

**The city and its walls: Street art, graffiti and the re-invention of public
space in Yerevan**

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to cover the diversity of street art and graffiti in Yerevan as the most populated city and the capital of Armenia. By looking at the variety of works including the explicit political texts on the walls of National Assembly having the lifetime of several hours up to the commercialized character drawings in the outskirts of the city, the research seeks to answer the question of how the public space within urban context of Yerevan is re-invented through the agency of street artists and graffiti writers. In doing so, the research is theoretically re-framed in a way, which will allow to see the practices of street art and graffiti within broader contexts, such as the social-political changes and the urban environment. Through the lenses of these theories, based on the conducted in-depth individual interviews and the visual analysis, the research will guide through the surfaces of Yerevan's urban landscape showing its specificities, complexities and contradictions.

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Dedicated to the city of endless contradictions, to the walls and the streets of my beloved Yerevan and each and every of its inhabitants.

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1 Introduction

Yerevan, as the most populated and diverse city in Armenia, is not a worldwide renown location for graffiti and street art. Nevertheless, the works of street art are rather diverse there not only in their physical representations but also in the purposes they have. Whether decorative or politically engaging, well-thought or spontaneous, sponsored or illegal, all of them have their roles in the city. Some long, some short, each of them has its life cycle adding to the layers and the stories of the capital. The moment the spray, the brush or any other tool used by the artist or the writer touches the wall, the communication between the city walls and its inhabitants begins. This visual dialogue is both personal and public, emotional and intellectual, frustrated and loving. It is as contradictory and changeable as the city itself.

The places, where the works are located might range from the city center to its outskirts related to the variety of possible explanations and motivations. The artists might have taken part in sponsored contests and festivals, they might spend their free time practicing it as a hobby, crush the city surfaces with poetry or encourage citizens for active political actions. In any case, the works are typical Yerevanian shouting from walls about the problems, the desires, the dreams and the fears of the city. While one of the artists was writing sentences from her short stories on the walls, another was giving “second life” to an old and forgotten district. While one was decorating the abandoned buildings in the outskirts, another was fighting against the unfair political system in the country through his art. All these examples are part of a big puzzle coming together to construct and represent the life in the small Armenian capital.

Besides the stories that the works themselves represent, their creation is related also to the broader events happening in the city, and in the country more generally. The social and political activities taking place in certain places of the city re-create their meanings, which later find expressions in the works of the artists. Neighborhood improvements and gentrification are the social phenomena circulating around Yerevan, which some artists try to save the capital

from. The improvement of certain areas accompanied with street art placements leads to the change within the field as a whole by eventually institutionalizing and commercializing it. By censoring the seemingly non-political decorative works the political field maintains and recreates broader values and moral canons prevalent in the society through street art and graffiti. Moreover, the change of the social and political conditions in the country can be determinative, too in terms of the relevance of the works. While rapidly developing through past years, political graffiti and street art have almost disappeared from the city surfaces after the Velvet Revolution (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). Being a tool in the hands of politically-engaged young artists it has lost its sense for them as such after they have reached their goal, that is- the change of the government.

All of the mentioned examples illustrate the importance of situating the works and the entire field of street art and graffiti within social-historical context. Needless to mention, that these events are determinative both for the content, and for the placements of works. However, the artists and the writers are the ones to “manipulate” the places and spaces accordingly. This research will illustrate how through the walls the artists add, create and transform parts of it both visually and socially. By looking at the variety of works starting from explicit political works on the walls of National Assembly building being cleaned in hours up to character paintings in the outskirts of the city, the research aims to answer the question of how the public space within urban context of Yerevan is re-built through the agency of street artists and graffiti writers. My main argument relies on the idea that street artists and graffiti writers re-invent the public space through their agency by changing it both physically and socially. This re-invention is regarded in close connection with the placements of works looking at respective practices within urban context.

The first part of the research will build upon the literature about the intersection of public space and street art to show the latter from that perspective. Later, it will move on to the

description of the field of street art and graffiti as a field of cultural production from the perspective of field theory suggested by P. Bourdieu. It will also draw upon such concepts as commercialization and commodification of art, political art and resistance graffiti, public art, to name a few. Therefore, the first two chapters seek to show from one side how street art practices “re-make” the city, how the public space can be transformed, and from another side what street art and graffiti themselves represent as a field of cultural production, and how these two approaches intersect.

Later, the paper moves towards the analytical part of the research conducted in Yerevan, Armenia, in the spring of 2019. The chapter “Into the field- Crystallizing the Field of Street Art and Graffiti in Yerevan” gives a short summary of the field of street art and graffiti in Yerevan by framing the analysis around the ideas of resistance and commodification, referring also to the definitions and boundaries, as well as various ways of networking within the field. Further, the next chapter re-frames these practices within urban context of Yerevan by referring to the importance of places and the hierarchized perceptions related to different places. The final chapter ends the research in an emotional note by connecting the works of street art and graffiti to the artists’ emotional connection towards the city, as well as the background self-experienced knowledge they possess about it.

In order to describe and analyze the works, 8 in-depth individual interviews with street artists and graffiti writers were conducted according to the main method of the research. As the second method, visual analysis was implemented: photos of the works were taken and retrieved from social media. This method includes not only the visual analysis of the artworks, but also the overall environment, in which they are placed (e.g. the buildings and the area around). The integration of these two methods allowed to not only collect the narratives about the practices told by the artists and writers, but also to see those narratives in visual dimension, in relation to the works. Deriving from the main question, due to the implemented methods, the research

aims to analyze also the meaning, function and definition of street art and graffiti for the artists, the decision-making process of the work placement, the “usage” of the city and its parts, the absence or presence of networking within the field, the phenomenon of legitimate and/or legal art and practices, the extent of state’s involvement, to name a few.

Despite the differences of the ways I reached to my informants, they were mostly the influential figures within the field knowing and talking about each other. This complex relationship of neither competing, nor co-operating can be described as basic familiarity with each other and each others’ works within this small field of Yerevan. Nevertheless, my positionality as a person grown up in Yerevan played an immense role in understanding this relationship. Moreover, the interviews would not be possible if not my personal connections with people who are related to street artists and graffiti writers and who made my acquaintances with them possible.

2 Urban space, public place and their re-invention through street art

Street art and graffiti have been studied by various disciplines starting from criminology and art criticism up to urban studies and sociology. One of the possible reasons of such interest can be explained by the fact that it is an interstitial practice (Brighenti, 2010, 316), which both allows and “obliges” to view it from different perspectives such as from the point of legality and normativity, aesthetical evaluation, commercialization and commodification, to name a few. This chapter seeks to see it as a practice re-creating and reclaiming public place within urban space. It aims to illustrate how, by having certain agency towards the space, street artists and graffiti writers transform it. Moreover, here the term “transformation” presumes not only visual change in urban geography, but also the change in social meanings. In other words, besides the visual dimension, the transformation takes place also in social dimension. Thus, street art is regarded as a practice which re-creates urban places, whether it is a street, a whole district, or a wall specifically.

Street art and graffiti, as other forms of urban art and architecture, are inescapable in terms of public space consumption. If regarded as a public good, public space is being used to certain extent by relevant agents, which can be passengers in the streets, dwellers in the neighborhood, street artists locating their works on the walls etc. However, on contrary to other forms of public goods, public space is impossible “not to consume”, in other words, similar to architecture or other forms of urban design, it is inescapable (Visconti et al., 2010; 512). The consumer, in this case did not explicitly choose to become a consumer of that certain place. This inescapability adds to artist’s authority to “own” or “re-define” the public space by creating and modifying something there according to his or her personal values, artistic perceptions, views, to name a few. Thus, the space becomes “dictated” to certain extent by the artist. This turns anonymous spaces to places with certain social meaning. Moreover,

Christensen & Thor regard street art and graffiti as social phenomena which express placemaking (2017, 587).

Moreover, aside from artist's personal preferences related to the style, technique and the content of the works, other influencing factors should also be taken into account, such as other institutions and agents, for instance local authorities and/or sponsors (not necessarily separated). However, leaving other agencies aside for a while, one of the main starting points can be that the artist and the writer proclaim the place by manifesting their agency over the place through the creation of certain communication between the space and the consumers. Moreover, Henri Lefebvre regards social space as a means of production (1991, 85). While conceptualizing social space within objective reality (*Ibid.*, 191), Lefebvre explains it also within its social dimension, thus broadening its understanding.

