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7 Expressive measures

An ecology of the public domain

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A time of swiftly shifting appreciations . . .

In the context of the focus in this section of the book on the writing (but also representations and reading) of graffiti and street art, it may be interesting to notice how, in the mid 2010s, a slight yet perceptible tendency to disaffiliate from the label of 'street art' has appeared. This positioning manoeuvre has been made more or less subtly and more or less contingently by some artists, and especially by various curators and gallerists. Certainly, several artists belonging to the big wave of street art of the early 2000s have sound idealistic, if not ideological reasons to be disappointed today. To them, as well as to several cultural critics, street art has, in the meantime, turned into the veritable mark of urban gentrification, the proof that capitalist dynamics have entirely recuperated the spontaneous creativity from below that characterized the early 2000s explosion of global street art.[2] Curators and gallerists might have their reasons to flee street art, too. From a commercial point of view, this genre might not be going to sell as well as it has done in the last decade. Its cutting-edge status is increasingly challenged, and cultural producers and promoters around the world feel that the label 'street art' is growing old, turning into a straightjacket that misrepresents their current research and productive efforts (see also Schacter in this volume).

So, has the whole phenomenon of street art been, economically-wise, a speculative bubble? Shall we expect that street art, also known as post-graffiti, will eventually be superseded and supplanted by *post-street art*? If street art is 'graffiti with a college degree',[3] is post-street art going to be street art with a PhD degree?

Obviously, artists do not need PhD degrees to do their work – for that matter, they don't even need art school degrees. What this metaphorical escalation of academic titles alludes to is not so much the status of producers themselves, as much as the nature of the larger social and urban sphere graffiti and street art have intercepted. Over the last decade, street art events have been caught up in official territorial marketing and tourist destination branding strategies. Major street art exhibitions, such as the one organized by Tate Modern in London in 2008, are just landmarks of a much larger trend that includes a proliferation of urban art events, galleries and organized tours. This way, graffiti art and street art have been ingrained in the official scripts of urban revitalization and urban promotion. Increasingly,

contemporary art centres all over the world have opened their doors to this type of art, and the cultural policy of a number of key cities has been sensibly receptive to them. In some cases, having a local street art scene has turned into an undisputable tourist asset – if not, in some cases, a goldmine. While in 2006 the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair was still posing before reporters with a graffiti removal hose during his visits to disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Getty Images 2006), in 2014 a senior cultural policy officer at the Greater London Authority, Adam Cooper, warmly welcomes graffiti for its 'social communal value' depicting graffiti artists as 'pioneers of a new kind of visual arts', in connection with the fact that 'culture and creativity are the essential ingredients to any successful city' (Cooper 2014).

During the last decade or so, street art has functioned as an unmistakable conveyor of 'urban creativity', a fuzzy if not hopelessly blurred notion that can be traced back to the 1990s and the rise of an array of cultural strategies and policies aimed at promoting the arts as an economic growth tool at the city as well as the national level.[4] The street art market has determined the success of galleries such as Urban Nation in Berlin and Stolen Space in London (a branch of The Whitechapel Gallery devoted to urban art), while major urban festivals such as Urban Affairs in Berlin, Upfest in Bristol, Cityleaks in Cologne, or NuArt in Stavanger, Norway, have flourished. The number of venues where street artists have been showcased has increased exponentially. Concurrently, one cannot fail to notice a trend toward gigantic operations, such as 'La Tour Paris 13' (Itinerrance 2014), defined by its organizers as 'the largest street art exhibition ever'. If La Tour Paris 13 undoubtedly shares resemblances with a kind of 'street art Disneyland', at about the same time the global street artist *par excellence* Banksy launched his Dismaland project, a post-street art operation contradistinguished by his sarcastic approach to contemporary Europe, its politics and lifestyle. Already in his first movie released in 2010, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, Banksy ironized on how easy it can be to create a street artist *ex nihilo*. Indeed, *Exit* can be read as not only a docu-fiction, but also as a larger performance art project consisting in creating one such street artist.

Infamy and celebrity of graffiti in the public domain

This chapter is not an ethnography of producers. Rather, the theoretical proposal here is for a shift towards an 'ecological' perspective. Rather than merely confined to the impact of human industrial activities on the biosphere, an enlarged conception of the ecology also includes a human ecology, an urban ecology and a cultural ecology, or ecology of the mind. In short, an ecological approach is a theoretical approach that focuses on the relationships that are established within a heterogeneous social sphere. In other words, an ecological perspective is not meant to capture the point of view of individual actors, rather, the global pattern that derives from their intended as well as unintended moves. What is the relationship between publicness and value? How is value practically produced and measured? How can a cultural production, such as graffiti and street art, be

embedded within a circuit of valorization? What are the variations and transformations that may occur in this circuit? These are the kind of questions that can be tackled ecologically.

