THE SPRAY CAN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD:
STREET ART AS A MEDIUM FOR POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE POST-SOViet REGION

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By

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ABSTRACT

In authoritarian states, opposition movements and members of civil society lack unrestricted and uncensored access to the mainstream media and subsequently to the public sphere. As a result, those wishing to express their political sentiment or influence public discourse are forced to seek out alternative avenues of expression. An anonymous and untraceable art, graffiti freely criticizes everything that the mainstream media does not and perhaps cannot. Graffiti reclaims the corporate-dominated public space as a place for sharing banned information, promoting ignored causes, discussing society’s ills, and even mobilizing the public for a certain aim. An art of satirical discourse, graffiti anonymously communicates the frank narrative of a city, uninhibited by official censors. This research project analyzes contemporary graffiti not only as a popular public aesthetic, but also as a mouthpiece of political sentiment. This paper explores the use of graffiti and street art within the post-Soviet region and post-Communist Europe. In particular it explores and compares the street narrative of politicized or authoritarian Minsk, Budapest, Saint Petersburg, and Moscow, four cities where graffiti and street art offer a voice to the voiceless and a medium for the politically suffocated. This is the first formal comparative study of how graffiti is used as a political tool in the post-Soviet region.
Aux yeux verts et yeux bleus,
    a Magdushka,
    и солдатам правды.
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“*The Master and Margarita*
By Mikhail Bulgakov

I found the people to be a mystical bunch. They discuss their writers and the arts in a way that is very full-blooded. I love this novel because it captures the essence of what it is to be Russian. One of my favorite places in the world is the long, winding staircase leading to Bulgakov’s apartment in Moscow; every inch of it is covered in graffiti. The Soviet authorities Censored his book and kept painting over The graffiti as a way of suppressing people’s memory of him, but each time, even though it was risky,

Russians would write.”

- *The words of Julia Ormond, cut-and-pasted onto a magazine collage.*
INTRODUCTION

On a particularly grey and hazy Muscovite dawn, Misha Most carefully painted Article 29 of the Russian Constitution onto a wall adjacent to the Kremlin. “Everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of ideas and speech,” he spelled in thick, black letters near a still-empty parking lot. The old paint on the government building was chipping and the cold nipped at his exposed skin; Most grimaced, wet his brush, and continued to write. “No one may be forced to express his views and convictions or to reject them,” dripped a second bullet-point. A Kremlin guard stood by with a dull boredom as the young man completed his work. “The freedom of mass communication shall be guaranteed and censorship shall be banned.” The constitutional passage exhibited in the public sphere for three weeks before it was buffed by order of the Russian government. Misha Most is a graffiti artist and his wall painting was an illegal work.
Graffiti can freely criticize everything that the mainstream media does not and perhaps cannot. Through this anonymous and accessible avenue, artists and activists can share banned information, promote ignored causes, and discuss society’s ills in the public sphere, even if the practice raises issues of private property and hooliganism. If done thoughtfully, street art can be as nuanced and as aesthetically pleasing as what can be found in art galleries. Yet gallery art, political or not, is only accessible to those who have the resources of free time and expendable income; street art is free and visible for all those who choose to acknowledge it. An art of discourse, graffiti shares the frank narrative of a city, uninhibited by official censors. For example, one artist illustrated a public concern during Moscow’s March 2012 Presidential election: a significant percentage of Moscow residents claim that they do not support Putin, yet also do not support any other candidates per the potential and suspected chaos that might accompany another’s victory. Putin remained the safe, and ostensibly the only, choice. This artist mirrors that sentiment, asking who might run Russia if not Putin [Figure 1]. The graffiti poses the underlying questions, who does the public suggest might be a better alternative in this election and is the public willing to forego democratic freedom if it means protection from anarchy? Other Moscow stencils offer a meta-criticism on Russia as an unfree society. The city’s streets offer an unrestricted public location where an artist can express his or her political sentiment: “I Love Unrestricted Press,” and “I Love Independent Courts” [Figure 2]. The tongue-in-cheek critiques, located directly outside of a major, downtown metro stop, are intended for the individual cognizant of Russia’s corrupt judicial system and censored media. The use of a wall to express disdain about a suffocated freedom of speech specifically illustrates the unrestricted quality of the art form.

This research focuses on the street art observed within the post-Soviet region and post-Communist Europe. The post-Soviet region is immense and largely differs from neighborhood to neighborhood, let alone region to region. For the shortfalls of available time and resources, I focus my analysis on three states due to their threatened media freedoms and politically divided environments. According to the 2011 and 2012 Freedom House “Freedom in the World” and “Freedom in the Press” reports, Russia and Belarus are both listed as “unfree,” while Hungary is listed as “partly free,” a downgrade from its 2011 status as “free.” Hungary’s January 2011 Media Law and recent drastic political shift render it a highly politicized, unstable, and increasingly authoritarian-leaning democracy and therefore a fascinating case study.
In an authoritarian state, opposition groups and dissenting individuals are often prohibited from voicing their opinions in the traditional public sphere (on the nightly news or in a daily digest). Media is a key tool for gaining, losing, and centralizing power; by restricting certain individuals, ethnic groups, or social circles from using the media for certain types of political expression, the powerful maintain their authority and keep their control tightly wound. In Russia, a large number of media outlets, especially televised programs, are state-owned or have been bought by state-owned gas companies. Independent journals and newspapers exist, but their writers “run the risk of attack and even murder if they delve too deeply into sensitive subjects such as corruption, organized crime, or rights abuses.” Even the last free television station—Ekho Moskvy, owned by the oil and gas company Gasprom—encountered state pressure in March 2012 during the Presidential election. On the internet, especially as of late, bloggers and social network users are fairly free to speak as they please, following in the example of corruption-hunting blogger and opposition leader Alexei Navalny. In Belarus, the state owns and explicitly censors all national television stations. The newspaper industry is not overtly controlled, but state-owned newspapers are subsidized and opposition newspapers (like Narodnaia Volia) encounter fines and shutdowns. In its 2009 Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Belarus a lagging 151st out of 175 countries. Bloggers like Anton Motolko maintain a semblance of freedom but their online visitors are monitored and the bloggers themselves routinely thrown into jail. Until recently, the Hungarian media boasted a fully free and democratic media sphere. Journalists do not threaten their careers by speaking out on certain politicized issues and all political parties remain vocal to their newspaper followers. However, since the Fidesz government introduced the January 2011 Media Law that subjects all published material on the net and in print to government approval, this freedom is threatened. The European Union, of which Hungary is a member, acknowledged the Media Law as controversial and continues to encourage Hungary to reform the ruling. Ethnic issues receive skewed publicity or none at all. Under unexplained circumstances the longtime, left-liberal radio state Klubrádió lost its state funding during the summer of 2011 (but overcame the deficiency through listener donations), was refused its tender in December 2011, and in spring 2012 lost its frequency to Advenio, a private firm owned by Tamas Fellegi, a minister of Orban’s cabinet, and Zsolt Nyerges, a Fidesz-employed lawyer.
As a result of these restrictions, those wishing to express their political sentiment are forced to seek out alternative avenues of expression, either by necessity or as a matter of social duty. There are a few viable options for alternative protest; the first is the public demonstration—literally marching in the streets en masse. Recently, citizens of Belarus, Russia, and Hungary have taken to their respective streets in solidarity for greater political openness, honest democratic practices, and the protection of human rights. Despite seemingly endless inertia and global media backing, their efforts have effected little change.

For example, on July 3rd 2011 protesters in downtown Minsk attempted to clap out the seventeen-year authoritarian rule of Aleksandr Lukashenko. Plain clothed employees of the KGB arrested four hundred at the event and hundreds more at their homes in the days following. A week later on July 13th, protesters met in Iakub Kolas Square with alarms set for eight p.m., at which time their cell phones buzzed and rang together in solidarity. In response, plain clothed officers threw a few demonstrators into waiting, green “catcher vans” that resemble American UPS trucks. Eventually Belarusian authorities decreed that anyone with suspected intentions of protesting—even one person standing alone—could be arrested for opposition action.

While Russian street protests draw significantly larger crowds and include fewer reports of Minsk-style violence, they generally conclude with similar results: multiple arrests, apathetic crowds, and political stagnation. On December 10th 2011, fifty thousand Muscovites heeded blogger Alexei Navalny’s call and gathered in Bolotnaia Square with sarcastic banners and critical words. In the biggest demonstration since the fall of the Soviet Union, the masses united against government corruption and the alleged electoral fraud that took place during the December 4th 2011 Parliamentary elections. Despite the massive turnout, no ballot recount took place. On December 24th 2011, despite record low temperatures, eighty thousand demonstrators met on Sakharov Avenue shouting about the “party of crooks and thieves,” Navalny’s nickname for Edinaia Rossiia. Putin publically recognized, yet disregarded, their cries as those of an inconsequential minority. On March 4th 2012—Election Day in Russia—thousands of riot police barricaded Moscow’s downtown public squares with rows of metal detectors, ensuring that opposition demonstrations could not take place. Hundreds of military vehicles lined Red Square, Pushkinskaia Square, Maiakovskaia Square, Bolotnaia Square, and Teatral’naia Square, demonstrating the ruling regime’s military might. Thirty thousand pro-Kremlin Nashi youth were bussed to Moscow from around the
country to patrol those areas where the military vehicles could not fit—the city’s underground passageways, metro stations, and back streets—to “make sure nothing happened.” Moscow’s large and peaceful meetings on March 5th and March 10th also yielded no results.

On January 2nd 2012, tens of thousands of Hungarians marched in downtown Budapest to protest the right-wing Fidesz party’s newly passed constitution. The single-party document (titled the “Basic Law”) includes questionable rewrites of the nation’s history, outlines the complete restructure of the electoral system that strengthens Fidesz’s power to a nearly untouchable degree, incorporates conservative ethical norms as law, and employs a nationalist undertone throughout which threatens minority or foreign-born citizens. The January protests resulted not in a collaborative constitutional rewrite—even after the European Union and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton got involved—but rather in Fidesz’s heightened interference in judicial autonomy, incorporation of Hungary’s main banks by the state, and replacement of Jewish and Roma cultural leaders with politically-favored persons.

With demonstration-style meetings increasing in frequency and heavy-handed rulers fighting back fervently to retain control (effectively, thus far), it is clear that dissenting citizens must uncover further avenues for political expression. A second viable option is to harness a connected audience using social networking websites like LiveJournal.com and Twitter.com, which have emerged in recent years as mobilizing venues, due to users’ abilities to share information in real-time under a pseudonym. Yet, even on the World Wide Web, free speech has definite limits. On January 4th, Belarusian President Lukashenko enacted an internet censorship law that restricts access to foreign sites, including news hubs like Radio Svoboda, social networking sites like Facebook.com, and consumerist portals like eBay.com. The January 2011 Fidesz-introduced Media Law gives the Hungarian government full control over online content. And in Russia, political institutions and private hacker-groups easily navigate locked portals and IP addresses to threaten the security and privacy of basement activists.

An artistic alternative in the Internet era, graffiti is an effective and untraceable tool for reaching people without computers. Illegalities aside, street art is an unbarred medium that allows anonymous commenters to express their sentiment on a truly public stage. Anonymous or pseudonym-protected authorship protects the identity of particularly vocal writers. Today savvy graffiti artists can push the limits of social norms and political correctness by using street art to criticize recent nuclear policy, to question ethnically motivated murders, or to laugh at failed
economic ventures, such as the freehand drawing of an unlabeled can of Campbell Soup that criticizes the company’s inability to effectively immerse itself in the traditional Russian market [Figure 3]. In Saint Petersburg, stencils on the concrete invite strollers to remember the wartime atrocities of the country’s Soviet past, reading the date June 22, 1941 and the words “We Remember, We Grieve” [Figure 4]. A set of satirical stickers near Saint Petersburg State University share the specifics of the Strategy 31 assemblies, meetings (on every 31st of the month) designed as official meeting places where the political opposition can voice their concerns. These stickers show the famous Bronze Horseman statue trampling the city’s former mayor Valentina Matvienko, illustrating the oppositional tone of the meetings for anyone unfamiliar [Figure 5]. In Budapest, politically motivated graffiti coats the city’s streets, criticizing media censorship, the carnivalesque government sphere, and the growing partisan schism between fascist right, right wing, and left wing citizens. Overall, street art in the post-Soviet sphere concerns everything from fabricated election results to unlawfully imprisoned political figures and questionable entitlement. The overall purpose of this research is to show that graffiti and street art serve as an effective voice for the voiceless and as a medium for the politically suffocated.

Figure 3: Anonymous. *Campbell's Soup*. Freehand. 4 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
While acknowledging the dynamic nature of hard-to-quantify street art, I organized this discussion to bring it a social scientific constancy. I standardized my research by applying the same fieldwork methodology to each urban center. In all four cities, I collected images in six specific locations in order to systematize my observations: the student district, the artist district, the end of the line, the downtown district, the market district, and the graffiti spots. This practice allowed me to more accurately compare and contrast my findings per their location within the city. During my analysis, I categorized each image by eight sub-categories: theme, location, language, medium, surface, content, legal status, and artist. The thematic category is then divided into seven options: political, social, political fascism, advertisements, religious, music, and sport. I rejected any images that did not match one of these seven categories of hard or soft politics. Due to the limitations of measuring the ratio of political to apolitical
graffiti, I have instead elected to look at where, why, and when political graffiti exists. My methodological decisions and explanations are described in greater detail in Appendix One (Materials and Methods).

There are a few principal techniques employed by contemporary graffiti artists. The most commonly associated methods are colorful murals and freehand writing; typically the former is defined as street art and the latter as graffiti though the boundaries are blurred with the advent of stencils, wheatpastes, and other contemporary methods. Stencils are typically cut from cardboard material with a razor in the outline of an intended design. Stencils allow an artist to paint a uniformed image repetitively across the public space. Wheatpaste and sticker art are other effective techniques for graffiti artists as they can be created or ordered at home and quickly stuck to an intended surface. Wheatpaste is essentially the art of posterizing without scotch tape. A sticky paste mix, made from vegetable starch and water, allows an artist to affix the paper to an external surface. When the liquid adhesive dries, the poster is nearly impossible to rip off, even through inclimate weather. Sometimes artists affix these posters with large rollers to cover a greater surface. This is a common technique for advertisers in the entertainment industry as well as for street artists. The final notable technique is the airbrush. The airbrush tool aids artists in adding precise and detailed effects to their artwork, however it tends to be one of the more time consuming techniques and is less frequently in everyday street art. Other creative media of expression include living greenery (moss graffiti), paint-filled fire extinguishers, and public performance.

I first explored the topic while studying the Russian language with a group of McGill University students at Saint Petersburg State University during the summer of 2009. In the area surrounding the university, I observed stencils that opposed Russia’s nuclear program, protested the unwarranted arrest of Artem Loskutov, and memorialized the historical blockade. Walking the same route to class each morning, I realized that the writing on the wall shared a narrative about Russian oppositional sentiment that was less, if at all, apparent from other media channels. It seemed to me that a city’s streets doubled as a stage where frank, anonymous, and unpunished dissent could exist. I wondered if my understanding was based on a particular neighborhood, whether it was a common theme throughout the post-Soviet region, or whether it was a global phenomenon.

In February 2011, Roger Gastman gave a public lecture on the history of American street art at Washington D.C.’s Corcoran Gallery of Art. In the last five years, Gastman has situated himself as an expert in the burgeoning
field: he produced the Academy Award-nominated documentary “Exit Through the Gift Shop,” he authored the popular “The History of American Graffiti,” and in 2011 he co-curated the “Art in the Streets” exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA). During the question-and-answer session following Gastman’s lecture, I asked whether graffiti could be used as a medium for expressing political sentiment, especially in those countries where free access to unrestricted media is denied (essentially pitching my thesis idea to him to see how it would be received). “I think in any city, in any country, there are always going to be people there using graffiti for that message but that is not the case here (in the United States),” Gastman insisted that, in our western society, the main purpose of dominating a public space with one’s pen is to achieve notoriety. Inspired by this lecture, I read through the existing analysis of graffiti and street art, which allowed me to more clearly recognize the unusual aspects of the art form in the post-Soviet region. To me, the art lying east of Berlin seemed more desperate and intentional than that found in New York or London (though there are always exceptions on both sides; social critique in western Europe certainly exists and wild style name art is not uncommon in former Soviet states). I focus on this region because it is of greatest interest to me however the ideas that I present in this thesis are not exclusive to the post-Soviet region.

My intentions for conducting this research are three-fold. First and most simply, I seek to fill an academic void with my historical and analytical summary of a contemporary counter-culture. The existing literature on the topic is sparse. The most notable text is John Bushnell’s *Moscow Graffiti*, which was published in 1990. While Bushnell provides a good assessment of the Soviet countercultural progression and thoroughly outlines how each movement (hippies, pacifists, rockers, fanaty, etc.) used graffiti as a tool to share their ideology, his analysis stops with the end of the Soviet Union. Based on my interviews and fieldwork in the region, I build on his historical perspective by adding a revised and detailed account of the art form’s progression from 1985 through the present-day.

Secondly, I hope that this project encourages western analysts to consider the street narrative when offering their assessment on public sentiment in authoritarian states. For example, starting in the summer of 2011, the graffiti stencils across Saint Petersburg very clearly stated the goals and expectations of the political opposition. These Russian-language messages were plastered throughout the public sphere; each image included a web link where interested individuals could go to learn more information about a particular issue or viewpoint. I think this
understanding could have aided western journalists, academics, and political analysts in their understanding of opposition sentiment when the masses took to the streets five months later, chanting the same slogans. Finally, I hope that this project inspires average citizens to realize the value of street art. I want to show that one does not need to be artistically endowed in order to express his or her opinions through street art. For each citizen that wishes to influence the social discourse of his or her community, the tool and medium of street art is accessible, affordable, and effective.

My thesis is arranged in three chapters. Chapter One charts the progression of graffiti and street art in the Soviet-turned-Russian example from its scribbled beginning to its post-collapse developments. The chapter ends with a discussion of graffiti as a medium of social and political critique. It focuses on information gained via interviews with a set of the most well known artists and crews in Russia today: Misha Most, Basket, Kirill Kto, Partizaning, Zuk Club, and Radya among them. This text offers the first historical compilation of post-Soviet graffiti and street art in over twenty years.

Chapter Two is a literature review of sorts. Aside from Bushnell’s seminal text, the only other notable forays into this topic are Nadiya Parfan’s Master’s Thesis Kyiv Graffiti (2011), Igor Ponosov’s Objects series, and Laszlo Ruszty’s Street Marking in Hungary (2009). Parfan, Ponosov, and Laszlo’s works are locally distributed and self-published. In light of this minimal amount of existing analysis, I have elected to forego a literature review in the traditional sense. Instead Chapter Two is a critical theory review that, separated into three sections, looks at the concept of the image, the public space, and the temporal-spatial reality of the graffiti narrative through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope.

In Chapter Three, I present my analysis and charted findings, exploring the concept of aesthetics versus politics in contemporary non-conformist art. Appendix One outlines the materials and methods of my research and Appendix Two presents a full plate list. All transliterations throughout the paper adhere to the Library of Congress system. All of the photography plates that appear in the body of this paper belong to either Nicholas van Beek or myself. To view these images in full resolution and more photographs and analysis of post-Soviet political graffiti, please visit www.PostSovietGraffiti.com.
I would like to express my deep gratitude toward Georgetown University’s Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies (CERES), the School of Foreign Service, and the Cosmos Club of Washington D.C. for their financial support. I am thankful to have found two excellent advisors, Dr. Harley Balzer of the Department of Government and Dr. Alison Hilton of Georgetown’s Department of Art and Art History, who were willing to cross academic disciplines to advise me on this project with creative insight and patient guidance. Their constructive feedback, endless support, and careful attention to detail helped mould an idea into a tangible deliverable. Thank you to Catherine Evtuhov (who directed my unbridled enthusiasm toward the study of history and who inspires me endlessly) for bouncing around theoretical ideas for at least a year and for believing in the project (and in me). A fond thank you to Christian Caryl for mentoring me through the entire process and for patiently showing me how to think, interview, and write like a journalist. I feel very fortunate that I get to bring your empowering support and honest wisdom with me throughout these adventures. Thank you to Vladimir and Olga Kitov for your warm, Moscow welcome, to Jean Hébert and Dolorés Ferraton for opening your Montréal home to me during the writing stage of this project, and to all of our awesome hosts and guides throughout the region like Lili Pach in Budapest, Shriya Malhotra in Moscow, and to so many more who must remain clandestine. Thank you to Jacek Lubecki for inviting me to present an early version of my research at the 2011 Central Slavic Conference in Saint Louis and to the 2012 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Annual Convention for inviting me to present my research among such an esteemed community of scholars. Thank you to the University of Michigan Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies and to Georgetown University for exhibiting my research and to Wayne State University for supporting me by sponsoring the project’s next steps.

