# Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

**Volume 16, 2024**

Edited by Vítor Moura and Christopher Earley

# The Impact of Aesthetics on the Reception of Art in Public Spaces: The Undesirable Graffiti

Voica Pușcașiu[1]

Babeș-Bolyai University

ABSTRACT. This study examines the varied forms of art in public spaces, from commissioned monuments to illegal Graffiti and Street Art, to explore how aesthetics shape public reactions. By focusing on two case studies, in Athens and Vienna, it highlights artworks that incorporate Graffiti-inspired strategies and aesthetics, enhancing their conceptual depth but often impacting their public reception negatively. This analysis suggests that aesthetics may play a larger role in public acceptance than a work's intended message. Ultimately, the findings prompt further questions: if Graffiti expresses a claim for the 'right to the city', who should these works serve? Does the public need to appreciate public art, or is a certain level of disruption beneficial? These considerations open a larger discussion on the role of public art and its place within the social fabric.

## 1. Introduction

For the purpose of this study, public space refers to areas that are open and freely accessible to the public at all times, without barriers or restrictions (Dickenson, 2021, p. 5), therefore only art that occupies these spaces is considered. Within this context, public art can be divided into unsanctioned and commissioned works, though despite their seemingly irreconcilable differences, they actually

---

[1] E-mail: voica.puscasiu@ubbcluj.ro

cover a spectrum that includes everything from Graffiti and Street Art to decorative public sculptures, monuments, and memorials. The most compelling case studies, as we will explore, arise when these media and strategies intersect, challenging traditional boundaries and expanding our understanding of public art's role and reception. Reception is measured via research done in media, through social media comments and channels, as well as in academic papers, and semi-structured interviews.

## 2. More Than a Taxonomical Difference

Despite a general consensus among scholars studying unsanctioned art (Wacławek, 2011), the terms Graffiti and Street Art are still often used interchangeably, which is factually misleading. What is more, by making this distinction, light can also be shed on the reception of the works. Graffiti is quick and gritty as befits illicit activities, though it is clear that speed alone does not define it. The most common distinction comes from the fact that Graffiti generally centers on letter forms, while Street Art often employs logos (Wacławek, 2011, p. 32) and imagery. While this is undeniably a good starting point, it still proves insufficient since there have been very early Graffiti works that incorporated characters from popular culture (Thompson, 2009, p. 41). Simultaneously, there is plenty of Street Art solely consisting of lettering, including one of the case studies presented here. This means further important distinctions must also be made, such as the subject of the works, their aesthetics, and last but not least, the audience towards which they are directed.

This being said, Graffiti's subject is almost exclusively the author's nickname or a dedication (Thompson, 2009, p. 41). In contrast, Street Art addresses a broader array of themes and messages. This became one of the golden rules when establishing if something belongs to Graffiti or Street Art, but from here on out, distinctions can be further developed, especially when considering their audiences. While Graffiti is largely unreadable for people outside its artistic community and its aesthetics and value are judged solely by peer members, Street Art is distinctly directed at everyone it happens to come into contact with. Its aesthetic is also much more relatable and open to judgment and analysis, while its message is usually clear, even if it is just funny or whimsical. Even though their motivations both stem from the same desire to reclaim public space,

and to actively participate in its creation, they pursue this goal differently. Graffiti's exclusivist attitude and closed aesthetics render it hostile in front of the audiences, while Street Art courts a more general acceptance.

In his works on the 'right to the city', Henri Lefebvre is adamant in the fact that this right should act towards the wishes and the well-being of the citizens who spend their entire time in the city, or as he puts it the "working class" (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 154). This assertion could extend to the Graffiti-writing youth and is also why Graffiti can be considered a prime representation of the demand to be taken into consideration. It is the tool handled by a part of society that was, in actuality, cast aside by protesters in general. However, while Street Art makes friends more easily by being digestible and even funny, Graffiti tends to especially alienate the middle class by seeming foreign and even frightening.