Since the 1960s, in urban studies the ecological perspective has been criticized for depriving actors of their agency. Human ecology has been attacked for its weakness in taking political economy into account (York and Mancus 2009). However, that is not necessarily the case. The point with an ecological perspective is not so much erasing agency, as much as *bracketing* it. This is especially useful for investigating emotionally and morally charged phenomena; in that ecological analysis is intrinsically a-moral. The subsequent questions for social researchers, concerning how to un-bracket or unpack subjectivity and morality, and how to reconnect it to the analysis of social relations in their fullness, cannot be tackled ecologically. At some point, phenomenology is called forth to complement ecology and, an albeit apparently paradoxical synthesis – an 'ecological phenomenology' – must be envisaged.

While the farthest eco-phenomenological horizon is not part of the present inquiry, the important caveat is that the ecological perspective is far from being the ultimate perspective on social life. Nonetheless, it may turn out to be a provisionally helpful tool for inquiry – a Wittgenstein's ladder, so to speak. Thinking ecologically makes it possible to envisage overall patterns, or complexes of actions and reactions that allow us to gain a global insight into certain regions of social life. Such patterns can also be analysed as, diachronically, trends in transformation and, genetically, newly emerging formations. Narrowing down to a discussion of graffiti, the theoretical move proposed here enables researchers to observe what happened in the larger social and urban sphere surrounding these types of urban interventions. Elsewhere (Brighenti 2016a), I have argued that the Deleuzian notion of *divergent synthesis* might be helpful to explain the curious paths of valorization that have appeared in the field of graffiti and street art. To summarize a rather complex theoretical endeavour, Gilles Deleuze (1969) crafted the notion of divergent synthesis to overcome the traditional logical binary of conjunction and disjunction. For Deleuze, classic logic suppresses the positive presence of *difference* as a third entity that is irreducible to either affirmation or negation. In my understanding, the notion of divergent synthesis enables us to see how apparently contradictory phenomena – for instance, a tendency towards assimilation and a tendency towards expulsion of graffiti from the circuit of urban valorization – may happen. While it is impossible, and fruitless, to draw a sharp line between graffiti and street art, we observe that, on the one hand, traditional graffiti – quintessentially, tags – continues to be rejected outside the boundaries of civility, while, on the other, at least certain street art items have been accepted into mainstream art. This is a complex tendency, a divergent synthesis – simultaneously towards expulsion and re-inscription or recapture – that needs to be untangled.

Here follows a cursory glance at the first pattern. Despite all the celebrations of street art as one of the pivotal embodiments of urban creativity, the widespread attitude against graffiti has not at all waned. Just as at the time of the broken

windows theory (Wilson and Kelling 1982), graffiti remains an easily identifiable scapegoat for a vast array of urban ills. Just to mention a few cases, in 2014 the New York Police Department reported a 24 per cent increase in complaints about graffiti (Holpuch 2014). In 2015, the city of San Francisco sued graffiti artist Cozy Terry, asking for a $54,000 damage to public property, requiring to prohibit the artist from possessing spray cans and to ban him from public transport (SocketSite 2015). Graffiti writers all over the world still die in train accidents in the attempt to escape from guards and the police, not to mention accidents where the police have shot graffiti writers, frequently misjudging them for thieves. Even from an aesthetic point of view, graffiti remains defamed – not far away from the 'bastard art' Brassaï was inquiring into in the 1930s. Just to mention an example, a first-class aesthete such as the director David Lynch recently declared: 'Graffiti to me has pretty much ruined the world. It's ruined it for film. When you go to a place to film, everything is graffitied so if you don't want it, you have to paint it out' (Robertson 2015). To take another case, recently, the London-based all-city tagger Tox – technically speaking, a bomber (Van Loon 2014) – was found guilty of a string of graffiti attacks across England. Most interestingly, the public prosecutor, as well as some expert witnesses, deliberately sought to humiliate him, declaring: 'He is no Banksy. He doesn't have the artistic skills' (Davies 2011). This way, not only did an aesthetic judgement enter the legal field as a ground for incrimination, but it has crucially been employed in a shame game aimed at distinguishing *good* (artistic) and *bad* (untalented) graffiti. From an ecological perspective, Tox's point of view remains out of the picture – e.g. one cannot rule out that, after all, he might have enjoyed the 'lack-of-artistic-skill' charge on the part of a lawyer as a compliment. In this sense, in his analysis of the Sydney street art scene, Cameron McAuliffe (2012) has spoken of a 'moral geography' of the city and the citizens that is conjured up through the machinery of creativity.

