

Youth Precariat Worlds and Protest Graffiti in The Dystopia of the Greek Economic Crisis: A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork during the times of economic crisis, this article addresses protest graffiti created by young people, often living in precarious conditions. The text explores the uncertain living conditions of Greek youth in the era of austerity and investigates the graffiti act as a cultural tool through which a young graffiti artist seeks alternative modes to express its dissatisfaction, protest and, often, readiness for social change. It employs a socio-semiotic analysis combining a biographical approach of graffiti writers' lived experiences and the semiotic analysis of graffiti creation within the specific social and cultural context in which the very act of graffiti is performed. Exploring the social world of politically themed or existentialism-oriented graffiti in various Greek cities, the analysis sheds light on the structures of feeling of young people living under adverse conditions, revealing social and aesthetic trends, expressive forms of social protest, and existential quests within Greek youth. The research findings show that the scene of political-existential graffiti is an encounter between the subversive aesthetic aura of graffiti with the counter-austerity movement's repertory of collective action in the ongoing struggle against austerity policies.

KEYWORDS Youth, precariat, political graffiti, socio-semiotic analysis, biographical approach

Youth, protest graffiti, and precariat activism

Making graffiti under circumstances of crisis is a meaningful activity among youth. Young people often have lack of power to engage in more institutionalized means of political discourse and the subversive aura of graffiti, a physically demanding and risky activity, allowing them to make space for alternative kinds of aesthetic (dis)order, dialogue and urban encoun-

ter (Iverson 2010). In the context of the long-standing economic crisis in Greece, the proliferation of protest graffiti has become a striking feature of the visual space of Greek cities. Young writers visualize their own readings of an unexpected crisis, engaging in anti-austerity mobilizations.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork during the times of economic crisis, this article addresses protest graffiti created by young people, often living in precarious conditions. Drawing on a semiotically informed ethnography based on multimethod research, the article uses different styles of research methods and data collection techniques (Hunter & Brewer 2003). It employs a specific socio-semiotic analysis that allows the convergence between semiotic exploration of graffiti creations on the visual palimpsest of Greek cities and a biographical approach focusing on young graffiti writers' lived experiences of meaning. In doing so, it reveals fruitful links between (critical) discourse analysis and semiotics in the interpretation of an invisible youth world, not discernible by other means of research.

The research data consists of field observation, photographs of graffiti, and biographical materials, including informal discussions and life story interviews with graffiti writers. The sources were gathered through fieldwork in communities of graffiti writers in ten major Greek cities during the period of the crisis.¹ The analysis of multiple sources of fieldwork, including narrations and visual text or images, in relation to the associated surrounding offers new possibilities for understanding human experience and lived realities (Keats 2006: 194; Mason 2006; Hunter and Brewer 2003) and the meaning of doing political or existential graffiti within an unpleasant social environment.

The article explores briefly the use of graffiti by precariat young people under circumstances of crisis focusing on the case of Greek graffiti scene in the era of the memoranda. The main part of this text is divided into two sections. The first employs a socio-semiotic analysis of protest graffiti in the visual palimpsest of Greek cities focusing on some striking exemplars that shed light on aesthetic trends, political claims, and existential quests within Greek youth. The second brings in the foreground the voices of young graffiti artists exploring the ways by which the actors of an invisible social world define, evaluate and understand the meaning of graffiti activity. The final section of the article discusses on the importance of fertile cross-disciplinary ethnography combining semiotic analysis and biographical approach in the study of graffiti youth worlds.

The intersection between spatial activism of young graffiti artists and the unpleasant social contexts that surround their communities has inspired a varied academic body of literature (Khosravi 2013; Luna 1987; Luzzatto and Jakobson 2001; Nayak 2010). Ferrel has argued that young people create graffiti in order to resist the increasing segregation and control of urban environments, constructing alternative cultural spaces and undermining the effort of legal and political authorities to control those (Ferrel 1995). Young people, who feel socially and culturally excluded, have been using graffiti-saturated walls to raise their voice in protest against a

more powerful Other, for example a non-responsive state, the political elites, and the mainstream media (Pettet 1996; Austin 2002; Waldner and Dobratz 2013).

Drawing upon Fromm's theory, Christopher Williams suggests that, when opportunities for meaningful engagements with the world are limited by social circumstances and biographical realities, human beings tend to seek out or construct alternative spaces for fulfillment of their needs and creative interplay (Williams 2007). Potential spaces, such as protest graffiti, offer young people opportunities to playfully explore them, freed from the fetters and limitation imposed by material existence and the normative structuration of experience (Williams 2007: 55).

For precariat young people, the protest graffiti act is an expressive response to the condition of existential despair and increasing hazardous conditions of precariousness they experience in moments of crisis. Precarity can be understood as the experience of material and existential uncertainty of workers and young people as a result of flexible employment arrangement (Bain and McLean 2013: 97; Waite 2009). In the context of European anticapitalist/globalization social movements, the terms precarious labor and precarity come to represent an emancipatory terminology used by political activists as a critical way of addressing the neoliberal conditions of labor deregulation (Matos 2012: 221).