This might be connected to another important view on urban space in general, prevalent around scholars which allows to see it constantly changing as opposed to the notion of it as a given (Bodnar, 2015; 2). While firstly seeing it according to its geometrical and aesthetic characteristics (Krier, 1979, 17), it can be further understood also within the social context, too.

From the perspective of urban public space, street art and graffiti cannot be fully understood if ignoring its “infinitely” changing character. Moreover, here I adopt a view according to where “Public space is inherently political and potentially subversive; it is seen as both the manifestation of reigning political power but also as that of a more inclusive power that can reclaim it temporarily by occupying it for political purposes” (Bodnar, 2015, 6). It is the idea of the changing and transforming urban space which allows to see the re-invention of the space accompanied with the communication taking place between the public and the public space, which allows artists to impose their own or others' aesthetic perceptions, values, ideas etc. to public. Moreover, by doing so they create the social and historical meaning of the space:

“As the artists use urban spaces to fulfill their own desires, they are also constructing a history of their own making. Value and meaning are not inherent in space or place; instead they are continuously created, reproduced, recreated, and defended” (Cresswell, 1996). Street artists are augmenting and enhancing conceptions of the past, present, and future for both themselves and others who see the piece. In this way, street art can be seen as a powerful unmediated alternative mode of communication” (Conklin, 2012, 69).

From an architectural point of view (Krier, 1979, 17) the initial historical function of the street was passing. But, on contrary, within the context of street art, street gains a new meaning. It doesn't fulfill a function of passing only, it is re-created by the artist and later- the consumers as a site where artworks are being created, the resistance is being exhibited or the site of manifestation of any other purpose certain work of street art or graffiti has. Moreover, the street itself becomes not only purely a physical space, but also a resource in the hands of the writer or artist. “Just as painters use canvas, paint, frames, galleries, and walls, street artists use elements of the street” (Riggle, 2010, 245). Therefore, the use of street by the artist or the writer immensely influences their works. From this point of view, street can be regarded more as a public space, rather than a public place. That is to say, while place has a certain meaning ascribed to it, space is regarded as something more anonymous (Visconti et al., 2010, 512). The walls, more specifically as the site where the artistic practice is mostly represented (though not necessarily always), have a big significance in this context. “Walls are among the primary boundary-creating objects. The general category “wall” includes, in fact, a wide set of separating artifacts, such as barriers, fences, gates, parapets, wire, and so on, each of which is endowed with its own specific boundary-making features.” (Brighenti; 2010, 322). Hence, the walls distinguish one public place from another through the presence of the mentioned barriers. Moreover, this definition can be looked also as a metaphor of something that distinguishes between official and unofficial, legal or illegal, something supported and punished by the state

etc. In other words, it might illustrate not only the physical boundaries, but also, the political and social ones. However, this does not presume, as given, that any form of street art or graffiti is illegal. Moreover, further examples will prove the opposite, that street art and graffiti can be rather supported and sponsored by the state. Therefore, it can be seen that they are sites imbued with political meanings.

The term of “re-thematizing” is also of relevance here, since the works of street art not only re-create the space visually within their physical dimension, but they also reconstruct the social meaning of such places, as noted above. For instance, in the case of beautification, not only certain walls become “nicer”, but also a district, which could have been previously considered as a dangerous area, might gain a new meaning, might become more popular place among certain audiences, e.g. tourists or certain segments of youth. Here the term public domain can be of relevance, which shows is “public space and public sphere at the same time” (Brighenti, 2010, 329). Moreover, it is important to look at public sphere closely related to public space in order to see it as a site, where political conduct can happen (Bodnar, 2015, 4).

This connection between public space and public sphere, once more shows that if looking at street art and graffiti practices from urban public space context, not only the visual content of the work matter, but also the urban site where they are located. Simply said- the place matters. The question of whether the place would have gained a new meaning if the painting would have been different, is another angle and matter of other possible debates. Nevertheless, despite the potential answers to this question, the result is that the place is being re-created and, thus, re-thematized in certain cases, which will also be shown in the analysis of this given research.

The term public also presumes the idea of public art, the meaning of which will be reduced if perceiving it in its geographical and physical dimension, solely.

“Key to the creation of social cohesion is the belief that public art, or the processes through which it is produced, is able to create a sense of inclusion. By this token, public art should be able to generate a sense of ownership forging the connection between citizens, city spaces and their meaning as places through which subjectivity is constructed” (Sharp et al., 2005, 1003).

By locating the works on the streets and public spaces, public art enables the works of art not to be exclusive for certain segment of public, e.g. certain segment of consumers with high economic and cultural capital, but also it is open to public. Therefore, from one side, street art and graffiti are unavoidable and even might be considered “imposing”, from the other side along with their claim of challenging and even revolutionizing the traditional field of visual arts, they also reclaim the public space. This ambiguity lies within the very core of the practice, which is both imposing and “liberating” at the same time. Despite that artists might have in their mind purposes fulfilling the needs of public or more collectivistic purposes, rather than individualistic, the prevalence of their agency is unquestionable. The authorship of the works belongs to them, and they are the ones to transform the public space hence reclaiming and recreating it according to their (or imposed on them) views, aesthetical taste, technical skills and ideological beliefs. Moreover, as already mentioned, with the presence of other influential agents, such as the state or local authorities, in some cases the possible audience they have in mind and the will to meet their requirements, this process becomes even more complicated and includes not even their own individual purposes, solely.

In some cases, the involvement of political institutions might be claimed to be for public or collective welfare such as gentrification of the neighborhood by decorating and beautifying it, giving it “second life”. Gentrification is one of the social phenomena which connects street art and graffiti to commodification- thus “insidering” them (Christensen & Thor, 2017, 591).

However, with the presence of potential censorship, the state not only limits the so-called artistic “freedom” and the opportunity of the artist to express themselves and their artistic skills to the maximum, but it also imposes certain rules on the space, which is public. With the mentioned inescapability of the public space, hence, the community or the public deals with the public space, which was regulated and in other terms- even “dictated” by other agents being whether the state in general, certain political authorities or the artists themselves. In order to understand these complicated connections, next chapter will draw on “Field of Cultural production” to look at street art and graffiti as relatively autonomous artistic field and also analyze it in relation to other fields.

3 Street art and graffiti as a field of cultural production

This chapter aims to look at graffiti and street art as artistic field, or what Bourdieu calls “The Economic world reversed” (Bourdieu, 1993; 30). By avoiding to look at artistic field from idealistic point of “art for art’s sake” and rejecting another radicalism of viewing it purely within structures and systems by ignoring the agency of artists, this theoretical framework will be of help to analyze the specificities of graffiti and street art in Yerevan. From one side looking at positions within the field itself, and from another describing them in accordance to other fields, such as the field of power, it will enable to see this specific field as a whole with all its complexities.

However, to get a deeper understanding of this artistic field itself, other sources of literature were used, such as articles about commercialization and commodification of art to later give the detailed description of street art festivals, contests and urban projects in relation to institutionalization of street art and graffiti. Further it will address the scholarship related to public art, which is related to the previous chapter on public space, too. It will be regarded not only in its relation to the geographical and physical location, but also to the core idea lying behind it, that is- the public access to art, which will help to understand another case related to open-air gallery in Yerevan. And finally, this chapter will refer to the literature related to political resistance through street art to understand the political works, and the literature which will draw upon commodification and commercialization of art.