The case of Tox also gives us, by contrast, an entry point into the second pattern included in the divergent synthesis. As mentioned above, this second pattern has been shaped by the eulogies to street art that have flourished since the early 2000s and that have marked the last decade especially. The examples in this vein are numerous. Let's just mention one discourse that resonates with the genre of aestheticizing gaze on street art seemingly shared by Tox's prosecutor, too. StreetARToronto is a programme run by the municipality of Toronto. Its public presentation reads as follows:

> StreetARToronto or StART is a pro-active program that aims to develop, support, promote and increase awareness of street art and its indispensable role in adding beauty and character to neighborhoods across Toronto, while counteracting graffiti vandalism and its harmful effect on communities.
> (City of Toronto 2013)

Here, street art is described as an urban asset for both its beautification potential as well as its community-building capacity. While the former attribute is related to the idea of art as public decoration, the latter is clearly tied to the presence of

artist communities and creative milieus present in the territory. Thanks to such a rhetoric, the municipalities of large cities with active local art scenes have tried to appropriate, or at least employ, street art as an item in a Charles-Landry-Richard-Florida-type-of recipe for building their own respectable 'creative city'. The creative city literature – a large and, arguably, repetitive body of work – is sufficiently known not to be discussed in depth here. Suffice to recall how, in its unclearness, the jargon of creativity has resonated with a can-do attitude towards urban regeneration placing increasing emphasis on a kind of snapshot-language that has always been quintessential in the graffiti culture. Under the hegemony of the creative-city narrative, street art has been wielded into an urban development tool, targeting specific areas and neighbourhoods. As noted by McAuliffe (2012), the creative city has offered to street art new paths towards recognition. In the public discourse, street art has thus provided something like a mirror into which the contemporary city could mirror itself, finding beauty for once – after decades of graffiti ugliness! For an example of top-down strategic uses of street art, one can recall the commissioning of street art 'protected' interventions in the context of the London Olympic Games (Wainwright 2013). Not only major cities, but even a few remote villages such as Fanzara in Spain – which have come to be identified as street art hubs thanks to the efforts of a few relentless and passionate organizers – could hope to recover from their fate of semi-abandoned dying villages, turning into an instance of 'cultural triumph' (Kassam 2015). Success engendered a paradox of anonymity and stardom, in that a larger number of producers has fostered the fame of fewer bigger names. In economic terms, this has led to increasingly differentiated payoffs within the same market, according to a typical winner-takes-all scheme.

If we consider the two dynamics that characterize the divergent synthesis, a clear-cut opposition seems to have been put in place between, on the one hand, bad, defacing graffiti, and, on the other, good, decorative and marketable street art.[5] However, we should resist the temptation of simplifying thing in this way. Not only is the distinction between graffiti and street art not always easy to draw – as the lack of an established terminology testifies. The fact is that nowadays, as recalled above, an increasing number of cultural producers are positioning themselves against – or at least outside the boundaries of – street art. In this respect, one case is particularly illuminating. Back in 2007 and 2008, the Berlin-based street art curator Lutz Henke had invited the Italian artist Blu to paint a wall in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood. The pieces by Blu (one of which in collaboration with the French JR) have become quite notorious, to the point of being a naturalized part of the Berlin cityscape. Pictures of this artwork can be found on websites as diverse as the municipality of Berlin and a real estate agency currently redeveloping the zone. In reaction against this capture into the mainstream, in 2015 Henke put out a press release titled 'Blu Murals painted black'. In a public lecture, Henke (2015) explains that, in agreement with the artist, his collaborators have whitewashed the wall. 'We created something that contributed to gentrification and in the end we expelled ourselves from the neighborhood', Henke commented. At the same time, as the site of the artist reveals, Blu has completely dissociated

himself from the street art mainstream, shifting to grass-root murals and working mainly if not exclusively with leftist squats, neighbourhood councils and social projects.

The Berlin piece by Blu has been recurrently described as 'iconic'. The problem, however, is that it was never clear of what it was an icon in the first place. This may have something to do with the inherent ambiguity of iconicity at large. Truly, icons are signs, but it is never clear of what they are signs. Despite their enhanced visibility, in fact, icons can never be reduced to 'established figurations'. Instead, they exist in a twilight region of the visible (Brighenti 2015). Icons are not systems, and cannot be. This is the reason why icons end up quite easily caught in the 'perverting' dynamics described in Stoic philosophy. Icons, in other words, are twisting operators that break unified designs and strategies: their most proper move is betrayal. They are as easily appropriable as they can get out of control again. The difficulties in circumscribing and stabilizing the meaning of icons deserves an in-depth inquiry that would probably drive us towards the core of social life – especially in connection with the question about why do we keep looking for them. However, for the moment, let us just content ourselves with observing how, in various cases, the iconicity of street art has intersected the discourse of urban creativity.