Graffiti as a word originates from the Greek word *graphien* meaning "to write" and afterwards it was used in Italian as *graffito*, meaning "to scratch", mostly referring to words (DeNotto, 2014, p. 208) and it was in this sense picked up in the English language where it has been in use since the 19th century. There is a permanent confusion between 'Graffiti' as an art form with very specific roots and characteristics, and 'graffiti' as the writings on walls. The latter, also called "latrinalia" (Dundes, 1966; Trahan, 2011) or "bathroom graffiti" (Molloy, 2013) as it was named in the 19th century, is an omnipresent practice at least from the Roman Empire onward. Contemporary Graffiti was named after it, which points to just how misunderstood the practice still remains – unworthy of even a proper taxonomical distinction, although some scholars might increasingly argue in favor of calling it Graffiti Art. Nevertheless, even nowadays, both variations are considered 'dirty words' (Jechow, 2015) with undesirable connotations.

In accordance with the etymology of the word, even the practitioners of Graffiti are most often referred to as 'writers' and their practice is actually just that, an often highly stylized form of writing their nicknames, as if the entire work consisted actually of only the artist's signature. This gesture of proclaiming 'I was here', however, does not seem to deem them fit for the label of artists, further underscoring how low on the artistic hierarchy these practices are. Contemporary Graffiti art long ago left the streets of Philadelphia (Wacławek, 2011, p. 10), New York, and the U.S.A. altogether, as did the word which perpetuated the confusion of the term. More often than not, it is

used to define the writing of political statements that are intentionally provocative (Jaffe, Rhiney & Francis, 2012, p. 2). It is perceived as an anti-institutional and radical way of communicating political ideals and reclaiming the city (Taş & Taş, 2014, pp. 328-320), but with little artistic intention or merit, if any.

Ever since its appearance, Graffiti has been seen as a threat, both by the authorities and by the outsiders of the culture. For the commuters using the trains, it spoke of violence, of a city no longer under control, and Graffiti was associated with poverty and urban decay but was also thought of as gateway crime (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Neighborhoods in which it flourished became even more undesirable since they showcased the authorities' lack of interest or power in the area. Even the fact that spray paint cans were sometimes stolen by kids and teens who couldn't afford to buy them created a connection between this culture and shoplifting (Rahn, 2002, p. 9). These may seem like prejudices, and for the most part, they were, but they still prove very hard to combat, and the reason for that may just lie in the intrinsic characteristics of Graffiti, namely its closed-off aesthetics.

Most people encounter Graffiti without fully understanding it, and it is often not meant to be understood. It thus becomes increasingly hard to defend or even like something that is intended to keep you out instead of drawing you in. In a sense, Graffiti parallels the situation of postmodern art, which suffers from perceived elitism. Graffiti works are for the educated few, but educated not in the sense of being knowledgeable and sensible to contemporary art, but instead versed in the meanings and readings of Graffiti. For commuters, the tags on the trains created discomfort, so when these meaningless-to-them scrawls were washed away by the authorities, they applauded the effort. The people were even happy with trains running slower (Masilamani, 2008, p. 9) and with large amounts of taxpayers' money being spent on the clean-up, as long as they did not have to deal with the Graffiti anymore. This widespread lack of empathy for graffiti writers remains, as the art form too remains largely cryptic and hence more likely to be dismissed as vandalism.

Nowadays, Graffiti, though still very much a crime, is more frequently being viewed as part of a widespread youth culture whose members thrive on the low-level risk it provides while making them feel creative at the same time. The culture's members are not limited to any social class or education level, and they don't consider their behaviour to be in any way anti-social (Light,

Griffiths & Lincoln, 2012, p. 351) or linked to gang activity, for that matter. Although, in time, a certain liberalization has been noticed, there is still a long way to go before the decriminalization of Graffiti can be fully reached, and the situation is very different across geographical and cultural areas. Rather, a more common strategy is to co-opt the Graffiti aesthetics and push it towards commodification, by making their signatures more readable (Lombard, 2013, p. 98). Making their radical aesthetic milder ensures the gesture's survival on one hand, and on the other hand, 'clean' Graffiti murals are cited as responsible for discouraging Graffiti tagging (Lombard, 2013, p. 99) by occupying an otherwise blank wall.