Most of all, thank you to Nicholas van Beek for everything that you have done: sticking by my side in dark alleys in the name of photography; trekking day and night in absolute heat, endless rain, and freezing snowstorms; inadvertently taking on the role of an anti-fascism activist with me; putting me on your shoulders to get a better view of Putin and Medvedev on Election Day; sleeping on a children’s play structure in Mátészalka so that I could try to find my grandma’s childhood home; and staying awake while I slept on the ground with a delirious flu in a Transcarpathian train station. This project would never have happened without your brilliant contributions, your excellent photography, your endless kindness, and your absolute bravery.
CHAPTER I: THE HISTORY OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART IN RUSSIA

Graffiti-Producing Counter-Cultures of the Soviet Era

According to the social history presented by John Bushnell in his 1990 book *Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture*, the unadorned graffiti of hippies, punks, soccer hooligans, and pacifists dominated Russia’s public sphere in the late Soviet period. The subculture youth of the late Soviet period used graffiti as a rebellious medium to express their non-conformist ideologies. In chalk, in oil paint and brush, or—before the early 1980s—less commonly in spray paint, Soviet graffiti artists attempted to infiltrate the government-controlled public sphere with peace sign symbols, popular rock references, and Nazi swastikas. While records of explicitly dissident graffiti exist these instances were uncommon. Bushnell states that dissident graffiti were: “so unusual that they set off KGB investigations, and sometimes political trials.” Overall Soviet graffiti writers avoided direct political aggressions, instead concerning themselves with the soft politics of Afghanistan war protest, dissent toward American imperialism, anti-nuclear armament sentiment, and the freedom to musical and artistic expression.

While the history of Russian graffiti likely dates prior to the formation of the ninth century Rurik Dynasty (when graffiti largely served a labelling or basic advertising function), graffiti by its modern definition—writing on public walls to convey a message, however vulgar or seemingly meaningless—was first recorded in the early 1970s and credited to Soviet football fanatics. Football fans (*fanaty* in Russian) broadcast their allegiance to FC Spartak Moscow, FC Dinamo Moscow, or TsSKA by etching the team’s name or the team captain’s name on the walls of Moscow’s residential outskirts. Often lacking forethought, fan graffiti quickly devolved to reflect the belligerence of their artists’ raucous, boyish, and instigative behavior, such as the stencil that suggests fans “Fight for Zenith” [Figure 6]. Over time the *fanaty* and their graffiti developed an association with more extreme gang lifestyles, excessively vulgar speech, and violent hooliganism.

Though suspicious of the genre’s subversive messages and popular influence, party leadership softened toward Soviet-born rock groups the late 1970s. By means of concert tours and relatable lyrics, domestic musicians began to develop fan bases. State support for foreign artists soon followed; on May 20th 1979 authorities invited British
crooner Elton John to Soviet soil for a concert and later that year, per Soviet request, American blues guitarist B. B. King added a Moscow stop to his world tour. By the early 1980s, the youth influenced by rock-and-roll began to dedicate their graffiti to foreign rock groups like AC/DC, the Sex Pistols, and Led Zeppelin. By 1983-1984, their music-themed writing accounted for 20-25 percent of total graffiti in Russia.¹⁰

In June 1983 Konstantin Chernenko, then Minister of Ideology, announced to the Communist Party Central Committee that the rockers were causing ideological and aesthetic harm to the Soviet ideology.¹¹ Swiftly the Soviet leadership repressed the rock community by denying performances, censoring lyrics, and requiring the dissolution of many non-conformist groups. Genre participants reacted in a wave of creative, cosmetic changes; musicians reworked band names to sever their future projects from their former identities (now deemed un-Soviet by the authorities), the black market capitalized on selling outlawed tapes, and thousands of artists simply declined to register themselves with state officials, further enhancing their rocker authenticity.¹² One year later in 1984, Mikhail Gorbachev took office and introduced the Soviet policies of perestroika and glasnost’. Perestroika, loosely translated into English as restructuring, introduced pseudo-market economic reforms to the Communist model. Gorbachev’s glasnost’, defined in English as openness, established a more transparent government and encouraged free debate. The latter policy resulted in a significant loosening of media censorship and increased individual speech freedoms. In correspondence with the opening created by these top-down reforms, the rock scene made a state-supported comeback.

In the mid-to-late 1980s rock music returned to once again rest at the center of the Soviet subculture for everyone from the heavy metal Iron Maiden idolizers to the peace-loving Beatles fans [Figure 7]. By 1988, half of Moscow’s graffiti was about rock-and-roll and increasingly centralized on permitted graffiti spaces known as fan walls. When Viktor Tsoi, the lead singer of popular rock band Kino, died tragically in 1990, his loyal listeners expressed their remorse on a still-existing fan wall near the far end of the Staryi Arbat [Figure 8].¹³ Today fans continue to memorialize the fallen Tsoi as a symbol of peace and a figure of youthful independence by contributing to the fan wall. Punk lovers, ideologically opposed to figures of authority, also began to systematically tattoo the Soviet streets with their chosen badge, the anarchist symbol. Though fanaty and rockers largely dominated the late
Soviet graffiti scene, other subcultural youth movements—hippies, pacifists, and fascists—also edged their way into the public square.

The Soviet Union’s most explicitly political graffiti messages appeared in the early 1980s. During this time, hippie youth used the walls to share the international peace sign symbol, calls for universal free love, and poetic slogans about brotherly kindness (“Make Hair Everywhere,” “Long Live Butterflies,” among these). Pacifist groups such as the Free Initiative meanwhile focused their political advocacy efforts on the moral wrongs of war and violence. While state threats of detention and arrest frequently derailed their demonstrative efforts, pacifists remained undeterred to speak out against the wars that they opposed. Alienated from the censored Soviet press and public sphere, Soviet anti-war demonstrators used graffiti to publicize their opposition to the Soviet Union’s 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, the United States’ imperial expansion, and the heightened threat posed by Cold War nuclear power, using slogans such as: “End the Shameful War in Afghanistan,” “Out of Afghanistan,” “Gorbachev—Murderer of Afghan Children,” and “Russian Children’s Skin is Just as Sensitive to Napalm as Afghan Skin.” Today, hippies and pacifists continue to draw peace signs and paint against nuclear armament, writing statements such as “Atoms Cannot Be Peaceful” and painting murals of the negative impact of nuclear energy on the environment [Figures 9, 10, 11, and 12].

The fascist revival of the early-1970s and its impact on the Soviet street narrative cannot be ignored. Graffitied slogans of “Russia for Russians,” “Heil Hitler,” and “14/88” began to frequent urban centers by the early 1980s [Figure 13]. On 20 April 1982—Hitler’s birthday—Moscow’s neo-fascist counter-culture made its public debut at an unsanctioned Pushkinskaia Square demonstration. With the understanding that their ideology is more about Russian nationalism than Nazism, the neo-fascist reverence for Hitler in a country so negatively affected by World War Two is overtly instigative. Bushnell explains that the neo-fascists “esteem Hitler not so much for his specific beliefs—certainly not for his ideas about Slavs—but for his concept of racial purity and his example of dynamic, authoritarian rule… The fascists have chosen deliberatively to offend: their purpose is as much rebellion against political verities as it is promotion of a set of political views. They resemble in that way the counterculture they claim to despise.” Seeking maximum exposure in the public consciousness, the leather-jacketed youth became active graffiti writers, especially outside of Moscow’s urban center. Fascist graffiti—swastikas, the lightning-
bolted SS insignia, and anti-Semitic slurs—long outlasted the Soviet Union and slogans such as “Love Your Own Race” continue to permeate the public spaces across the contemporary post-Soviet sphere [Figures 14 and 15].

These graffitied ethnic confrontations by skinhead youth writers do not exist in a vacuum. Documented as early as 1983 in Russia, an anti-fascist revivalist counterculture took to the streets with responsive demands for a Russian reality void of fascism and fascists. Anti-fascist writers engaged their counterparts in discourse by crossing out fascist symbols or dwarfing them with peace signs. Today, Russian anti-fascist activists, commonly referred to as members of the European Antifa movement, paint graffiti about life sans extreme nationalism, writing slogans such as: “Russia without Fascism,” “Art Without Fascism,” “Yellow, Red, White, Black, We Are All the Same,” and “Good Night White Pride” [Figures 16 and 17].

Figure 6: Anonymous. “Fight for Zenith.”Stencil. 3 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 7: Anonymous. Beatles Tribute. Mural. 10 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 9: Anonymous. “No War.” Freehand. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 10: Anonymous. Nuclear Alien. Stencil. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 12: Anonymous. *Nuclear Tree.* Mural. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 14: Anonymous. SS. Freehand. August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 15: Anonymous. “Love Your Own Race.” Stencil. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 16: Anonymous. “Let's Construct Russia's Future Without Fascism!” Freehand. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
‘Breaking’ Into Contemporary Graffiti

Multi-colored tags and murals painted with spray cans define the contemporary graffiti practice. The counter-culture is no longer a community of hippies or punks who also happen to write, but rather an organized subculture of graffiti writers running from the police per the practice’s illegal nature. Where is the connection between Soviet graffiti-writing communities and the present-day street art counter-culture in Russia? This is where Bushnell’s early publication date restricts his analysis. While he does a thorough job of explaining the historical progression of graffiti and street art in the Soviet Union from the early 1970s through the late 1980s, Moscow Graffiti’s 1990 publication date prevents his analysis from considering graffiti in its post-Soviet form. The scene’s present-day leaders unanimously credit a small group of breakdancers (more commonly known as breakers) not only as the cultural transmitters of street art from the west to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, but also as the transporters of the art form from the Soviet to the post-Soviet period.

Breakers entered the Soviet counter-culture mix around 1985, when they began to meet at schools, at sportzaly (Soviet-style sport centers), and at informal breakdancing festivals. By 1986, officials noticed the growing dance trend and elected to sponsor more serious, cross-Soviet competitions, choosing cities like Kaliningrad, Donetsk, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg to host the large events.18 Party organizers invited talented breakers from across the Soviet Union to participate in the festivals, paying for their transportation, food, and local housing as incentive.
Despite government efforts to expand a subculture that they saw as positive, the original breaker community in Saint Petersburg remained close-knit and fairly insular. The scene was still small enough that the breakers could meet to dance, undisturbed, in two or three secluded spots across the city. In an interview, Basket—an early proponent of Saint Petersburg’s breaker culture—shared his narrative of the moment amid Gorbachev's reforms when the medium shifted from breaking to writing (the colloquial abbreviation for graffiti writing). “One of my friends told me that they wanted to show me something special. They told me that it was a secret and not to tell anyone.” Basket continued:

I had no VHS player, nor did any of my friends. In Russia, only politicians had VHS players—we didn’t have them. In Saint Petersburg, there was one coffee shop—a café—near Petrogradskaia metro station. It was very small… just three tables. And in this coffee shop there was a VHS player and a TV. There, they had three videotapes—only three videotapes. There were only three of us there because we were about to see some secret information. We didn’t have any money—only enough for a cup of tea or coffee. So we would sit and wait and started watching while drinking a cup of coffee.¹⁹

The movie that Basket watched is called *Beat Street*. Produced in the United States in 1984, it tells an inspirational story of three young men—a hip-hop artist, a breaker, and a graffiti writer—that try to achieve success from the socio-economic depths of the Bronx slums. Back in the Saint Petersburg café, the breakers studied the film’s novel dance styles and breaking techniques. Feeling like they had come across something momentous and exciting, they also became inspired to create graffiti.

At this time in Saint Petersburg, there were only three or five shops where you could buy spray paint and only in neutral tones like yellow, white, and gray. Determined to experiment with color and texture, Basket knew that he had to find more paint.

The only paint factory for the whole Soviet Union was in Riga. So I took money from two or three friends and went to Riga where the factory was. In this shop, I bought all the colors. It wasn’t like it is now, of course, but you could get, maybe, twenty or twenty-five colors. One can cost two rubles then.²⁰

Lacking tutorials and teachers, the Soviet breakers resorted to trial and error with the basic tools available to them. At first, they stuck to simple tagging, the practice of writing one’s name either in unadorned freehand or layered bubble letters. They developed original styles and street name pseudonyms, by which they would be called for the remainder of their careers as graffiti artists (one artist who goes by the pseudonym Make jokes that his son did not inherit a patronymic from his father’s given name, but instead that from his graffiti name—Makovitch). In the beginning, there were only a few known graffiti writers in the USSR: Basket, his friend from Riga, and another
friend from Kaliningrad among them. In these early years, the ramifications for destroying – or improving, depending on one’s perception of the practice – private property remained unclear. This uncertainty of consequence often drove artists to react to police presence in a suspicion-inducing manner. On a clear afternoon in 1988, for example, the trio of graffiti artists broke into a sprint when a squad car unexpectedly rolled past. Terrified, they ducked into a Soviet-style courtyard and realized that the enclosed area had only one exit, which was now blocked by the officer. Probing into what they had done wrong to warrant such fear, the breakers explained that they did nothing criminal, and in fact that they were simply painting. Per his request, the group agreed to show the policeman their mural. To the trio’s surprise, the officer did not punish the writers for vandalism nor did he demand a monetary exchange for his silence, but instead complimented them on their artistic skills. This vignette illustrates the lack of precedent for graffiti dealings in the late Soviet Union; at this time, there existed no legal ruling or cultural norm that deemed graffiti a criminal, destructive, or morally bad action. According to Basket, even some *babushki* (elderly Russian women; grandmothers) supported the artists because their pieces brought beauty and color to their otherwise dull, cement-lined apartment complexes.

**Western Corporate Sponsors Usher in the Second Wave**

On March 8th, 1991 the (collapsing) Soviet Union officially introduced the American-born Music Television Channel (MTV) to its tube-tuned citizenry. Born in the 1980s, MTV acted as a vehicle for the global transmission of American popular cultures, among them hip-hop, breakdancing, and graffiti writing. Inspired by this example, western sponsors eagerly entered the post-Soviet market in an effort to capitalize on the cultural opening and consumerist void that lay east of Berlin. In 1995, Nescafé sponsored the first annual wintertime snowboarding festival in Moscow. Among the festivities was a graffiti competition, to which young artists were invited to compete with one another. The corporate sponsor hired Basket, with a decade of experience by this point, as an expert judge who could evaluate the applicants’ proposed projects. “Every day,” Basket recalled, “there was a theme, or a challenge, that each artist had to accomplish.”

The applicants brought me about thirty or forty sketches. I took their sketches into the tent, where there was alcohol and some food, and went through them. I chose the ten best sketches and announced to the artists, ‘Okay, you paint here, you paint here, and you paint there.’ There were ten guys, all Russians from Moscow. These ten guys were freezing while they were drawing. I remember that a couple guys
who later joined my crew were there. I remember Misha Most was there too. This festival really showed everyone in the second wave how to do graffiti. After this festival, the normal tagging and the crews really started.\textsuperscript{22}

The second wave of Russian graffiti writers emerged shortly after the inaugural Nescafé festival—in 1997-1998—and this time the group was younger, larger, and reportedly cooler, Basket jokes. This generation of new writers was able to look to already-existing institutions—MTV, western graffiti magazines and films, and writers from the first wave—to acquire new skills, techniques, and methods of practice. Many prominent contemporary street artists such as Most, Kto, and Make, emerged during the second wave. The practice also gained a mainstream following. Basket capitalized on the practice’s hyped popularity when he ran a street art school during the second wave’s early years. There he and his friends taught “a lot of children of rich people who wanted to be cool, but who did not actually feel passionate about learning to do graffiti.”\textsuperscript{23}

Moscow-based Misha Most remembers the Nescafé festival of 1995 with some disdain. “I saw all of it—the legal parts, the legal jams run by Nescafé coffee. Only in Russia can this happen,” he recalled in an August 2011 interview.

They put up a big wall of this shitty material—pressed wood or something. Every Friday they buffed the wall from the week and on Saturday, they buffed the Friday one. Basket was the judge and the organizer. It was always during the winter so it was -10, -15 degrees (Celsius) and there were snowboarders and everybody was drinking this coffee and doing graffiti. I didn’t like it at all. I went one time and spray painted colorful blasts all over the wall and wrote: “Graffiti Should Be Without Frames.” The authorities and the media heavily influenced everyone [to create in a legally sanctioned place and manner] because the stuff that we saw at legal festivals was really all that we knew.

Nobody was thinking, ‘oh, this is nice painting on the wall.’ They were saying, ‘oh these guys want to make the city better, they want to make it beautiful.’ The graffiti scene in the 1990s was pretty romanticized. A lot of guys started their careers at these legal jams and then went on to work as legal writers. Not a lot of illegal writing came out of this. People who like to do something beautiful, they are usually less destructive. This is why legal and illegal writers belong to separate categories. There was an outline at the beginning [explaining how to do graffiti] but we started to break the rules; I started using roller paint, working with the environment, and other methods that were different from standard graffiti writing.\textsuperscript{24}

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the region’s newly acquired capitalist ideology guided and encouraged the consumerist inclinations of Russia’s graffiti artists. Soon everyone writing both illegally and legally had a logo, somewhat like his or her own unique, personal watermark. Writers coveted an association or, even better, a sponsorship with a popular brand-name paint company or a corporate clothier. “For most artists in the 90s, street
art was less about politics and more like lots of advertisements. You can tell how graffiti became more of an industry [during the second wave].” Most lamented, reflecting upon the past decade.

You can buy the caps, the gloves. It’s like coming to a shop to become a fisherman. You buy these things, the camouflage. You put the things in the pockets. You say that you want to be a graffiti artist. You buy two videos, a couple magazines, ten different cans of spray paint specifically designed for graffiti. It’s really less interesting from certain points of view. I remember the old times, when we used to mix the paint ourselves. You feel the process more. You make the cap yourself; you make the color yourself. It’s a bit different. You learn from the photos of your friends, not from magazines or on the internet. It’s a different thing now. Graffiti has become an industry where any businessman can put his money into it.

For example, Nike organized a jam. They give graffiti artists a white shoe and have an exhibition to show it and reproduce it and don’t pay you or anything. Vandalism meets consumerism when artists are exploited to create a consumer product. It’s free advertising and they make the young kids do it. There are also skateboard jams here where graffiti artists paint skateboards for corporate sponsors. I have mine here though. I broke it and put a cast on it. But the young kids made these beautiful skateboards so that the companies can hang in the shops. I consider it a bad thing when graffiti artists are used to design a product for free.25

By 1999, another aspect of the post-Soviet graffiti scene changed—authorities codified and implemented legal consequences for illegal and destructive behavior. Without hesitation, each regional interviewee could recall a past run-in with local authorities. One spoke of a night when the police called their bridge painting a threat to national security; another coyly reminisced about the multiple times that she was let off without demerit for being a female artist; and a Saint Petersburg-based interviewee shared the story of the time when she and friends got picked up by the authorities for writing graffiti, only to be invited to paint a colourful mural in the police headquarters in exchange for a speedy and paperwork-free release. By the end of the 1990s, sentencing writers for vandalism or hooliganism (a more serious offence as it often merits jail time) became as commonplace as the bribes paid to avoid these charges. Older writers explained that, over time, they simply learned how to avoid spots frequented by the police.