Firstly, beginning with Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, it is important to mention that his theory is also a methodological approach, which integrates three levels of social reality. The first one is the position of artistic field within the “field of power”, the second is the structure of the field itself and the final one is the genesis of the producer’s, e.g. artist’s or writer’s habitus. (*Ibid.*, 14). This is related to the understanding that artists are standing in the intersection of two components: the positions they occupy and their dispositions, which are

mutually dependent and shaping one another (*Ibid.*, 61). Another important aspect of Bourdieusian theory is that despite looking at this field in accordance to others, it does take into account the specificities of this field and analyzes it accordingly. What might largely define the agents' positions in other fields, might be of different importance within this field. While in other fields the possession of high degree of economic capital might presume higher level of position within the fields' hierarchies, here cultural and symbolical capital are of more significance and more determinative. However, that, by no means, rejects the importance of economic capital. Moreover, the simultaneous possession of high levels of three forms of capital is what moves the agents to the new positions, in general (*Ibid.*, 68). Nevertheless, within the field the rules seem to be different. It is more regarded as a field related to criticism and of relative autonomy. As Bourdieu puts it:

“In other words, the specificity of the literary and artistic field is defined by the fact that the more autonomous it is, i.e. the more completely it fulfils its own logic as a field, the more it tend to suspend or reverse the dominant principle of hierarchization, but also that, whatever its degree of independence, it continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit.” (*Ibid.*, 38-39)

This characteristic of artistic field might be connected to its relation with the discourse production which itself determines the production of the work of art. One of the most important components of the latter is its value and the production of it, which is defined by the legitimate discourse which the struggle takes place for (*Ibid.*, 36). Concerning legitimacy, Bourdieu distinguishes three types of it. While the first is the recognition gained by the “autonomous self-sufficient world of ‘art for art’s sake’” and the second is the legitimacy satisfying the ‘bourgeois’ taste, the third is ‘popular’ legitimacy- “the consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the ‘mass audience’” (*Ibid.*, 50-51). The latter gains special importance when

connected to the commercialization and commodification of the works of art, where street art and graffiti are not exceptions.

Interestingly, when referring to the commodification of cultural artefacts, Harvey mentions that despite the obvious commodification of culture, it is still hard to see and admit that process mostly because culture is regarded as something related to creative and authentic production rather than something related to economic field (Harvey, 2002; 93). Yet, we can see the processes of artwork trades and rents, and it is of no doubt that the cultural field is commodified. The concept of commodification is built on the idea of commodity, which here refers to its classic definition suggested by K. Marx: “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (Marx, 1887, 27). Already at 1940s, Frankfurt school scholars Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were alarming about the rapid commercialization and commodification of the cultural field (2006). Bourdieu, too, did mention that cultural and symbolic forms of capital can be transformed to economic one, thus enabling to see the commodification of the works of art in this case. (1993, 7) What can form the important characteristics of the artworks such as its authenticity and uniqueness can be transformed to monetary dimension. Harvey writes:

“First, while uniqueness and particularity are crucial to the definition of ‘special qualities’, the requirement of tradability means that no item can be so unique or so special as to be entirely outside the monetary calculus.” (2002, 95).

In comparison to other art products, the commodification of artworks is not a simple process. It goes through several institutional processes before its value production and commodification (Ganahl, 2001, 30). Nevertheless, this research does not aim to give detailed description of commodification process. Rather, it takes it as an important factor to analyze street art and graffiti as forms of art.

Commodification goes hand in hand with commercialization. In the case of graffiti and street art it is mainly related to the fact that, nowadays, many of the works of street art are being re-located to museums, exhibited and more generally- represented according to institutionalized and legitimate rules of the field. This process is itself contradictory, since as Riggle mentions: “street art does not exist in a designated "artspace"- a place like a museum or gallery specially reserved for art” (2010, 246). Street art and graffiti have their rules- where the canvas is the wall, and the museum is the public place. The city itself is an open-air gallery, which is perceived by artists separately and independent from political and economic fields (Christensen, & Thor, 2017, 608). Nevertheless, in some cities- sooner, in others- later, the works of street and graffiti become eventually commercialized. When looking at the examples of commercialized graffiti and street art in Minsk and Chisinau, Muth mentions that being a rather recent phenomenon for the Post-Soviet world, it is only in the last twenty years that these urban manifestations became noticeable within Post-Soviet urban context (2016, 19-20). On contrast, Visconti et al., based on their ethnographic research in different countries, note that other artists, who stand for street democracy refuse the idea of commercialized street art and more generally, the capitalistic private ownership towards city landscapes (2010, 520). This is not only related to the idea of the right to the city already mentioned in the previous chapter, but also to the concept of public art.

Joanne Sharp et al. write that public art, as other forms of art is a matter of debates concerning the taste and aesthetics. Nonetheless, in this case these issues are increased mostly because of inescapability (2005, 1001), which is mentioned in the previous chapter. Taking into account the diversity of the forms that public art can take, the authors defines it as such:

“...public art is art which has as its goal a desire to engage with its audiences and to create spaces—whether material, virtual or imagined—within which people can identify

themselves, perhaps by creating a renewed reflection on community, on the uses of public spaces or on our behavior within them” (Ibid., 1003-1004).

Therefore, it can be seen, that public art should be regarded in its relation to the idea of social inclusion and other questions underlying its politics. It is vital to look at the production of the public art from the view of democracy and social inclusion to reach a comprehension about its role within urban context (*Ibid.*, 1006). As can be seen, public art is defined as such not only because of its physical and geographical location at public spaces, but also related to the politics it presumes. Moreover, my strong belief is that regarding it separated from its political meaning and purpose would lead to its reduced understanding.

Obviously, politics here referred mostly to the idea of challenging the ownership towards the public space, privatization of it and exclusion of public. However, it is significant to refer to another dimension of what is called “political” in order to gain a comprehensible description of the examples being discussed in this research. The concept of “political” will also be used in terms of those works of street art which represent content related to explicit political resistance against the power. In these terms, the article by Awad et al. “The Street Art of Resistance” illustrates the role of street art as a creative and aesthetic tool for political change within the context of Egyptian revolution (2017, 161). They use the concepts of resistance and resistance graffiti to analyze political street art with all of its specificities:

“Resistance graffiti presents an artistic form of opposition that is unique in its form from other graffiti and tagging behaviour. It has a unique temporal context relating to a certain contested issue and oriented towards an imagined future” (Ibid., 164-165).

As further the analysis of this research will also indicate, those works of street art and graffiti which oppose the power and are explicitly political cannot be regarded independently, separated from their historical and temporal context. The importance of temporality is related to the purpose-oriented character of these works. That is to say, these works appear as tools or

means for the artists to get to the larger purpose or aim they have which corresponds to their futuristic imaginaries. In these terms, aside from being regarded as both “social and individual phenomenon”, as well as “a constructive process that articulates continuity and change”, resistance is also viewed as “an act oriented towards an imagined future of different communities” (*Ibid.*, 161).

Another important characteristic which describes resistance street art is its relation to the audience. While generally a significant and conscious part of artists’ activity, the presence of audience should be addressed when referred to other forms of street art and graffiti, too. Nonetheless, the specificity of resistance graffiti audience is that besides including general society and public, it is also focused towards the actions of authorities and addresses them as audience, too (*ibid.*). This is of key importance in the case of my research too, which will later illustrate how the artists doing political works not only keep in mind authorities as a part of their audience, but also create and place their works according to the potential expected reactions from them. However, this resistance in general is not pointed against local authorities solely, it also directed against prevailing practices and ideas (*Ibid.*, 163). Considering this, it is also important to refer to the “practice of everyday life” in the understanding of Michel De Certeau, which allows to see also the resistance within everyday practices (1988). By giving agency to the consumer as the one who resists, it might be of help to understand how the practices of resistance are constructed. This again leads to the point where political should not be understood merely within the context of political authorities, but rather in its larger understanding, and the political resistance should be regarded respectively.

In this chapter, by starting from the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu and then drawing upon other scholarship related more specifically to the field this research concerns, I aimed to find a ground for the proper analysis of the research, as well as give definitions to the key

concepts important for it. Later, the paper will address the analytical part of the research with the help of the theories, researches and concepts mentioned in this and previous chapters.