## 3. Two Case Studies

The crossovers that do exist between Graffiti and Street Art can be grouped into four main categories: the aforementioned inclusion of figures in tags, polished graffiti murals often created on commission, Street Art that adopts the visual form of Graffiti, and Graffiti art that acts as a form of creative protest against the *status quo* in public art. These intersections show how Graffiti and Street Art can sometimes blur aesthetic and conceptual boundaries. The following case studies have been chosen because they belong to the latter two categories, offering prime opportunities to examine their strategies and aftermaths. Both examples are complex and reflect highly specific situations, which will not be fully described here since this study is limited to analyzing the impact that Graffiti aesthetics has had on their public perception.

### 3.1. Kessariani 22

The area known as Kessariani, now part of the greater metropolitan area of Athens, Greece, was founded in 1922 as a refugee camp, primarily for those displaced from Smyrna. As far as settlements go, this setup is already intriguing – a home for the disenfranchised and the conditioned. The municipality's population subsequently became massively involved in the National Resistance movements and the Civil War, all of which left significant marks on the place's history and culture. Marking 100 years since its foundation, the project *Kessariani 22: Community Mural: Oral,*

*Archival and Spatial (Hi)stories* aims to bring this multi-layered history closer to younger generations by employing archival investigation, informal history lessons, and art and architecture workshops. The events were scheduled as part of the *Centenary of the Asia Minor Catastrophe* Continuous Open Conference, organized by the Municipality of Kessariani from September to December 2022 (Kessariani 22, 2024).

The project, conceived by curators and researchers Konstantinos Avramidis and Constantinos Diamantis, involved local high school students painting a mural under the guidance of Graffiti artist R-EAST, with full funding and support from Greece's Ministry of Culture (Kessariani 22, 2024). While the scope of this paper does not allow a deep dive into the methodological details and implications of the project, it is clear that the result extends far beyond a typical Street Art initiative, making future publications on the subject highly anticipated.

A key part of the project involved integrating students into the research process: they sifted through archival records, learned personal stories, and selected representative words and phrases to incorporate into the mural. The wall, cleaned and painted white specifically for this initiative by the city hall, was loosely divided into chronological sections, with each section marked, in large lettering, by prominent dates from 1922 to 2022, overlapped with corresponding words for each era (Avramidis & Diamantis, 2024). The 1940s particularly shaped the town's identity with two bloody events. On May 1$^{st}$, 1944, 200 communists were executed in retaliation by the Nazis at the Kessariani rifle range, and on June 17$^{th}$ of the same year, 10 members of the United Panhellenic Organization of Youth who had been hiding in the Monastery of Kessariani were discovered and killed.

The mural transformed letters of the Greek alphabet into stylized versions of themselves, reminiscent of Graffiti block style (Thompson, 2009, p. 42) (Fig. 1), maintaining legibility at first, but becoming harder to read as quotes overlapped. This public creation process drew the attention of passersby, whose mixed reactions were observed. Although many appreciated the project's significance, some, especially older viewers, commented in the documentary that it seemed "fun but messy" and they were concerned that people would no longer be able to tell what it was by the end (Avramidis & Diamantis, 2024). The mural was, in fact, quite elegant since, unlike 'organic' Graffiti walls, the color scheme of red, white, black, and grey was consistent throughout its whole