According to the challenging approach of Guy Standing, the precariat is a class in-the-making, consisting of people who lack the labor-related security that characterized post-war industrial citizenship (Standing 2011: 9). Living in poverty without employment and work security, income earning opportunities and collective rights the precariat become 'alienated, anxious and prone to anger' and tend towards opportunism in their attitudes and decisions. As *denizens*, not citizens, they do not have a clear vision of what type of society they wish to usher in, they do not recognize themselves as 'part of any solidaristic labour community' with a long-established social memory and ethical norms (Standing 2011:12).

The consumer-driven global economy of advanced capitalism spawns a young, peripatetic army of low-wage service and retail workers who drift between part time jobs and temporary housing and have a life defined by precarious prospects and constant uncertainty (Ferrel 2012: 1696-7). For Standing, the prospect of a viable future for youth needs an alternative political scenario that moves beyond the negative trends of neoliberal austerity policies, providing young people with opportunities to recover their identities and to fulfill their occupational role expectations (Standing 2011:12).

Precarity politics, which identify or imagine precarious workers as a new kind of political subject, exploring alternative ways of collective living and being (Ferrel 2012: 1696-7), quickly has given genesis to new forms of cultural expression and social protest. For Gill and Pratt, precarity signifies both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of political party or trade union. This double meaning of the ideas and politics associated with precarity, offers the chance to explore precariousness not only as oppressive situ-

ation but also as opportunity for new subjectivities, new socialities and new kinds of politics' (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3).

Indeed, in the context of advanced capitalism new forms of precarity activism have emerged using theater, cinema, music, graffiti writing, and street art to effect political change and propose alternatives (Gill and Pratt 2008; Ferrel 2012; Bodnar 2006; Schuster 2015). Artists and other cultural workers are among the protagonists of current struggles against exploitative working conditions in art world participating in social movements actions, such as the transnational Euro May Day mobilizations, the Occupy Wall Street protests, and the Milanese cultural workers' activism against the neoliberal model of competitive creative city (de Peuter 2014; d'Ovidio and Cossu 2016; Gill and Pratt 2008; Mattoni and Doerr 2007; Mattoni 2008).

In the case of Greece, the combined effects of the recession and the sweeping austerity measures have dramatically increased the level of precarity among young people (Gouglas 2013). The majority of young people in Greece are trapped in persistent unemployment or low-paid contingent jobs with limited and not idyllic prospects for upward social mobility. Although this condition used to be the case since the 1980s, the crisis has acted as a catalyst for deteriorating further the working conditions of young people. Austerity policies make previous models of intergenerational solidarity unsustainable, because they reduce young people's access to economic resources (e.g. family income and fewer job opportunities) and social transfers (Kretsos 2014: 41).

During the period of economic crisis, youth unemployment climbed abruptly and many young people who have a job tend to be in low-paid and/or precarious employment, struggling to meet the rising costs of living. Many young people, especially those coming out of the educational system with higher skills, have migrated to other countries. In a segmented labor market many young people attempt to enter as 'beneficiaries' of flexible work programs funded by the EU, or to find any available job, often trapped in flexible work schemes in black market economy without social security.

Young Greek people frustrated by strict austerity policies have expanded unrest and public anger at the mainstream political institution (Kretsos 2014: 41). Squatters have occupied various old, abandoned buildings all over Greece, transforming them into cultural and political hubs of grassroots resistance activities. A remarkable example of this type of cultural activism is the long-term occupation and activation of the disused theater *Empros* in the center of Athens by precariat cultural workers (Kompatsiaris 2014: 15) who use it as self-managed space for free cultural expression and social action. Similarly, during the 2011 protests in Greece, thousands of people across classes, ages and political beliefs had a strong presence in 'occupation of piazzas', thus constituting a type of contentious politics through which Greeks expressed their protest against austerity and neo-liberal restructuring (Diani and Kousis 2014: 395). Within this context, street artists and graffitiists were at the forefront of fights against hostile austerity policies, and young writers used graffiti as a means of political activism.

Images of crisis: protest, revolt and existential quest on walls

The protest graffiti scene provides young people living in turbulent times with the opportunity to react to social pressures of crisis, sometimes in a remarkably creative way. The urban walls have been an experimental space by which young people utilize poetic language and paradox linguistic elements that twist conventional writings in order to express philosophical musings, political ideas, existential quests, and emotions. They use playfully, intriguing images and/or texts conveying linguistic or semantic novelty, and often, address introspective and reflexive statements focusing either on existential and self-conscious musings (Islam 2010: 251-2), or societal issues articulating a counter hegemonic discourse in the public sphere.