4 Into the Field - Crystallizing the Field of Street Art and Graffiti in Yerevan

In order to understand the works within the context of the city and public place, it is important to refer to it as a field. Looking at it as a such will, firstly, enable the detailed description of the specificities of street art and graffiti in Yerevan in terms of their inner characteristics, such as how the artists and writers identify themselves, how they create networks with each other, to name but a few. Secondly, it will also allow to grasp an understanding of it within the field of positions, specifically in relation to local authorities. By illustrating the contemporary development within the field, I will show that despite being at the early period of its development, street art and graffiti as a separate artistic field is eventually being commercialized and institutionalized by the state although not always explicitly. My argument will unfold around the idea that this artistic field is in the dominated position in the field of power determined by the possession of several levers from the side of local authorities to keep this field in the subordinated position either by commercializing and institutionalizing the works or by directly suppressing them. Although the artist and the writer still has the agency to transform the public place, that agency is largely influenced and determined by the field of power.

In order to show the commercialization, the examples of state-sponsored practices, festivals and activities will be drawn. On contrast to it, also the examples of artists' followings and detentions will be drawn to illustrate the local authorities' efforts of direct suppression. I will show that even in the mentioned cases of artists' detentions, those events were not determined according to the practices as such, which are not regulated strictly by the law, but, rather related to the content of the works. Before getting to the main argument, some specificities of the local street art and graffiti field in Yerevan will be brought up in the first

part of the chapter, such as how the practices are defined within the field, what types of practices exist and how they interrelate to each other.

Floating between definitions

Despite the variety of explanations and definitions of street art and graffiti among scholars (Borghini et al. 2010), there is no precise interpretation of each and demarcation between them among the artists and writers in Yerevan. What is described as graffiti for one person, could be strongly defined as street art for another. The differences which define their practices lie mostly in the purposes they have. From self-expression up to beautification, the purposes both differ and intersect.

The understanding of vandalism

However, interestingly, some artists define street art and graffiti according to the concept of vandalism. When asked about the barriers and when street art crosses it becoming an act of vandalism, the artists and writers usually claim of its relative and individual character. Despite their claims that they define their limits and barriers themselves, the understandings of it usually correspond to one another. Usually they relate it to the buildings of cultural-historical importance, which represent national cultural heritage. However the mentioned places are always almost identical, they are the ones also officially very strongly protected and defined as culturally significant by the state. Hence, by defining what is “individually defined” according to them, they reproduce the dominant discourse of the field about the legitimacy and legality of the works related to its placement.

The networking

Although there were famous street artist groups within the field, such as “ArtLaboratory” or “Hakaharvats”, the communication among street artists and graffiti writers in Yerevan cannot be described as strong. Generally, the artists are familiar with each other or each other’s works, and they refer to one another in their narratives not knowing that other

artists were also the informants of the research. Whenever asked about the people “in the field” although sometimes they criticize each other, there is no explicit evidence of competition. Specifically, the attitude towards political works is very interesting, because many artists who themselves never did explicitly political works, describe them (they generally describe the activities of “Hakaharvats”) with respect and acceptance, although distancing themselves from such by commenting “It is just not mine”. Obviously, they see artistic field as a creative one detached from political one paralleled with the criticism of the latter. Despite the relative communication within the field, there are not many examples of co-operation or sharing of experiences. Many of the informants blame “the national mentality” saying that it is hard to connect within Armenia, although they have and seek connections with foreign artists and communities.

The controversy of resisting and reproducing at the same time

The latter example especially refers to artists who have education in visual arts and who practice street art and graffiti as a way to make the city nicer. They also usually use the terms specific to the field, such as “buffing out” (the practice of closing others’ works) or share their knowledge about street art and graffiti history. In such cases the visual aesthetics of the works is dominant over their content or conceptual side. By having certain academic capital accumulated throughout their years of education, they reproduce the dispositions prevalent in artistic field in the field of street art and graffiti. Thus, they create what Bourdieu calls “parody”: “In this case, the newcomers “get beyond” [‘dépassent’] the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is” (1993, 31). This is one of the main complexities of the field which was initially supposed to challenge the traditional field: despite the changes in their practices, e.g. replacing canvas with the wall and traditional

paints with the spray, the artists repeat and reproduce the canons prevalent in the academic field of art. Among them the technical part is prioritized and when asked any question related to their favorite works, or the process of creation, they firstly refer to the technical side of the works, such as used materials, or technical literacy. They usually draw parallels between street art and traditional painting describing the former as something more modern and relevant. For them, the wall or the public place, where they locate their works is regarded more as canvas, where they apply their knowledge and rules accumulated through the academic education. They reproduce the language and approaches in the artistic field by defining whether the work is correctly done or not. In these terms, the case of Kond open-air gallery is especially interesting and ambiguous. The founder refers to public art by emphasizing how important it is for finding the solutions of social issues and improving generally the field of art. From one side opposing the rules of the traditional field of visual arts, he reproduces the vocabulary prevalent in it with the very concept of “gallery” or “museum”, thus- accepting the rules of academic artistic field.

“Their subject is decorating the concrete, ours is the idea.”

However, from the other side of these technically well-thought works, lie the works which represent political protest. As one of the informants noted- they did not seek aesthetics, it was secondary for them. Theirs was the message and its dissemination.

There was a group (identifying themselves as art group) called “Hakaharvats” literally translated as counterblast. They were famous for their shocking and radical street art works and street actions against the former government. Their works included swear words addressed to the President of Republic of Armenia, and more importantly, they were usually placed near the government buildings, usually on the walls or in front of National Assembly building. Whether through posters, stencils or even street activities (in this case, the activities on the street are also defined as street art by them) their works represented explicit political resistance against the political power. It has different members during different periods starting from its formation in

2012. One of the informants was in Hakaharvats and was famous for his works done within its scope. They were actively working before the Velvet Revolution (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019), during which and after which their main activity stopped (although they might work individually, yet not that actively). In this case, the temporal dimension of street art gains specific importance firstly because of the acknowledgment about the works' short life, the acceptance that they will be cleaned within short period of time and secondly, within broader time-specific social-historical context, which makes the works relevant only within certain time and certain historical period. It is similar to what Awad et al. note when referring to the temporality of street resistance graffiti (2014, 164-165). As street art in this case was considered as a tool to express the protest and the resistance against the government, their main activity stopped after the change of the government. Here, it can be seen how important the idea of "In the right place at the right time" is. Not only the place of their works was of big importance, to which I will refer in the next chapter, but also the time. Obviously, writing the same political texts would not make sense in contemporary Yerevan because of the recent changes. This was emphasized also by other artists showing once more how the time can change the relevance of the works in relation to their context. Moreover, it illustrates how the field of street art and graffiti is connected to the broader political and social transformations.

"We were never caught for street art"

During the period of their active engagement in civic activities and political resistance, the street artists were usually under the danger. This danger was not expressed only through the reaction of the police, on contrary- it is mostly represented in an unofficial way, where the artists were followed or provoked by certain people- on the first sight, legally defined as "natural persons" not-related to the government. Accompanied by attacks and dangerous warnings, the followings were the inseparable part of political street art in Yerevan. When answering to the attacks, the artists happened to be detained together with the provokers, yet

the provokers were released sooner. Sometimes, seemingly related to the ownership towards their neighbourhood areas, these cases obviously were related to the political situation and the content of the works. Once, the artists were forced to clean up the work because it contained inappropriate vocabulary, such as swear words. However, they were also multiply detained by or charged by the police. Interestingly, when asking the policemen whether they would have been detained if the content of their works would have been different including simple images such as drawn trees and flowers, the artists had got the negative answer. That way, it becomes obvious that they were never detained purely for the violations of law about public order, it was mostly related to the content of their works. The reaction of the police was not triggered by the practice of street art itself, but by the messages the works had.

The law [lessness]

Despite some examples, usually not all the artists or writers had serious issues with the police or local authorities. Especially, if the artists place their works in the outskirts or peripheries of the city, the local authorities do not even react, which is related to the hierarchy towards the urban space, referred in a more detailed manner in the next chapter. The law in this case does not work to the extent, that some artists are not even well familiar with it. They are not painting street art or writing graffiti anonymously or secretly. They are usually openly working during daytime or any other time they prefer. One of the artists even described how the policeman was standing in front of her watching her drawing on the wall. Also, their friends and family are aware of their activities, moreover the street artists and graffiti writers are rather open to share their works on social media under their own names.