area, as was the lettering style. And yet, the general consensus of those not involved in the project was that they liked it less and less as it progressed and believed that the final overall aesthetic of the piece just invited more Graffiti.
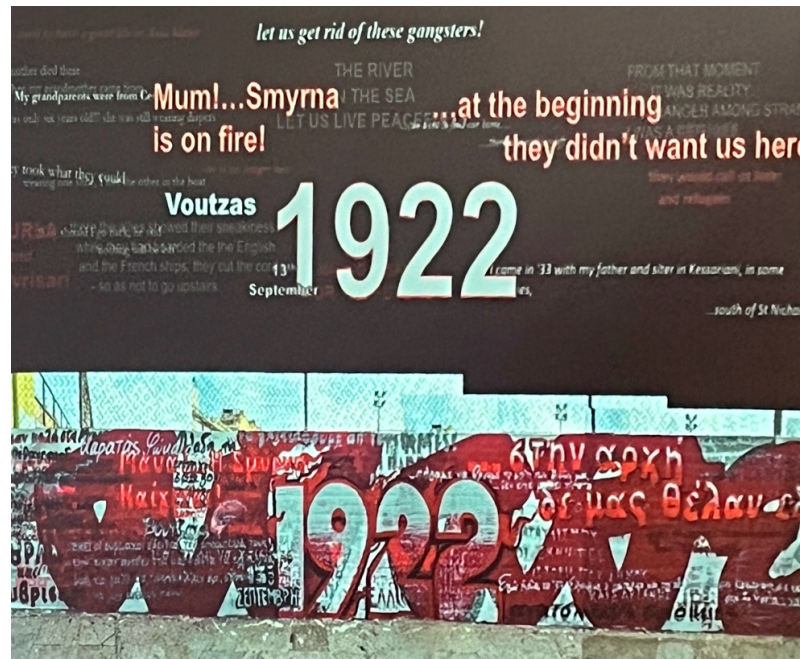


Fig. 1. *Kessariani 22: Community Mural* (detail with English translation), Konstantinos Avramidis and Constantinos Diamantis (curators), spray-paint, Kessariani, Greece, 2022.

The choice of Graffiti as a medium was deliberate, alluding to the quick, clandestine messages of refugees and those in hiding, with scrawled words intended for whoever might read them. It represented a resilient do-it-yourself attitude, reflecting the determination to still be seen despite adverse conditions (Avramidis & Diamantis, 2024), thus linking the refugees and fugitives to the marginalized youth of 1970s America. Although unmentioned by the curators, a deeper connection can be drawn: one of the earliest publications on Graffiti and tagging highlighted the fact that the most prolific tagger at the time was a Greek teen (Anon., 1971, p. 37). This reinforces

Graffiti's ties not only to immigrant communities in general but specifically to the Greek diaspora, which may also explain the candid embrace of the artistic taxonomy.

### *3.2. Statue of Karl Lueger*

Karl Lueger (1844-1910) served as Mayor of Vienna from 1897 until his death, during one of the most transformative periods in the modern city's history. His policies undeniably left a significant mark on Vienna's urban geography, and for that, he is remembered throughout the city in numerous memorials. He was also regarded by Hitler as one of the "greatest German mayors of all time" (Hoare, 2021) and a teacher in the ways and beliefs of political Antisemitism (Kolirin & Halasz, 2023), and for that, his legacy is deeply contested. Lueger was renowned and beloved during his lifetime, yet his fame reached colossal proportions following his passing, whichis reflected in the size and placement of the monument discussed here. Unveiled in 1926, following the earlier models of sculptor Josef Müllner, it was the very first monument dedicated to a modern politician on the Ringstrasse. It is also the largest personal monument erected in post-monarchic Vienna, and at 4 meters tall it is one of the largest monuments to a city leader anywhere in the world (Nierhaus, 2022).

Following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, a wave of protests against questionable symbolic figures rippled all throughout the world. In 2020, the word "*Schande*" (German for "shame") was repeatedly spray-painted in capital letters around the monument's large octagonal plinth. Primarily in red, the inscription echoed the memorable 'walk of atonement' scene in *Game of Thrones* (2015), where Cersei's character is being followed by a bell-ringing observer chanting "Shame!". Soon after the initial intervention, the Vienna authorities promptly washed off the Graffiti (Hoare, 2021), except they appeared again and again in the same manner. Sometimes, golden letters were even applied in relief, vertically, on the center of the pedestal in addition to the red spray-painted ones.