As Anti Randriir has argued, the pragmatic aspect of graffiti meaning has to do with the very conditions under which graffiti creation emerges: the place of occurrence and the time of emergence. The specific place and its temporary nature in combination with the linguistic and pictorial representation of each graffiti, assigns its meaning, and stresses its stagedness and theatricality (Randviir 2015: 97-98).

Many young graffiti writers articulate visual counter-sites around local social movement networks. They choose distinctive urban areas with vivid political symbolism to transmit their messages to their audience, squares associated with the Greek 'Indignados' anti-austerity movement, high schools and universities, squatted centers, downtown areas, and working-class districts. Surfaces on historical buildings and banks, shabby walls, viaduct poles, rubbish bins, shop windows and derelict houses are used by graffitiists to make the visualized city more vibrant, intriguing, and protesting.

The semiotics of the place and the appropriate choice of street objects is part of the writers' spatial strategy to convey meaningful messages and to provoke the interest of passers-by. In this vein, a slogan reading 'Our dreams are here' inscribed on a rubbish-bin out of a secondary school in the center of *Patra* reflect the sense of frustration of a young generation experiencing the effects of the worsening living standards, the rising level of unemployment and the dismantling of social welfare services (Spyridakis 2013). In another case, the wall of a derelict, humble house in Exarchia –a notorious and rebel neighborhood of downtown Athens, where many students, artists, writers, intellectuals, anarchists and leftists hang out-has become the realistic decor of an imaginative piece. It depicts a melancholic figure of an old man at the 'window' of the house, conveying a meaningful message that warns: 'Don't underestimate hunger'.

Young people use an intriguing texture to express the experience of unemployment or precariousness through protest graffiti. This is the case of a graffiti by WD (Wild Drawing; he is an important street artist from Indonesia who lives in Athens) that depicts an aged unemployed beggar saying (in English) 'I need job, not speech'.² It reminds us of the painful experience of unemployment, criticizing in a playful mood mainstream politicians, who, despite their

rhetoric, have not managed to tackle rising unemployment and social exclusion effectively. Another impressive creation of WD covered the first-floor wall of a house in Exarchia and displays a huge figure of a half-alive homeless man who is sleeping. The piece is accompanied by a meaningful message: 'Dedicated to the Poor and Homeless here and worldwide'. The use of combined pictorial and linguistic elements provides the writer with the opportunity to make a caustic comment on social and economic inequality endowing it with affect and emotion.

The frequent use of foreign languages in political graffiti reflects the influence of technological advancements on writers' interactions, mediations, and spatialities (Avramidis and Drakopoulou 2015: 135). Since some intriguing graffiti that depict images of everyday life within the dystopia of Greek society have attracted the international media, a network of communication has been developed between foreign and domestic graffiti artists allowing Greek writers to expand the horizons of their subculture carrier beyond the Greek borders. Moreover, various iconic representations of the crisis in elaborate murals painted by eminent European street artists have been exhibited in street art festivals in Athens and Thessaloniki, funded by private enterprises and state organizations.³ The rise of a new kind of corporate, sponsor-based graffiti action has incited a furious debate within graffiti worlds. For some graffiti artists these changes reflect an effort of powerful organizations to incorporate graffiti activism into mainstream culture, spreading consumerism and commercialism in street art.

Beyond these cultural disputes, some huge murals painted by European artists attracted the interest of graffiti communities. This is the case of an impressive mural by Goin, a prestigious French street artist, which has covered two external corner walls of the School of Fine Arts in Piraeus. On the first wall a barefoot, skinny child with a ball beside his foot is depicted saying: *I need food not football*. On the other wall images of cameras and a satellite antenna are displayed, criticizing allusively the consumer-driven and media-oriented worlds of professional football competitions all over the world. The graffiti was painted during the 1st street art graffiti festival in Athens and calls into mind the 2014 FIFA world cup in Brazil, raising a voice of protest against the organizers of the economically powerful sports mega-events who neglect the needs of the poor. The mural recalls related ideas concerning the impacts of 2004 Greek Olympic Games in Athens on the Greek economy and the situation of impoverishment of Greek people.

In the same vein, an imaginative stencil by *Antifa Babies* criticizes the penetration of nationalism into football worlds parodying the ephemeral Greek football fans' enthusiasm for their national football team achievement to reach the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. It depicts a group of fans celebrating the victory of the national teams adding a caustic comment: 'When you have no dignity, then you degrade yourself by supporting the national team'. Young writers to comment on their precarious living conditions often use subversion, irony, and parody of conventional popular images. In this regard, a past-up near the National Technical University of Athens comments on the dramatic increase in homelessness and poverty during the era of

austerity. It portrays a seditious image of Santa Claus in shabby clothes grilling a sausage in a pot with a caption reading: 'Empty Saint Claus'.