#the role of social media

Although, the artists and writers do not use digital media analytics tools to reach to their audience, they are generally active to share their works on social media, mostly on Facebook

and Instagram. For “Hakaharvats” artists the social media was of special importance, because it was a way to document their works, which, as mentioned, had short lives:

“When doing it, only an archive was enough for us. Even if torn off, the archive was there to see what they tore off, in what way the police reacted, or what did they do to us for that... No-one could manage to see it in real life, but it is important that it is outside.” [political street artist, former member of “Hakaharvats”, no academic education in visual arts]

It can be seen that the idea of the works being in public place- in streets is of big significance despite the acknowledgment that soon they will be cleared. The idea that their works would have short life was not itself very significant for them as long as they had media tools to document, archive and share them with the public.

For other artists, the feature of hashtags on Instagram is of big importance, since they help them to engage not only with the audience, but also with other artists worldwide. Although Facebook is considered secondary and is subordinated by Instagram, some artists have Facebook pages, too, where they share their works, as already mentioned under their own name, without hiding their identity. Also, they might engage in correspondence with people from other countries related to street art, nevertheless, they do not use other platforms for active exchange.

Interestingly, one of the informants, who took part in Yerevan Urban Art Festival 2019, mentioned about the possibility of creation of a media application which would show in the map the graffiti and street art works in Yerevan. Seemingly a nice idea at the first sight, it might, in reality, result to the commodification and institutionalization of certain street artworks and graffiti. This commercialization of some works might lead to the exclusion of the others, which are new, unknown, or not corresponding to the rules of institutionalized, legitimate art. Certain works will become more publicly renown and commodified, thus dictating the rules of the field which was supposed to protest the traditional rules within art field. This argument brings this chapter back to its initial point of the production of legitimacy.

Commercialization of street art and graffiti in Yerevan

However, despite being not entirely institutionalized within the field of art in Yerevan, the works of street art and graffiti are being more and more commercialized and supported by the state. One example of this was “Yerevan Urban Art Fest 2019” which took place for the first time in Armenia, in March of 2019. It was a co-operation between “Goethe” German-teaching center in Yerevan, municipality and the Modern Art museum of Yerevan. There was a contest announced for participation requiring portfolios from potential participants. Also, German artists were invited to collaborate with the artists and teach them. While sponsors supplied the artists with the necessary materials and other finances, the municipality provided them with the place giving official permission to locate the drawings near the Modern Art museum of Yerevan (Fig. 1, 2). Interestingly, although one of the artists who participated in the festival enjoyed the process, she expressed high frustration with the fact that there was strong censorship.

“They didn’t think about technique: who would do well, who- bad. They were thinking “just let it not be an image that everyone would complain about, let it not be an image out of censorship. Stay away from social subjects, from political, too! Just have a nice image, so that people would look and say: “Oh this is so nice!” [Street artist, has education in visual arts]

It can be seen how the field is being created with powerful agents such as the state and local authorities, which can dictate their rules about what is forbidden and what is allowed, thus making the barriers of legitimate and non-legitimate art and institutionalizing street art and graffiti to certain extent. As seen, although not yet represented in museums, the works had been officially supported, encouraged and discussed by local authorities. This contradicts the romanticized view of street artist or graffiti writer, who is supposed to secretly locate his or her works in the forbidden places as the act of protest and resistance. What was initially challenging

the traditional field of visual arts, is being institutionalized worldwide. Yerevan is not an exception.

In this case, the streets and the public places are also a part of the field since they are being socially and visually re-invented by the agents, which are not artists only, as shown. As a result, although the artist is the one to draw and seemingly to decide what to draw, his or her creative freedom is limited through censorship defined by the state. Moreover, through the censorship it also reproduces the moral values prevalent in the society in the larger meaning, such as what is being tabooed, what is not perceived as appropriate, what is indecent, to name a few. The informant claimed that she wanted to draw kissing couple as part of the festival, but because it might have caused additional discussions, she was rejected. As a result, she needed to make a different sketch and show it to the municipality, which was approved, and which was consequently drawn (Fig. 3). At first sight, that work was also something she liked, and it was her idea. However, the options of her choice were already limited by the barriers drawn by local authorities.



Figure 1, 2. "Yerevan Urban Art Fest 2019", Location: City center, near Modern art museum of Yerevan, on residential building walls

Figure 3. “Yerevan Urban Art Fest 2019”,
Location: City center, near Modern art Museum of
Yerevan, on residential building walls. Photograph by
author



The censorship was also strong in another event which was known as “Dalan projects” in 2011, when the municipality organized the decorations of the city in the public places called dalans, which are arched passageways usually leading from the street to the inner yards of the residential buildings (Fig. 4, 5). The students of “State College of Fine Arts named after Panos Terlemezyan” were provided with paints and were paid to decorate the dalans of the city as to give them second life. The project had controversial feedbacks among the public. During the interview, all the informants expressed negative attitude towards this project related to the

technical side of the works, their aesthetical value and even the statement that it was a part of money laundry. Even the informant who took part in the project described it mostly a bad experience and simply a way to gain money. Another example of municipality-authorized street art is the renovation plan of the passageway near Park of Mashtots, which will be described in the next chapter.

Finally, one of the informants is famous for his series of “Big Armenians”- works of street art of big sizes representing famous Armenians, such as writers, national heroes, composers, actors, to name a few. Described by the artist as one of his favorites, these works are usually criticized among other artists either for the technique or for the populist content. The latter is being explained that by the choice of the topic the artist secures and saves himself from judgment and criticism, since he cannot be criticized because of the topic he chose. The potential criticism will be ascribed to the content, which will make the criticizer to look in a bad light.

To summarize, I tried to show in this chapter the intrinsic characteristics of the field of street art and graffiti in Yerevan, which are created through the agency of the artist or graffiti writer, which itself is controlled by the field of power (in the faces of local authorities) either by supporting or suppressing the mentioned practices. Next chapter will contextualize these characteristics of the field within urban context of Yerevan to give a better and relevant understanding of it.



Figure 4, 5: Dalan at city center, Pushkin street (the street of pubs).

"The Beatels" pub in the background. Photographs by author

5 Street Art and Graffiti within Urban Context of Yerevan

This chapter will analyze street art and graffiti in Yerevan as the practices conducted in urban public places. I will argue that the place of the artworks or writings is of big importance which is highly acknowledged by the artists, too. Moreover, I will later develop this argument related to place in its relation to the hierarchy of perceptions, which are reproduced both by local authorities and the artists themselves.

The Place Matters!

While theoretically shown, the empirical data also illustrates that the place is important and is related to the content and the purposes of the works. Here, the place will be viewed in accordance to space which, as already mentioned, is regarded as more unknown and anonymous (Visconti et al., 2010; 512). The significance of place is not certain form of unconscious attitude from artists and graffiti writers, on contrary- they usually acknowledge its significance and mention that it plays an immense role within their practices. Mostly the decision about the place is related to the potential audience or the segment of public towards which it is directed. However, audience here does not necessarily mean the commercial one and is not directed towards the accumulation of economic capital. In some cases, it might signify the will of the artist to gain more symbolic capital, such as fame and recognition as an artist.

Here, the audience might differ related to the works themselves. This is the audience the artist has in mind when creating the work. When writing her favorite work- a line to which the writer connects emotionally, she located it in the underground passage near the library, so that mostly well-read people and people who visit the library will have access to it. Since the work is dear to her heart, she does not want others, who, according to her, would not possibly understand the meaning to see it. However, it is still located in the public place, and consequently everyone has access to it. Also, another artist mentions that she would like to

locate her works near the places where youth gather, because it is a small part of underground subculture in Yerevan for her, hence she wants to place her future works in the areas where young people mostly visit. And another artist, sharing his plans on doing series of mandalas mentions:

“I would do mandalas near Aeon (an anti-cafe), ACCEA (Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art), or near the Modern Art Museum, where there would be the flow of people, and they would understand that it is a mandala, it is not just a random cycle...”

Certainly, these examples show that the place is rather connected to the potential audience the writers and artists have in their minds. In case of resistance street art, as already mentioned in second chapter, aside from public, the audience includes also certain authorities which the works are addressed to. However, it is not related to the audience, only. The content of the works is also of significance. “Hakaharvats” artists mostly located their works in government buildings and even on the building of National Assembly. Their works portrayed or were related mostly to the president or the representatives of oligarchy, hence the place was relevant in terms of content.

