flawed or ephemeral, all contribute to the vibrancy, heterogeneity and subversive undertones of the city's art production. The value of these art movements and their ability to self-sustain whilst avoiding institutional colonisation and gentrification was a regular topic of discussion within the art community.

In many instances, artists have effectively employed elements of these methods to further the potential for art to speak to, and influence larger social movements focused around participatory and horizontal engagement. Whilst discussing whether the debates and experiments occurring within the art world could influence the wider socio-political sphere, Poka-Yio commented:

It definitely should. I question whether it can. I believe it should not by abolishing its realm of independence and becoming instrumentalised or becoming trivial, or becoming politicised, or becoming applied. But because we need to set things off balance and art in particular is the best catalyst, the best lever to set things off balance. We can say that art in general, that's one of its main

goals, to set things off balance. This belief in the canon that has made us suffer, take for example the economic canon, things are regulated, things are subject to very strict laws that protect us from speculation and all this protectivism, and the belief in the economic system, and the belief in the legislative system, and the belief in all these things, and this sense of pseudo-security that has led us to the verge of collapse, this aloofness, passivism, has led us to the point of, basically to the edge.

Here Poka-Yio reasonably questions the limits of the potential that art can and should have as an experimental field for social organisation and political action. What he does highlight is that the acceptance of the “economic canon” and complacency with “pseudo-security” that had pushed Greek society to the “edge”, is now being set off balance, questioned and contested through art production, practice and associated community building. Notwithstanding the potential drawbacks and ultimate limitations of these radical formats of self-organisation, artists remain dedicated to testing the limits of their application in the sustainable production and dissemination of art. Most recently an Athens based collective named Trojan DAO (Decentralised Autonomous Organisation) has begun experimenting with blockchain technology and Ethereum cryptocurrency as a means of bypassing the institutional art world. The DAO is a “community-governed, crowd-funded art/cultural organisation, the first of its kind to leverage blockchain technology in order to create an autonomous funding pool for artists” (Trojan Foundation, 2019). The crowd funded pool of money is to be allocated to different projects based on the votes of members. The Trojan DAO’s website describes the project as “an experiment in radical new forms of collective governance and resource allocation that we hope will have implications for art far beyond Athens” (Trojan Foundation, 2019). Projects such as The Trojan Dao are too recent for authoritative comments to be made at present about their effectiveness and sustainability. Nonetheless, they represent the continued willingness of artists to experiment with alternate forms of horizontal organisation in the foundation of subversive and sustainable, anti-institutional art practice.

### 7.3 The Arrival and Departure of Documenta 14 “Learning from Athens”

The disjuncture between the institutional art world and the Athens art scene became clear throughout the controversial lead up to, and subsequent opening of Documenta 14. During my fieldwork, no single art event was subject to as much analysis, excitement, criticism and suspicion as Documenta. In 2013, Polish curator Adam Szymczyk was appointed Artistic Director of Documenta 14 and made the radical proposition that the exhibition should be split between its home in Kassel, Germany and Athens, Greece. He described the splitting of Documenta into a “divided self” as a “decidedly anti-identitarian stance” (Szymczyk, 2017, p. 21). He further explained that moving Documenta’s “geographical and ideological centre from its home in Germany” was necessary because “the world cannot be explained, commented on, and narrated from Kassel exclusively – a vantage point that is singularly located in Northern and Western Europe” (Szymczyk, 2017, pp. 26-27). The 14<sup>th</sup> Documenta was entitled *Learning from Athens* and ideologically aligned itself with the subjugated voices of the Global South, for which Athens with its recent economic, social and refugee crises had become a posterchild. A meeting at the Athena Biennale elicited a heated debate about the dangers of reducing Athens to a passive symbol of the oppressed ‘other’. Aimed towards those who objected Athens being portrayed this way, an artist passionately exclaimed, “here in Athens, we are in the south, like it or not”.

For many involved in the Greek art scene, enthusiasm for Documenta soon transmuted into a deep distrust of the institution. This distrust was fuelled by what one artist described as Documenta’s “shadowy dealings in Athens”, referring to a perceived lack of transparency and local engagement on behalf of the curatorial team. As many local artists began to realise they would not be included in the exhibition, feelings of resentment began to fester. In response to this one Greek artist satirically created a marble plaque which read “I am anti because I am not in”. This work referenced Documenta’s use of marble identifying plaques in their Athens gallery

spaces as a homage to the city's ancient past. The work also satirised artists' divergent attitudes after learning that they would not have a place in Documenta's line-up.