As graffiti is usually performed as a politically conscious act of resistance, locations with high political symbolism have become sites of artistic experimentations. For example, the walls of the occupied self-managed factory of VIOME⁴ in Thessaloniki, have transformed into sites of meaningful political graffiti. On the frontage of the building an inventive graffiti by Skitsofrenis depicts a young refugee in black and white, wearing a colorful crash helmet with a boat painted on it. The contrast between the melancholic glance of the boy and the colorful boat on his helmet seems to signify the mixed feelings of the refugees: the fear of the unknown and the hope of a better life somewhere else. In the background one can see pictorial elements of working class life (factory funnels and gears).

In the bottom right hand corner there is a couplet from a poem of left-wing Tasos Leivaditis, which was set to music by the famous composer Mikis Theodorakis, saying: '[the world] is small and there is no room for my groan'. The song refers to the social life of Greek refugees in the slam areas of Piraeus, bringing to memory the disagreeable experience of Asia Minor refugees during their exodus to Greece (1922-1923). Using a significant historical account, the writer assigns a sentimental tone to the meaning of graffiti, stimulating the viewers to turn their attention to the contemporary tragedy of the Middle East Refugees on their painful way to the alleged paradise of the developed West.

The grim picture of a young generation living under conditions of sustained uncertainty without positive future prospects has inspired many stencilers. For example, in downtown Thessaloniki a stencil depicts a bent man who is dressed formally and carries a bag with a winding key in his back. This iconic figure is accompanied by an existential question: 'Are you alive?'. Another one portrays a barefoot, doleful child that holds a cord, which ends up in a red-colored inscription saying: 'No future'. Likewise, stencils and past-ups expound noticeable representations of trapped young bodies and emotions, figures of vagabond children with sorrowful looks, accompanied by verbal expressions of disappointment: 'It is certain; I will never find a job', 'Has anyone seen my future?'. Moreover, the young people's loss of confidence in the repeated governmental promises of saving the country has found expression in series of playful, ironic slogans, such as 'No more rescuing', 'No more heroes'.

In a similar vein, inner feelings and beliefs found an outlet for expression on urban surfaces all around the country. A slogan in the center of Herakleion says, 'Let us aestheticise our grief' and a graffiti in Exarchia depicts a disappointed weeping girl reading, 'Like lost children we live our uncompleted adventures'. Using black and white words in the phrase 'uncompleted adventures' and omitting a few letters, the writer attempts to render expressively the sense of uncertainty and the feelings of unfulfilled desires.

Slogans full of playful irony and rhetorical subversion transmit youth discontent across Greek cities. One slogan written by a young woman paraphrases the well-known saying of the

famous Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, 'I hope for nothing, I fear for nothing, I am free,' replacing the last phrase to 'I am unemployed' in order to express sarcastically the feeling of exclusion and futility. Other series of slogans juxtapose words that signify feelings of vulnerability and despair (e.g. 'Abasement, loneliness, desperation' 'Wretchedness, misery, depression'), or expound negative sentiment expressions ('Fear is rising everywhere,' 'I am suffering'), endowing public spaces with unmistakable signs of the social and psychological tensions of young people who live in a 'risk society' experience.

Sometimes this type of affect graffiti with its melancholic tone leaves space for more politicized voices of protest. This is the case of a piece by the socially engaged graffitist Bleeps in Metaxourgeio, a neighborhood located north of the historical centre of Athens. It represents a child who holds a placard reading, 'Hopeless'. Words on the background of the graffiti signify either dystopian conditions of social life ('immorality', 'loneliness', 'pollution', 'injustice' 'selfishness'), or structural systems of power ('monetary system', 'capitalism', 'aristocracy', 'religion', and 'globalization'). Following a linguistic convention of the juxtaposition of words with a similar meaning, the graffitist strengthens the meaning of the message, underlining the systemic structures of socio-political domination that surrounds the social context in which the semiosis takes place (Vannini 2007: 117).

Beyond the realm of affect graffiti, many political slogans and stencils incite young people to take part in acts of resistance against austerity policies and the corrupted political system. Young writers articulate a revolutionary rhetoric ('Wake up- rise up') and often, a raw anti-systemic texture (e.g. 'Generation of 300 Euros set fire to the State', 'School lights up only when it is on fire', 'Eat the Rich'). Grassroots political activists seek to transgress the dystopia of crisis proclaiming their faith in an alleged possible non-capitalist future society using a language of revolt: 'There will be a day when revolution will not be a utopia,' 'Towards working emancipation for an autonomous society', 'One solution: revolution'.

Young activists make use of catchphrases and visual images to excite the public interest around the issue of social inequality and injustice in slogans: 'Guards everywhere, justice nowhere', 'In the world of bosses we are all foreigners'. Similarly, a mural in Exarchia allusively comments on power relationship, criticizing the ideological domination of elites and the subordination of non-privileged groups. It depicts a distorted figure of man, who looks like a quadruped held by a hand on a leash and accompanied by the slogan: 'The trouble is that people learn to love their chains.'