However, not only the place as such matters, but also the space where the works are located. Being more anonymous and similar to non-places (Augé, 1995, 78), space can be understood as something related more to the physical characteristics, such as mentioned presence or absence of shadows and the quality of the wall. Usually those artists who do more decorative works emphasize the space over the place. That is to say, when asked for the best place for their works, they name physical characteristics as the features of the wall, the geographical environment, to name a few. Meanwhile, the artists for whom street art and graffiti are mostly means to reach certain purposes, whether political or social; or for whom it is more of emotional self-expression, mostly refer to the place rather than the space. This is also related to their educational background, because those artists who practice mostly decorative street art

generally have education in academic painting, hence for them the technical features, including the surface and the space as “the canvas” is important. For others, who do not consider themselves artists as such, in general, the technical features, even the materials do not play big role. One of the informants once even wrote with a chalk explaining that she needed to do it at the right time, and she did not have other materials in her hands. On contrary, for those who identify themselves as artists, the process is rather well-thought, planned and they come into the field with the proper materials in their hands.

Key Public Places

There were key places in Yerevan that were specifically emphasized by the artists and graffiti writers. Those places can be mostly found on the map pictured in the figure 6. First place of big importance was the Republic Square. On contrary to its political importance within civic activities, many artists mention it as a place where they would never locate their works. Political importance here refers to the political meetings that took place in Republic square, including the most important one in recent Armenian history- The Velvet Revolution (Lanskoy & Suthers, 2019). Interestingly, although one of the artists who did political street art works and actively participated in political activities, mentioned that she would never write there. On contrary to other cases, when street art is regarded as a political activity, here we can see that republic square is separated from that meaning and regarded as a place of national importance. Here it is regarded more as a cultural place, rather than political one. Also, the centralized character of the city, which is also reproduced in the narratives of the artists shows that some key places, which usually represent the center of the city are regarded as inappropriate for street art. Moreover, many artists consider vandalism having works there. Similar is the case with the building of Opera which is also perceived as one of the key places in the city center. This leads to another point that the approach and the attitude towards the city is uneven. There is a precise

differentiation between the city center and other districts, which are sometimes regarded as the same or similar and are described in accordance and in relation to the city center.

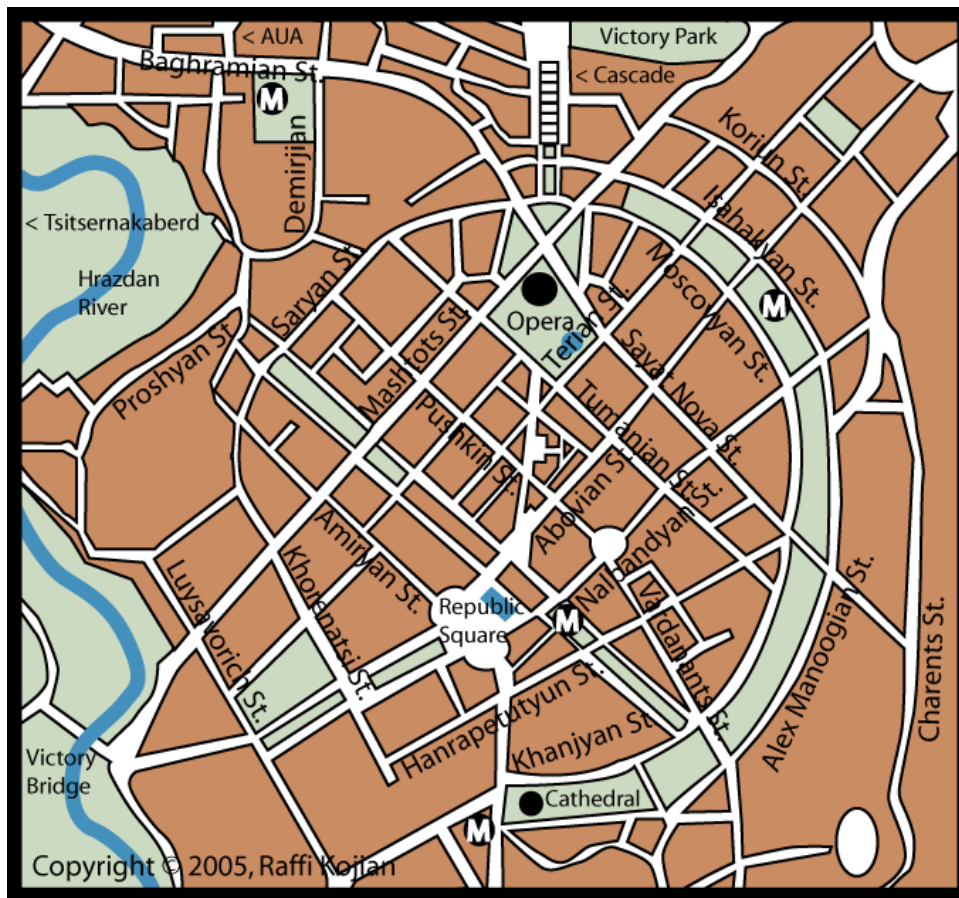


Figure 6. The map of Yerevan city center, retrieved from Wikipedia

Another important place, which is emphasized among the artists is the building of National Gallery. Interestingly, it is located in the republic square, at the very heart of Yerevan. But in this case, it is not related only to the location of the building, but also to the idea that it the building which represents the institutionalized art. While saying that he would never place his works there, one of the informants explained: *“through your art you spoil the art.”* [Stencil street artist, the youngest of informants, has education in is visual arts but not in higher institutions].

The building of National assembly gains special importance within political street art, although it is not ignored by other artists, either. While others mention it as another “forbidden” place, for political street artists it was a very significant “spot” to represent their resistance

against the government. They wanted their protest to be in the right place- right in front of the institution towards which their protest was directed. In this case especially the connection between the place and the works is emphasized mostly, to which I will refer more detailed later.

On contrary to the National Assembly building, the next place- the underground passage near Children's railway does not have any specific characteristics describing the works located there. That is to say, the variety of works of different topics and with different technical solutions can be found there. According to one of the informants that is one of the few places officially provided by the state for street art. Besides, the place is also unofficially renown as such among artists. While the artist of "Hakaharvats", rejects the idea of drawing there specifically because he thinks of it as legal place provided by the state, others find it generally interesting to have works there although it is not one of the most favorable places for that.

Mashtots park's importance is rather ambiguous, because it also has specific meaning within political and social activities. It was mostly renown for #SaveMashtotsPark movement, when the citizens were fighting against the construction plan there, which had the purpose to add trade kiosks. The movement was not only against the commodification but also against the explicit lawlessness within the government and oligarchy. The park remained, as did the underground passage near it, which also, as many underground passages in the city center is a site for graffiti. However, recently, a famous architectural studio published a new municipality-approved concept of that passageway which includes street art on the walls ("The version of Mashtots avenue underground passageway", 2019). Obviously, some artists will be hired in order to draw these drawings although the paintings on the walls are already decided (Famous figures both Armenian and foreign, such as writers, for instance). In this case, it is becoming more and more institutionalized and legalized by putting under question the core/initial idea lying behind street art and certain amount of freedom it requires. As a result, although the works of street artists are not promoted by certain figures in art field and they aren't commercialized

to the fullest yet, they are becoming commodified and approved by certain authorities, which initially street art, as a revolutionary and protesting form of art, didn't aim to. Although the museumification of street art is not relatable in the case of Yerevan, the commercialization of artists' work takes place to certain extent. Moreover, in some cases, such as the case with underground passage, it leads to the commodification of street art (Ganahl, 2001).

The last key place found during fieldwork was Pushkin street, which is also in the city center being famous as a "pubs' street". The most famous pubs are located there, and interestingly many artists, in order to describe the location of their works, describe them in accordance to the pubs in Pushkin street. This might be related to another important point mentioned by one of the informants, that the artist community within Yerevan is very small, as she said:

"The same community goes to political actions together, goes to pubs to drink together, goes to parties together..." [graffiti writer; no education in visual arts].