The suspicion of Documenta was further fuelled by the curatorial team's failure to maintain open dialogue with significant Greek initiatives such as the Athens Biennale; which was supposed to be a major collaborator. The schism between Documenta and the Biennale occurred after a series of joint conferences and public appearances, and in spite of the two sharing an office building in Athens (Batycka, 2017). Behind this rift were rumours that Documenta had been poaching workers and collaborators from the Biennale (Batycka, 2017). Regardless of the specific reasons behind the split, the choice to remove the Biennale significantly tarnished Documenta's reputation. The institution seemed to be isolating itself from meaningful engagement with Athenian voices. One participant was of the opinion that Documenta had used Athenian initiatives such as the Biennale to prepare Athens for its arrival, "it is trying to create what it wants to find here" he explained. He expressed the belief that whatever didn't suite the Documenta curators' idealised vision of 'crisis' Athens was intentionally excluded from the program. This artist was of a particularly sceptical disposition and had little faith in the motives of the curatorial team, he reiterated to me that "Adam (Szymczyk) believes everything is for him, Athens is just a backdrop for him".

Beyond being rooted in feelings of exclusion and isolation, resistance to Documenta was also driven by a range of socio-political factors. From the outset, the choice to split Documenta between its traditional base in Kassel, and Athens generated controversy from both German and Greek commentators. In the *Documenta 14 Reader*, Szymczyk acknowledged that:

Kassel feared the 'loss' of Documenta to Athens, and Athens feared yet another big event with no sustainable effect, much like the 2004

Olympic Games, which were followed by Greece's gradual economic decline (Szymczyk, 2017, p. 21).

In 2015, prior to Documenta's opening in Athens, Yanis Varoufakis (Greek Minister of Finance from January 2015 to July 2015) emphasised his scepticism of Szymczyk's choice to bring the exhibition to Athens:

I have to say that I am not very happy about the idea that part of Documenta will take place in Athens — it is like crisis tourism. It's a gimmick by which to exploit the tragedy in Greece in order to massage the consciences of some people from Documenta. It's like rich Americans taking a tour in a poor African country, doing a safari, going on a humanitarian tourism crusade. I find it unhelpful both artistically and politically (Varoufakis, 2015).

Although the ideological discourse behind Documenta presented an institution that challenged power hierarchies and homogeneity, a radical disjuncture was observed between the institutionalised art world and the subaltern 'others' it purportedly represented. The curatorial team adopted the activist rhetoric of anti-neoliberal grassroots groups but presented these views within the context of a dominant neoliberal art institution. The sheer scale of Documenta made it difficult for the team to convincingly emphasise the marginal forms of artistic expression upon which the anti-institutional discourse of the exhibition was based (Tramboulis & Tzirtzilakis, 2018; Yalouri & Rikou, 2019). In Athens, this translated into accusations of neo-colonialism and the willing exploitation and exotification of a crisis-stricken city and population. For many, the comparison between the German art institution and the European imposition of austerity and structural readjustment, negatively influenced their perceptions of Documenta. This perspective was informed by wider historically based discourse that framed Greece as the perpetual target of extractive exploitation through self-interested foreign meddling (Herzfeld, 1985; Knight, 2012, 2015). Within the socio-political, economic and historical context of Athens, Documenta's self-

portrayal as a proponent of the Global South, was criticised as an inherently contradictory move on behalf of the neoliberal mega-institution.

As a result of this perceived contradiction, many artists feared that their long-term struggle within the underfunded and largely anti-institutional Athens art scene was at risk of being commandeered by a self-interested art giant. Anti-institutional art has a potent capacity to portray subjectivities that exist in the periphery of hegemonic social constructs. The lack of institutional control over a large cross-section of the Athens art world, allows artworks to transcend power relations by opening “a new dimension of experience” through the “rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 7). This is something that Documenta asserted it would nurture through its activities in Athens. However, echoing the arguments of Marcuse (1978) one artist commented that “capitalism has a way of turning art movements into commodities”. This statement relates to the notion that the powerful are able to employ their superior access to resources to reshape and homogenise society’s heterogeneous subversive voices (Lefebvre, 1991; Theodossopoulos, 2014). In the case of art this is often enacted through gentrification and institutionalisation. Although most artists did not deny the desire to see financial returns on their artworks, they remained distrustful of top-down institutional control by the art elite; a sentiment accentuated by Greece’s long-term periphery positioning within European power structures (Herzfeld, 1997a).

When discussing the arrival of large neo-liberal institutions into the Greek art scene Poka-Yio explained:

Some people call it rape, some people call it romance, so relax and enjoy. I’d say that there is definitely a lot of speculation, a lot of social mining here, there is a lot of colonial activity, on the other hand there is an activist militia, there are all sorts of voices at work; activist, reactionary, exploitative, and all this comes together... it’s this strange place that you can feel drawn to... it is in a flux.