Gender inequality issues in the context of crisis are also depicted in the protest graffiti scene. Graffiti written by feminist groups portrays images of precariat and unemployed girls protesting for the deterioration of the living conditions, while other present non-conformist girls in conflict to the dominant images of girlhood. For example, a painted graffiti at the University of Crete shows a fighting girl with an unconventional way of dressing saying: 'The girls spend the night out fighting fascism.'

Other graffiti comment on the manipulation of young people's consciousness by mass media, criticizing their prejudiced, one-sided coverage of the crisis events. The writers employ the poetic geography of free space as counterpoint to the neo-liberal logic of tightly controlled public spaces (Ferrel 2012: 1689) to criticize the existing structures of power and domination. Various slogans assert rights of free expression claiming 'More free space', and criticize the mass media through caustic and sarcastic mottos: 'Police talks to you through news broadcasting,' and 'I am sorry that I am writing on walls, I am not called in reality shows.'

Some graffiti illustrate social commentaries on embarrassing political events, acting as a unique memorial and a medium of healing in communal grief and trauma caused by regrettable incidents (Klingman and Shalev 2001). In doing so, young writers bring to the foreground memories of youthful traumatic events of rebellions in the past, attempting to prompt their readers to get involved in direct action towards a desirable youth uprising. A variety of graffiti across the country illustrates iconic images of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos, reminding of his fatal shooting by a police officer in Exarchia in December 2008. These are often accompanied by catchphrases with reference to the youth riot that occurred in its aftermath all over the country, attempting to raise the spirit of revolt: 'How many Alexises do you expect to die to make you go out on the streets?'; 'I live through your fights.'

The assassination of the young leftist rapper Pavlos Fissas by a member of the neo-fascist political party Golden Dawn on September 14, 2013, is another case in point. The dreadful event triggered a strong reaction, including protest marches and antifascist events organized by youth activist groups. Under these circumstances, many graffiti have appeared in visual landscapes of Greek cities adorning them with elaborate pictures of Fissas and, often, poetic inscriptions or antifascist slogans, articulating a space of expressive commemoration in his memory.

Elaborated, colorful murals, intriguing stencils and playful slogans in the visual palimpsest of Greek cities are signs of the existing structures of feelings of a society in crisis. They are visual embodiments of young people's perception of feelings of loss, precariousness, distress and insecurity. The graffiti scene shows the ways through which youth react to the dystopia of crisis employing space activism and artistic experimentation to present their understanding of crisis and to produce a social critique in terms of resistance.

The voices of writers: making graffiti in context of crisis

Researching the young precariat artistic world from the subject's own perspective is important to grasp their ways of thinking and structures of feeling. Ethnography fieldwork allows us to shed light on the interpretive framework that guides their actions. The study utilizes a combination of open-ended biographical interviews or unstructured conversation with young

writers conducted by the research team⁵ and field observation. With a few exceptions, they are well-educated and have job-related experiences and skills, frequently as cultural workers. Some of them experience frustration and despair due to the lack of employment and educational prospects under the present condition of crisis. For ethical reasons, in the stage of analysis the writers' real names have been hidden, and respecting their specific preferences, we have used either pseudonyms or, in the cases of interviewees who wanted to retain a full anonymity, a capital letter. The analysis of interview data presupposed the organization of consistent material on the basis of several criteria: chronological order, thematic field, context (della Porta 2014: 249). Here the analysis pays attention to the process of comparing and contrasting the different ways by which narrators interpret the graffiti activities and tell their stories to make sense of their life, revealing varied visions, beliefs, meanings, motivations and experiences that lie behind the scene of graffiti.

The context of the harsh and extremely pressurized conditions of austerity seems to be a hallmark in young people's life trajectories in Greece. Doing graffiti is a meaningful, affective activity that offers opportunities for imaginative expression and a chance to stand up to those power holders considered to be responsible for the unfavorable modifications of surrounding environments (Zaimakis 2015).

For many writers, political graffiti is perceived as an act of creative resistance against the rise of authoritarianism, racism, and fascism during the austerity era. *Skitsofrenis*, a well-known spray-painting writer, uses street art both as a bread-winning job and as means to sustain or reinforce an activist identity. He began his career in street art worlds as a member of a hip-hop band to move later to the graffiti scene creating elaborate murals in Kalamata and other Greek cities. According to his statement, graffiti provide an expressive instrumental tool with which you can adequately combat fascism:

'Young people should understand that we must change the game. [...] If you fight fascists with your own weapons [of artistic graffiti] you will disarm them. [...] It is the power of poetry, education, the ennoblement of instinct.'