Zachem/ No Future Forever

In 2003 Misha Most banded together with five friends, fellow Muscovite artist Kirill Kto among them, to found Moscow’s first major graffiti crew—Zachem.26 Zachem (in English, “for what?”) sought to wake the apathetic masses from their newfound hyper-consumerist and over-indulgent lifestyles.27 “It’s a question that is specifically addressed to the viewer,” explained Misha. The group achieved street fame by covering Moscow with the word
“Zachem,” writing in Russian specifically to counter their fellow artists who seemingly preferred to write in English [Figure 18]. “Most of the guys blindly transmit what they see on the Internet and in magazines into what they do [on the streets]. A lot of graffiti artists were writing English words and English letters, which encouraged me to write a meaningful Russian word with Russian letters.” In its early days, the crew was composed of two conceptual artists and four bombers, or artists whose goal is to write the same word—colloquially, to bomb—as many times, in as many ways, and in as many creative places as physically possible in order to assert a dominating street presence. It was important to balance the crew with these two types of writers, Most explained, because it ensured that an important and interesting concept would be more widely distributed throughout the city.

![Figure 18: Zachem. “Zachem.” Freehand. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).](image)

The crew tattooed the word “Zachem” in an enormous font on the many schoolyards, highway overpasses, and corporate advertisements across Moscow. In its early years of 2004 and 2005, the intention behind “Zachem” was ostensibly political. In the public sphere, however, the tag’s overall projection lost its overt message and became susceptible to contextual influences. By 2006 the crew moved on from simply writing “Zachem” and adopted the punk-inspired phrase “No Future Forever” [Figure 19]. The slogan originates from “No Future,” a Sex Pistols lyric that the Soviet punks of the 1970s co-opted to complement their “live fast and die young” mantra. Feeling as though the entire world was living by this motto, the members of Zachem added the sarcastic “Forever,” because “[this mentality] seems like it will last forever.”28 The co-opted slogan is explicitly intended as a critique of the political apathy, social lethargy, and total ambivalence rampant in the artists’ local communities.
Seeking to inspire Muscovites to confront uncomfortable questions and decisions (“Why do this? What is the point? What good does apathy bring?”), Zachem placed their statements in high-traffic and high-visibility locations. The crew gained international recognition and what many graffiti artists consider a real sign of success—fame—through viral internet photography, magazine interviews, and three self-produced DVDs. “Zachem” references began to appear in popular books and high-production films, as some consider the graffitied phrase an emblematic detail of the illustrated post-Soviet Moscow. Across the region, new graffiti gangs imitated Zachem’s tags and murals. Soon the word coated major Russian-speaking centers across the post-Soviet sphere from Russia and Belarus to areas of Poland and Latvia. Zachem reproductions soon became more common than Zachem originals, and the movement’s expansion became more important than its founders or individual writers.

While Zachem’s early tags continue to appear throughout the post-Soviet region, its original members have progressed as artists. Their new projects incorporate local context, social critique, ideological graffiti, buff-style censorship imitation, and other avenues of urban activism (refashioning existing advertisements, vandalizing luxury vehicles, and altering government street signs). In 2005 Most painted a large, memorial mural reading “1941-1945: Remember the Eternal” in block letters on an aboveground subway line. For Most, this type of street art responds to popular attempts to define the complicated contemporary Russian national identity. “There are not many national ideas in Russia today,” he began.

In the states, they have strong national sports and the flags are everywhere. Of course people love Russia, but their show of patriotism is different. Before it was Communism and, before that, the Russian Empire, which was based on the church and religion and a strong army. Since the collapse, it’s something new to think about and to try to define national identity.
WWII rhetoric is common in contemporary stencil and mural street art, and graffitied war memorials are rumored to be government-funded. If this assumption is based in fact, the increase in Saint Petersburg blockade references and World War Two pieces might be related to the increased tensions between Russians and Eastern Europeans over their conflicting collective wartime memories. Russia insists that the Soviets liberated Eastern Europeans countries like Hungary and Latvia, while Eastern Europeans attest that the Soviets occupied their borders for nearly five decades. Graffitied nostalgia for wartime continues to prove a common theme across the post-Soviet region as national groups use the art form to present themselves as either victor or victim.

The Control and Co-option of Graffiti: Buffing, Advertising, and the Legal Festival

Government-led buffing, or wall cleaning, efforts began in 1996 in response to the heightened visible presence of street art and graffiti in Russia. A buffed painting implies that it previously presented a controversial, vulgar, undesirable, and most of all unsanctioned message. Concurrent with the 2008 Presidential election, the Russian buffing directive expanded in scope, necessitating the mass employment of foreign workers to maintain an unblemished urban façade. In an August 2011 interview, Saint Petersburg’s Light Graffiti shared an anecdote about a fellow writer in Moscow who waged a personal war with these seemingly tireless street buffers. On a given morning, the friend would paint an extravagant and detailed mural on a quiet side street, only to have the buffers arrive in the evening to clear the wall. The friend would return the following morning to replicate their piece and, again, the buffers returned at night. No longer was the battle between the writers and the police, or the writers and the political authorities, but rather it became a matter of situational absurdity between two parties—the writers and the buffers—neither of which possessed legal ownership of the streets by capitalist definition.

Kirill Kto uses the buffing technique to censor hateful, unappealing, or poorly executed subculture or corporate graffiti, like that of the global name graffiti trend [Figure 20]. Kto buffs out the graffiti works of other, usually less experienced, writers to criticize their unfounded attempts to dominate an area that does not “belong” to them; he is the social censor of the artist district in a modern-day graffiti turf war [Figure 21 and Figure 22]. By buffing guerrilla advertisements and refashioning corporate banners, Kto highlights their transiency and irrelevance. “Advertisements are not useable,” explained Kto, “so we damage them and harvest the parts to create something
useable.” The socially responsible messages that remain once Kto finishes buffing the streets presumably raise his district’s cultural currency. On the other hand, some graffiti artists satirize the official buffing efforts—interpreted as government censorship—in their personal artwork. Misha Most writes important passages from the Russian constitution—especially those which focus on the freedom of speech—and buffs out arbitrary segments with aesthetically unappealing neutral tones. Most’s self-defined meta-buff technique mirrors his mocking assumption that most people would not recognize their constitutional rights independent of their documented context and format. While the majority of Most’s meta-buffs are opaque, he occasionally makes a portion of the original text legible from beneath the layers of paint, commenting on the barely recognizable basic truths that peek out from beneath censorship efforts.

While authorities and resident artists buff for ideology and control, corporate entities also use street-art techniques in the public sphere to reach their target audiences in novel ways. Following the abolishment of state socialism in the post-Soviet realm, the city of Moscow developed a thriving private industry. The efforts of this rising, Muscovite business class drive Russia’s current status as a world-leader in resident millionaires. In spring 2011 Moscow-based corporations began to deploy guerrilla graffiti artists to the concrete exits of the city’s downtown metro stations and underpasses. From late June 2011 to mid-August 2011—a period of less than two short months—the stencilled flyers for women’s clothing stores, car insurance providers, home improvement shops, and gymnasiums doubled in frequency [Figure 23]. A walk from Red Square to the old Arbat became a convoluted moment in time when the grandeur of the Soviet era was suddenly juxtaposed with a suffocating ever-presence of post-Soviet capitalism. Kto is a vehement opponent to the guerrilla-advertising trend:

Is there anyone who likes the advertisements, which are everywhere? Or are they legitimized (or pseudo-legal; just because they are paid for does not make them legitimate, I insist), protected by the fact that someone paid so much for them that it is shameful to tear them up in broad daylight in order to save people from obsessive appeals to buy another car or take a loan with covert conditions and crushing interest rates?32

Just as corporate advertisers copy graffiti writers to increase a product’s attractiveness, artists also imitate corporate techniques by, for example, copying advertising visuals or taking over central billboards—massive and highly visible—to project illegal art projects to a large population of viewers and to increase their perceived
legitimacy. In his book *Objects 3: Russian Street Art*, Moscow graffiti artist Igor Ponosov writes about the relationship between the advertising and graffiti realms in the twenty-first century:

The art of the 2000s was a new form of backlash on gallery art and the total commercialization of everyday life, both virtual and real. Artists turn streets into a battlefield where they fight against advertising for public attention. They mock ads, redefine them and, like pop-art artists, use their contents to create original art.

Two-dimensional art tried to challenge commerce as well. But its active proliferation on the streets gradually led to merging art and advertisement—numerous corporations, recognizing street art messaging potential, promptly adopted its methods and employed them in marketing campaigns (spray, stickers, stencils, creative placement). As a result advertising tried to mimic art, which originally used some of the advertising techniques (distributions, branding and such). Urban dwellers have become unable to distinguish original art from commercial. Now... artists must redefine the line between art and ad.33

The marriage of public art and a contract-guaranteed paycheck is not a new idea in the graffiti realm. Street artists can gain income, practice, and notoriety by painting commissioned murals, guerrilla bombing for advertisers, and participating in legal festivals. Basket admits that, nowadays, he paints primarily for money, as this is the source of income that supports his wife and children. He mainly airbrushes contracted pieces for businesses, such as the commissioned and blacklight-incorporated mural that advertises a Japanese restaurant-slash-nightclub near the Belarusskaia metro station [Figure 24]. “In the 1990s, there was no such thing as commercial graffiti,” he explains.

Only in this century have we started to incorporate graffiti and airbrush. There are many people that want to write only for art’s sake but we, too, need money. For the last three or four years, I have only done contracted jobs and, of those, I only do airbrush work. Nobody looks down on you for it. I can call up any graffiti writing friends and say, ‘Hey I have twenty bucks if you come paint a wall.’ That’s the human component... we are a part of a community that grew up together. Everybody needs money. Nobody looks down on you.34

Corporations and institutions interested in appealing to a trendy market often broadcast themselves by sponsoring legal festivals. These competitions or conventions offer to artists a permitted open space where they may leisurely paint, unencumbered by the usual threats of authority interference and post-production buffing. Legal festivals are not only corporate ventures; on occasion they are sponsored by local businesses, schools, and community centers that express the seemingly wholesome intentions of beautifying a neighborhood, bridging the gap between nuclear families and the underworld art scene, deterring youths from engaging in illegal graffiti practice, and bringing communities together in the name of shared experience. Yet graffiti, as a practice,
inherently opposed to authority and social hierarchy. It traditionally wages a midnight war on private property and mainstream media censorship. In theory, rarely—if ever—should the temporal and spatial planes of the viewer and graffiti writer collide. As legality itself is conceptually a destruction of graffiti, may a non-corporate, community-based sponsor deem a legal festival to be permissible? I argue, yes. As painting murals means taking responsibility for your local public space and beautifying your neighborhood for the benefit of your community, the legal festival can be a valuable and meaningful event. That said these pieces should not be considered graffiti per the traditional definition of the term, but rather as permitted street art.


Figure 21: Kirill Kto. *Buff*. Freehand. 3 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).
Figure 21: Kirill Kto. “Less Regret, Less Laying Around. More Wanting, More Wishing.” Adapted Advertisements. 2 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).


Figure 22: Basket. Legal, Commissioned Piece. Mural. 11 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).
Graffiti as a Medium of Social and Political Critique

In contemporary Russia, especially prior to the widespread protests that began in December 2011, explicitly critical political sentiment is regularly censored in the mainstream media. Those who hold dissenting opinions about obvious corruption, flawed elections, or undesirable political leaders are barely, if at all, permitted to broadcast their sentiment for fear of job loss, social alienation, or worse. A hierarchy of topic permits critique of foreign relations, local authorities, and police actions; encourages the avoidance of Kremlin officials, their questionable ethics, and corrupt oligarchs; and entirely prohibits critique regarding strife in Chechnia, murdered journalists, and abused human rights activists (prior to December 2011, Putin himself was sacrosanct, though this topic is becoming more open to public discourse). As a result, citizens who wish to engage in critical discussion are forced to uncover alternative avenues of expression, in which they may freely and unabashedly express political or social critique. This sentiment can take shape in a number of media: rock music (think Kino or Pussy Riot), internet chat boards, town hall meetings, public marches, and, as we saw in Barnaul, Russia in February 2012, mock protests attended by Lego toys and stuffed animals. Yet it is street art, thanks to its anonymous nature and despite its under-acknowledged worth, that exists as one of the most effective avenues for free political expression. Politicized writers and viewers can engage the writing on the walls to access an existing political discourse that is otherwise visibly absent from the public space.

If the symbol (the peace sign, the swastika) illustrates the graffiti mentality of the Soviet 1980s and name graffiti culture corresponds to the post-Soviet 1990s, then the graffiti of the 2000s depicts an increased attention to spatial and critical thinking among Generation Two street artists. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the purpose of graffiti was no longer limited to territory appropriation or the pursuit of fame; the writers of the early post-Soviet period began to actively engage their viewership through explicitly political themes, layered social critiques, intertextual references, and the sharing of otherwise-censored information.

Around 2005, British street artist Banksy pioneered a global movement that employed stencils as effective tools for voicing political sentiment and social critique. Banners, stickers, wheatpastes, and mailing labels also joined the ranks of available and preferred media for street artists. These techniques gained particular value for activists who could largely design their art from home. When the time came to spread their message in their street, artists and
activists could quickly repeat the same stencil across a larger distance, leaving a more widely visible and uniform mark on the public sphere. “Stencils are number one in political graffiti,” stated Most. “You don’t have to have good handwriting, you just spray over a cut-out.” Political parties have also noted the high visibility and effectiveness of graffiti stencils and have, in turn, co-opted the medium for the purposes of garnering support for a political figure or building a unified front against another. Stencilling is not always a good thing, suggests Kto. When stencils share extremist messages and stray too far from the center, observers begin to believe that these statements accurately reflect an existing street narrative. Though these undesirable and offensive symbols are exactly what Kto wants to buff, he is incorrect to claim that they do not reflect accurately the existing street narrative. To the contrary, these extremist stencils do reflect the at-times xenophobic, fascist, extremist, and anti-Semitic sentiment, which also participates in the public discourse. The characteristics of stencilling—speed, uniformity, distance covered, and thus the assertion of a citywide presence—empower the practitioner to influence public opinion in both positive and negative ways, depending on the message depicted.

During Moscow’s March 2012 election period, the graffiti commissioned by and supporting political parties dominated the city’s walls. Stickers and stencils about partisan politics, opposition meetings, and Presidential candidates saturated the streets. So much so that those artists typically involved in forming the political discourse of the graffitied public consciousness during non-election periods were elbowed out of the streets and back into their workshops. During a March 2012 interview, a Zuk Club artist explained that while his crew made a banner for the December 24th opposition meeting depicting cartoon thievery and deception, they largely avoided adding art to the cluttered streets during the Presidential election season, conceding that the viewer becomes inundated with so much visual noise and new information in the public sphere during an election period that real political sentiment may become muted beneath the temporary influx of partisan politics. While the Zuk Club art group is composed of a younger, more energetic, and boyish crowd, their sentiment is shared by older artists like Most and Kto. The latter players also concur with Zuk Club’s mantra that writing support for, or against, a particular political figure is pointless. To the contrary, street artists feel that they have an implicit obligation to create something new, to engage their communities, and to inspire deeper waves of social change. In a February interview, Kto explained his own reasons for creating street art:
My work not only regards the dialogue of the city but also the harmony of the space. Politics is already a fact of the dialogue on the walls, but the themes important for me are those more existential. I am interested in the local situation, but I don’t write about Putin or macroeconomics. I am more interested in connecting with my local district. I combine codes from pop culture, from modern culture, and from politics in my art. For example, Luzhkov [Moscow’s previous mayor] = king and Kasparov [a reference to Garry Kasparov, the international chess phenomenon turned politician] = toy.

There is a tacit consent among writers that we have all the tools, and therefore the responsibility, to tell something as it truly is. Still, most continue to write their names, which—to me—only confirms their social lethargy and indifference to political change. To me, name graffiti and loyalty to the existing regime are one and the same. If you are quietly engaged in your own business and do not react in any way to an event in society, then you agree with the current political and social course of your society.

The general right to expression in the street on any theme is fiction and voluntarism. You should be reliable for a place, and you should write there impudently.

Writers who fail to take responsibility for their voice and power in the public space are precisely the individuals that Kto parodies. He pokes fun at Nashi, a pro-Kremlin youth organization that paraded through Moscow’s streets on Election Day wearing leather jackets and black touques, and paints their slogans on luxury cars as a way of highlighting the connection between money and power. He writes mini-manifestoes on the walls of Moscow that assail political apathy, private ownership of public property, and the graffiti artists who clutter the public sphere with empty words. He writes sarcastically glorifying messages on the behalf of the ultra-right about Edinaia Rossiia and destroys the eyes in advertisements to leave behind a message to see beyond the corporate realm.

When the powers-that-be abruptly decided to replace the long-time Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov with a Kremlin insider named Sergei Sobianin in 2010, Kto used the city’s walls to send the new mayor a message: “Sobianin, you’re just a baby,” Kto wrote. “Don’t disappoint me.” Kto takes his responsibilities seriously as director of the “Wall Project,” a Vinzavod art installment that exhibits the work of a new graffiti artist bi-monthly. Kto also organizes and proctors a lecture series, in which he invites these artists to present their work and ideas to the community in a formal setting. By encouraging artists to discuss their intentions through an academic lens, Kto singlehandedly raises the bar for quality and introspection in Muscovite street art.

Kto’s critical eye and methods do not leave him drawing alone in a vacuum. The upper echelon of Russian artists largely approaches the medium with a more careful and sustained forethought than in the previous decade. Most significant are: Novosibirsk’s artistic martyr Artem Loskutov, the scandalous art-group Voina, Ekaterinburg’s intellectual Radya, Moscow’s youthful Zuk Club, Saint Petersburg’s stencilled Group of Change,
and the street artists cum social activists at Partizaning. These groups and individuals are intentionally concise, assertive, and major players in defining the narrative of the public sphere. They dominate the streets with succinct, nuanced political critique, and a clear, visible writing style.

Upon his May 15th 2009 arrest, the artist Artem Loskutov achieved national fame. He was charged with the possession of clearly planted narcotics and bogus acts of hooliganism. In his Siberian hometown of Novosibirsk, Loskutov acted as a key organizer of absurdist public actions. Press releases for his meetings stated no explicit political intention; rather they focused on art’s relationship with mass absurdity and public shock, causing art historians certain reminiscence for Mikhail Larionov’s Futurist demonstrations at the turn of the twentieth century. And yet the government, obviously threatened by Loskutov’s mobilizing abilities, arrested the absurdist artist and kept him in a Novosibirsk jail for three months. During the summer of 2009, protests flared up across Russia in response. These mass actions were intended both to espouse Loskutov's innocence as well as to bring attention to the judicial system’s injustices, which landed their martyr in jail in the first place. Stencilled graffiti that called for Loskutov’s release quickly coated nationwide urban centers [Figure 25]. In the Vasilievskii Island neighborhood surrounding Saint Petersburg State University, Artem’s stencilled face showed next to the words: “Freedom to the Artist Loskutov! Art is Not Extremism,” for several years. By August 2011, the numbers of Loskutov stencils had multiplied significantly. The stencil no longer demanded Loskutov’s prompt release—the artist had been long since freed—but instead for artistic freedom from political pressure.

Figure 23: Anonymous. “Freedom to the Artist Loskutov. Art is not Extremism.” Stencil. 8 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
Some of the most notorious recent examples of shocking public art are credited to the art-group Voina (in English, War). Founded in 2005, Voina does not have a set list of members, but a rotating conglomerate of participating artists. In 2011 the collective won a prestigious contemporary art award for defiling one of the Neva’s raising drawbridges with an immense spray-painted phallus. When raised, the bridge faced the FSB headquarters building in Saint Petersburg. Though the group has kept to the streets for most of their work, last year they sneaked into Saint Petersburg’s Russian Museum to conduct an elaborately staged public orgy, which they promptly dedicated to President Medvedev. Voina, along with its feminist rock offshoot Pussy Riot, tiptoes the line between art and activism. They have been known to throw cats at McDonald’s employees and light police vans on fire. The group does raise some concerns, suggests Misha Most; anytime political art in Russia is openly supported by participant names, suspicion about that art-group’s true purpose is never far behind. Nevertheless, Voina has capitalized on its relative fame by organizing larger scale, art-based anarchist protests that call for the release of their leader Oleg “Vor” Vorotnikov. In November 2011, the group launched their “Wanted” exhibition on Prague’s historical Charles Bridge. The action criticizes the Russian government and police for allegedly persecuting Voina artists, focusing on Vorotnikov’s sentence.