Urban creativity and the urban atmosphere

As discussed above, over the last couple of decades, the mantra of urban creativity has asserted itself as one large-scale narrative that a vast array of different actors ranging from local administrators to shop owners have strategically and tactically employed to talk about cities, imagine them and, ultimately, transform them. But, the rhetorical exploitation of the creativity narrative as an asset for urban development has increasingly experienced limitations, beginning from the fact that it is not entirely clear how such an asset can be produced, sustained, increased and, ultimately, turned into economic value. Among the attempted explanations of this phenomenon, Jack Katz (2010: 27) introduced the phrase 'urban alchemy' to describe 'the trick of selling versions of the public to the public'. What Katz refers to as 'urban alchemy' is simply the fact that people are attracted to cities because of their global human atmosphere, rather than just a specific set of tradable items. A series of economic opportunities derive from the very human density of cities. Katz takes the example of the bistro owner who,

> simply by orienting chairs toward the avenue or square, can charge extra for the espresso that comes with a landscape view of communal life that generations of others have made magnetic.
>
> (Katz 2010: 27)

This way, besides the pursuit of single goods, the city itself constitutes a preliminary *meta*-good people are willing to make sacrifices to afford. In our view, this happens because cities are coterminous with a public domain that constantly

overcomes the plethora of objects and goods that are placed in it. In this context, *icons* lie precisely at the threshold between the plethora of objects and the immaterial enveloping milieu. From this perspective, it is impossible to conceptualize graffiti and street art without placing them within the larger ecology of the public domain and its specific dynamics.

The public domain can be imagined as an integral, enlarged public space beyond physical settings (Brighenti 2016b). Not only does the notion of public domain join together public space and the public sphere, it also moves beyond a topographical definition of public space, in order to apprehend the specific *publicness* that contradistinguishes public space and the public sphere. A theory of the public domain takes into account the fact that the existence of specific locales in the city is constantly prolonged towards other locales merged into circuits of imagination, discussion, affection and action. Spatially speaking, the public domain is infused (or scattered, disseminated) in the city in an interstitial way, through more or less visible paths and currents. Publicness corresponds to a specific degree of intensity in social life, and the intensity of the public domain is characterized by the on-going confrontation between a number of addresses that are released (or even 'shot') into an accessible, visible domain together with the reactions these addresses elicit or, in any way, meet (Iveson 2007). This is also why the public domain can never be fully occupied by anyone, least of all by the authorities. The public domain thus embodies the *limits of control* of public agencies. 'Reversible appropriations' could be a phrase that conveys the endless working of the public domain. In our case, a piece of graffiti or street art is cast or launched by its creators into the public domain through an inscription into the register of the visible and the accessible. By doing so, that piece of graffiti occupies a locale and from there begins to be spread out in a number of visual and discursive paths, including the reactions of passers-by, media coverage, discussions in forums and magazines, the wanted or unwanted 'attention' from the public administration, commercial actors and so on. A whole ecological circuit is thus drawn that incessantly passes through phases of closure (appropriation, privatization) and re-opening (further addresses, further changes made to the environment).

Part of the seduction of the urban atmosphere is a consequence of its eventfulness, and part of the attraction of urban eventfulness lies in its never-perfectly-controllable status. This is the inherent life of the public domain, an ecology that no single actor can master thoroughly. Incidentally, this might be one of the reasons why the labels 'public' and 'urban' have increasingly come to flank, if not supplant, the 'street' in street art. In a sense, one of the problems with street art since its outset has always been that it has never been 'street' enough – at least, never as 'street' as the old graffiti tradition from which it stemmed (for some artists) or with which it hybridized (for others). 'The street' carries the connotation of a space that can never be fully tamed, where a degree of unruliness is true to type. This consideration has certainly constituted part of the coolness, thrill and excitement that welcomed street art in the early 2000s. In fact, however, unruliness, then perceived as conveying a liberating and empowering sense of freedom, itself

facilitated the capture and re-inscription of graffiti art. The reason is to be sought in the peculiar, wide-ranging relationship between capitalism and governance that has been progressively asserting itself since the 1970s. As compellingly conceptualized by Michel Foucault (2004), the spread of 'ordoliberal' theory and the rise of neoliberal governance practically coincided with the project for a type of governance that includes freedom instead of excluding it. Rather than through norms and restrictions, the neoliberal individual can be governed through through the environment – essentially, through market competition. From the moment street art has come to produce value, its unruly aspect has posed no problems to governance. To put it differently, the trick that critical theorists since at least the Situationists have called recuperation, or co-optation into the system, is deeply inscribed into one of the crucial contemporary models of power (albeit, arguably, not the only one in place).

Value-measure environments

So far, we have argued that graffiti and street art have been caught in an encompassing pattern of urban valorization. Consequently, the question now turns into the following: how is it that certain things acquire and, in turn, confer value? And, conversely, how is it that they lose value and, ultimately, detract it from its surroundings? More specifically, as seen above, with graffiti and street art we have been observing two mutually exclusive yet simultaneous processes of valorization, that is, simultaneously towards infamy and celebrity, towards expulsion and re-inscription. The existence of such simultaneous divergent circuits is to be related to the nature of value, and how it can be measured, if at all.