Skitsofrenis employs a poetics of assemblage using selected combinations of pictorial and linguistic elements. The represented persons can be eminent persons from the world of (popular) art, science and politics or ordinary people from specific social groups, such as refugees, young people, and children. The pictorial elements are often accompanied by slogans inspired from the vocabulary of popular music, Greek art-popular song, rebetika and low-bap scene. Besides the meaningful use of the combined pictorial and linguistic elements, he employs various spatial tactics to draw the viewers' attention:

'I was walking down a pedestrian street closed to the Acropolis in Athens and beside I notice a homeless man who was seated. Passers-by were walking with bowed

heads and holding empty bags. I was thinking of what to create there. [...] I made a representation of Socrates gazing at us and I wrote on it: "Conium, conium, conium is free." Many tourists, such as Russians, Americans etc. gathered around capturing photos but a (shopkeeper) came and told me, "Do not do such things, man. We have to offer them some happiness" [...]. However, the foreigners showed their appreciation: "We came to Greece and [for the first time] we saw a graffiti representing the reality".'

The quotation reveals the meaningful spatio-temporal tactics of the writer. He chose a popular historical area in central Athens to present his creation to an international public, employing the historical figure of the ancient philosopher Socrates to intrigue the curiosity of passers-by. Replacing the title of the controversial song 'Alcohol is free' that represented Greece in the 2013 Eurovision song contest, with the slogan 'conium is free' he offered a sarcastic and timely remark on social inequality. While people's discontent was on the rise, the costly campaign of the song with its showy superficiality and empty pretentiousness was seen as a provocation for a society living in hard times.

For V., a social science student, graffiti is part of the everyday politics of a local LGBTQ youth group in its effort to sensitize people to issues of body, sexuality, and human rights. During a student occupation of the University of Crete in Rethymnon in autumn 2015, the group wrote a variety of slogans with derisive catchphrases against the rise of racist and xenophobic attitudes in the era of memoranda. Moreover, it creates murals depicting non-conformist girls that challenge the dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions.

'Beyond the issues of housing and food, we had to assert the right of our existence and visibility within a general assembly of students. [...] seeing a depiction, especially a political one, a person may think of several political issues [...] these paintings draw the attention of people [...] simply because when we discuss about antifascism and activism we have men on our minds. Women live in obscurity because of discrimination or sexism.'

Employing carnivalesque representations full of irony, transgression, sarcasm and artistic innovation, the activists of human rights attempt to attract the viewer's attention and to convey political messages in a expressive way. Other activists focus on the political role of street art and highlight the lived experience of risky pleasure. For instance, WD has drawn inspiration from recent political protests against austerity measures and comments on the emotional and pleasurable sensation of graffiti performance. He views graffiti as a politicized street art, an effective tool to the re-appropriation of public space.

'I like painting in the streets very much. [...] there are a lot of difficulties: it is illegal and

costly, you are exposed to the cold and heat, or the public gaze. [...] and finally this kind of art in public space is ephemeral. Tomorrow, your work may have already been destroyed. However, all these are counterbalanced with the pleasure I feel when I finish a piece and a passerby who stands beside it smiles and says 'bravo'. [...] [Graffiti] should adopt a view of contemporary social reality and it should be active, making its presence be felt in order to sensitize people on societal issues opening up new modes of thinking, communication, and action.'

The repertory of WD ranges from timely political graffiti focused on social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and authoritarianism to wider existential pieces dealing with themes of consumerism, life style, and conformism. A watershed moment in his carrier was the assassination of Alexis Grigoropoulos and the following spontaneous young revolt with mass demonstrations and violent protests all over Greece.

'The revolt, thousands of people, slogans, struggles, metropolitan violence, and a society ready to rise up. I felt it intensively in the streets; I was living in the center of Athens feeling this rebellious vibration. [...] Athens was a laboratory, something that seemed to produce; it produced what had been inside [people's lives] for a lot of years: an anti against the assassination, the State, the Police, the institutions. It was an image from the future.'

Another graffitiist and unemployed activist, P, connects the very action of graffiti with the psycho-social pressures of the economic crisis. The act of graffiti is experienced as a meaningful political action that has a cathartic function.

'During the years of crisis many people feeling a deadlock have the need of externalizing it. Graffiti is an appropriate way to do this, because you can address more people. It helps to overcome fear and insecurity. Whoever has tried to externalize this fear by sticking a poster, writing a slogan and then chanting a slogan in a protest march he feels that he is not alone and he is escaping from the fear.'

P. employs graffiti in the context of the tactical repertoires of radical political groups, often in protest marches where he takes the responsibility of writing on the walls, conveying political messages to the readers. Employing graffiti as a visual political speech, he seeks places that might be seen as sites of modern governmentality, finance capitalism, and uncontrolled free markets. He selects meaningful spatial locations, such as 'banks', 'public buildings and city halls', 'open shops on Sundays that infringe working people's rights,' and 'multinational companies that impose unfavorable social conditions on labor' to transmit political messages concerning issues of oppression and exploitation.