One of the most fascinating aspects of Documenta's arrival in Greece was that its controversy opened avenues for critical discourse between a diverse range of artists and stakeholders. The most meaningful debates were often those that occurred around Documenta, as opposed to those presented within its institutional framework. Likewise, some of the most thought-provoking works of art were those individually and collectively created in response to Documenta.

In the summer of 2017 I participated in the organisation of a collaborative art event called *The Collective Festival at Avdi Square*, that satirically celebrated the end of Documenta's precarious time in Greece. The event was open to the public and included music, food, art and performance. A large range of self-organised community initiatives took part, including the Afghan Children's Refugee Group, a traditional African drum and dance company, various theatrical performance groups, musicians and a community kitchen. The event was intended to be a social reaction to the commercialised art world. Rather than being a direct attack on Documenta, it focused more on the capacity for artists and everyday people to express self-determination through engaging the social elements of public space outside of institutional control (de Certeau, 1988; Lefebvre, 1991). James, a leading organiser of the festival described it as "not anti, nor for Documenta".

The structure of the evening borrowed loosely from a style of traditional Greek celebratory festival known as a *Panigiri*. The event took place in Avdi Square located in the Metaxourgeio neighbourhood of Athens. Metaxourgeio was chosen as it symbolically encapsulated many of the debates surrounding Documenta. It is a neighbourhood which is half-gentrified and half-poverty stricken, home to popular bars and restaurants, as well as society's most downtrodden. Beyond the neighbourhood, Avdi Square was also symbolically significant as it was the site of a public art installation called *Monument to Revolution*, commissioned by Documenta. The 2017 work was a large stage built of recycled bricks and dedicated to global rights movements and class struggle. The brick wall behind the

*Monument of Revolution* was painted in red and white to symbolically convey the work's association with revolutionary movements of the radical left (Avramidis, 2012; Chatzidakis, 2018). Within the context of the Avdi festival, the stage was transformed into a symbol of the discord between Documenta's radical leftist rhetoric and its neoliberal institutional structure. The social function of the stage and its place within spatial practice further perpetuated these contradictory readings. As a legally commissioned work of art it fell within the conceived spaces of formal urban planning, whilst the intention of the installation was to represent and engender collective revolutionary action associated with representational space (Lefebvre, 1991).

One of the performances which took place during the Avdi festival mimicked a Greek wedding, albeit in a dark surrealist fashion. It included absurd reinterpretations of traditional wedding songs, and a performance artist dressed in a bridal gown, with the head of an ancient Cycladic sculpture. Greek wedding songs were performed live and mixed with contrasting dark ambient soundscapes whilst the bride greeted the audience. Eventually, members of the audience were invited onto the stage to take turns spray-painting (desecrating) the bride. Figure 7.6 depicts the graffiti covered bride standing on the *Monument to Revolution*, which as can be seen, had itself already been vandalised/alterred with graffiti and posters, prior to the performance.



Figure 7.6 The desecrated Cycladic bride stands upon the *Monument to Revolution*, 2017

The performance concluded with the 'bride' climbing a ladder to the top of the red and white brick wall lining the back of the stage. Upon reaching the top, black paint was released so as to gush from beneath the bride's garments and ooze down the wall (Figure 7.7).



Figure 7.7 Black paint gushes from the bride over the Monument to Revolution

This performance, although abstract, was highly symbolic through the iconoclastic desecration of both the figure of the Cycladic bride (symbolic of Greece and its history), and the Documenta commissioned 'monument'. A wedding in Greek is called a *gamo*, a word which can also mean 'to fuck'. The concept of the marriage was used to represent the fraught relationships between Germany and Greece, Documenta and Athens, centre and periphery, resistance and institutionalisation. Through this performance the artists intentionally mediated the symbolic values inherent in the surrounding urban context to subversively distort and rearrange meaning through performative interventions (Hall, 1980). Like many works analysed within this thesis, this performance bridged the temporal divide between multiple pasts as a means of symbolically scrutinising the unfolding present

(Appadurai, 1981; Gell, 1992; Knight, 2012). Ultimately through the work, the artists raised the question, who is fucking who?

The event was successful not only as a productive response to Documenta, but also as a means of engaging a diverse cross-section of the community who otherwise might not have collaborated on such a large scale. The organisational process and lead up to the event was itself of great interest, as the regular meetings elicited discussions that highlighted a range of views regarding the intents and outcomes of Documenta. During the first meeting, one artist commented:

If Documenta came here with the money it had, what was it 30 million? 40 million? and started with a bottom-up approach, and began with some research to speak with artists, with the people. What I want to say is, it doesn't have to do with the money coming here, it has to do with how they function and their process.