An ecological perspective invites us to observe the multifaceted composition of measuring tools deployed to capture value. To begin with, the notion of value must be liberated from both a narrowly economic and a narrowly moral understanding. Rather than a local phenomenon, value is best imagined as a total social fact – if not, probably, the *ultimate* social fact. To understand value, we need more than ecology: we need vitalism. Value – or, as it may also be called, worth – is a phenomenon that enables acts of creation and conversion across different social domains – fields or subsystems. Hence, its inherent instability, its polymorphic and metamorphic appearances. Not by chance, Katz (2010) chose an alchemic image to describe the process of urban valorization. The alchemic metaphor stresses the inherently metamorphic, converting aspect of value. Even better, we should speak of a 'conversive' feature, in the sense that not simply is value converted, but value is that which makes things be converted. What these things are, though, is not entirely clear yet. In connection with this, it should be remarked that, while value sparks from the middle of social life itself, it also mysteriously points towards an *outside* of social life, keeping the social domain open towards some kind of non-social space from which all sorts of innovations and unheard-of formations proceed.

Indeed, besides the notion of divergent synthesis, Deleuze also provides us with an important insight into art value (2004: 77): 'We know – he writes – there is

only one value for art, and even for truth: the "first-hand," the authentic newness of something said, and the "unheard music" with which it is said.' A faithful vitalist, Deleuze ties value to novelty, immediacy, and its ensuing positive affections. In this view, the first-hand fresh experience that characterizes valuable art is akin to a *presence* (incidentally, here one can retrace a debt of Deleuze towards phenomenology, which he otherwise criticized). Elaborating a bit on the terminology, we could say that value is *expressive*. Now the puzzle becomes slightly more clear if we consider the extent to which such expressive innovations and unheard-of formations are difficult to integrate into social reality. What is interesting about the notion of divergent synthesis, or disjunctive conjunction, is that both convergence and divergence admit commensuration. They admit it in principle, yet practically they pose a series of considerable challenges to each single measurement. Therefore, the questions to be considered include the following: Can expression be measured? What is the relation between expression and measure? Do measures just capture expression or do they also produce it – and, if so, in what sense?

So intimate is the interplay between value and measure that it is possible to speak of veritable 'value-measure environments'. Actually, a measure provides not only a metric, but a whole environment where things can be apprehended and compared. In other words, the creation of new measures always entails the introduction of new ways of making, stabilizing and transforming how humans associate with their socii in a shared environment. Rather than simple tools, measures can be best conceived of as bundles of aspects, or selective gazes, packaged into every single measure unit and measurement act. The technological–material, the legal–political and the cultural dimensions of measures represent some such gazes bundled into each single measure environment. Every technical measurement system thus functions not only as an epistemic model but also, inherently, as a power tool. Not simply this: every measure system shapes and evokes a whole imagery. No power system, no institutional organization can exist without a whole ecology, cosmology and, eventually, a theodicy of measures. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Gabriel Tarde (1890) observed that measures enable us to treat in logical – even quantitative, mathematical – terms things that, in fact, pertain to the field of teleology. In other words, measures turn what we want into what we believe.

Truly, measures enable us to objectify value. More precisely, perhaps, they enable us to *visibilize* it. Making value visible – such is the working of measures. In practice, we couldn't even imagine a manifestation of value that does not *ipso facto* conjure up a measurement system. A measure, understood as a procedure of visibilization, consists in the inscription and projection of value into the domain of the visible. Acts of visibilization are not innocent, though: they are acts that make things happen. Just as there is a magic of value, there is a corresponding magic of measures. But these two forms of magic should be carefully distinguished. The magic of measures is to be connected to two different yet superposed meanings contained in the word 'measure', namely: a) measure as the result of an act of measurement that records or gives back a certain value or worth;

b) measure as an explicit act meant to pursue or promote a given goal within a certain means–ends scheme (what might also be termed a 'policy'). The tension between recording an independent reality and creating the reality supposed to be ascertained or assessed, is the tension out of which the magic of measures springs. So, when it comes to understanding the 'vibrant urban environments' where graffiti and street art are produced, one clearly senses that urban vibrancy intimately resonates with excess, transgression and thrill – as said above, the public domain as the limits of control. In fact, however, it is only through measure that excess and transgression can be identified. Etymologically, both words contain a precise reference to the stepping or falling beyond measure. This is also why it is impossible to straightforwardly assign moral qualifications – such as good versus bad – to either measure or excess. If measures turn what we want into what we believe, then the quest for measure is intrinsically the quest for the *right* measure. It is an axiological quest. But the rightness of measure can only be commensurate to the value to be made visible, and the complication lies in the fact that, as noted above, there is no neutral act of visibilization.