While some activists perform graffiti for their own political purposes, other creators employ it as a medium of personal expression and existential quest. Usually, they create elaborate pieces addressing wider existential issues imbued with philosophical musing. For the street artist B., a graffiti act is a 'personal expression where someone 'performs his identity'. Similar to many other graffitiists, he uses the practice of spray-painting during the austerity era not only as a medium of expression exposing inner feeling to the public view, but also as a means of livelihood. Graffiti offers opportunities for temporary work paid by piece. However, as several writers say, agreements with their employers do not always include payments but purchases of material goods (e.g. spray-colors), the remnant of which they can use to paint their own pieces. Under these circumstances, V. illustrates elaborate pieces both on walls of back streets and on the surfaces of derelict factories. In his narrative he links the act of graffiti with inner feelings and existential motives:

'It is a circle of artistic work that addresses the issue of the relationship between life and death, as well as the fragility of human existence. Moreover, I like to play with the location of graffiti, placing them on unexpected sites.'

The spatial politics of the visualized city is a major topic in the narrative of N., a member of a young crew in Thessaloniki. According to his argument, a graffiti act is a spatial exploration within urban landscape:

'You get in the mood of exploration, looking for abandoned buildings, tunnels, and places to leave your signs. I find places and locations, through the exploration and curiosity that I would have never experienced otherwise. [...] The choice of the place depends on several criteria: How central this location is? How many people are expected to see it? How dangerous is it? In the last case you do it something like as a conversation with other graffiti writers who will pass by and might see it. Then, you gain appreciation other street artists [...] the material is also important. Maybe it is an available canvas, for example the blind of a shop, or a vast wall.'

The creators' tactics are often directed to the graffiti communities, attempting to obtain symbolic capital in terms of prestige and fame. They use graffiti landscapes as a public forum where artistic novelties, linguistic peculiarity, affect expectation, existential quest, and deviant political ideas can circulate freely. The act of doing graffiti enhances writers' self esteem and gives them a way to visualize ideological imagery concerning identity-based issues. The voices of precariat young writers reveal the young underground currents of the city that seek an outlet in a fragmented and insecure society badly stricken by austerity policies.

Bleeps is a cultural worker and graffitiist influenced by postmodernist approaches and aesthetic trends. His intriguing graffiti has drawn the attention of international mass media, in-

cluding the Guardian and the New York Times. During the austerity era he has moved from a political-themed graffiti to an existentialism-oriented creation with more introvert orientation and a focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people. Part of his graffiti activism turns against the mainstream consumer-driven street art, which is prevalent in contemporary funded graffiti festivals projects. Unlike many other politicized graffitiists in Athens, he acts beyond the iconosphere of Exarchia, seeking more common graffiti sites: places of social and commercial gathering, popular streets and squares, lower-class areas, and even disreputable districts:

‘There are areas that constitute the genuine expression of the city, where junkies shoot freely [...] I had been active in [areas] where one could see black [sex workers] women working in the street.’

The writer chooses specific locations to display his creations assigning them with particular meanings. This significant spatial tactic is attuned to Bleeps’ wider interpretation of graffiti act as street poetry. For him graffiti is a discourse on the conditions of everyday life that gets poetry back into the realm of streets. Moreover, he is aware of the role of the exchanges of knowledge and graffiti-related techniques within cyberspace in the dissemination of his work and the highly competitive context of graffiti worlds.

‘The dynamism of an artist is strengthened through his presence within networks and social media. [...] I do not share the accusation on art, I like allegory. [...] Art in public place is a discourse. I do not use slogans that were outside of my interests. Even if I used mottos, such as ‘viva la revolution’, there is something hidden beyond that. I see my writing as street poetry. [...] What annoys me is that graffitiists function competitively in public space attempting to appropriate even the last corner of the city in order to ‘announce’ themselves. I prefer the public dialogue.’

The protest graffiti scene brings about the meeting of distinctive, often contrary and contradictory, voices and intentionalities that have to do with diverse forms of social protest. Many graffitiists turn their interest towards a solitary activism using graffiti as a playful and emotional activity and a way of an underground communication among unaligned writers and readers. They have built their own communities of interests within urban space promoting displays of subjectivity that respond to personal impulses and desires embedded in the particular social context of crisis. Other young activists attempt to convert the feeling of exclusion into a visual form of protest. Graffiti creation process signifies the readiness of young people for changes towards a better world; even though the vast majority of them do not have a clear view of what types of policies and reforms should be implemented to overcome the crisis effectively.

Discussion

Graffiti has been used by young writers as a unique tool for materializing contentious politics and influencing social experience. Employing a cross-disciplinary research combining biographical and semiotic elements, the analysis shed light on the spatial politics of the writers and the varied strategies of cultural representation of social life in the era of austerity. The research findings show that protest graffiti signifies both a meaningful activity with sentimental value, allowing the expression of feelings, and simultaneously, a political, vociferous youthful protest against unfavorable chances that frustrate the life expectations of youth.