On the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains in Ekaterinburg, street artist Radya organizes high production-value works aimed to criticize political deficiencies, intellectual bankruptcy, corporate dominance, and social misgivings. Radya recognizes that when artists release their work into the public space, meaning and interpretation fall to the viewer. For this reason Radya, like Misha Most, explicitly sticks to simple designs and phrases to express simple critiques (a distinct shift from the text-saturated posters of the late Soviet period). Nevertheless, Radya appears to be an intellectual and the layers of his projects reflect this. For example, in an August 2010 installation, Radya designed his intertextual “face book” project in Ekaterinburg. In this piece, Radya built a shrine to the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii, a literary heroes of the Soviet era. In this project, Radya used painted books filled with Maiakovskii’s poetry as his chosen medium, highlighting an abandoned trail of unread masterpieces by the society of the technological age. In “face book,” Radya also sought to comment on the suspended temporal-spatial plane, on which a conversation with the author is always possible, regardless of the non-literary progression of time. A March 2011 installation exhibits a wooden desk halfway submerged beneath a flowing Ekaterinberg river,
surrounded by the poetry of Iosif Brodskii, another Soviet literary icon. The artist explains that in the artwork the river eats away at the material objects just as time causes the form of man to erode and transform. In January 2011, Radya painted a giant red square on the empty lot of a demolished home in Ekaterinburg. Authorities permitted contractors to illegally raze the property to make way for the construction of an adjacent skyscraper. “[We painted while] it was dark,” Radya writes on his website, “but as the sun rose, it turned out scary—[the paint] looked like blood.” The glass-windowed skyscraper overlooked the painted red square in the now-vacant lot, a symbol of the government’s insurmountable right to power over its citizens. “The new glass house on the blood of the old one,” Radya adds. As bombing flared up at the tail end of the Chechen insurgency in August 2008, Radya launched a project titled “On the Other Hand” that criticized the Russian government’s actions in Grozny during the 1999 Second Chechen War and their unwillingness to accept responsibility for the bloody consequences that continue to take place nearly a decade later.

Most recently, Radya’s street art focuses extensively on Russia’s recent fraudulent election cycle. On December 4th 2011, the Russian citizenry voted in a parliamentary election, the results of which remain internationally criticized per the innumerable violations that took place. On an official-looking billboard atop a nine-story apartment building in Ekaterinburg, Radya wrote “You’ve Been Cheated,” next to a small, red checked box drawn to resemble an election ballot. Radya responded with a similar aesthetic to the March 4th 2012 Presidential election. On a billboard overlooking an Ekaterinburg highway, the street artist wrote “Nothing New,” again painted as the only option on a standard voting ballot.

In 2000, four neighborhood friends banded together to form Zuk Club, a group that began as a simple graffiti crew but soon developed into a non-conformist and intentionally outrageous street art unit. By 2005 the crew expanded: “we went from four people to a big crowd that really wanted to create something unique. We ignored the rules of art—the norms of color and composition—and started painting some psychedelic and shocking stuff.” While one writer shared a digitized catalogue of the crew’s recent projects, another spoke about his favorite art action of the last decade:

It was during the time of the Georgian-Russian war three years ago. Russia broke all of its meeting points with Georgia but, in the meantime, we claimed that we were friends though it was clear that they were our biggest enemy. It was really strange for me because Georgia always seemed like a part of Russia, a part of the USSR. Of course it wasn’t but that’s what it seemed like. After the war, I was
so amazed that we had so many enemies at our borders. [Because of Georgia’s close relations with the United States] we drew a big work that depicted a Russian bear destroying the USA flag. The root of Medvedev’s name is medved, which in English means bear.

With passion and animation, the cohort spoke about the widespread opposition protests mobilizing in response to Russia’s current social and political state. In addition to demonstrating against December’s fraudulent Parliamentary elections and the informational void in the media, Zuk Club expressed their belief the most important tension in contemporary society is the battle that pits young people against a status quo. According to Zuk Club’s spokesperson, Russians spent so many years in a catatonic state that most do not comprehend the power of protest en masse. The demonstrations encourage a political opening and a freedom of speech that did not exist to the same degree only a few months prior.

It’s a new trend for young people [to express their political sentiment publically]. It’s a new thing that you can talk to other people about politics. Two years ago it was really strange, just you and the people around you. It was very personal. Now it’s an all-society thing. It’s not dangerous. It’s the birth of something very good. If you want to burn some cars in the street [like Voina did on New Years’ Eve 2012], of course it’s very dangerous but if you want to make some posters in the streets or you want to paint a wall in a beautiful color, and not in the color of depression, that’s cool and right now that’s what people are doing. This is my truth: to do something is better than doing nothing.

750 kilometres to the north in Saint Petersburg, the Group of Change’s stencils depend less on nuanced illustration and more on explicit and cutting calls to action. The crew plasters its city with stencils that demand an end to state-led censorship, the historical preservation of pre-revolutionary architecture, and mass mobilization for greater rights. Their pieces almost always incorporate URLs that lead to their website, where viewers can learn practical details about upcoming events and, more recently, public demonstrations. Recently in downtown Saint Petersburg and Moscow, the group wheatpastes small comics that depict Putin and Dosteovskii’s philosophical musings during hypothetical, quotidian outings. En route to an August 2011 interview in Saint Petersburg, a young, female graffiti artist commented on a Group of Change stencil that read “Modernization or Death” [Figure 26]. A colleague of the crew, she explained that the Russian public wants greater rights and an end to corruption more than any wholesale abolition of the existing system built around Putin and Edinaia Rossiia. The goal of the Group of Change in particular and the opposition movement in general is not so much to create a viable opposition candidate, but rather to demand a better life for the average Russian in the workplace, at school, and in their
community. Other Group of Change stencils oppose construction in the city that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, criticize media censorship, and invite observers to protest alongside the crew [Figures 27-30].

Figure 24: Group of Change. “Modernization or Death. Group of Change.” Stencil. 7 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 25: Group of Change. “The City As It Is. Group of Change.” Stencil. 8 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
Figure 26: Group of Change. “On the 8th of March, and Write it Down, We Will Be Together. Group of Change.” Stencil. 10 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 27: Group of Change. “Censorship Doesn’t Sell. Group of Change.” Stencil. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 28: Group of Change. “Stand Up Beside Me. Group of Change.” Stencil. 10 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
In Moscow, Partizaning shares the Group of Change’s mentality as both seek to work *with* the local government, rather than in opposition to it. Partizaning uses guerrilla street art to call for increased pedestrian rights, a more child-friendly locale, and the reappropriation of the city through better street signs and stricter parking laws. Founded by Make and Igor in November 2011 (but unofficially organized much earlier), the group seeks to spread knowledge about urban re-design. They regularly release a contemporary art publication, arrange free public lectures about street art and urban activism, and house events in a former wine factory. In a March 2012 interview at Moscow’s Art Play center the team’s editors explained, “In Russia, many people think that they cannot do anything because they think that there’s no solution for this country and for its problems.” Partizaning does not tell their Muscovite volunteers what needs to be done or how to do it; instead its editorial board—a team of art historians and graffiti artists—seeks to, by example, inspire average citizens to challenge social problems using creative tools and existing public spaces. Partizaning’s self-published manifesto explains their rationale for using street art as a tool for inspiring community engagement, accessible urban living, and thus eliciting positive social change:

Since the 1920s, radical artistic experiments have sought to destroy the boundaries between art and everyday life. Old industrial buildings, city streets, the Internet and mass media are increasingly replacing museums and galleries as the ideal forums and exhibition venues for modern art.

Today's activist urban residents do not think of art [as] a distinct system. They use the language of art as a tool to challenge and change their daily reality: from DIY [Do-It-Yourself] urban repair to struggling for new forms of state representation.

Unsanctioned interventions and interactions in our urban environments, combined with mass media connectivity, have become effective transformative tactics for a new, alternative vision for the future.

In a March 2012 interview, I asked the Partizaning editors if they felt like they were, more than agents of change, soldiers of some semblance of truth. An editor laughed and replied that she did, to some degree, feel this way; a street artist is responsible for activating, organizing, and communicating with their community, she explained, and therefore has the power to bring its ills to public attention and hopefully to their dissolve.
CHAPTER II: THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF STREET EXPRESSION

In “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Russian cultural and literary theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin evokes nostalgia for the lost public sphere. He pines over the pre-industrial central square where inhabitants of a town would gather to celebrate, share sorrow, gossip, and engage in daily trade. The advent of industrialization in the 1840s resulted in a widespread shift from the public square to the private spaces of the workplace and the home. Time, now valued in workdays, coffee breaks, overtime, and production quotas, became cyclical and commoditized. “The tightening of the chronological net around daily life had everything to do with achieving the necessary coordination for profitable production and exchange over space,” explains urban studies theorist David Harvey. In the industrial era, average citizens began to dominate space by dividing it up, owning it, and selling inches for financial gain via currency or equity. Graffiti artists reject this private domination over public space by writing unfavourable statements on walls that do not belong to them. In a way, street artists restore the pre-industrial public square by reinvigorating it as a place for information sharing and political discourse.

In Chapter One, I outlined the highlights and limitations of John Bushnell’s arguments in his work *Moscow Graffiti*. As I suggested in the introduction of this thesis, there is a void of analytical literature on the topic of graffiti or street art in the post-Soviet realm. Therefore I elected to forego the literature review in the traditional sense. Instead my goal in Chapter Two is to examine the basic concepts of graffiti—the image, the public space, and the temporal-spatial plane in which the graffiti realm exists—through a critical, multi-disciplinary lens. I will then explore the applicability of these theoretical concepts to illustrations of political graffiti that I collected throughout my regional fieldwork.

The structure of this chapter will be divided into four sections: (1) a short introduction to the critical theory surrounding the concept of the image, focusing on Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulation and Simulacra*, Niklas Luhmann’s understanding of the original and the replication, and Marshall McLuhan’s popular theory that views the medium as the message; (2) a brief discussion and application of existing urban critical theory regarding the public space, also referred to as the third space, primarily outlined by Henri Lefebvre and Ray Oldenburg; (3) an application of
Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s concept of the spatial-temporal literary plane—the chronotope—to the graffiti counterculture and narrative, including an explanation of the chronotope of corporate reality and the chronotope of the graffiti realm; and (4) a discussion on illegal versus legal painting and how the latter corresponds with the aforementioned chronotopal analysis. These topics will reveal that street art images can be analyzed by similar standards as traditional or gallery art, yet maintain that the factor of place—in this case, the public space—obliges the observer to consider the unique factors of the street art practice (surface, tools, meaning) and the way in which an image is enhanced by third variables such as illegality, environmental context, or a commitment to the clandestine. To understand the practice of graffiti through a chronotopal lens is to acknowledge its discursive quality and therefore to read the art form and practice as critical parts of the expressed message and to analyze each production as an indicator pointing toward a greater narrative.

The Image

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously, text and symbols generate meaning. This section offers a brief discussion of artistic symbols and their ability to convey complicated messages, despite an oft-unadorned appearance. Ferdinand de Saussure’s theoretical program of semiology views linguistic signs as the building blocks of communication. The two components of semiotics are the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the expression, or literally the acoustic image, and the signified is the concept expressed by means of this particular combination of acoustic images. Saussure explains the three categories of the image as the sign, the symbol, and the signal. Henri Lefebvre, in his text Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday, comments on Saussure’s three categorical occasions, in which the signifier and the signified appear:

The symbol differs from the sign and even more so from the signal in that it appears inexhaustible. Effectively, it is. The signal is something that we are conditioned to understand, i.e. red light, green light. The sign is an auditory, and also visual, word or command. Halt. Stop. Leave. The sign is different than the signal because the sign has a duality of meaning: phonemic level and meaning/signifier. The symbol is the cross, or the fox as cunning, or the advertisement that is familiar to us. [The symbol] immediately triggers off emotions, and even sensations.41

From this explanation, we understand graffiti and street art as constructed signs and predominately, though not exclusively, as motivated and meaningful symbols. Jean Baudrillard, in his text Simulacra and Simulation, attests that these fabricated signs and symbols are often constructions and mirror-image simulations of the real (real in
that they are originally found in nature). Though a mirror image replicates an original with great accuracy, one cannot reach out and touch the face in the mirror in the same way that they can connect with the actual face. Furthermore, the mirror distorts the image by flipping the original right to the mirrored left and vice versa. Thus, according to Baudrillard, these reproductions of reality in media and culture have replaced original objects in nature—truths—with generated symbols and signs, therefore leading the symbol and its associated message to become a fictitious—yet authoritative—dominator over truth. For Baudrillard, “postmodernity marks the horizon where modern dynamics of growth and explosion have reached their limits and begin to draw inward and absorb themselves, resulting in an implosive process devouring all relationship poles, structural differences, conflicts, and contradictions, and referential finalities.” Such is the case with Putin’s cult of personality; the Russian leader’s face is depicted on banners, in street art, and on the television on a constant basis. Thus when he appears in his actual form before a crowd, it is not the poster that feels falsified, but the self. The image of Putin is perpetuated so heavily throughout Russian society, that the form gains a fictitious air. The mass reproduction of symbols of “truth” and “reality” largely impact a breakdown of the distinction between the real and the reflection. The ability to mass-produce the replica but not the original empties the latter of its meaning and value. When the form is propagated, the real is devalued.

These mirror images and symbolic representations of concepts in nature ensure that a viewer cannot (and furthermore, should not) disassociate the replication, the graffitied sign or symbol, from its contextual relevancy. A juxtaposed Star of David and Nazi swastika illustrate a more complicated relationship than their basic shapes; it is their historical and social associations that intensify the relationship between these two symbols and bring the piece a duality of meaning [Figure 31]. Due to the fact that these symbols are familiar to the artist and viewer, their presence on this wall tells a greater story about Judaism and Nazi-bred anti-Semitism, especially throughout Eastern Europe, where historical prejudice against the Jewish population is no secret. It is because of these symbolic associations that a third artist approached this piece to cross out the swastika in purple spray paint. In Riga, a wheatpaste depicts a female figure going through a meat grinder while holding stars [Figure 32]. A contextual familiarity with Riga’s downtown monuments, however, reveals that the figure is Latvia’s Lady Freedom who stands atop the Freedom Monument in the city’s center [Figure 33]. The figure on the national
monument holds up three stars in the same alignment that is shown in the wheatpaste. The statue represents Latvia’s freedom and sovereignty, initially from Russia and then as a symbol of Latvian identity despite the Soviet occupation. Understanding the historical context of this figure makes its demolition via meat grinder all the more meaningful. Large, individual pieces of meat enter a meat grinder and thin uniform tubes exit. This critique of Latvian national identity placed through a meat grinder mirrors the public narrative of Riga, which explicitly expresses fear about the country’s accession to the European Union and the concessions that Latvians must make in order to gain respect and dominance in this global community. A noticeable percentage of Riga’s street art reflects this theme and other economic concerns.

Figure 29: Anonymous. Jewish Star and Nazi Swastika. Freehand. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

In Saint Petersburg an artist stencilled a double-headed eagle, the national symbol for Russia dating back through the Tsarist era, with what seems to be a bottle of vodka in its talons, criticizing the alcoholism that plagues Russian men [Figure 34]. In Minsk, one artist painted a stencil that illustrates a knight on horseback. Members of the opposition and Belarusian historians identify the symbol as the Pahonia [Figure 35]. The Pahonia, which in English translates as *chase*, was originally a symbol used during the Polish-Lithuanian Empire of the ninth century. It was co-opted by the Belarusian state after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Lukashenko came to office in July 1994 and by 1995, banned the image from all aesthetic discourse. The opposition to Lukashenko adopted the Pahonia as its own symbol of freedom, independaence, and opposition solidarity. Not one of these four described images includes any explanatory text, however the meanings of these symbols are understood per their historical, political, and social associations.
Through the act of repetition, an artist creates a reputation for a symbol, building meaning for an image that previously had no contextual relevancy. At first, an artist writes his name or message next to a symbol and, over time, the symbol will speak for itself and the accompanying name or explanation will cease to appear [Figure 36]. On the right side of this image, the artist has drawn a wreath-like symbol. Alone, this has no explicit meaning, but if a viewer has for example lived in the city for an extended period of time, they are aware that the symbol previously accompanied nationalist and xenophobic slogans like “Love Your Own Race” [Figure 15]. The wreath symbol gains an emotive power, directed toward those who understand the narrative of the streets and therefore recognize its historical relationship with, for example, a hateful phrase or a violent graffiti crew.
The symbol alone speaks tomes about the artist, the intent, and the message, simply based on the recognizable colors, placement, style, and size of the image. A common practice in the graffiti world is that of copying, or co-opting, another artist’s graffiti image. When imitation gangs began to copy the Zachem graffiti, it resulted in a less important and less unique original. It also increased the importance of the Zachem concept as it devalued the original Zachem group. What is critical is not how accurately a reproduction mirrors the original, but rather how the reproduction impacts or affects the viewer. According to Niklas Luhmann in his text *The Reality of the Mass Media*, an adherence to an authentic reality and therefore to the image in nature is not as important as the message expressed in the symbolic reproduction as the latter allows subsequent discourse to evolve farther from its origins and potentially creates new ways of seeing and understanding the initial concepts. Luhmann explores the role of authenticity in art:

Reality is nothing more than an indicator of successful tests for consistency in the system. Reality is produced within the system by means of sense-making... if reality is expressly emphasized in the communication (a real lemon, a real experience), then what is simultaneously emphasized is that doubts are possible and perhaps even appropriate. The more complex the system becomes and the more it exposes itself to irrations, the more variety the world can permit without relinquishing any reality – and the more the system can afford to work with negations, with fictions, with merely analytical or statistical assumptions which distance it from the world as it is.44

Thus the construction of the real, while a perversion of authenticity and perhaps truth, does not necessarily impede intellectual discourse or the public narrative. Here, Canadian critical theorist Marshall McLuhan’s mantra, “the medium is the message,” adds value. Not only does the image not have to replicate the original with precision, the tools and methods used to produce the replication are just as important in a message’s construction. In Minsk for example, an artist wrote the word Svaboda (in English, *Freedom*) on an interior cloth wall within the confines of the artist district [Figure 37]. If the medium is the message, this call for freedom in a hidden place—perhaps one of the only somewhat public spaces for uninhibited artistic collaboration in Minsk—indicates to the viewer that it remains unsafe to graffiti messages of freedom outside of this protected womb. This act of writing an emotive word like *freedom* in authoritarian Belarus is as, if not more, meaningful than the phonemic combination written elsewhere. The action and its residual markings on a cloth board in a back hallway within Belarus’ small, remaining civil society leave a constructed and inauthentic, yet powerful and unifying message about the pursuit of artistic and political freedom for Minsk’s oppressed artistic community.
A photograph taken in downtown Budapestcatalogues a stencil of a blindfolded person speaking into a radio microphone. Below the character, the viewer reads “Freedom of Speech” [Figure 38, also see Figure 2]. The medium of this stencil—to spray paint illegally onto a crumbling wall—indicates a nearly anxious desperation to express this message. In January 2011, the Hungarian government introduced its controversial Media Law, which subjects all publications—on the web, on the television, and in traditional newspaper print—to official review, thus enacting a policy of total censorship on the heavily politicized Hungarian state. An anonymous artist designed this stencil, observed in July 2011, evidently in response to this top-down constraint on the media. Recall the March 2012 stencils in downtown Moscow addressed in the introduction [Figure 2]. One stencil reads “I Love Independent Courts” while an adjacent production says “I Love Unrestricted Press.” These two stencils appeared during a highly politicized election period in the center of Russia’s capitol city. When the disenfranchised lack
access or equal representation to power vacuums—in this case, specifically the Hungarian and Russian media and the Russian judicial branch—the anonymous nature of graffiti provides a certain shared power to this otherwise voiceless societal group. An artists’ use of graffiti as a medium to express discontent with repressive censorship or power barriers reflects precisely the free and effective nature of the public art form.