Another crucial fact in the deployment of measures concerns the distinction between an object and an environment. Properly speaking, only an object can be measured, while the environment corresponds to the blind spot of measure – for the good reason that measure itself is such an environment. On the other hand, objects have no intrinsic value, rather, they draw their own value from the context and the situation in which they are inserted. This is particularly clear in the case of graffiti and street art, which have been described as precisely emplaced, topo-sensitive, situational, and embedded in unique spots (Chmielewska 2007, 2009; Ferrell and Weide 2010; Young 2014; Avramidis 2015). Thus, it is a matter of clarifying the nature of the urban interventions under scrutiny. Graffiti cannot be disembedded without altering its nature. But, applying a measure systematically entails severing the object from its environment. The transformation of value as a total social fact into value as economic asset – ultimately, as price – illustrates this dynamic. In order to 'cash' value, one has to circumscribe an artwork with definite boundaries, to turn an artwork into a tradable object. The paradox, however, is that severing the object from its environment also cuts the original link from which value itself stems. By doing so, value evades objectification and returns to the environment. What remains is, perhaps, a cherished decorative fetish, something that, in the short or long run, will lose liveliness and vigour. In the end, what remains is not even a fetish, but a *potiche*. In synthesis, here this is the unsettled relationship between value and measure: on the one hand, there is no value independently from the measures with which we attempt to grasp it; on the other, though, value can never be fully grasped by any act of measurement whatsoever.

Expressive measures and artful materials

The fact that 'urban creativity' has turned into an established, even major asset in contemporary capitalist urban valorization makes the relation between creativity

and resistance not linear. Today, creativity per se is neither liberating nor capable of producing value. Indeed, the so-called process of capitalistic recuperation is always a recuperation of products, not value. However, from a political point of view, from the moment in which creativity has lost its novelty, those who want to resist the present state of affairs, and thus create a *new* novelty in the arts, find themselves in a complex situation – as we have seen in the Henke/Blu affair above. Like them, a whole cohort of people who were actively engaged in the scene in the early 2000s have felt increasingly expropriated of their own productions, with their own creative weapons of resistance turned against themselves. In this context, one can also read the bitter declarations by C215 (Guémy 2013). A certain dissatisfaction and maybe even hopelessness vis-à-vis street art has followed (the traditional graffiti community, on the other hand, has been much less affected). In this section, a proposal is made to reconsider a notion that represents, in a way, the uncanny alter ego of creativity – namely, the notion of *expression*. Perhaps, once this notion has been disentangled from creativity and decoration, an overall reassessment of current valorization patterns can be envisaged and, consequently, a space for new schemes may be imagined.

First, let us quickly review the imaginaries evoked by the words creation and creativity. Creation is, literally, a bloody enterprise. To begin with, the Latin verb *crĕor* is akin to the word *crŭŏr*, blood, and originally referred to childbirth – something that cannot happen without a certain expenditure of blood. It is a passive, not active verb. While we know that, in fact, the child is anything but passive during delivery, the ancient imagination encapsulated in the word creation tells that the child is being born because her mother is pushing her out. Also, one cannot help but notice the theological resonance of the imaginary of creation: we are all creatures because we have been created, and what we can create in turn is just a minor addition that never counterbalances our original debt towards our creator. Despite the original bloodiness of creation, in post-1968 Western culture the word creativity has been progressively transformed into a sanitized version of what is supposed to be an act of creation. Creativity seems to have become a sort of disembodied quality that has not much to do with creation itself and is instead to be connected with personal attitude or attribute. Psychologists have established all sorts of metrics to measure individual creativity; in parallel, urban studies scholars have employed it as the characterizing mark of local neighbourhoods, districts, as well entire cities – presumably on the basis that creative persons want to stay with other creative persons. Understood as an attitude of creation that prescinds from creation itself, creativity illustrates what Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950) once called a 'floating signifier', a vague catch-all phrase that can be deployed as a discursive resource to support valorization, albeit as simulacrum. At first sight, the discourse of creativity seems to stand in opposition to rationalist explanations of social action; in fact, both creativity and rational choice are grounded in an individualist model of society. As hinted above, the larger historical horizon in which such a trend makes sense is the rise of neoliberal governance where power works through free competition of individuals in the market. It is not by chance, then, that the discourse of creativity is inherently competitive and meritocratic.

Expression, by contrast, places us in a completely different register of imagination. What it offers is an essentially non-individualistic explanation of social life, one that fits with the ecological prism proposed at the outset of this chapter. In the previous sections, a conception of value as a form of expression has also been put forth. The ground for this view is that expression is contradistinguished by an accentuated *centrifugal* vector, a movement that goes from the core to the periphery. The core, however, is not an individual. Rather, expression proceeds from the heart of impersonal social life. Expression is not something that comes from within the individual and erupts outside of him/her; it is something that comes from within social life and erupts in a connective milieu of people. Thus, expression is a manifestation of the force of social life itself that connects individuals and envelops them within evolving environments. From this perspective, expressive persons, such as cultural producers of all sorts, represent singular points where the impersonal forces of expression coalesce and condense, and from which they are bounced and spread around. This view is not meant to downplay the importance of individual inventions; yet, it is important to distinguish expression from invention. While invention is something the individual confers to society, expression is something individuals come to embody by becoming receptors of social forces. In short, expression is another name for the mobility of preindividual and impersonal value. There is a further important connection to be established between expression and public life. As seen above, the public domain corresponds to a dynamic whereby a plural, even anonymous public is addressed. Such is also the dynamic of expression. In other words, if the centrifugal movement of expression draws outward trajectories, the outside towards which expression is directed is nothing else but the public domain itself.