In retort, another remarked:

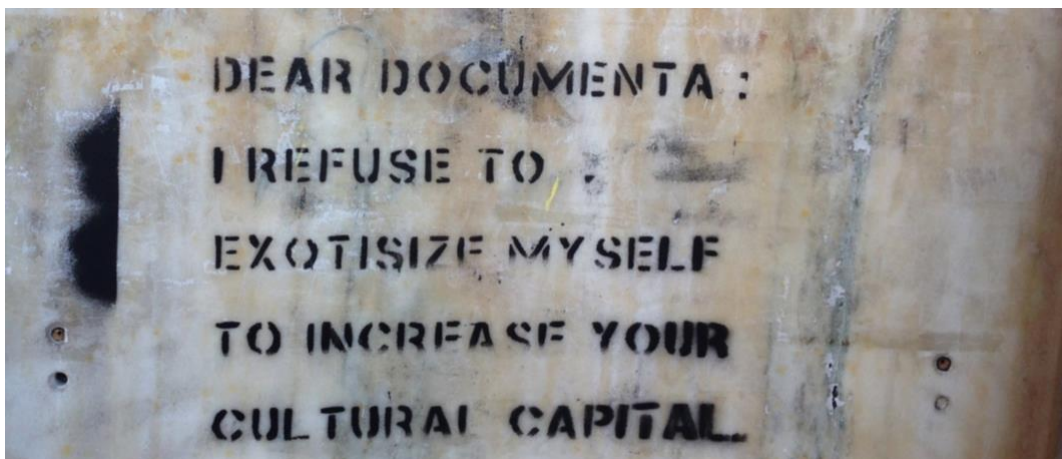
Even though I agree with what you are saying, Documenta can't come here and just give a present to Athens... The issue is that the little resources that we have to exploit have been distributed to Documenta. Out of self-interest people gave a year and a half of their lives worrying about how they were going to get into Documenta, and didn't focus on their own work they are doing here. From the Greek institutions, we had one museum for contemporary art and it has been closed for 7 years, it opened for Documenta. Even the School of Fine Arts gave their buildings, not for students to present their work, but for Documenta. Documenta isn't to blame, well it is to blame, but in conjunction with our institutions.

He then sarcastically said "because you are Documenta take it take it, with no economic recuperation". Another artist in attendance noted that the art really didn't live up to the budget:

The Documenta exhibitions (at EMST and the School of Fine Arts) have some things that I have seen and thought it is good, or it is so-so. But, when I think that it had a budget of 20, 30 or 50 thousand Euros, and I see the work friends have done with no budget, and it is of the same quality. It is not justified, I imagine what some of the kids could do with that budget it would be an amazing production.

He then continued discussing the proposed festival noting that “what is interesting to me with this project is the fact that without any budget you can still do things”. These conversations took place in late June 2017, during an eleven-day garbage strike in Athens. One artist jokingly suggested “we should take all the rubbish to the front of EMST as an installation for Documenta”.

As is common in Athens, the debates surrounding Documenta swiftly proliferated visually throughout the urban-scape. The posters, stencils and graffiti found within the city during this time are indicative of the social perceptions of Documenta. Figure 7.8 appeared during the Fifth Athens Biennale next to the entrance leading into Bangeion. The stencil reads “Dear Documenta I will not exoticize myself to increase your cultural capital”. Figures 7.9 to 7.11 are further examples of the visual contestation and criticism of Documenta and its perceived neoliberal motives.



*Figure 7.8 Anti-Documenta graffiti out the front of Bangeion, Omonoia, Athens*





Figure 7.9 'Crapumenta 14'