The Public Space

“The urban is at best an ideological construction.”
Henri Lefebvre. The Urban Revolution

The categorization of space is generally limited to two types: the public and the private. However, urban studies theorist Ray Oldenburg, in his book The Good Great Place, explains the categorization of space as having three components. The first space, Oldenburg writes, refers to the nurturing privacy of the home, while the second is the contained workplace with its own set of production-centric temporal and spatial values. The third space is the neutral, voluntary, and inclusive “core setting of informal public life.” Oldenburg explains that in “pre-literate societies, the third space was actually foremost, being the grandest structure in the village and commanding the central location,” a place to mourn, to rejoice, and to pass the hours collectively. The third space—a neighborhood bar, a public square, a parade ground—is a leveller, in that it is accessible to the public, lacks exclusive membership restrictions, and deconstructs the structures of social hierarchy, which dominate in both types of private space. Anyone can come into the third space and feel as though they belong there, whether they are rich or poor, well-read or illiterate, ill or able-bodied. “Third spaces tend to expand possibilities,” Oldenburg states, “whereas formal associations narrow and restrict them.” Property rights complicate the boundaries of the third space, as there is a constant push and pull between its expansive, liberating potential and the interests of those who own and control it.

The most cardinal and sustaining activity of the public—or third—space is conversation. In the third space “conversation is more spirited, less inhibited, and more eagerly pursued. Compared to the speech in other realms, it is more dramatic and more often attended by laughter and the exercise of wit.” Historically, the public square existed as a place to share news, celebrations, and gossip with other members of a community. By definition, the third space remains a place for unrestricted information sharing. Alternative to the more strictly controlled and
monitored first and second spaces, the third space offers the additional “opportunity to question, protest, sound out, supplement and form opinion locally and collectively,” a necessary practice for any functioning participatory system. In his 1964 article “The Public Sphere,” Jürgen Habermas agrees with this claim: “The public space is where a citizenry finds the greatest freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest.” The public space is where the citizenry can form ideas about their government, their society, and their loyalties. In this sense, the public sphere is a symbol of freedom, which gains its legitimacy and strength by means of public participation.

Graffiti discourse, displayed in the three examples below, is an important concept in reading a dialogical street narrative. On a trash canister in Budapest, artists engaged in a similar political conversation in graffiti form. One artist wrote “F*ck Jobbik,” another “Cigány (a derogatory term for Roma),” a third “666,” a fourth a cross, and a fifth an anarchist symbol; five politicized symbols and phrases, all from arguably different political camps, that coexist and interact within one small rectangle of space [Figure 39]. A residual anger toward the post-war Soviet occupation remains in the Czech rhetoric and the topic appears frequently in the streets. On one wall in a quiet neighborhood by the river, one artist drew Che Guevara wearing a Che Guevara t-shirt, a mocking play on the overhyped impression of Che Guevara by Soviet revolutionaries. Beside Guevara, another artist stenciled the helmeted head of Iurii Gargarin, the famed Soviet astronaut. Next to this stencil the artist wrote, “Yuri Says: Reach for the Stars!” In a third handwriting, an anonymous commenter has added the words, “Russian Go Home!!!” [Figure 40]. This historic and lasting tension between Russians and Czechs illustrated in street art is not as surprising as these artists’ decisions to conduct their entire conversation in the English language. There is no definitive explanation as to why all three artists elected to do this without finding the artists and conducting interviews. As the anonymous writers may never be located, the message remains subject to the viewer’s interpretation—another participant in the urban narrative—until the wall is buffed.

One artist, or several artists painting with the same stencil, assumedly felt empowered by the liberating public space to question the murder of Iurii Volkov, a television journalist and fanaty murdered in a post-match fight in July 2010 [Figure 41, see also Figure 81]. The slogan “For What Purpose was Iurii Volkov Murdered” questions the Chechen-Russian relations in Moscow, the stereotypically confrontational fanaty, the fair assessment provided
by police and jury members, and the manner in which Volkov’s murder activated the neo-fascist community to hold memorial ceremonies en masse.


In the third space, status does not dictate who may speak, when, about whom, and how much. All participants share equal access to the streets, despite their level of knowledge or range of wit. Anyone with a spray can belongs in the public space and has the freedom—albeit an illegal freedom—to speak his or her mind. Henri Lefebvre suggests that this freedom of speech associated with the public space explains why mass revolutionary events generally take place in the streets. “Space holds the promise of liberation,” Lefebvre explains, “liberation from the tyranny of time apart from anything else, but also from social repression and exploitation, from self-imprisoning categories—[space builds] liberation into desire. Space is radically open… speech can become ‘savage’ and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls.” Totalitarian governments are keenly aware of this fact and closely monitor or discourage via buff or consequence the heated discourse that incubates in the informal gathering space.

If the public space encourages political discourse and it is the thinking artist’s responsibility to portray societal problems as said artist feels they frankly exist, then graffiti is not only an inevitable, but also a necessary tool in the search for a social truth. Graffiti is simply the transmission of public sentiment from verbal to written—from private to public—in the anonymous, public space. Martin Levine, in his book chapter titled “The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture,” expands on the power of street art:

Street art reveals a new kind of attention to the phenomenology of the city, the experience of material spaces and places in daily life, and has re-introduced play and the gift in public exchange. Well-executed and well-placed street art re-anchors us in the here and now, countering the forces of disappearance in the city as a frictionless commerce machine neutralizing time and presence and claiming all zones of visuality for itself. Street art rematerializes the visual, an aesthetic of reappearance in an era of continual re-mediation and disappearance.
With the understanding that the most critical aspect of the public space is conversation, graffiti as a practice and as an aesthetic must invariably carry a dialogical element. Multiple voices and meanings can be drawn from one mural or the street art spanning one neighborhood. In their book “Social Semiotics, Style and Ideology,” Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress write, “Instead of assuming that the coherence of society, conflict and contradiction are the norm [even within insular communities], dialogic and pluralist codes signify the existence of various kinds of opposition, resistance, and negotiation within a group.” When reading a wall for a city’s narrative, it is important to take into consideration the competing voices, contexts, and interests.

An Application of M. M. Bakhtin’s Chronotope to the Narrative of the Streets

While the previous sections discussed the characteristics of the image and the public space, the following will explain the basic features of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope, which he introduced in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” published in the text Dialogical Imagination. The chronotope (literally chronos-topos, or “time-space”) is “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that [is] artistically expressed in literature.” The chronotope is the result of the interaction between three elements: the temporal plane, the spatial plane, and the viewer’s interaction with that particular temporal-spatial intersection. In Bakhtin’s chronotope of the Greek Romance, for example, both time and space are abstract, boundless, and simultaneously suspended in a state of “at just that moment.” As a result, even if the observer (the reader) resumes reading the Greek Romance after a twenty-year hiatus, the protagonists remain equally youthful, brave, courageous, and physically able to rise to the challenges separating themselves from their lovers. Upon entering and exiting the chronotopal realm as he or she chooses, the reader interprets the narrative as according to his or her own contextual understanding, engaging in discourse with and therefore legitimating the constructed reality of the narrative. If a literary trope is crafted correctly and expressively, the reader will inevitably draw aspects of the chronotopal reality from within the binding into his own, non-literary, quotidian version of reality. Temporally and spatially, reality is no longer “concentrated in the spaces of rooms where private family life goes on, rather [it] unfolds under the open sky, in movement around the earth. It must spread out as far and wide as
The chronotope exists in the limitations of each, unique narrative, not in pre-existing ascertains of reality or fantasy.

Though not published within two book covers, graffiti is a communicative and narrative art, which transforms a city’s walls into a discursive text. Therefore it is possible to define the particular confines of a temporal-spatial graffiti realm with traditional literary tools, specifically in relation to the Rabelaisian chronotope. Bakhtin’s chronotope of the Rabelais analyzes the literary carnivalesque, in which the corporate reality is completely abolished and the new reality (the carnivalesque) fully inverts existing norms of power and social hierarchy. “It is necessary to destroy and rebuild the entire false picture of the world, to surrender the false hierarchical links between objects and ideals, to abolish the divisive ideational strata.” Bakhtin explains how authenticity, laughter, and truth deconstruct the corporate world:

The ancient matrices are re-established here on a new and loftier base. They are freed from all that had disunited and distorted them in the old world. They are freed from all otherworldly explanations, sublimations, [and] interdicts. These new realities are purged through laughter, taken out of the high contexts that had disunited them, distorted their nature, and are brought into the real context [the graffiti plane] of a freely developing human life. These realities are present in a world of freely realized human possibilities. There is nothing to limit this potential. This is the most fundamental distinguishing feature of Rabelais’ work. All historical limits are, as it were, destroyed and swept away by laughter. The field remains open to human nature, to a free unfolding of all the possibilities inherent in man. In this respect Rabelais’ world is diametrically opposed to the limited locale of the tiny idyllic world [the corporate realm]… All limitations are bequeathed to the dying world, now in the process of being laughed out of existence.

The foremost devices of this chronotope—humor, vulgarity, and the rejection of a corporate authority—closely resemble those of the graffiti realm. Humor, irony, parody, and wit—used by graffiti artists when poking fun at political leaders and their policy decisions—“not only destroys traditional connections and abolishes idealized strata; it also brings out the crude, unmediated connections between things that people otherwise seek to keep separate, in pharisaical error.” The carnivalesque is about creation and growth through humor and deconstruction. By dominating private property, street art created on the walls of the public sphere appears the perfect medium to carry out a radical disavowal of the corporate world. In the carnivalesque ritual of reversal the king is demoted to a joker and the joker promoted to a position of power, a phenomenon illustrated in the following four references. In Budapest, one sticker depicts Viktor Orban wearing Mickey Mouse ears. Below the character, the sticker reads “Viki Mouse,” a feminization of the Prime Minister’s first name [Figure 42]. A second artist in
Moscow, in another play on words, painted over a stencil in Moscow that reads, “Surkov, Search for Other Marmots” [Figure 43]. Vladislav Surkov, the alleged ideological backbone of Vladimir Putin’s system of managed democracy, is criticized for his political influence and questionable ethics. By telling Surkov to search for other marmots, this artist is evidently telling Surkov to find another nation to control, by retaining the play on the politician’s family name. In a stencil fashioned to appear like a cigarette package label, a Saint Petersburg artist wrote, “The Party Edinaia Rossiia May Be the Cause of Impotency” [Figure 44]. In a less ornate but more series piece, a Budapest artist wrote, “Viktor Orban is the King of the Thieves” [Figure 45]. By painting messages like these on a city’s public space, the artist gains some control over the public reception of a political leader, thereby elevating his or her own power as the keeper of the information. Of course, this gained power and control depends on the visibility of the piece and its reception.

![Image of a stencil with text](image)

**Figure 42:** Anonymous. “Viki Mouse.” Sticker. Budapest, Hungary. 23 July 2011. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
Figure 43: Anonymous. “Surkov, Go Search for Other Marmots.” Stencil. March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 44: Anonymous. “The Party Edinaia Rossia May Be the Cause of Impotency.” Stencil. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

The chronotope of the corporate world that stands opposed to the graffiti realm is one mitigated by money. Time and space are commodities that can be bought and sold. Time is on a strictly cyclical schedule, measured in production, coffee breaks, paid time off, and contract lengths. If one needs to move more quickly toward the future, that time shift can be purchased. When citizens do not possess the hard currency necessary to buy time, they may risk their equity. Space is divided up into tradable portions and the system is, according to Luhmann, “operatively closed on the basis of communication.” The key characteristic of the corporate world is man’s total domination over both the temporal and spatial planes. The tools of technology and industry allow man to run the contemporary corporate world with greater efficiency than ever before. The advertisements, marketing campaigns, and symbols of the corporate world carry a sense of permanence and authority, as if these completed products and ideologies have always existed. The physical manifestation of this aesthetic—the shopping mall—exists as an allegory to this presentation as symbols are delivered in a suspended state for our viewership and consumption.

The social hierarchy of the corporate world is clearly defined and the methods of rising up the corporate ladder are based on having a shrewd ability to produce, dominate, and successfully consolidate power. In the corporate world, the elites determine which events constitute as newsworthy and how that news is communicated to the public. In this realm of ownership and consumption, average citizens earn relative obscurity beneath the domination of their masters. Yet in the graffiti world—and in the Rabelais for that matter—social constructions and corporate ladders are deconstructed. In the graffiti realm, a determination of what information is newsworthy depends on the individual with the spray can. The graffiti realm, inhabited by a group of people who create their own space and propagate it with stolen supplies and clandestine operations, is a completely separate world that intrudes into the corporate realm’s regimented existence through signs left on the walls. The dried paint is the only signal that another realm exists. By the time the resident of the corporate world observes a symbol, it is already in its death-stage. The corporate world operates under the ideology of consumption; consumption functions by seducing the viewer into a space of anti-participation. Says Jean Baudrillard in his essay “On Seduction:” “To be seduced is to be diverted from one’s truth. To seduce is to divert the other from his truth. The truth then becomes the secret that escapes him.” In the midnight graffiti chronotope, the art of graffiti purges the corporate world of its inauthentic men and deities, restoring the authenticity of the corporate world by sharing with its citizens a
liberating truth. If the narrative in the corporate world is nearing its death within a pre-determined and contained temporal-spatial reality, then the narrative in the graffiti realm at the intersection of two boundless planes is only just unfolding.

Considering a piece’s location is also critical when analyzing street art. In their book Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place, urban theorists John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch explain that a place gains significance per the value that people put on it. Graffiti artists in the midnight realm pick up on this attributed place value and react accordingly; places that are more valuable in the corporate world (in dollars) are also more valuable in the graffiti world (in social currency). Social constructions make X a better place to tag than Y. Without the interference of money, the artist can temporarily own the public space by covering it with his own symbol of dominance (usually one’s name).

If the clandestine realm of midnight graffiti world were its own chronotope, it would take place in the depths of shadowed dark alleys. Temporally, the graffiti practice transcends time in a traditional, measurable sense. The realm follows a time cycle that more closely reflects pre-industrial notions of time (sunrise, sunset) than contemporary result-driven time. The art is always created at night, or at least in darkness and exists with fluidity from night to night. Spatially, the realm of graffiti exists as a system of signs and symbols beneath highway overpasses and between boxcars in abandoned train yards. An air of nervous excitement penetrates this scene, offering to the participant an adrenaline rush, eternal within the confines of this temporal-spatial existence. Yet “the whole point of the carnivalesque, and equally dialogism, is that the viewer is also a participant,” therefore the most effective images are painted in high-traffic, socially valuable neighborhoods where the reader cannot avert their attention away from the artists’ message.

The image itself, and with it the urban narrative, is constantly changing. Painted words and ideas are buffed away almost as quickly as they are etched, thereby creating a race of sorts between the artists and the erasers. The faster the artists create, the faster the erasers respond with a blocked coat of pastel-colored paint. Yet, the image is rarely erased in full, leaving behind a symbolic residue, implying that a message of truth cannot be concealed or socially cleansed. However, truth is subject to interpretation and the midnight setting also allows hate-speech to accompany political critique and contemporary design [Figures 46-48].


The carnivalesque highlights the human body, death, defecation, food, and sex. Metaphorically powerful, these factors are all taboo topics for the corporate quotidian. Graffiti artists bring these underlying themes of human existence into the public space for all to see. Whether a viewer chooses to draw the image into their conversation is unimportant, their very acknowledgement of vulgar, uncomfortable, or unpleasant symbols indicates recognition of the message and its power to infiltrate the viewer’s consciousness. As with a comic book drama on the last page of the daily press, the citizen of the corporate realm can only follow the published narrative that is released with each new morning. Residents of the corporate reality never witness the process of artistic creation, ensuring an impermeable barrier between the observer and the unfolding urban storyline.

**Contracted Street Art and Legal Festivals**

“If graffiti merely consisted of empty signifiers that ‘have no content and express no message,’ rather than signs that were charged with multiple meanings far beyond those intended by their makers, the corporate world under the conditions of the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ would hardly have shown such interest in this type of aesthetic.”

Legal work—commissioned street art and corporation-sponsored graffiti festivals—undermines the art form’s inherent opposition to authority and robs it of its ability to offer genuine critique. Financial sponsors offer prime locations with high visibility, plus income and professional costs (paint, per diem), in return for a commodification of the art form and co-option of its artists, which by association make a company trendier. As discussed in section three, street artists and their audiences theoretically exist on completely separate chronotopal planes. The viewer walks on a Vasilievskii Island backstreet, observes the stenciled sentiment (whether consciously or subconsciously), and processes the symbol’s message according to his or her own contextual understanding. Rarely, if ever, should the temporal and spatial existences of the viewer and artist collide. And yet, this collision is the precise intention of a commissioned work or legal festival.

Legal writing specifically indicates a commissioned graffiti job, in which the artist is employed by a business or local institution to market a product through a mural. Gallery attention to graffiti artists has skyrocketed in the past decade and graffiti artists can now making a living through their paintings, if they know how to market them correctly. The paintings of Bristol-based artist Banksy, who stencils aesthetically pleasing political sentiment around the world, are chiselled out of surrounding brick and thrown into museums or sold in galleries with
exorbitant price tags. Though Banksy retains his artistic independence, capitalizing on his investors’ and collectors’ interest without surrendering his critical vitriol. In fact, it is precisely his shocking points of view that draw to Banksy his loyal fan base. By presenting works like Banksy’s as edgy products in demand, the western gallery market has commodified the previously anonymous and illegal art of graffiti and thereby undermined the art form.

The legal festival outlined in greater detail in Chapter One (The Control and Co-option of Graffiti: Buffing, Advertising, and the Legal Festival), first boomed alongside hip-hop and breakdancing culture. Legal festivals attract willing artists by offering paint (which many artists otherwise allegedly shoplift), food, musical entertainment, alcoholic beverages, and, most importantly, a consequence-free and highly visible painting space. Not long after community centers began organizing these events, governments and corporations recognized the transmission of coolness associated with promoting street art and collaborating with graffiti artists and began organizing larger, sponsored festivals.

The problem with the legalization of graffiti is that the art form—the illegal type—is inherently an inaccessible and anti-authority activity. The chronotopal realm of graffiti wages a midnight war on private property and mainstream media censorship. In their book Ancient Graffiti in Context, J. Baird and Claire Taylor explain that while graffiti images sometimes kick “against authority with what they say or depict, their primary and defining characteristic is spatial insubordination, that is appearing on surfaces where they have no right to be.” By commodifying the image through legal channels, the corporate realm co-opts, and benefits from, graffiti writing. Legalizing the practice pits artists willing to create murals for payment against those who create for non-commercial purposes. When graffiti is legalized, stencils no longer need to hide in the shadows of dark, back-alleys; rather the corporate world welcomes graffiti artists to paint on private property in broad daylight. Communities welcome previously outlawed graffiti artists back into the social fold. Yet the practice of legal graffiti in fact ostracizes illegal writers, who believe themselves—as according to an important aspect of the chronotope of the carnivalesque—to be expressing (what they believe to be) an important truth. The graffiti, when legalized, is no longer a nuisance but rather a prized tangible, which humans can possess, sell, dominate, and control. The veil is lifted and the artist—no longer anonymous—steps through to the venerating corporate world, simultaneously losing legitimacy within the graffiti realm. The basic chronotopal characteristics—laughter, crude
vulgarity, and the deconstruction of social hierarchy—disappear to some degree with the legalization of the art form. Legal graffiti does not deconstruct the existing social hierarchy, but rather joins it.

When a corporate body holds a legal festival with the intention of exploiting artists for the purpose of improving their own street credibility or developing free products, this behaviour is unethical as it threatens to commodify and demystify the graffiti practice so that a single entity can dominate it. In an August 2011 interview, the director of Saint Petersburg’s GraffFest, Nick Hopp, shared several examples of artists who had been accepted to participate in the 2011 festival. Proposed murals with political, social, or religious sentiment would not be chosen for inclusion in the festival. This tendency to avoid any ostentatious or contradictory themes is not uncommon for legal festival planning committees. In order to gain funding and permission for these events, the participants must be carefully chosen and their proposed murals pre-censored. Among the companies and institutions listed on the festival’s sponsorship roster were the MegaFon network provider, the United States Department of State, the City of Saint Petersburg, rock concert venues, contemporary art magazines, and pop-culture news sites. According to Hopp, those who had proposed murals with political, social, or religious themes would not be chosen as the goal of the festival was not to comment on matter of policy or ideology, but rather to beautify the city.