No expression can be understood apart from a prolonged engagement with specific materials. Ethnographic studies of graffiti and street art have emphasized the skilled, sensuous and embodied work upon a range of specific materials that is being carried out by producers (Brighenti and Reghellin 2007; Young 2014). In every expressive act, a protracted faithfulness to an *art* is required. Here, the word art is to be understood in an extremely broadened sense, including all sorts of skilful domains where tools and tricks of the trade are deployed. There is nothing general about expression, given that expression cannot be but expression-in-something. In other words, expression is something that happens with or in materials themselves; it is an operation that proceeds through materials and their technologies. More precisely, expression consists in making materials expressive. After Duchamp, at the very least, all art is conceptual. But that is far from ruling out that artists – just as all humans, on another account – necessarily struggle with specific materials. The intimate physical, visible contact with materials always includes a kind of struggle and restlessness – together with commitment and, ultimately, enjoyment.

Having disentangled expression from creativity also offers an interesting entry point into the hypothesis of the *ornamental* nature of street art. In a recent contribution to the literature, Rafael Schacter (2014) offers a fresh and important insight into a thread of street art he has termed independent public art. In his work,

based on a prolonged ethnography of the Madrid scene, street art is celebrated as urban ornament. The hypothesis is a fascinating one, which makes sense especially once ornament is neatly distinguished from decoration. Decoration (from the Latin *děcět*, bring appropriate) consists of *decent* embellishment, merely non-belligerent beautification. Ornament is a different story. The *ornamentum* is, originally, the equipment, the amour, the warrior's gear. It is also the jewellery and, by extension, the honour and distinction that come with it. Ornament is *parure, bijou, Schmuck*. To the modern eye, ornament may appear as tamed and domesticated in terms of elegance and distinction – just, slightly kitsch. Yet, as noted by Georg Simmel and Adolf Loos in two short, crucial essays, both from 1908, there is something inherently *excessive* in ornament. Loos was a modernist architect who passionately fought against ornamentation in architecture, regarding it as a sign of primitivism and lack of taste. This is exactly why he despised ornaments (Loos 2006 [1908]). From the point of view of modernist design, which should have been based on sober aesthetics, he stigmatized the ornament as 'criminal'. On the other hand, Simmel – the eclectic and highly refined cultural critic and theorist who remained an academic outsider throughout his whole life – offered a more rounded analysis of the ornament, describing it as the simultaneously egoistic and altruistic object *par excellence*. Egoistic, insofar as it is motivated by a careless desire to distinguish oneself and top others at any price, the ornament is also altruistic in the measure in which it proceeds by constantly offering aesthetic gifts to the beholder. The ornament thus represents a 'synthesis of having and being' that draws a strong give-and-take nexus between the individual and his/her milieu.

In clear contrast to decoration, the ornament lacks appropriateness; it is superfluous and frivolous, akin to the *bling* in hip-hop culture. Hence, the ornament constitutes a sort of graphism that is out-of-measure vis-à-vis the established and accepted aesthetic canon. The notion of *dépense* in Georges Bataille (1967), thought of as an unproductive expense of energy and goods, echoes a similar attention to a dynamic that the French author regarded as fundamentally anti-bourgeois. The ornament as an attitude, as 'ornamentality', is primitive, yet not restricted to far away tribes. In fact, it is the eruption of the primitive – such a childish mix of egoism and generosity beyond measure – in the heart of every modernity. There is, in other words, a rebellious stance in ornamentality that recalls the primitive rebellion of the social bandits described by Eric Hobsbawm (1959). The bandit is someone who has been banned and is searched for by the authorities. However, in rural societies the outlaws are often seen as beacons of popular resistance insofar as they represent peasant struggle against landlords, usurers and clergymen – let's just recall Robin Hood. Hence, the qualification of 'social' banditry. Excessive and dangerous to the establishment, social bandits steal and gift generously, measurelessly – they ornate their milieu.