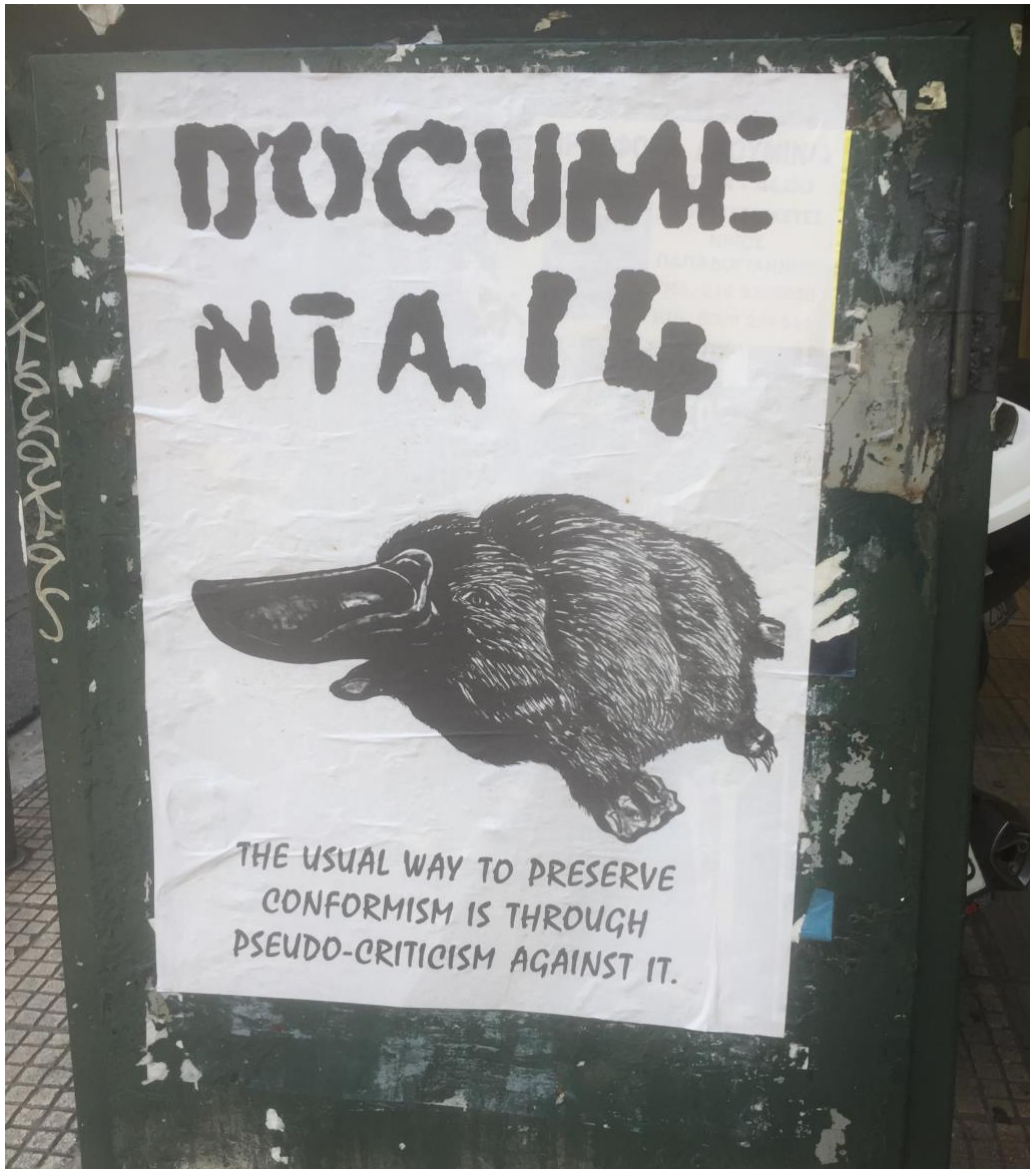
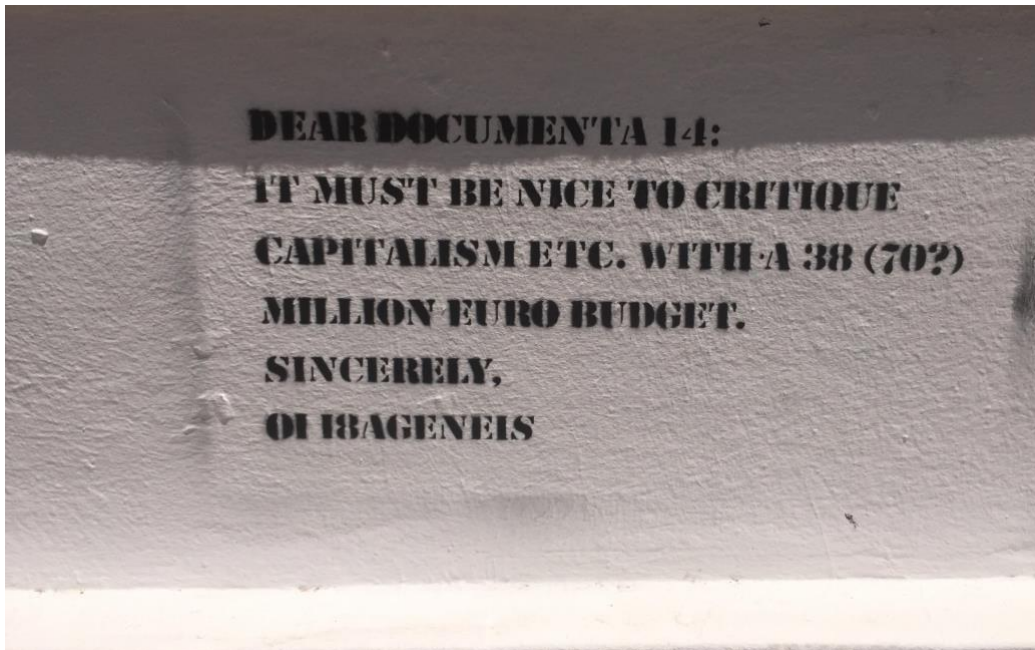