As the city hall remained intent on eliminating the traces of the protest, artistic and civic groups organized a "vigil of shame" surrounding the monument and keeping watch against the cleaners (Hoare, 2021; Kolirin & Halasz, 2023). This action was concerned with keeping the protest

visible for as long as possible: "We stand here in order to stand guard over the graffiti that brands the monument to Lueger as what it is: a disgrace," the artist Eduard Freudmann said in their manifesto (Hoare, 2021). But the vigil, stalling for time against the removal of the Graffiti, also forced the authorities to open up a public debate as to the future fate of this, and possibly other contested monuments. The solution reached after the roundtable discussions was one proposed all the way back in 2009 by Klemens Wihlidal, then a student at Vienna's University of Applied Arts. Tilting the statue, pedestal and all by 3.5 degrees to the right is a minimal yet symbolically charged gesture (Kolirin & Halasz, 2023). It suggests the fragility of the great-man myth and serves as a reminder that both regimes and monuments can be toppled. Yet it is obvious that this creative act, chosen through a competitive process, contrasts with the raw energy of the 'trashy' Graffiti. Even though they both arise from the same anger and frustration, one is infinitely more demure than the other. The *Schande* signs became synonymous with the monument, becoming viral in their efficiency to mark the discontent, and yet they are set to be removed during the tilting process. Officials have announced they will refrain from cleaning future Graffiti if it reappears but are intent on starting the project with a clean slate (Marschnig, 2024). This may reflect their hope that the aesthetic, artistic intervention will suffice, and the need to further 'deface' the monument with spray paint will diminish.

Of course, not all are satisfied with the force, or lack thereof, of Klemens Wihlidal's project, which is scheduled to be implemented in late 2024 or early 2025 (Kolirin & Halasz, 2023). It represents a clear aestheticization of the otherwise raw feelings of justified anger towards Lueger's legacy. While authorities are wary of "cancel culture" and reluctant to erase his legacy outright (Hoare, 2021), they don't seem to have a problem with erasing Graffiti. Obviously, removal is an undesirable, and uncreative solution, a sweeping-under-the-rug of sorts, which solves little in terms of dealing with contested histories, but it is notable how even in protests the aesthetic dimensions matter in what is considered acceptable or desirable, and Graffiti just continues to fall short.

## 4. Questions Instead of Conclusions

While it is abundantly clear that aesthetics does play a role and affects reception, perhaps more so than the works' message, some questions still arise: Is aesthetics enough to increase the public's satisfaction? And is the public's satisfaction even truly the point? From an economic standpoint, public art is considered "mixed public good and bad", meaning that from different perspectives some will enjoy it, and some will despise it no matter what it consists of (Cordes & Goldfarb, 2007, p. 160). Following a capitalist logic, it would seem obvious that the negative reception needs to be decreased, yet where does that leave the artist's agency when dealing with art in public spaces? Should artistic license be sacrificed for the preferences of the public? Furthermore, does following the principles of asserting the right to the city imply that the public should like the art that is created through it? Or should an effort be made to advance more radical, grittier forms of public art in order to preserve a rawness that arguably is characteristic of the urban spirit? And finally, what is the price we have to pay for the aestheticization of public art? Does it inevitably lead to dreaded gentrification, or can the first exist without the latter?

## References

Anon. (1971), '"TAKI 183" Spawns Pen Pals,' *The New York Times*, p. 37, accessed October 18, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/21/archives/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals.html.

Avramidis, Konstantinos and Constantinos Diamantis (2024), 'Shared and Invented Urban (Hi)Stories: Reflecting on the Creation of a Participatory Community Mural in Athens,' *6th International Art and the City Conference*, Göttingen, June 3-5.