The question, however, remains: can the ornament be subversive? Following the diverse insights from Loos, Simmel, Bataille and Hobsbawm, the ornament remains assigned to a status of ambiguity. While there is certainly an anarchic, unruly ingredient to it, the ornament lacks any overall political project. Indeed, Hobsbawm himself was the first to warn against the romanticization of social

banditry, highlighting how in many cases social bandits had more of a conservative than revolutionary function, keeping rural society straddled in an impasse that inhibited any development. Like tattoos, ornamental practices entail an unleashed, joyous cruelty of the eye necessarily imbued with moral and political ambiguity. While ornaments lie outside of the aesthetic canon, they can still be captured by it and made functional. In the terms introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1972), the primitive territorial coding ends up being overcoded by the barbarian despotic machine, that is, the central state. Whenever the state comes back in, the ambiguous graphism of ornamentality is replaced (or encaged) by proper writing. More than subversive, the ornament ends up being subverted.

Conclusions

Motivated by a rational strategy, the destruction of the wall by Blu in Kreuzberg has been a desperate attempt to resist the rise of creativity. The gesture is bold, yet per se incapable of elaborating alternative patterns of valorization. Probably, those who seek to resist current valorization patterns will find ornamentality similarly insufficient. Nonetheless, ornamentality retains an important indication. Indeed, the ornament conveys a deep sensuous engagement with materials. From this point of view, the ornament shares similarities with the work of expression that, as we have seen above, pivots around the transformation of materials into expressive materials. The ornament is expressive, although not all expression is ornamental.

More generally, this chapter has suggested that an in-depth analysis of expression might lead to novel insights into the overall issue of value-measure environments in contemporary society. In doing so, it should be kept in mind that art producers are not the only ones who handle expressive materials. Indeed, as the ecological point of view stresses, it is impossible to imagine the public domain without a plurality of heterogeneous materials of expression being worked upon, disseminated and coming into reciprocal contact. The contentious legal–political, economic and cultural dynamic surrounding graffiti and street art can be appreciated through the prism of the public domain – attending, that is, how the new measures of the urban are created, put in place, as well as challenged and undermined. Ultimately, the question to be tackled today concerns whether and how measures themselves can become expressive.

Notes

1   The author wishes to thank Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi for their careful reading of the first draft of the chapter, their generous comments and the wealth of suggestions to better it. Limitations are my own.
2   However, one should not overlook that street art traces back to at least the 1970s, stemming from independent and experimental art movements such as Fluxus and Situationism, whose avant-garde artists first engaged the materials of pop culture.
3   Such naive yet effective expression has been used by the New York-based street art tour guide Matt Levy (Holpuch 2014).

4   For an example drawn from British pop music, one can think back to the famous 'Cool Britannia' moment in the mid 1990s. (Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cool_Britannia. Accessed: 11 January 2016). More pointedly, recent conferences such as *(Dis)respectful Creativity Conference: Graffiti & Street Art on Contemporary Society & Urban Spaces* (6 June 2014, Athens) and *Lisbon Street Art & Urban Creativity International Conference* (3–4 July 2014, Lisbon) may be recalled (Available at: www.sgt.gr/en/programme/event/1692 and www.urbancreativity.org/ respectively. Accessed: 11 January 2016).
5   Two pieces by Lush make the point in a punchier way. Available at: http://lushsux. tumblr.com/post/111130182756/carry-on; http://lushsux.tumblr.com/post/11211963 2201/get-outta-jail-free-card. Accessed: 11 January 2016.

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8   Dead ends and urban insignias

Writing graffiti and street art (hi)stories along the UN buffer zone in Nicosia, 2010–2014

Panos Leventis

Introduction

The United Nations Buffer Zone is a strip of land of varied width that runs from west to east and divides the island of Cyprus in two. In the heart of Nicosia, the island's capital, the Buffer Zone (BZ), also called the Green Line, bisects the old city and its sixteenth-century fortifications (Figure 8.1). It is an urban landscape mentally and physically associated with a long history of armed conflict and violence.[1] During the last decade, the words, colours and messages of graffiti and street art have reappeared and proliferated in the midst of this landscape,[2] with often perception-altering results that affect both the place itself and its users.

This contribution identifies individuals and groups of artists who create on the walls of old Nicosia's no-man's land, 'writing' and 'telling' (hi)stories on the Buffer Zone's semi-destroyed urban fabric. It investigates whether specific sites are deliberately chosen, and inquires whether context influences content, theme or end-result of the work(s). From commenting (or refusing to comment) on military invasions, urban destruction and unresolved conflict, to engaging in past times of prosperity and rampant capitalism, and to pondering current realities of socio-economic crisis and uncertainty, street art along the Buffer Zone is discussed as a critique, a reflection, and an inseparable part of Nicosia's current and future urban processes.

The contribution is a phenomenological, composite urban walk comprised of narrations of experiences of the city's fabric, graffiti and street art. The walk progresses along the Buffer Zone of the Walled City, from Paphos Gate in the West to Famagusta Gate in the East. Each of the three short, two-part fictional narratives features a different protagonist who experiences events, spaces, the city, the graffiti and the street art. The protagonists are, in order, a reporter, activist and street artist in his twenties, a soon-to-be unemployed banker in his late thirties and, lastly, a multi-tasking architect – a refugee from the north of Cyprus – in her forties.