Figure 7.10 Anti-Documenta poster



*Figure 7.11 Graffiti questioning Documenta's anti-capitalist rhetoric*

For some, Documenta was considered to have had a positive effect on the contemporary Athens art scene. It brought along with it unprecedented tourism and media concerned with contemporary art as opposed to the city's ancient heritage (Yalouri & Rikou, 2019). Even if just temporarily, Athens was cast into the international spotlight and became a focus of the international art world. Other perspectives consider Documenta's engagement with Athens to have failed in adequately dealing with the complexity and heterogeneity of the subaltern ideas and experiences the institution claimed to represent. Critics of Documenta accused it of neo-colonialist ambitions, ideological contradiction, perpetuating historical Greco-German power imbalances, and neglecting significant aspects of the local art scene (Tran, 2017; Yalouri & Rikou, 2019; Zefkili, 2017). In spite of these contrasting perspectives, what Documenta did instigate in Athens was the formation of diverse networks of artists, curators and community groups that acted in response to the institution's presence. The exhibition provided local artists the urgent need to introspect on their own city, practice and scene, leading to an increased rigour in experimentation, collectivity and art production. Through the responses to Documenta, the multifarious facets of the counter-institutional Athens art scene truly came to light. The connection between people, the city and their socio-political and historical

contexts were accumulatively shown to profoundly and actively influence the social function of art within a time of crisis (Gell, 1998).

## **7.4 Conclusion**

The contemporary art scene in Athens has developed largely outside of institutional settings in the lived and experienced spaces of urban life (de Certeau, 1988). To overcome the scarcity of funding and support of contemporary art, artists, curators and social groups have experimented with innovative ways of creating and presenting their works. This has led to a wildly diverse art-scape comprised of (limited) public institutions, private galleries, non-profit spaces, semi-formal occupations, illegal squats, temporary exhibition sites and the city streets. The Athens scene has prospered throughout the crisis as a result of the creativity and ongoing work of artists and the networks that they are able to forge. The subversive ethos driving the art scene draws inspiration from graffiti and street art movements which have long embodied many of the anti-institutional arguments elaborated by the art world (Irvine, 2012). The street art ethos has been incorporated into the wider art scene and expanded to meet the demands of different artists and collectives.

In this chapter I have used the example of the Sfondoni movement to highlight how horizontal organisation and direct democracy were engaged to rapidly respond to a perceived injustice. Art is inherently linked to larger socio-political processes and as such the same rebellious vigour that resisted past occupations and the modern crisis, is also shown to be heavily present in the art scene (Herzfeld, 1985; Theodossopoulos, 2014). The chapter concluded with the analysis of Documenta 14 and its connection to the colonising and exotifying gaze of the Global North. Despite differing perspectives surrounding Documenta, the presence of the institution inadvertently activated a massive cross-section of the Athens art scene, inciting collaboration on an unprecedented scale. In Athens, the powerful art institution did not find a passive city emblematic of global crises, but



instead a heterogeneity of active voices, unbroken by imposed suffering,  
and unwilling to be subdued.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis has been to ethnographically capture a historical moment, not only significant to Athens, but to the world of contemporary art more generally. The dire context of the crisis, Greece's precarious position within global economics, the nation's rich albeit contested history, and the resilience of its people, have influenced the development of a contemporary art scene which is vibrant, experimental, subversive and complex. This heterogeneous and counter-institutional scene shines a light on the fraught relationship which exists between the often-subversive roots of thriving art scenes (such as 'crisis' Athens, Berlin in the 90s and New York in the 60s), and the colonising forces of gentrification and institutionalisation which seek to commercialise, subdue and control them. By building upon the experiences and knowledge of research participants I have illuminated the central factors contributing to the development of an art scene which has proven to be fiercely resistant to institutional domination.

The arrival of graffiti into Athens in the 1980s is shown to be a key impetus for the development of the counter-institutional artistic practices which have gained the interest of the international art world over recent years. Graffiti is an artistic style born of poverty and oppression which continues to resonate with social outcasts and dissidents around the globe. With its subversive roots and connection to the spaces of everyday life, it has long been marginalised by the art establishment (Miles, 1997). Despite this, the graffiti ethos foreshadowed many of the anti-institutional debates and experiments that are currently being explored within the wider art world (Irvine, 2012).