Cordes, Joseph J. and Goldfarb, Robert S. (2007), 'Decreasing the "Bad" for Mixed Public Goods and Bads: The Case of Public Sculpture,' *Eastern Economic Journal*, vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 159-176.

DeNotto, Michael (2014), 'Street Art and Graffiti: Resources for Online Study,' *College and Research Libraries News*, vol. 75, No. 4, pp. 208-211.

Dickenson, Christopher P. (2021), *Public Statues across Time and Cultures*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Dundes, Alan (1966), 'Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia,' *Kroeber Anthropological Society Paper*, vol. 34, pp. 91-105.

Game of Thrones (2015), 'Mother's Mercy,' Created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. Season 5, Episode 10. HBO. First aired on June 14, 2015.

Hoare, Liam (2021), 'Disgraced: Whither Vienna's Monument to Karl Lueger?,' accessed October 18, 2024, https://k-larevue.com/en/disgraced-whither-viennas-monument-to-karl-lueger/.

Jaffe, Rivke, Kevon Rhiney, and Cavell Francis (2012), ',,Throw Word": Graffiti, Space and Power in Kingston, Jamaica,' *Carribean Quarterly*, vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 1-20.

Jechow, Elyssa (2015), 'Public Art, Public Statements: An Opinion on Graffiti,' accessed October 18, 2024, http://musedialogue.org/articles-by-genre/visual-arts/street-art/public-art-public-statements-an-opinion-on-graffiti/.

Kelling, George L. and James Q. Wilson (1982), 'Broken Windows. The Police and Neighborhood Safety,' *The Atlantic*, accessed October 18, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/.

Kessariani 22 (2024), 'Kessariani 22,' *Facebook*, accessed October 18, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/Kessariani22.

Kolirin, Lianne and Stephanie Halasz (2023), 'Vienna Finds Off-kilter Solution to Controversy Over Statue of Antisemitic Mayor,' *CNN*, accessed October 18, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/austrian-antisemite-statue-scli-intl/index.html.

Lefebvre, Henri (2000), *Writings on Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Light, Ben, Marie Griffiths, and Siân Lincoln (2012), ''Connect and Create': Young People, YouTube and Graffiti Communities,' *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no.3, pp. 343-355.

Lombard, Kara-Jane (2013). 'From Subways to Product Labels: The Commercial Incorporation of Hip-Hop Graffiti'. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, vol. 20, pp. 91-103.

Marschnig, Georg (2024), 'Deconstructing Debate: Public Controversies and Historical Learning,' *History and its Discontents: Theory and Practice, Stories from the Classroom. Annual Conference International Society for History Didactics*, Providence, October 10-12.

Masilamani, Rachel (2008), 'Documenting Illegal Art: Collaborative Software, Online Environments and New York City's 1970s and 1980s Graffiti Art Movement,' *Art Documentation*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 4-14.

Molloy, Catherine (2013), '"Curiosity Won't Kill You Cat" A Meditation on Bathroom Graffiti as Underlife Public Writing,' *Writing on the Edge*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 17-24.

Nierhaus, Andreas (2022), 'The Lueger Monument by Josef Müllner: Christian Social Personality Cult in Red Vienna,' *Magazin*, accessed October 18, 2024, https://magazin.wienmuseum.at/das-lueger-denkmal-von-josef-muellner.

Rahn, Janice (2002), *Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Taş, Tuğba and Dğuzhan Taş (2014), 'Resistance on the Walls, Reclaiming Public Space: Street Art In Times of Political Turmoil in Turkey,' *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 327-349.

Thompson, Margo (2009), *American Graffiti*, New York: Parkstone Press International.

Trahan, Adam (2011), 'Identity and Ideology: The Dialogic Nature of Latrinalia,' *Internet Journal of Criminology*.

Wacławek, Anna (2011), *Graffiti and Street Art*, London & New York: Thames & Hudson.