The meaning of graffiti is established through discursive and interpretive conventions that are socially constructed and framed by the intense politicization of everyday life during the austerity era. The creators employ politics of assemblance, drawing upon a rich repertory of pictorial or linguistic elements, such as iconic figures, traditional and historical references, social movement vocabulary, timely social questions, popular songs, and revolutionary mottos. The narratives of interviewees show the multiplicity of meanings associated with the graffiti act. All graffiti writers understand the act of making-graffiti as a deep emotional and creative activity that gives meaning to their lives. Nevertheless, some of them perform graffiti as a politically conscious resistance to existing forms of domination and as a kind of cultural response to dystopian conditions of crisis. Other writers use it as an expression of inner feelings, employing more existential and emotional aspects of everyday life.

The socio-semiotic analysis of protest graffiti shows a variety of modes of expression, aesthetic quests, and demands of graffiti world, revealing a dissenting underground culture that contests and subverts mainstream narratives and dominant cultural meanings. Several murals and stencils are sophisticated, playful and innovative creations, which excite the curiosity of passers-by galvanizing them into collective action. Existential graffiti imbued with melancholic poetry serve as reminders of isolation, anomie, hopelessness, and the loss of vision of a new life in a risk society. Utopian and revolt graffiti employ images of a desirable oncoming revolt and philosophical musing towards future utopian worlds revealing the desire of young activists to make alternative urban spaces. It is a grassroots activism of invisible young people that aspires to become a revitalizing agent in the fights against social disruption and austerity.

Many graffitists are young activists who have affiliations with politically oriented groups, mainly leftist and anarchist collectivities, beyond mainstream parties. Usually their actions are inextricably linked to the social movement of politics of everyday life. Other graffitists employ more playful and allusive ways of expression, conveying existential and/or pessimistic messages imbued with emotional resonance and affect. They usually are unaligned writers or members of grassroots artist collectivities, often well-educated, fostering more individualist and emotional reactions to the dystopian condition of crisis.

Precariat young people with no faith that any political savior will appear any time soon

and trapped in the vicious cycle of austerity into insecurity, unemployment, and poverty, express their sense of existential stalemate. The poetic of precariousness is a new phenomenon in the domestic graffiti scene, reflecting public discontent and social despair. Writing on walls has become a cultural response of a young artistic precariat to the context of crisis, expressing in a creative way the particular traumatic national experience of financial crisis and its feeling of loss. Graffiti not only convey highly visible, often provocative, political messages and cultural expressions, but also has a cathartic function. Existential graffiti, reflecting one person's inner state and feelings, offer the opportunity of engaging in an open dialogue with the reactions of other participants and passers-by, provoking a kind of catharsis, since the thoughts, no longer secret, are written in public on walls easing the conscience (Dragičević-Šešić 2001: 83).

Usually politicized young graffitiists are motivated by feeling excluded from the politics or that politics as usual (Waldner and Dobratz 2013: 377). Moreover, artistic expression, desire for recognition, reputation among peers and fame can stimulate graffiti creation. For young writers, graffiti is a meaningful way to make a statement to the world of adults reminding them the texture of their living conditions and sometimes their desire to stand up against domination and injustice. They negotiate their identities and make graffiti within the process of context-bound and conflict-laden interpersonal interactions of graffiti worlds within and across local communities and virtual-based global networks.

Graffiti scene provide us with the opportunity to learn about the ways that young people attempt to transcend the unfavorable social conditions of crisis, understanding it, in Schuster's terms (2015), as an intensity of artist and political practices that link the public, the particular, and the intimate in contentious spaces of graffiti. Writing on urban surfaces allows invisible young writers to expose publicly their visual imageries, reminding us the existence of a young artistic precariat living in high-risk and ever changing conditions. By transforming boring spatial locations into vibrant graffiti-saturated sites, young writers attempt to convert their dissatisfaction into festivals of visual protest displaying an alternative network of cultural knowledge outside institutional settings.

NOTES

1 The fieldwork was conducted in the framework of two research projects of the Laboratory of Social Analysis and Applied Social Research, Department of Sociology, University of Crete. The first was carried out between April 2011- March 2014. The second is an ongoing project that started in October 2015 in the cities of Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Patra, Larisa, Volos, Mytilene, Herakleion, Chania and Rethymnon.

2 The majority of writers use Greek but some employ foreign languages in an effort to communicate their art to an international audience of readers and writers.

3 A striking example was the 1st Athens Street Art Festival: Crisis? What Crisis. It was organized by the School of Fine Arts, the Municipality of Nikea- Piraeus, and private galleries, with the participation of twenty famous international European street artists.

4 Since May 2011, the workers of VIO.ME have occupied the factory after a decision of their general assembly. The bankrupted factory had abandoned by its owners. Nowadays they produce and sell ecological cleaning products, which they distribute and sell through a network of cooperatives, squatting centers, and solidarity economy groups.

5 The research team comprised of the experienced interviewers Christina-Marily Bourma, Antonis Drakonakis, Vaggelis Gaggelis, Melpo Vardaki, and their supervisor Yiannis Zaimakis.

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