Although graffiti is a truly global phenomenon, the adaptation of its underlying ethos by Athens based artists has allowed them to creatively contest and overcome the specific social and economic challenges ushered in by the Greek crisis. By removing itself from institutionalised settings, graffiti and its derivative forms of street art are a powerful means of expression by which artists can have their messages rapidly reach massive

populations. Within the precarious context of the crisis, graffiti practice has afforded artists the capacity to instantaneously respond to abruptly changing socio-political circumstances in real time, unhindered by the gatekeepers of the institutional art world. However, when art exists outside of dedicated art spaces, the definition and categorisation of works can become highly controversial. As summarised by street artist Skitsofrenis, many understood that “when you take the step and suggest something on a public wall it is by itself a political action”. Through my ethnographic analysis of the differing perceptions surrounding artwork in public space, the meaning and function of art is revealed to be intimately related to the particularities of its context.

To highlight the important role that the urban context has had on the development of the art scene, the spatial and historical construct of Athens has been examined through the conceptual frameworks provided by Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1988). Lefebvre considers that conceived spaces through which social engineers seek to establish homogeneity have come to dominate much of the modern urban experience. This kind of space seeks to impose order, structure and control over the spatial practices of urban dwellers. However, due to a range of factors such as periods of spontaneous ad hoc spatial development, state lenience to illegal building practices, a peripheral positioning in global power relations, a historically rooted distrust of authority, and the importance of maintaining social relationships, I have demonstrated that the citizens of Athens maintain a strong and subversive relation to social space. Social space, also referred to as representational space, deals with the transcendence of homogenisation and the desire for new meanings and uses to be attributed to urban environments (Lefebvre, 1991). It is within this visceral social space that the graffiti ethos took root and blossomed into the radical art scene which has thrived within the city streets of ‘crisis’ Athens.

Through my examination of art’s spatial context it becomes evident that space and material objects are not passive, but actively engaged in the production of social relations (Morphy & Perkins, 2006). Due to a range of

historical factors mixed with the financial strains of the crisis, Athens is currently home to many abandoned and decaying buildings (Belavilas & Prentou, 2015). These derelict buildings afford artists the opportunity to cheaply rent, occupy and repurpose them as urban canvases, galleries, studios, meeting spots or performance spaces. During fieldwork, participants regularly referred to these spaces as living characters, treating them as active contributors to the artistic process. These accounts of the agential capacity of space align with De Certeau's assertion that old urban structures become characters, personas, actors and heroes which "organise around them the city saga" (1998, p. 135). To further understand the influence of material spaces on art, the concept of affect is used to elucidate the affordances and atmospheres created through the interface of people and art with their material context (Deleuze, 1978; Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

Material agency further manifests itself in this dissertation through the potential for artworks to adopt unintended meanings and functions as a result of their spatial and temporal context. It is here that I contribute to bridging a theoretical schism between non-representational agent based theories (Deleuze, 1978; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Gell, 1998; Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Thrift, 2008) and symbolic analyses deriving largely from the ideas of Peirce and Saussure (Barthes, 1967; Bourdieu, 2000; Cohen, 1979; Hall, 1980; Parmentier, 2016; Riches, 1986). To do so, symbols are explored as a central mode through which art becomes a vessel of material agency (Morphy, 2009). I maintain that this abstract agency can be seen to act through the zones of distortion existent between the encoding and decoding of symbolic propositions into artworks (Hall, 1980). These zones of distortion have the potential to alter the social function of art by affecting the signal chain between the signifier, signified and interpretant which form Peirce's triadic function of symbols (Parmentier, 2016). When placed in the city streets, art's symbolic function is susceptible to external interferences such as the symbolic relevance of the surrounding space, the temporal and political context of the work, and the subjectivity of those interpreting it.

The diverse material agencies invested within and around an artwork are shown to have the potential to incite responses beyond those intended by the artist. In one extreme case discussed in *Chapter Five*, this rallied a community toward the ultimate destruction of a significant work of public art. The combination of symbolic, spatial and agent based theoretical approaches allows for art to be observed through the function it serves within its surrounding social environment. The study of art within its social context is precisely what Gell (1998) suggests the anthropology of art should have as its focus. Despite this, I contest his call for anthropologists to abandon the symbolic analysis of art, for in so doing the very context in which an artwork is engaged and entangled is at danger of becoming obscured (Bowden, 2004; Layton, 2016; Morphy, 2009).

Building on from this, my analysis has indicated the diverse and creative ways through which street artists and performers masterfully mediate the complex symbolism inherent in urban space to invest their works with powerful communicative potential. Artists that create within the urban paradigm possess a keen understanding of the semiotics of space, and utilise the city as a collage of visual environments and source material (Irvine, 2012). The tumultuous history of Athens has seen urban space sporadically transformed into sites of protests, riots, occupations, executions, battles and revolutions (Dalakoglou & Giovanopoulos, 2011; Dalakoglou & Poulimenakos, 2018; Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2010). The politicised nature of space has made it a particularly powerful tool which artists engage to symbolically resist, challenge and overcome the socio-political and economic challenges posed by the crisis.