The very boundaries of a legal festival contradict the essence of the carnivalesque and midnight graffiti chronotopes. The festival’s set location and official time frame traps the underground art world within a state-sanctioned temporal-spatial reality, therefore dominating the carnivalesque temporal-spatial reality with that of the corporate world. The festival, while agreeable in its surface intentions, nevertheless robs the art form of one of its basic purposes: to offer a forum for genuine, anonymous, and unabashed sentiment in a heavily censored society. The legal festival co-opts the practice of street art, whitewashes it with mainstream ideology, and produces a final product of sterilized self-censorship and public performance.

So why do artists agree to paint in corporate legal festivals? Typically, legal festivals (often permitted, if not co-sponsored, by city authorities) entice artists with free food, drink (sometimes even alcohol), live musical performances, and, most importantly, with all the paint colors one could desire. On occasion, a legal festival may present a generous cash prize to its top artist or artists. Some seek competitive fame and public recognition while others might prefer the creative comradeship of a collaborative atmosphere. Still other artists may feel more
comfortable writing in a legal setting, as the absence of consequence encourages a higher-quality aesthetic. A fourth category of writers may participate for the free cans of spray paint (and the prospect of taking home the leftovers), as these typically cost the equivalent of $5-10 each in home improvement and paint stores.

This chapter investigated the multi-faceted graffiti realm in abstract terms. It first explored some of the most applicable critical theories of the image, the public space, and the chronotopical reality of the countercultural practice. I reviewed the basic framework of the image, of the replication, and of the supposed purpose of art. I introduced the theories of Henri Lefebvre, Jean Baudrillard, and Niklas Luhmann in relation to the space and the image. I discussed Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope of the carnivalesque and fashioned two alternative new chronotopes, outlining the spatial and temporal dimensions of the corporate realm and the graffiti realm. Finally, I examined the legal festival and the commodification of graffiti through a chronotopical lens and explained that the legalization of street art delegitimizes the authenticity of a previously anonymous act.
CHAPTER III: THE TENSION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND POLITICS: ANALYSIS

Figure 49: Anonymous. “R/Evolution.” Stencil. 1 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 50: Anonymous. “R/Evolution” Buffed and Replaced with: “Sorry.” Freehand and Buff. 3 March 2012.

Art or Politics

The most surprising discovery of this research was the lingering contradiction between aesthetics and politics. On the streets, graffiti depict political leaders in compromising states and construction contracts as corrupt, but in the private spaces of Moscow, Minsk, Saint Petersburg, and Budapest, artists continuously reaffirm the apolitical intentions of their works. Kirill Kto and the members of Partizaning, for example, call their street art thematically social, aimed at addressing existential problems within the community like apathy, pedestrian rights, and the building of a child-friendly Moscow. On a busy street corner in Moscow’s central artist district, a pro-Putin stencil appeared by the Sunday before Election Day. It disappeared behind a buff on Monday and, by Tuesday, someone
wrote “Sorry” in English in its place [Figures 49 and 50]. When street art contributes to a politically explicit discourse during a politicized period in a high-traffic neighborhood, the message therein expressed is, first and foremost, political. Yet even when a stencil explicitly criticizes a political leader, the interviewed artist most often states, definitively, that the work is not political. Rather, it is a piece of art in the public sphere intended to engage the space and the viewer through placement, context, and aesthetics. The following chapter will reject these artist claims, based on the thematic distribution of graffiti observed in each city. For the purpose of avoiding repetition, I have elected to combine the cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. I will still identify the main differences between the graffiti in these two cities, but insist that the national topics of discussion are largely the same.

The artist’s hesitation to associate him or herself with political dissent is nothing new in this region. The historical Sots Art movement embodies this trend. Sots Art artists produced critical and satirical pieces beginning in the late 1960s and continuing throughout the 1980s, repeatedly denying the political intentions of their artwork. The blatantly obtrusive red stripe in Erik Bulatov’s 1971-72 *Red Horizon* inhibits the viewer’s ability to relax within the painting’s scenery, mirroring a Soviet citizen’s inability to escape the Party’s presence [Figure 51]. Aleksandr Melamid and Vitalii Komar’s Nostalgic Socialist Realism series can hardly be analyzed without referencing oppression, fear tactics, and other political tools of Stalin-era domination. Their painting *A Knock at the Door* symbolizes the all-too-familiar sudden arrival of a KGB interrogator at the door of a Soviet citizen, who reacts by hiding beneath his writing desk [Figure 52]. Despite what appears to be obvious dissent art, the artists of the Sots Art movement largely defined their early projects as non-conformist and apolitical. The Blue Noses Group, a present-day collaborative duo out of Siberia, radically satirizes Putin, the sexuality of Muslim Chechen women, and an unhealthy cultural obsession with revolutionary icon Che Guevara. Despite these politicized themes, the Blue Noses Group explicitly calls itself a mouthpiece of social—not political—critique. In 2001, in a country where Putin-directed critique remains largely prohibited in the press, does a painting of a boxer-clad Putin in bed with George Bush and Osama bin Laden really project an apolitical message [Figure 53]? Are satire and political critique mutually exclusive; as though joking about an emasculated Putin in bed with his enemies renders that critical piece of art as less of a threat?
Figure 51: Erik Bulatov. “Red Horizon.” 1971-1972.

Figure 52: Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid. “A Knock at the Door.” *Nostalgic Socialist Realism series*. Tempera and oil on canvas. 1982-83, 72x47.
Many contemporary graffiti artists in the post-Soviet region share this *art for art’s sake* mentality, a political claim in and of itself. While their artistic self-categorization as apolitical does not mean that these artists lack innovation or fail to challenge an artistic authority, it does beg for further examination. One explanation, especially in an authoritarian state where creating street art—political or not—is a dangerous and punishable offense, is that artists want plausible deniability. To outwardly claim naivety implies a fear of a future instance when an artist may be forced to take legal responsibility for their work, in which case they can explain that the work is not political. In this internet age when many artists operate their own blogs and media outlets publish exclusive interviews online, an artist can mould their cyber persona to leave behind an apolitical trail. Alternatively, artists may interpret political action as that which takes place in government buildings and from prison, therefore understanding their own art as apolitical from a strictly relative standpoint. Compare street artists with Russia’s Pussy Riot, for example. This Moscow-based punk band calls for an end to Putin’s career through noisy, inappropriate, and unavoidable public protest. In March 2012, the feminist punk-rock collective invaded the Cathedral of Christ the Savior for an unsanctioned, and heavily contested, protest concert. In August 2012 Moscow courts punished three members of the group with two years in prison on counts of hooliganism and religious hatred, an action that is hotly contested as a display of Putin-era power. Groups like Pussy Riot are not taken seriously for their aesthetic merit (observers mimic the group’s cotton balaclavas and rainbow-colored tights); rather they are viewed as politically motivated activists. In relation to a radical art collective like Pussy Riot or even Voina, an artists’ hesitation to classify their work as political seems rational, as doing so threatens to cheapen their artistic abilities and honed skills to that of activists. Regardless, when an artist releases their work anonymously into a politicized
public space, the message is subject to the viewer’s contextual interpretation. Without an explanatory placard or
gallery introduction—and sometimes even with these directory tools—the artwork will be interpreted not as the
artist assumedly intended it but rather as it exists within the politicized public sphere.

**Minsk, Belarus**

President Aleksandr Lukashenko presides over the last Soviet-style dictatorship in Europe and the politicized
environment of his authoritarian Belarus is ever-present. After gaining office in 1994 Lukashenko reeled in reform,
evening the symbolic realm by quickly erasing the national symbols of the post-Soviet era—the Pahonia, which
once adorned the coat of arms, and the then-Belarusian flag—in favor of more historically Soviet effects. For the
last seventeen years, Lukashenko has ruled Belarus with an iron fist, stamping out any dissent with the help of an
intelligence and internal security organization still branded with the infamous cold-war title of “KGB,” who can be
found plain-clothed in contentious public settings, often living up to their reputation. Media is under complete state
control and the distribution of news, popular images and ideology is centralized through soviet-style television
programs and magazines, which never openly challenge state power and rarely discuss sensitive issues.

In July 2011 the opposition launched its Independence Day initiative known as the “clapping demonstrations,”
which were fuelled by, among many other things, the blatant vote rigging in the December 2010 Presidential
election. During this peaceful action, four hundred citizens were violently arrested, even those who had no
apparent role in the demonstration. State-sent provocateurs marched alongside the people, trying to draw
participants out of the crowd of on-lookers. Plain-clothed KGB agents pepper-sprayed journalists and smashed
photographers’ camera equipment. Arrest and apathy thinned the demonstration before it reached its end point in
Oktiabr’skaia Square. There hundreds of uniformed officers waited alongside ordered lines of parked arrest vans.
The guards remained in Oktiabr’skaia Square for the rest of the summer, patrolling the square until late each
Wednesday night (the opposition organized meetings each Wednesday night via social networking sites), looking
into the eyes of each passerby in search of foreign agents and revolutionary intentions.

The opposition, the economy, and the opportunities for youth in Belarus are completely repressed. Travel
outside of the country is difficult, if not impossible, for associates of the opposition with No-Exit stamps in their
passports, and even difficult for less political citizens. It has recently become illegal to view foreign websites and therefore inconceivable to conduct business over websites like eBay.com or PayPal.com. SIM cards for cellular telephones are registered with one’s government-issued ID. It is not permitted to possess, exchange, or disperse US currency, though the quickly inflating Belarusian ruble surely promotes this behavior. Just as Kundera captured in his many accounts of the Czech Soviet experience, a plain clothed KGB agent with an earpiece and a leather jacket trailed close behind us on an afternoon walk through a downtown Minsk park, suspiciously listening to our English-language conversation.

It seems that Belarus is trapped in the early Soviet 1980s; in turn, Soviet-reminiscent graffiti related to countercultural movements—parkour crews, rockers, and pacifists—is commonly found downtown either scrawled onto a brick or scratched into a windowpane. Belarusian authorities and the citizenry together monitor their downtown streets, thus painting a mural in such a closely scrutinized public space could rationally land a writer in jail. As a result, artists stick to freehand marking and quick stencils to hasten their practice without foregoing it altogether, quickly-scribbling “Luka(shenka) sucks” on the clear, glass wall of a downtown bus stop or spraying over stencils alongside the Svislač River that call for the release of political prisoners [Figures 54 and 55]. Nevertheless, in the clean downtown district, the occasional stencil is immediately perceptible and subsequently buffed. With this in mind, it makes sense that the most critical words and symbols on Minsk’s walls exist out of sight, below eye level, and in its darkest corners.

Aware of the power dynamic and potential for confrontation in the visible, downtown public sphere, graffiti artists in Minsk retreat to dark, interior places outside of the city center. In a hard-to-reach courtyard within Minsk’s residential, student area, the threat of consequence is lessened per the secluded and discreet nature of the space’s enclosure. This is where many belonging to the city’s underground scene meet, from independent theatre performers to rowdy rock musicians, over pitchers of beer beyond Big Brother’s gaze. Outside of a popular student bar, ironically named Graffiti, a large mural reads “Long Live Belarus,” a slogan that has been co-opted by the opposition in recent years. The mural would almost certainly be buffed if located on a wall in the more visible and frequently trafficked downtown area [Figure 56].
One of the few places for free expression in Minsk is a seven-story abandoned parking garage in the outskirts of the city. There, graffiti images are explicitly political and aesthetically pleasing. On the top floor, a muralist painted an image of a police officer and a protestor with their weapons raised and pointed at one another. Next to the image, the artist wrote that the fifteenth of March marks a day to fight against police brutality in Minsk, an especially prescient mural per the protestor-directed police violence that would overshadow the summer of 2011 [Figure 57]. Other images in this secluded location criticize nuclear proliferation, note the secularization of religious symbols, and speak to the opposition in the form of the Pahonia symbol, as previously discussed in Chapter Two (Section One: The Image) [Figures 58-60]. In one especially dark corner, a muralist painted the names of political leaders, among them late Soviet reformer Mikhail Gorbachev and current American President Barack Obama [Figure 61]. A few feet away, another artist painted a large, bubble-gum mural centering on the phrase “(We Will Have) Freedom” [Figure 62]. The juxtaposition of these two pieces illustrates a voiced hope that the international community will recognize Belarus’ opposition and their calls for assistance in overthrowing President Lukashenko.

Figure 58: Anonymous. Nuclear Mask. Stencil. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 59: Anonymous. Jesus and Coca-Cola. Stencil. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 60: Anonymous. Pahonia. Stencil. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
Another surprising quality of Belarusian graffiti is the prominence of English-language writing [See Table 7]. In an interview with a young activist, I asked why so many Belarusian writers elect to express themselves in English, especially as the country boasts so few English-speaking tourists and generally opposes itself politically against Americans and Western Europeans. The interviewee explained that writers paint in English for two reasons: first, because it indicates that the artist and the statement are fashionable, in a way reminiscent again of the early 1980s in the Soviet Union; and secondly, the use of English in street art, as in the example of the small-lettered words in Minsk’s artist area reading, “Feel our Life,” is an invitation for foreigners to acknowledge the problems plaguing Belarus and Belarusians [Figure 63]. This is the same reason why, during a demonstration in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, protestors will carry signs in English, hoping that foreign photographers and international media outlets will photograph and disseminate their calls for change.
Budapest, Hungary

A member of the European Union, Hungary is considered to be a generally free and democratic state. Since his 2010 landslide victory, Viktor Orban and the right-wing Fidesz party have guided the country in an authoritarian direction via an official censorship policy, a single-party constitutional rewrite, and vehemently anti-minority, nationalist rhetoric. The previous Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany of the Hungarian Socialist Party, left office on a low note; he lost all respect and authority after a recording released his confession that he camouflaged a series of poor decisions that catastrophically affected Hungary’s already flailing economy. Since 2010, Hungary has become Hungary-Divided. On one hand conservative Fidesz and neo-Fascist Jobbik have built a strong and faithful right wing, yet on the other hand Fidesz’s human rights violations and Jobbik’s Trianon rhetoric portray the country as headed in a backwards direction and pit Hungarians against an increasingly angry European Union. This domestic division between the right and left, deeply rooted as a societal faction, results in a politicized quotidian for Hungarian citizens. Between the threat of further judicial, legal, and societal limitations and Hungary’s self-inflicted alienation from the international community, the people have overwhelmingly redefined themselves as activists within an especially politicized state. This political vigor toward one political party or another is tangibly incorporated with the city and its hyper-partisan, post-2010 street narrative [Figures 64 and 65].

In winter 2011 the Hungarian authorities forced Tűzraktér, Budapest’s largest independent artist collective, to shut its doors. A space for the freedom of expression among marginalized artists now lay padlocked in darkness. Then housed in a one hundred thousand square foot factory-turned-school-turned-open-air pub, Tűzraktér offered gallery and studio space to hundreds of creatives from around the world. The community, at its peak, hosted thousands of free or low-cost events each year—from circus performances to children’s concerts, film screenings to pro-Roma education nights. In this intellectual meeting place, artists drank Club Maté, a Berlin-reminiscent symbol of independence and revolution. “What happened with Tűzraktér is what is happening with the rest of the country,” explained the collective’s director Zoltan Balla. “It’s like a litmus test. They use us to see where the power lies and where the independent limits lie. They say are you with us or are you with them and we say we’re
not with you and we’re not with them.” With the cultural center gone, pressure to claim a political allegiance made clear, and their freedom of speech threatened by the state, political graffiti gains a new urgency for independent thinkers.

In Budapest, the public space employed by graffiti is the exact opposite as that in Minsk. Magyar artists do not face grave consequences for painting graffiti; if caught by authorities, the most likely punishment is a ticket and a monetary fine. As a result they are not obliged to hide their sentiment in shadowed structures outside of town. Rather Budapest street artists paint critical pieces in areas with heavy foot-traffic and therefore increased visibility and viewership potential. Their messages are often explicitly political, critiquing political parties, their wrongdoings, and Viktor Orban himself without regard for disrespect or punishment. Both sides of the right-left divide participate in Budapest’s political street art discourse. For example in District VII, one artist wrote “Banks=Treasonous Pig-Thief Fidesz Mafiosos” on an advertisement for an investment company while, near Deak Square downtown, another artist wrote “No Tax Evasion [sic.],” in a spot where, on the weekday afternoon when this photo was taken, a group of tattered, loitering men sat sharing laughs and beers [Figure 66 and 67]. Fearing no street authority, Budapest graffiti artists even incorporate the country’s characteristic sarcasm and irony into their art. For example, one street artist references the Red Sludge alumina plant spill of fall 2010 in graffiti that reads, “Send More Red Mud. We are Still Alive” [Figure 68]. The red sludge incident was a disaster, in which approximately 184 million gallons of toxic sludge poured across the Hungarian countryside by means of the Danube, forcing entire villages from their homes in the middle of the night and destroying innumerable crop fields.

In Budapest, artists tattoo every surface of the city center with freehand writing, stencils, and especially stickers, demonstrating a thoroughness that implies a near desperation to dominate the other actors in frequency and severity of message. On a construction wall in Budapest’s student district, an artist feverishly scribbles tirades that juxtapose calls for voter apathy with criticisms of the existing political circus, for example reading, “Every Four Years, Another Chimp is Elected to Office” [Figure 69]. Between the large, scrawled letters, another artist repeatedly paints a stencil that opposes an allegedly corrupt construction contract in this historic district of Hungary [Figure 70]. Artists adhere stickers liberally throughout District VII outdoor pubs, such as one that criticizes political entitlement or another that satirizes the unwelcoming atmosphere that Hungary has built for its resident gypsies, Jews, and Gays [Figures 71 and 72]. Though independent media and Gay Pride parades might no longer belong to the people, the physical walls of the public space continue to exist as unrestricted public domain.
Figure 69: Anonymous. “Every Four Years Another Chimp is Elected to Office.” Freehand. 19 July 2011. Budapest, Hungary. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


About a half-mile of murals runs along the Filatorigat stop of Budapest’s Suburban Rail system. There, artists come to paint large pieces that incorporate a careful array of colors and techniques. Walking to the end of the line, the murals become less and less extravagant, until what remains is one scrawled, freehand afterthought juxtaposed with flanking aesthetics. “Get Lost Trianon,” it reads [Figure 73], a colloquial reference to the Treaty of Trianon, which in 1920 redefined Hungary’s borders as a part of a greater post-war peace agreement. In the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost approximately seventy percent of its territory (including five major cities and its sea port) and about sixty percent of its population to neighboring Austria, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, and Romania. During World War Two, the fascist Hungarian government pledged its support for Nazi Germany in exchange for a restoration of Hungary’s original borders after the war’s end. Nazi Germany lost World War Two and Hungary’s borders remain as defined by the Treaty of Trianon. The call “Get Lost Trianon” implies a rejection of the Treaty of Trianon and Hungary’s hopeful return to the pre-1920 borders and its accompanying glory. This rhetoric, effectively co-opted by the Jobbik far-right political party that holds 12.18 percent of parliamentary seats, commonly appears on Budapest’s walls. Nevertheless, political graffiti is not a highlight of Budapest’s end of the line graffiti spots, positioning Budapest’s urban/suburban artistic divide in direct opposition to that in Minsk.
The city center is Budapest’s most politically vocal district, indicating two things: 1) a completely uninhibited freedom of speech remains accessible in Budapest’s public sphere, and 2) no individual or political party is barred from participating in the existing discourse. As a result, the street narrative is cluttered with skeletal political campaigns, transient corporate advertisements, and long-over social events. Playing on this emptiness of information in the public sphere, one of the most active graffiti crews in Budapest is the pseudo political movement called the Two Tailed Dog Party. Founded out of a frustration with a lack of viable political options, the Two Tailed Dog Party established itself as an officially registered ‘Joke Party,’ running on platforms of eternal life, a never-ending supply of cold beer, and other promises intended to poke fun at the average candidates’ unrealistic campaign vows. A mouthpiece for the freedom of speech and the deconstruction of power hierarchies, the political party’s principle avenue of information sharing is via pretend campaign posters, which they wheatpaste liberally across Budapest. Most posters feature an upside-down illustration of Istvan Nagy (the Hungarian naming equivalent of John Smith), the small dog/ political candidate that is too cute to steal [Figure 74]. While many of the Two Tailed Dog Party’s posters are nonsensical, some address serious issues, mostly regarding an unsanctioned political invasion of the public space. They play on xenophobic nightmares by sharing stories about immigrant dogs from Dagestan and mark the place where aliens will arrive several thousand years in the future, a satirical confrontation with the government’s decision to remove all World War Two-related plaques from the former Jewish Ghetto [Figures 75 and 76]. The Two Tailed Dog Party may run on sarcasm, but the
pseudo political party’s faux campaigning offers a valid critique regarding the emptiness of politicking and the way that it clutters the public space by degrading the quality of the visual public discourse.