It can be seen that the places where the artists spend their free time are rather similar, which shows that it is the intersection of different communities, which according to the same artist "is not marginal".

The Perception of the Concept of "Architecture" and the "Forbidden" Places

Interestingly, the perceptions about the architecture are always positive among artists. They do not see it as simply a component and the "carcass" of the city, rather they talk about it as something beautiful, valuable and something they don't want to "spoil" with their works. They especially emphasize facades, which most of them are highly cautious of. Some even mention facades as places, where they would never locate their works. In this context, certain parts of the city or certain buildings are more privileged than others, since the latter do not possess the characteristics of "architecture", hence they are not regarded as valuable or

significant. Another question is how they define architecture which is different and varies from one informant to another. While for one of them it is mainly newly-built buildings, for others these are mostly old historical buildings (though not demolished or deconstructed). As noted, this is also related to the places where they would never draw. For instance, the artist who emphasized the newly-built buildings as having architecture, never draws in the city center, which is being rather gentrified throughout recent years and where, consequently, the mentioned new buildings are located. As a result, the artist locates most of his works in other districts, which, for him do not differ from one another in terms of their values within the city. He describes outskirts as places, which do not have architecture. As a result, when working there, he does not ask permission from official authorities, while when working in the city center- he does. Moreover, he considers himself to “save” the abandoned area, which is also prevalent in other artists’ narratives.

Saving for and from Gentrification

The mentioned “saving” is rather related to the concepts of both beautification and gentrification. Firstly, many artists, usually those who have education in academic visual arts, see their works as something making the place visually nicer. They are very cautious of the changes they make in the urban environment, hence they usually want to make positive changes by working in the abandoned places, among which- abandoned old factory, old almost demolished walls, to name a few. One of the artists is famous for founding “Kond” gallery (figures 7, 8), which is an open-air museum of street art. It is named after analogous district located in the very heart of Yerevan, although it is not considered as part of downtown, because it is mainly seen as “slums” in the city center. It is renowned as one of the oldest districts in Yerevan (Vermishyan et. Al; 108). By locating his works there, the artist seems to have mainly the purpose of giving second life to that part of the city, which has “*beautiful aura and atmosphere*” according to him. However, the artist claims that the district is not regarded as

such and people have stereotypical negative views about it. Hence, his main purpose is not only to visually change the area, but also to deconstruct the general view about the district, which he believes is prevalent among Yerevan inhabitants. By this, not only he aims to beautify the area, but also to save the district with unknown fate from potential gentrification, which many artists are against. Moreover, many of them see their works as something which can give second life to the area and, consequently, save it from potential gentrification.



Figure 7. Kond gallery. Photograph by author



Figure 8. Kond gallery. Photograph retrieved from Instagram account.

Many districts - one city center

The last point is also closely related to decentralization of the city. Many informants see the city as very centered and point at it as one of the main issues in the city. Although sometimes they reproduce the hierarchical attitude towards places and districts in their narratives, mostly they are against it. Other districts and outskirts are usually seen as similar to each other in accordance to the city center. By trying to “save” some districts the artists sometimes try to shift the attention of the public to those districts.

“Because there is such a district, there are such people, they live here, there should be attention towards them, because in our city the attention is usually focused on city center or other special districts, and I don’t know why, but Kond itself is not given much attention.”
[street artist, the founder of “Kond” open-air gallery, has education in visual arts].

However, the hierarchical and uneven attitude towards different parts of the city is also expressed through the speed of clearing the works. While in city center the cleaning process might take hours, in other districts it might take days. Moreover, if not in the city center, the works might not even be cleaned by official authorities. As a result, the same artist who asks permission to draw in the walls of the city center, does not go to municipality for drawing in the outskirts knowing that it will not arise any legal problems for him. On contrary, as mentioned, he considers himself saving and beautifying the area which lost the attention from the side of local authorities. The artist does not see any moral right from them to negatively react on his works in these places. And the local authorities themselves do not react towards the works located in the outskirts or peripheries of the city. Hence this attitude is manifested not only from the side of the artists and graffiti writers, but also from the side of local authorities by being stricter concerning the regulations on city center than on the peripheries.

To sum up, this chapter tried to show the importance of place, which can also be hierarchized both within local authorities and artists. In order to illustrate it, the chapter included the map of Yerevan city center, where most of the works are placed and the description of key places which are of specific importance in this context.

6 The “Dialogue” between the Artist and the City

This chapter, as the final one, has two purposes: firstly, to connect together what this research referred to, that is - the field of street art and graffiti within urban context of Yerevan, and secondly, to illustrate the dialogue that happens within the city and street artists or graffiti writers through the painted walls. My main argument unfolds around the idea, that the process of creation is rather emotional, and presumes certain emotional connection between the artist or writer and the city. It is not simply a physical or technical process of transforming the surroundings devoid of any attachments or dispositions related to the city. On contrary, it is the complexity of the feelings that the artists have towards the city that leads them to this practice. Whether beautifying or gifting poetic lines to the city, street artist or the graffiti writer has his or her own story with the city. In order to show that, I will give examples of two cases of poetic writing, or what is called in respective scholarship- *poetic assault* (Visconti et al; 2010; 513-514).

The first writer aside from works which have literary and poetic content, used to do also works more related to social and political issues. Nevertheless, her stories evolve around her love towards the city, hence the subchapter is called “On loving [the city]”. She does not have any academic education in visual arts, moreover she puts it this way: “*I am bad at whatever is related to manual job, but what is related to the content, I am good at*”. She used to write short stories and sometimes gift its excerpts to the city. The second informant is also a young girl, who practiced mostly poetic writing not only in Armenia, but also abroad. Her education is in academic painting, which she started in Armenia, and later continued in France. However, within the scope of this research, the analysis will focus on her stories and works related to Yerevan.

On loving [the city] – Love the city, and it will love you back

When asked why she considered it bad that she places all her works in Yerevan, the graffiti writer answered: “I am being sometimes blamed because I privilege Yerevan”. Saying that she lived in Yerevan all of her life, she defines it as her home. However, she does not refer to home as the physical entity which has only spatial dimension and geographic location. One of her works, which was immensely disseminated through social media several years ago, stated: “Home is not a building, home is a person” (fig. 9). And because she thinks of it as something very personal, she felt bad when the writing was “buffed out”. Although, as mentioned, it is a common practice within the field and it is rather expected from the artists and writers, sometimes it might disappoint related to certain works, which are beloved. While many of her works might have been buffed out, she specifically mentioned this one. The writer separated this work from others which represented more political and social issues considering them as public, and this one- more personal. And accordingly, she located the works representing political resistance in more crowded and public places rather than the works she found herself attached personally. Also, she could emphasize that the personal works belong to her, while she could stay silent when referring to political works, because she did not have the similar feeling of ownership about those. However, the division between personal and public does not exclude her emotional connection to political works, either.

Interestingly, although sometimes proudly announcing about her works, other times the graffiti writer might keep it in secret. This can be described as certain type of “artistic mystery”, keeping of which is accompanied with the feeling of joy when her friends, without knowing the author of the works, would talk with her about those works or share them on social media. During the days of revolution ([link](#)), she wrote with the chalk on one of the walls in the city center: “7 at Republic square”, which was a rather disseminated expression during that period. After a couple of days, one of her photographer friends took a photo of that writing (fig. 10) and posted it on social media without knowing that it was her who wrote it. Not announcing

about the authorship of certain works, or about her co-operation with another artist for an extended period of time, she keeps the artistic mystery and enjoys the anonymity. The anonymity is what allows her to keep the close emotional connection with the city sharing the secret of her authorship with the city walls.