The harsh realities of the crisis have resulted in a profound turn to the past as people endeavour to make sense of the suffering imposed over the domain of everyday life. Historical past events are assembled by artists and morphed into a decipherable present (Knight, 2015; Munn, 1992). Events such as the Greek Revolutionary War, the First World War, the 1922 Asia Minor population exchange, the Second World War, Greek Civil War and the 1973 student uprising, provide frameworks through which resistance to

modern acts of oppression are legitimised (Appadurai, 1981; Fabian, 1983; Herzfeld, 1985; Knight, 2015). Likewise, past forms of subversive artistic expression such as Rebetiko, and more recently hip hop, are used in the construction of communicatively powerful artistic narratives of rebellion. The bridging of disparate temporal moments is a significant technique employed by Athenian artists as it allows them to make sense of, express and contest, present experiences of oppression and suffering.

The established conceptual framework focusing on agency, space, symbols and time, highlights that the art scene in Athens is irreducible to any of its individual components. Rather, it is the amalgamation of artists' admirable capacity to navigate complex agential, political and spatial networks which extend through time. The meanings constructed through the artistically mediated relationships are not fixed or given but open to experimentation and diverse interpretations. The city of Athens itself is shown to be a central character within the emergent art scene, a melting pot of heterogeneous actors, spaces, potentials and atmospheres. It is not my aim to suggest that Athens is impervious or entirely distinct to wider global political and art movements. Rather, I have elucidated how the coalescence of a range of factors have created an art scene which is unique to its spatial, temporal and social context. It thus becomes evident that Athens is not the "new Berlin" as often claimed by the mass media, but is indeed, as one street artist commented "Athens is the new Athens".

Finally, my analysis has outlined the conflict existing between the anti-institutional aspects of the Athens art scene and the increasing interest of major international art institutions. Throughout Greece's tempestuous history, a spirit of resistance has been nationally accredited as the heroic driving force behind the success of past liberation movements. However, this resistance is often carried out by revolutionary groups (such as the Klefts in the Greek War for Independence, and the Communist Party in World War Two) that do not easily fit into the hegemonic cultural narratives of the state and European Powers. This has led to a disjuncture between European, state, group and individual constructions of social reality and has

been the catalyst for a culturally imbued suspicion of the powerful (Herzfeld, 1985). The crisis has greatly accentuated this discord through its connection to a history of both foreign and internal exploitation, corruption, cronyism and greed.

It is from these foundations that the contemporary suspicion towards the presence of powerful neoliberal institutions such as Documenta 14 was born. The often-radical response that artists had towards these institutions was condemned as the unrestrained emotional impulse of overly reactionary Greeks. Concurrently, these impassioned responses were also attributed as the source of creativity, resilience and endless experimentation in an art scene which thrived within the economic constraints of the crisis. The precarious position of the anti-institutional art scene mimics the synchronic celebration and condemnation of historical resistance movements in Greece (Herzfeld, 1985, 2004; Theodossopoulos, 2014). Through the analysis of the Athens art-scape I have revealed how the spirit of resistance was enacted through subversive experimentations in self-organisation, squatting, illegal occupations and horizontal collectivity.

Artists understood the need to find balance and maintain dialogue between the radical antiestablishment aspects of the Athens scene, and the wider institutional art world. Through the events and discussions which informed this dissertation it became clear that increased funding, state support and international art networks would be critical for Athens to stake its claim as a new, enduring centre of European art. In spite of this, artists were all too aware of the looming dangers, including losing control of their scene, their spaces and ultimately their voice to gentrification, exploitation, commodification and institutionalisation; anxieties heightened by the perceived institutional manipulation of Greece's fragile economy. This seemingly impossible balancing act was at the centre of major controversies such as those surrounding the appointment of Fabre as director of the Athens Epidaurus Festival, and the arrival of Documenta 14 into Athens. These events, initially beacons of hope, were interpreted by many as extensions of the unequal power distribution observed in broader European

geopolitics. Regardless of one's perspective of these events, their presence in Athens radically activated the art scene, brought artists together and foregrounded important discussions at a critical time in modern Greek history. In the face of the trials and tribulations of the crisis, the capacity of resilient Athenian artists to sustain a vibrant, diverse and autonomous art scene, stands as a testament to their willpower, creativity and determination to be heard. The enduring counter-institutional Athens art scene stands as a source of inspiration to the archetypal struggling artist's eternal plight.



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