Saint Petersburg and Moscow, Russia

During the Soviet period, centralized power existed externally of the people. Political dissent took place within the apartments and artist studios of the private sphere. In the 1990s, this centralized power shifted from Soviet-style leaders to untouchable post-Soviet oligarchs. Russian street artists, perhaps, recognize subconsciously this historical power segregation in their refusal to categorize their works as political, instead insisting that their art addresses only social issues. Still, a state’s citizenry do not exist separate from the political sphere. Political decisions inevitably affect everyday life through enforced laws, public parades, and wartime enlistments. By claiming that their work is not political, artists disregard the inherent power dynamic between a political center and its peripheral participants. For artists to attest that their public art attacks societal viewpoints and a public sense of place—but not politics—is in practice a false assumption. Graffiti artists purposefully bring private sentiment into a historically politicized public sphere, thus taking active part in the existing political discourse.

Politicized street artists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg occupy a fairly uninterrupted and uncensored public space—primarily in the downtown area—, in which the benefit of heavy foot-traffic overshadows the threat of consequence. Similar to other regional city centers, artists that paint downtown primarily use stencils, assumedly for the purposes of speed and uniform repetition. This finding came as a surprise because of the way that Russian censorship and expressive control is portrayed in the western media, when in fact Russians retain a fairly uninhibited freedom to paint in the public sphere. In fact, a lot of things go on in the Russian public space that one might call vernacular: street music on the banks of the Neva, satirical posters at a Pushkinskaia Square opposition meeting, and impromptu performances along the cobble-stoned Staryi Arbat. Beyond the downtown districts of both Saint Petersburg and Moscow, the distribution of politically themed graffiti is fairly balanced between the remaining locative categories, an illustration of Russia’s wide population dispersion and citywide employment of street art as a tool for political expression.

During the non-election period of June through August 2011, I observed a greater percentage of political street art in Saint Petersburg than in Moscow. Aside from the Viktor Tsoi fan wall on the Staryi Arbat, some political fascism themed writing downtown, social advice at the end of the line (“Go Vegan,” “You are a Slave”), and the occasional sticker about a political movement near the artist district, very little explicitly political graffiti was
observed during this non-politicized period of Moscow [Figures 77 and 78]. The most direct attack was written in chalk on the street across from the Lubianka building, which is the former KGB and current FSB headquarters. The simple text reminded readers of the political prisoners who suffered under Stalin’s regime [Figure 79]. This chalked statement’s proximity to the Lubianka indicates that the graffitied attack refers not just to those who suffered during the Soviet past, but also to the country’s present day political prisoners. Alternatively the most visible graffiti in Moscow graffiti during the summer of 2011 were the corporate-sponsored, guerrilla advertisements that tattooed the city’s concrete, as discussed in Chapter One (The Control and Co-option of Graffiti: Buffing, Advertising, and the Legal Festival).

Figure 77: Anonymous. “Go Vegan!” Freehand. 14 August 2011. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 78: Anonymous. “You are a Slave.” Freehand. 14 August 2011. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).
On the other hand, the summertime streets of Saint Petersburg were littered with calls for mobilization and critiques of the existing political system. Advertisements for the permitted opposition meetings that take place on the thirty-first of every month could be found indiscriminately throughout the city, whether in artist, student, or downtown areas [Figure 5]. Typically the most virulent, nationalist, and fascist graffiti existed within residential courtyards outside of the city center while their antithetical calls of “Nazi-Scum” or “Antifa” more commonly lined Saint Petersburg’s main avenues. Downtown graffiti also discussed anything from personal health via a vegetarian diet to the mysterious circumstances of Yuri Volkov’s murder outside of a raucous football-match [Figure 80]. Stencils regarding Yuri Volkov are especially interesting because of their physical frequency along Saint Petersburg’s Nevskii Prospekt and the buffing directed at these stencils. Several stencils questioning the motives and underlying reasons for Yuri Volkov’s murder are buffed out, but only enough to mute the stencil and not enough to completely erase it from the city streets, reflecting the lasting tensions and mysteries that surround his case and trial [Figure 41].
National identity as intrinsically connected with historical collective memory is another common theme in Russian and Eastern European graffiti. On the ground, for example, a common stencil recalled the date June 4th 1941, and encouraged observers watching their feet hit the pavement to remember this day as critical in the history of their city [Figure 4]. In graffiti spots and downtown areas, stencils depict rock tragedy Viktor Tsoi and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin as famous faces of the Soviet past and thus influential figures in the contemporary narrative. At Moscow’s Vinzavod, one artist references Tsar Nicholas II by placing his head on the body of a mythical creature, bird-like, claw-footed creature reflecting the fact that, in Moscow, political leaders hold celebrity-like status, even long after their death [Figure 81]. Two courtyards away beneath a train yard underpass, a wheatpaste illustrates Vladimir Lenin standing in Red Square asking Vladimir Putin to lie with him in the immortal tomb [Figure 82].
Throughout Saint Petersburg and Moscow, anonymous graffiti artists do not appear to fear consequence for their words and satirical depictions. They freely criticize their state’s failed electoral system, its democratic façade, and the unequal distribution of its rights to those that control the country’s wealth. One of the most politically vocal street art crews in Russia is Saint Petersburg’s Group of Change. The Group of Change uses stencils to criticize the country’s heavy censorship, to demonstrate against corrupt development plans, and to inspire the public to stand together as the united opposition all across the city, even adjacent to Palace Square [Figures 26-30]. At the bottom of each stencil, the Group of Change lists their LiveJournal.com user page web address for any viewers interested in learning more or getting involved with the movement. The Group of Change participates in an entirely new approach to mobilization that includes both an internet and a physical street presence. Their graffiti publicizes their website and their website shares images of their street art, building a mutually reinforced message. In the internet age, activist and artist crews like the Group of Change understand and embrace the value in maintaining an accessible internet portal. However, they also acknowledge that the internet is over-saturated with threatening hacker-groups, a sea of unsupported claims, and a good deal of basement activism. In turn, political movements engage with the streets to build legitimacy and to contribute to a more tangible aspect of street discourse and public opinion.

Meanwhile in Moscow, the boom of political participation in December 2011, following the allegedly fraudulent December 4th Parliamentary elections, emboldened Muscovites to speak out with sharp, frank words. March 4th 2012 marked Election Day and in the preceding weeks stickers began to pop up around the Kremlin.
requesting that Putin be sent to jail for his actions. In the artist district, stickers pointed fingers at Edinaia Rossiia as the party of crooks and thieves and stencils expressed support for a free press that could share independent viewpoints [Figures 83 and 84]. In student areas artists wrote, “Putin is a Tsar” and “Putin [is a] Vampire,” the latter a play on the President’s first name, Vladimir [Figure 85]. Outside of many metro stops, activists updated the walls of stickers and stencils from hour-to-hour that announced logistical changes to upcoming demonstrations [Figure 86]. By following known activists on Twitter and simultaneously reading the practical instructions on the streets, it was easy to locate meetings and other protestors. Other election-period stickers, especially in the residential neighborhoods at the end of the line, encouraged viewers to go to the ballot boxes and submit their votes to ensure that honest and fair elections would take place [Figure 87]. Following Putin’s re-election, one artist expressed their simultaneous frustration and hope on the gate of a closed Elektrozavodskaja business, writing in English, “We want to believe something” [Figure 88].

Figure 83: Anonymous. “Thief. In the Kremlin or in Prison? 4th of March. Decide for Yourself.” Sticker. 2 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).
Figure 84: Anonymous. “I Love Unrestricted Press.” Stencil. 12 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).

Figure 85: Anonymous. “Putin, Vampire.” Freehand. 10 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).

Figure 86: Anonymous. “White Circle. Take the Kremlin by Circle. 26 February at 14:00.” Sticker. 5 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).
Non-candidate political graffiti was also present in Moscow during the election period. Responding to a heightened sentiment of social responsibility in the street narrative, nationalist and lifestyle graffiti showed up around the city, such as one end of the line sticker that called for Russia to “Stop Feeding the Caucasus,” or another that advised readers to follow the Khimki forest debate [Figures 89 and 90]. Stop Feeding the Caucasus is a phrase that was popularized on Navalny’s LiveJournal blog. Street artists frequently co-opt blogged sentiment and increase the message’s street presence. Their efforts reinforce the greater ideology of a movement because a viewer will interact with the message both in the private sphere (in front of their computer or over tea at home with family members) as well as in the public sphere while walking in the street. In general, even during a non-election period, Russian street art and graffiti remains accessible to its citizens with minor consequences for the experienced artist. In Russia, artists from all camps, from the right wing to the left and artist to activist, engage with the urban narrative through discursive street art.
Charted Findings

Acknowledging the dynamic nature of hard-to-quantify street art, I sought to standardize my research by applying the same methodology to each location and to level my analysis by categorizing all images according to the same set of factors. In each city, I collected images in six specific locations in order to systematize my observation: the student district, the artist district, the end of the line, the downtown district, the market district, and the graffiti spots. This practice allowed me to more accurately compare and contrast my findings per their location within a city. During my analysis, I categorized each image by eight sub-categories: theme, location, language, medium, surface, content, legal status, and artist. The thematic category is then divided into seven options: political, social, political fascism, advertisements, religious, music, and sport. Any images that did not match one of these seven categories of hard or soft politics were rejected. Due to the limitations of measuring the ratio of political to apolitical graffiti, I have instead elected to look at where, why, and when political graffiti exists. My methodological decisions and explanations are described in greater detail in Appendix One (Materials and
Methods). I also designed four color-coded city maps, located in Appendix One (Materials and Methods), to help aid my reader’s understanding of the way that I organized each city into six districts.

The following classification illustrates the distribution of topical graffiti, by comparing its theme with its location, frequency, and language. The following charts illustrate categorized data, albeit subjective, from thousands of images gathered throughout my fieldwork. Table One compares the thematic distribution from city to city, confirming the politicization of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Budapest, as compared to the less frequent occurrence of political graffiti in Minsk. Though Moscow shows the highest amount of explicitly political graffiti, Saint Petersburg had the highest amount of politically fascist graffiti, music related graffiti, religious graffiti, and sport related graffiti (overwhelmingly regarding Saint Petersburg’s football team, Zenith), the majority of which existed in the city’s hidden courtyards and end of the line neighborhoods. I observed no religious graffiti in Moscow, whatsoever. Socially relevant topics are ordered in levels of frequency in the same way that political topics are ordered (Moscow, then Saint Petersburg, then Budapest, then Minsk); yet proportionally, Saint Petersburg had a higher percentage of social themes (a surprisingly high amount regarding alcoholism in Russia). Budapest is second to Saint Petersburg in the frequency of its politically fascist themed graffiti. This category is split nearly equal between fascist and Antifa street art.
Tables 2 through 5 examine the thematically political makeup of the graffiti located in each of the six areas of town. These tables answer the question, which area of each of these cities includes the most political graffiti. Tables 2, 3, and 5 include no data for the Market District as the graffiti in and around their market areas remained noticeably absent. In Saint Petersburg, the student district had the most political graffiti and street art (at 28.44 percent); the downtown district tailed closely behind (25.48 percent). Notice that the end of the line and graffiti spot in Saint Petersburg had significantly less politicized graffiti (16.59 percent and 16.29 percent, accordingly). This reflects my argument that street artists employ the areas of Saint Petersburg with the heaviest street-traffic and thus the highest visibility. This indicates the threat of consequence in the public sphere does not outweigh the benefits of the act. Consider Saint Petersburg’s contrast with Minsk’s political street art, which is obliged to exist in dark corners outside of the central districts of town. In Minsk, an overwhelmingly high percentage of political
graffiti is observed in either the student district or in one of the multiple graffiti spots, all of which exist outside of the downtown area (39.15 percent and 26.1 percent accordingly). Though the graffiti in Minsk’s downtown district is still political (at 17.13 percent of all graffiti observed downtown), the figures displayed in Table 3 indicate that Belarus’ street artists understand the existing power authority’s ability to severely punish anyone that upsets the balance of power in Minsk’s public sphere.

The thematic distribution of political graffiti in Budapest is depicted in Table 4. In this summary, all six districts are sufficiently represented. The area with the highest percentage of political graffiti in Budapest is the artist district. This heightened political visibility in the street narrative likely exists in response to the equally heightened state pressure on cultural and artistic institutions like Tűzraktér. However, the percentage of thematically political graffiti in the artist district is not so far ahead of the downtown area and the graffiti spot, which share equal percentages (at 20.85 percent, each). Even the market exhibits a similar percentage of political graffiti as these others locations, as does the student district (12.51 percent and 15.64 percent, accordingly). The end of the line has the lowest average of political graffiti. This is because the downtown area—previously outlined as a bastion of free space in a tightening society—simply has more residents, more visibility, and more foot-traffic. Table 5 depicts the thematic distribution of political street art in Moscow, indicating that the vast majority, as in Saint Petersburg, exists in the city’s downtown district. The location with the second highest percentage of political graffiti is the student area, which includes historical places in Moscow for student gatherings such as Pushkinskaia Square and Maiakovskaia Square. Likely, the association of these student places in Moscow with demonstrations and protests accounts for the heightened percentage of political graffiti in this district. The end of the line neighborhood in Moscow was difficult to define, because of the sheer size of the city itself. As a result, the end of the line includes any place in Moscow more than two metro stops away from the Kol’tsevaia, or Circle, Line, including locations like the area around Elektrozavodskaia Metro, Babushkinskaia Metro, and Volkoivskaia Metro. Though residential, these areas are still highly populated at all times of day, and therefore might also be explained as the outer downtown Moscow. This explains why the percentage of political graffiti at the end of the line remains so high.
Table 6 depicts the language distribution in Saint Petersburg for thematically social and political street art. A significant majority of politically and socially themed art accompanies a Russian-language text (political at 42.11 percent and social at 25 percent). English-language text does appear alongside social graffiti nearly as often as Russian text (23.68 percent of the time), however English-language political graffiti barely appears in Saint Petersburg (9.21 percent). The language distribution of Minsk is depicted in Table 7, again pitting politically themed, Russian-language graffiti with the highest percentage (30.43 percent). Second highest is social graffiti in the English-language (26.09 percent), reflecting the explanation that English-language graffiti is in style. The third
largest category is English-language political graffiti, which supports the claim that graffiti artists use the English-language to communicate their political sentiment to an international community. Minsk artists write a smaller percentage of political and social graffiti in the vernacular, Belarusian tongue (13.04 percent and 4.35 percent, accordingly). This decision communicates nationalist intent as the Belarusian language is currently experiencing a period of national revival, though the majority of Belarusians read, write, and speak Russian, not Belarusian.

Table 8 illustrates the language distribution in Budapest as divided between Hungarian and English. In Budapest, the Hungarian language accompanies an overwhelming majority of political graffiti (59.02 percent). Artists divide socially themed street art almost equally between the English and Hungarian languages (16.39 percent and 18.03 percent), reflecting the common use of English among educated Budapest residents. Table 9 depicts the language distribution among social and political graffiti in Moscow. This city has the highest percentage of both political and social street art in the vernacular (64.29 percent and 19.39 percent), with a very small percentage of both categories in English (8.16 percent for both). This figure contradicts a popular assumption that many Muscovite artists write in English. As Russian political and social graffiti mainly discuss local or national issues (rather than foreign affairs), the majority of Moscow and Saint Petersburg’s graffiti accompanies Russian-language messages to communicate with a local or national population.
Table 10 illustrates the key differences between my initial fieldwork in June and August 2011 versus the period of follow up research in Moscow during Russia’s 2012 Presidential Election cycle. The most striking difference is the significantly heightened presence of political graffiti during the election period. The amount of overall political graffiti shot up 1068 percent in March 2012, partly explained by an increase of opposition activists posting stickers and painting stencils around the city’s central district. Another interesting discovery; during the summer of 2011, guerrilla advertising peaked and littered the Muscovite streets with corporate stencils promoting car insurance or exotic women’s clothing. In November, local Moscow officials prohibited this advertising method and the guerrilla advertisements on the streets nearly disappeared. Though a Muscovite March typically includes the occasional snowstorm, the streets themselves were clear and I did not observe one of these ground guerrilla advertisements. Albeit slight, the final finding is that when political graffiti increased during the election, so too did politically fascist themed graffiti, thus accurately reflecting all sides of the politicized, election-time street narrative.
It is important to note that the ideas presented in this chapter do not apply exclusively to all occasions of post-Soviet graffiti. Each image’s contextual analysis will be different according to the state of government affairs, the neighborhood in which the text or symbol is located, and the mental space belonging to the individual who interacts with the message. Graffiti as an act and art cannot be generalized as an international phenomenon or even from city to city. Instead, I have collected observed images over the course of several months for the purpose of offering a comparison of different districts, politicized seasons, linguistic leanings, and greater thematic distributions.
CONCLUSION AND QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research project investigated the assumption that street art and graffiti mirror a greater societal narrative and allow artists to contribute opinions on issues otherwise ignored, censored, or underpublicized by traditional avenues of state-controlled media. I suggested that groups without full, free access to the media—namely opposition groups, youth movements, and counterculture participants—appear especially critical and vocal, though pro-state groups also employ the same street art techniques to promote their causes and viewpoints. I hypothesized that artists painting under pseudonym gain free and anonymous access to the public sphere through the medium of graffiti. I argued that graffiti is an art of discourse and therefore that it shares the frank narrative of a city, uninhibited by official censors.

The region is vast and I chose to narrow my study to focus on a few states to offer a more thorough analysis for those four urban centers. I chose these cities—Saint Petersburg, Russia; Moscow, Russia; Budapest, Hungary; and Minsk, Belarus—because they all currently share an authoritarian or authoritarian leaning government where opposition groups and dissenting individuals lack unrestricted or uncensored access to the public space via traditional channels (nightly news, daily digest). More importantly, all three of these countries are currently experiencing intensely politicized periods of their national history.

In these politicized environments, ostracized individuals and groups seeking to express their political sentiment are forced to seek out alternative avenues of expression, either by necessity or as a matter of social duty. There are a few viable options for alternative protest, public demonstration and online blogging among them. However authorities arrest protesters, demonstrations result in stagnation, and basement activists are traced by their IP addresses. Graffiti, on the other hand, is an effective, untraceable alternative that allows individuals or crews to speak on a very public stage. Artists use anonymous or pseudonym protected names, which allows them to speak as frankly and critically as they wish without the threat of consequence. It is also possible that their anonymous signatures signify an avoidance to take responsibility for their claims, which might in turn delegitimize their critiques.
I organized this paper into three chapters. Chapter 1 outlined the history of graffiti in Russia from the early 1970s through the present day. Chapter 2 explored the theoretical underpinnings of the medium of graffiti and its corresponding counter-culture, specifically applying a multi-disciplinary understanding to the art form. First I examined the symbols and images of graffiti through a discussion of semiotics and replication. Then I looked at the public space in which graffiti exists through urban critical theory. Here, I explored the theoretical role of the public space and the way that graffiti challenges the privatization of the public sphere. Finally, with the understanding that graffiti provides a narrative and can be read as a text, I analyzed the street discourse through the lens of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s literary chronotope. I also compared and contrasted Bakhtin’s chronotope of the carnivalesque to the public, corporate sphere under the domination of the graffiti realm. Chapter 3 addressed regional graffiti artists’ common attestation that their works are neither politically motivated nor politically themed. I rejected these artists’ claims and argue that they are, whether subconsciously or consciously, aware of the political and power dynamics of their environments, which explains why they choose to write in a certain neighborhood or using a particular method (stencil, freehand, mural, sticker). I supported my rejection of their claims with photographic evidence from each highlighted city.