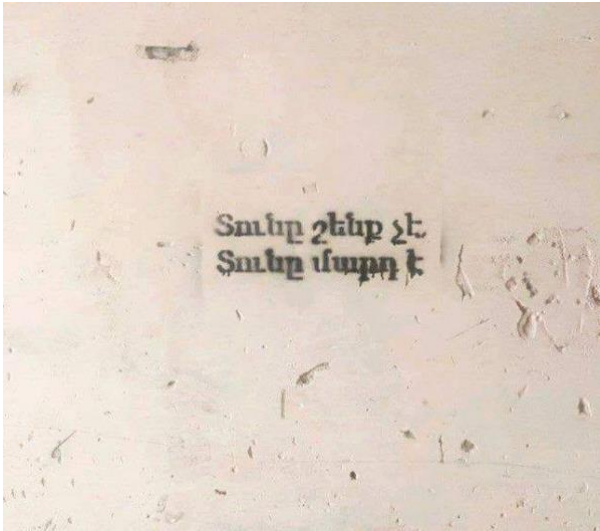


Figure 9. “Home is not a building, home is a person”. Location: City center, the underground passage leading to Avetik Isahakyan Central Library.

Photograph provided by informant.



Figure 10. “7 at Republic Square”. Location: City center, Amiryan street.

Photograph provided by informant

This is also related to the conscious writings which are not easy to decode, according to her. In other words, sometimes she is sure that the works which she locates on the city walls would not be completely understandable for others. Again, it is something special shared

between the city walls and herself. An example of this was her writing of an Armenian idiom «աչքներս լույս» near the maternity hospital during the days of civic activities related to the raise of electric taxes. The idiom includes the word “light” in it, and is literally translated as “the light in our eyes”, which people use whenever receiving good news. The maternity hospital walls were the most suitable for them (her and the artist who she co-operated with) to locate the idiom knowing that no-one would understand its political subtext but them and the walls. Another special characteristic of this work, which also relates to other works, too, is its locality. As she puts it: “I think what you can read on Yerevan’s walls, is typical Yerevanian”. Within scholarship, Chmielewska uses the term “locality”, which identifies a close reading of “specific surface manifestations positioned within the entirety of the urban visual sphere as well as inquiring into their immediate linguistic and symbolic fields set within the locally bounded system of references and the surrounding discourse” (2007, 150). It is of importance here, because it allows to see the work not only with its urban location, but also its specificities related to its language and symbolic.

It is this specific locality accepted and reproduced by the artists and writers which makes the works so “Yerevanian”. This locality is what makes the works specific and unique within their context and which strengthens the emotional connection between the artist or writer and the city. It presumes not only the love the writer has for the city, but also the love she expects from the city. When telling another story of many, the writer said: “Wow! Damn it! How much Yerevan loves me!”

Playing with contrasts

Another artist, on contrary to the previous one has never done any works of street art related to explicit political announcements. Although referring to political works- in general with acceptance, she mentioned that it would have been artificial towards herself to do such on her

own, because it is not her type of street art at all. Despite this claim and the fact that she never did explicit resistance graffiti she, indeed, has a work which might be a poetic expression of political issue. She told me that years ago when passing near Koghbatsi street, she noticed new high-rise buildings and between them an old low-rise building. This urban landscape inspired her to paint a work, which she calls “To drown in you” («Խեղդվել քո մեջ») – an abstract picture of two people visually expressing what she wanted to say about the building (fig. 11). The old surface is noticeable even from the photo. While not explicitly political at first sight, the work emphasizes her protest against neighborhood gentrification and seems to be a cry for help on behalf of the old building, which cannot ask for help on its own. This will to talk for the building to save it witnesses not only her love for the city, but also her protest against neighborhood improvement politics expressed through art.

With her education in visual arts, her works are usually paintings rather than texts using mostly ordinary paints instead of spray and city surfaces as the canvas. Not only the space in relation to its surface and area is of importance for her, but also the place within the city. When referring to her works, she mostly emphasizes her love for contrasts and how she likes to place her works in contradictory places. One of her works, related to dreams- “Le rêve de la petite fille” translated from French as “The little girl’s dream” is located on the wall of residential building, near the trash bins. When looking separately the work has rather poetic context and it might not presume the place, which it contradicts to (fig. 12, 13).



Figure 11. “To drown in you”. Location: Koghbatsi street.

Photograph provided by informant



Figure 22, 13. “The little girl’s dream”, city center, Amiryan street.

Photographs by author

Since usually she places her works in the city center, another one is at the same street, but on the different part. She used the gas insulated power generator to place one of her works from the series of “Buda” paintings symbolizing peace within the crowdedness of downtown (fig. 14). On the other side of the power generator she wrote a poetic line «Կապույտ անսահմանությունից քեզ խորը շունչ բերեմ» translated as “Bringing you deep breathe from the blue infinity” (fig. 15). Again, in this case the decision was not made according to convenience or place availability, rather it was a determined decision to place the harmonic in a place considered the least harmonic and the calm and dreamy poetry within the constant rush of the street.



Figure 14. Buda. Location: city center, Amiryan street. Photograph by author



Figure 15. Bringing you deep breathe from the blue infinity”. Location: City center, Amiryan street.

Photograph by author

To sum up, as it can be seen, the works of street art and graffiti not only possess certain characteristics indicative for their field, which is itself determined by urban context, but also that they have the characteristic which can be ascribed to what has been called locality. The Yerevanian character of the works whether coming from Armenian idioms, or using specific linguistic tricks is strongly related to the emotional connection and familiarity with the city. In order to create such works in such places where they are located, one needs to possess certain knowledge about the area and certain socio-cultural background. However, the knowledge and familiarity are not self-sufficient in this case- the emotional connection and love for the city have their specific place accompanied with the respective expectation of love from the city, too.

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7 Conclusion

The research conducted in Yerevan tried to show the basic patterns of street art and graffiti within Armenian capital. Firstly, while looking at it from the literature related to public space, I tried to theoretically frame how street artists' and graffiti writers' agency can transform the places and spaces within urban context. Later, I look at the field of street art and graffiti as the field of cultural production from Bourdieusian perspective by also adding scholarship related to certain specificities of this certain field, such as- commodification, political resistance, to name a few. Further, through the applied theoretical framework and used literature, I tried to connect the theory with the analysis of my research. By looking at public space as a changeable and not a given site, I argued that the artists and writers possess certain agency which allows them to transform the public spaces both physically and socially.

However, this agency should not be looked independent from other factors influencing it. Looking at the field of street art and graffiti as a field of cultural production enables to see this agency within the context of “position takings” and within dominated position in the field of power. The latter allowed to see both theoretically and empirically how this field is affected and sometimes determined by another field, which included the state and local authorities. Through either commercialization and institutionalization or through explicit suppression the local authorities try to either “insider” the field or have power over it. Through the various levers, such as the authorization of censoring or the monopoly of production of legitimate forms of art and its rules, the local authorities maintain their control and power over this specific artistic field. Not always accepting or entirely realizing street artists and graffiti writers tend to reproduce these discourses and dispositions both within specificities of the field (such as when defining vandalism, or adopting dominant rules in the field of academic traditional art to street art), and related to the placement of the works.

Although the placement of the works is strongly acknowledged by the artists, their choices of locations mostly maintain and reproduce the already existing centralization of the city. Not only the local authorities prioritize city center over its peripheries, but also the artists and writers attach more importance to it by locating their works there and consequently reproducing the existing hierarchy of the urban places. Nonetheless, these placements can be explained also through the emotional connection between the artists or writers and the city, which enables the specific dialogue between them. By arguing on the presence of such emotional connection which is accompanied with relevant knowledge about the city, I connect this claim back to the initial argument related to the transformation of the public spaces through the agency of the artist or writer. Since the works of street art and graffiti can be considered to be very local, or what can be called “Yerevanian”, the artists and writers gain their agency back by crashing the city walls with what is relevant, dear or important to them. This emotional connection and possession of certain knowledge is what returns artists to the initial point of having the agency. Nevertheless, through other arguments I tried to escape the naïve positionality of ascribing full agency to the artists or viewing the field of street art and graffiti separated from other broader social phenomena.

By drawing upon the differences between the works existing in Yerevan and showing their variety, I tried to illustrate the specific characteristics which are prevalent within this field, such as the definitions of their practices, the unwritten rules dominant there, the specificities of their small networks and connections, the purposes of their works, the state’s positionality to these works, to name but a few. But what unites all these works is what triggered and motivated me to conduct this research in the first place- the love and attachment to their beloved city of contradictions.

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