In Budapest, graffiti and street art was especially politicized along political party lines. This partisan tendency reflects the tensions between the three major Hungarian political parties: Fidesz, Jobbik, and the left wing Social Democrats. A high ratio of the graffiti in Budapest discussed political parties, satirized political leaders, and illustrated a public distrust for parliamentary representatives. The majority of political street discourse existed in downtown Budapest, where highly visible graffitied claims are contested. To the contrary, outside of the downtown areas of Budapest, graffiti is significantly less political, yet is not discounted as often by other artists. As a result, graffiti outside of the downtown area tends to be more politically fascist or ethnically aggressive.

Together, Belarusian authorities and citizenry monitor their clean, downtown district and its enclosed courtyards. Painting a mural in such a closely scrutinized public space could rationally land a writer in jail. As a result, writers stick to freehand marking and quick stencils to hasten their practice without foregoing it altogether, quickly-scribbling “Luka(shenka) sucks” on the clear, glass wall of a downtown bus stop or spraying over stencils alongside the Svislač River that call for the release of political prisoners. In the clean downtown district, the
occasional stencil was immediately perceptible and subsequently buffed. With this in mind, the most critical words
and symbols on Minsk’s walls exist out of sight, below eye level, and in its darkest corners, such as those inside of
a seven-story abandoned parking garage in the outskirts of the city. There, graffiti images are explicitly political,
frankly critical, and aesthetically pleasing.

Graffiti and street art in Saint Petersburg and Moscow incorporated a wider array of politically relevant
subthemes, from explicit calls for transparency to intertextual depictions of neighborhood concerns, and in all
districts from the end of the line to downtown. The street narrative of these cities seemed surprisingly uninhibited.
Crews like Saint Petersburg’s Group of Change write especially vocal graffiti and list their LiveJournal.com user
page web address on their stencils for any viewers interested in learning more or getting involved with the
movement. Their graffiti publicizes their website and their website shares images of their street art, building a
mutually reinforced message. In Moscow during the March 2012 presidential election, the media and general
public spoke and wrote about Putin and other Presidential candidates, a sentiment mirrored in the streets. Outside
of many metro stops, artists and activists affixed stickers and painted stencils that announced upcoming
demonstrations, making sure to update the information as it changed. Interested observers could easily locate
upcoming meetings by following major activists on Twitter and simultaneously reading the practical information
listed on the streets. Throughout all four cities, artists and activists used the tool of graffiti to criticize state
censorship on speech freedoms. Their use of graffiti as a medium to express discontent with censorship reflects
precisely the free nature of the public art form.

The lingering contradiction between aesthetics and politics was the most surprising discovery of this research.
On the streets, graffiti depict political leaders in compromising states and construction contracts as corrupt, but in
interviews, artists continuously reaffirmed the apolitical intentions of their works, claiming that they sought to
address societal issues but not political change. Regardless of their intentions, when an artist releases their work
anonymously into a politicized public space, the message is subject to a viewer contextual interpretation and the
influence of that politicized environment.

I expected that countries without a truly free media would have more politically relevant street art, but
nevertheless was surprised to find just how politicized the walls could be in an unfree state. The research therefore
met its aims and showed that street art and graffiti are effective tools for sharing politically sensitive information and opinions in the post-Soviet region. Issues not openly discussed in other, traditional avenues of the media (the television and print media) were unquestionably presented and observed on the walls. As regional street artists are able to speak their minds freely and anonymously through spray paint, their statements are frank, satirical, and often shocking.

Two major limitations for this project were the massive size of the region and its striking cultural differences and linguistic norms throughout. Even with endless funds and time, it would be impossible to document every political stencil and to interview every regional artist. Another limitation is the dynamic nature of graffiti as pieces are constantly created, buffed out, and repainted. An important technique in this research is to visit the same places many times over the course of several weeks, however unless one lives in a place and passes the same wall every day, it is difficult to make empirically sound claims about the nature of a district’s public discourse. As a result, my data, findings, and analyses are inevitably subjective per the context of my observations and the information shared during my interviews.

In the future, I hope to expand this project to include a more complete analysis of the graffiti and street art in other East European and post-Soviet states. I did encounter and photograph a significant amount of graffiti and street art in Latvia, Poland, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Though I did not include discussions of these locations in my study, I can offer some basic observations based on what I saw. For example, the street art scene of Riga was small but its aesthetics were of the highest quality. The graffiti there depicted corrupt bankers, problems regarding Latvia’s accession to the European Union, and aversion to the international G8 summit, among other thematically economic concerns. The graffiti in Prague (the city with arguably the freest media of all these places listed) is largely apolitical. Much of the graffiti and street art observed in Prague is name graffiti. In Prague, there were a few instances of stencils addressing international affairs, such as Putin’s authoritarian rule, the Israel-Palestinian debate, and China’s persecution of dissidents during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, I did not see graffiti that directly attacked (non-fascism related) domestic political issues. In Poland and Ukraine, I visited Krakow, Łódź, Lviv and Transcarpathia, where an unfortunately high ratio of the graffiti illustrated nationalism or ethnic/religious hatred, specifically regarding Jews. The population of Jewish residents in these
cities is nearly an illusion, despite an overwhelming display of anti-Jewish and pro-Nazi references in hundreds of different handwritings. Quite a few artists also wrote in the German and English languages. Understanding this region’s relationship with its national identity and shared memory—and how that relationship is portrayed in the streets—is a research project of its own that I plan to address in the future. I will also expand this project to Central Asia (I have a particular interest in how graffiti was used as a social mapping tool during the Osh ethnic conflict of 2010), the disputed territories of the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Finally I am interested in investigating the graffiti scenes in smaller Russian cities such as Barnaul, Ekaterinburg, and Nizhni Novgorod as it would be fascinating to examine the relationship between media freedoms, a politicized environment, and street art in a smaller, less populated city with fewer writers. The exciting thing about researching such a dynamic art form is that there is always more work to do and every regional visit or interview can deepen the study.

Down to its minute, theoretical details, this research project was fascinating to conduct. The countercultural scene in all four of these places is warm and open to foreign researchers. What I was especially impressed with was that street artists in the region are not afraid of consequences for their self-defined apolitical pieces, as they do not believe that they are doing anything harmful or wrong to society. Rather, overwhelmingly, artists responded in interviews that they were beautifying their neighborhoods and communities either with bright aesthetics or thought-provoking phrases. From Budapest to Saint Petersburg, street artists felt like their efforts were shaking the public out of a mass apathy to take control of their own happiness. Post-Soviet graffiti is important to the future of political discourse in the region because the artists and the activists within these communities so often overlap. The words on the street, painted in colorful blasts, often pulled from popular bloggers and leaders, correspond as the chants of the opposition marchers. This project has value if it inspires average citizens to realize the value of street art as a way of contributing to a greater street narrative. If others share a viewpoint but choose not to speak about it publically, viewing that claim on the streets can be an especially uniting and inspiring force.
Notes


5. Nashi Youth Member. Personal Interview. Moscow, Russia. 4 March 2012.


8. Ibid. Introduction.


10. Meanwhile, 50 percent of graffiti was still authored by fan gangs or focused on *fanaty* themes. Bushnell. P68.


12. Ibid. P77.

13. Ibid. P68.


15. Ibid. Pp 120-121.


27. Ibid. August 2011.


29. Ibid. August 2011.


34. For graffiti artists, the airbrush is a more technical tool that is especially good for shading and detail. It generally demands more time and attention, and therefore has become a common utensil used during legal or contracted jobs.


38. Bakhtin’s Dialogic Imagination essays were originally written in the 1930s and published in the 1940s. Arguably—per Bakhtin’s nostalgia for the public space of the past—the temporal and spatial elements of the corporate realm have become even more tightly wound in the past eight decades, and therefore that memory is even farther removed.

40. Ibid. P9.


46. Ibid. P17.

47. Ibid. P30.


49. Ibid. P70.


57. Ibid. P92.


59. Ibid P167.

60. Bakhtin. P168.

61. Ibid. P240.

62. Ibid. P170.

63. Ibid. P206, 236-237.

64. Harvey. P80.


70. Vice. P18.

71. Ibid. P170.


APPENDIX ONE: MATERIALS AND METHODS

The following section outlines the materials and methods used to conduct this research from June-August 2011 and in March 2012. I have divided this chapter into four sub-sections: (1) subjects, (2) ethical considerations, (3) protocol design, and (4) data analysis. I will outline my methodology and rationale in as clear language as possible, in order to help to facilitate the replication of my study.

1. Subjects

My research primarily focuses on street art and graffiti in the post-Soviet region. My main subjects were the anonymous stencils, stickers, wheatpastes, and freehand murals on the walls of Budapest, Moscow, Minsk, and Saint Petersburg. To supplement my research, I conducted a series of interviews with graffiti writers and artists in each of the four cities. In Minsk, I conducted four interviews, two in person and two online through email correspondence. All Belarusian subjects chose to conduct the interview in English, instead of in Russian. In Budapest, I conducted seven interviews, all in person and in English. In Russia, I conducted fifteen interviews. Of these, ten took place in person and five on the internet through email correspondence. Five of these interviews were conducted fully in Russian, two switched back and forth between Russian and English, and the remaining eight interviews took place in the English language. Of the fifteen subjects, ten took place in Moscow, three in Saint Petersburg, and two in Siberia. Three times in Moscow, the subjects spoke as a team of two—either as a married couple or as partners in a graffiti crew—per the subjects’ request. Female writers and activists were adequately represented, though the subjects were predominantly male. The subjects were all between eighteen and forty three years of age, with the mode of interviewees in their late 20s. The predominant socio-economic class of my interviewees was middle to middle/ upper class. All subjects indicated no obvious mental or physical health issues.
2. Ethical Considerations

Interviewed regional graffiti artists remain protected by self-assigned pseudonym throughout this document. I was able to contact all subjects through their publically available email addresses or social networking accounts. I deleted all trails of any electronic or online correspondences. I did not interview youth under the age of eighteen years old. All images referenced by artists are self-published and available to view online at each artists’ pseudonym-protected website.

3. Protocol Design

I spent the summer of 2011 and March 2012 exploring the highway underpasses, static train yards, and shaded back alleys of Budapest, Minsk, Saint Petersburg, and Moscow. Throughout this period, I photographed street art, explored art collectives, and interviewed graffiti artists as well as members of their crews. All interactions took place either in English or in Russian.

I attempted to standardize my findings by applying a general methodology to my search though I recognize that graffiti is a fluid and dynamic art and is therefore difficult to quantify. In each of the cities that I visited, I collected images in six specific locations in order to systematize my observation locations. This practice allowed me to more accurately compare and contrast my findings per their location within a city. The six areas are described in greater detail below and accompanied by a set of color-coded maps. Some locations are not included on the maps, such as detailed end of the line locations, market districts in all cities except for Budapest, and the student district of Minsk as these areas are all located outside of these cities. In these maps the color-coding is organized as follows: red indicates the artist district, yellow the student district, orange the downtown area, green the end of the line, blue the graffiti spot, and purple the market district.

A. Student District: I classified any graffiti located adjacent to a major university as existing within the student area. In the case that a city had more than one major educational institution, I was sure to visit all applicable neighborhoods. In all cases, the student area also refers to neighborhoods of town oft frequented by students, usually near the university, due to a high density of bars, music venues, or student supported retail establishments. In Budapest, this area is District 7 and District 8 Near Rákóczi. In Minsk, this is
Nezavisimosti (in English, *Independence*) Square and 16 Kalinin at Bar Graffiti. In Saint Petersburg, this is Vasil’evskii Island and the area near Saint Petersburg State University. In Moscow, this is Bolotnaia Square, areas near Moscow State University, Beloruskaia, Maiakovskaia, and Pushkinskaia Square.

**B. Artist District:** I classified any graffiti located in a publically recognized *art district* as existing within an artist district. In Budapest, this includes District 6 (Andrássy, Király street) and the area between Váci and Andrássy around Teréz körút. In Minsk, this includes the area behind Mashnarov Avenue near Pobedy Square. In Saint Petersburg, these are the areas around Pushkinskaia 10 and Loft Etazhi. In Moscow, this refers to the Vinzavod, Art Play, ArtStrelka, and Flacon compounds as well as the areas around Sakharov Street and Kurskaia metro.

**C. End of the Line:** Graffiti located outside of the city center, but not in an artist or student neighborhood is classified as though at the “end of the line.” This includes murals alongside the suburban rail, freehand writing or stickers in residential neighborhoods, or, quite literally, the graffiti and street art located around the end of bus and metro lines. In Budapest, this is Budakeszi Street, District 9, area near Memento Park on Highway 7, locations around Highway 7 and E 75 in Buda. In Minsk, this includes the area occupied by abandoned houses on Smolenskaia, the area around the Mound of Glory on the route to Bukharevo 2 and the Kamennaiia Gorka neighborhood. In Saint Petersburg this includes the graffiti at the Gulf of Finland and near Sportivnaia metro. In Moscow, this includes the areas around Babushkinskaia neighborhood, the VDNKh Exhibition Center, Fili metro, Voikovskaia metro, Elektrozavodskaiia, Vladykino and near the Botanicheskii Sad (in English, *Botanical Gardens*).

**D. Downtown District:** I classify any graffiti located in a city’s downtown, old town, or financial district as existing downtown. The downtown space includes the most frequented streets, the greatest density of tourists, and the highest real estate costs, deeming it to have the highest social and geographic capital of a city. Its walls tend to be more meticulously monitored and more regularly buffed. Though the downtown space carries the greatest risk of consequence, it also embodies the greatest spatial achievement for artists. In Budapest, this includes Szent István (District 5), Deák Square (District 5), Kossuth Lajos Square (Parliament, District 5), District 13 (New Jewish Neighborhood, near Szent István), and Bajcsy-Zsilinszky
street in District 5/6 (Downtown). In Minsk, this is the area along the river near Pobeditelei Avenue and Masherov Avenue, Maksim Bogdanovich, Oktiabr’skaia, Paris Commune Square, Maksim Gor’kii Park, Nezavisimosti, and the area around the Niamiga metro intersection. In Saint Petersburg, this includes any graffiti located on Nevskii Prospekt, the Neva Banks, and downtown sightseeing locations (Admiralty, Bronze Horseman, etc.). In Moscow, this includes any graffiti located on Tverskaia street, in Kitai-gorod, on Yauzkii Street, the area around Tret’iakovskaia street, the area around the Arbatskaia metro, and near the Kremlin.

E. **Market District:** Any graffiti located in or around a city’s food or flea market is classified as existing in a market area. In Budapest, this includes any graffiti around Batthyány square (Buda), Széll Kálmán Square (Formerly Moszkva Square, in Buda), Feny Street Market, and Lehel Square market behind the Nyugati Railway Station. In Minsk, this refers to the area near the stadium on Ulanovskaia Street at Lenin Street. In Saint Petersburg, this is the area surrounding the Udel’naia Market. In Moscow, this refers to the areas around the Fili metro and the Izmailovskaia Market.

F. **Graffiti Spot:** In each city, there are places designed—whether illegally or legally—for graffiti artists to paint. This includes fan walls (Lennon Wall and Tsoi Wall), heavily painted courtyard interiors, and other places where members of a counterculture can paint. Generally, these areas display more advanced aesthetics. In Budapest, this refers to the Filatorigat mural area. In Minsk, this is the area near Proletarskaia metro (by train tracks), Akademicheskaia Street and in the Botanicheskaia Street Parking Garage. In Saint Petersburg, this refers to graffiti located in and around Marata 16. In Moscow, this refers to Tsoi Wall and permitted graffiti spots on both the Staryi and Novyi Arbat.

Map 3: Color-Coded Map of Saint Petersburg, Russia. Original color map found online at Orange Smile. OrangeSmile.com. 29 April 2012. Web.

Map 4: Color-Coded Map of Moscow. Original color map found online at Infokart. Infokart.ru. 29 April 2012. Web.
5. Data Analysis

I manually organized my photographs for analysis based on seven categories:

A. Medium (Materials and Method of Production): Stencil, Sticker, Wheatpaste, Mural, Tag, Freehand, and mixed;

B. Crew, if known/ or artist, website listed, or various;

C. Theme;
   i. Political (references to a political party, political leaders, political candidates, political policies, national identity, political history references, mobilizing efforts against or for a political purpose, questioning power dynamics and authority relationships such as media censorship, police brutality, anarchist movements),
   ii. Political Fascism (Antifa and nationalist sentiment),
   iii. Social (Beatles references, nostalgic history references, calls for freedom, drug references, Racism, peace signs, writing about alcoholism, social behavior, social reform, vandalism, vegetarianism, mobilizing efforts without a purpose, car politics, bringing art into the streets for the sake of beauty or aesthetics),
   iv. Advertisements,
   v. Religious symbols or references,
   vi. Music (references to music groups, punk rock, Beatles references), and
   vii. Sport.

D. Surface (flat exterior, business door, residential, bus stop, ground);

E. Content (text, character, inanimate design, mixed);

F. Where (1-6, per location as listed in sub-section 4);

G. Status: Legal (Commissioned), Illegal (Regular), Permitted (Illegal without buffing, de facto legal); and

H. Language (English, Russian, Belarusian, Hungarian, German, etc.).

After assigning these categorizations to each photograph, I discarded any images that were illegible or did not fit into the seven categories offered in section C. This removed name graffiti, gang graffiti, city name graffiti, crew
name graffiti, and declarations of love graffiti from my study. When uncertain about the official status of a wall (regarding categorization G), I erred on the side of illegal.
APPENDIX TWO: PLATE LIST

Figure 1: Anonymous. “Who, if Not Putin?!” Freehand. 2 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


Figure 3: Anonymous. Campbell’s Soup. Freehand. 4 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 4: Anonymous. “We Remember. We Grieve. 22, 06. 1941.” Stencil. 3 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 5: Anonymous. Advertisement for Strategy 31, a monthly opposition meeting. Sticker. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 6: Anonymous. “Fight for Zenith.” Stencil. 3 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 7: Anonymous. Beatles Tribute. Mural. 10 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


Figure 9: Anonymous. “No War.” Freehand. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 10: Anonymous. Nuclear Alien. Stencil. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


Figure 12: Anonymous. Nuclear Tree. Mural. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 14: Anonymous. SS. Freehand. August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

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Figure 16: Anonymous. “Let’s Construct Russia’s Future Without Fascism!” Freehand. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


Figure 18: Zachem. “Zachem.” Freehand. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 19: Zachem. “No Future Forever.” Mural. 2 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).


Figure 21: Kirill Kto. Buff. Freehand. 3 March 2012. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: N. van Beek).


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Figure 30: Group of Change. “Stand Up Beside Me. Group of Change.” Stencil. 10 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 31: Anonymous. *Jewish Star and Nazi Swastika.* Freehand. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


Figure 33: Latvian Freedom Monument. Riga, Latvia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 34: Anonymous. *Double Headed Eagle with Alcohol Bottle.* Stencil. 6 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 35: Anonymous. *Pahonia.* Stencil. 7 July 2011. Minsk, Belarus. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 36: Anonymous. *Pig Cop and Nationalist Symbol.* Stencils. 7 August 2011. Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


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Figure 78: Anonymous. “You are a Slave.” Freehand. 14 August 2011. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).

Figure 79: Anonymous. *Memorial for Political Prisoners Under Stalin.* Freehand. 28 July 2011. Moscow, Russia. (Photo: A. Zimberg).


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**Khirill Kto.** Personal Interview. Moscow, Russia. February 2012. Internet.


