

STREET ART AND GRAFFITI IN RIGA: MOTIVATION, OPINION AND WORK PROCESS OF ARTISTS

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Abstract

This article describes characteristics of graffiti and street art in Riga.

The aim of the article is to present features of street art and graffiti phenomenon, as well as to highlight portrait of a typical urban Riga artist by analysing types of activities, motivation and other characterizing aspects of graffiti writers and street artists.

The author of the article introduces general street art and graffiti phenomenon, highlighting differences between these forms of art, following analysis of such topics as manifestation of street art and graffiti in Riga, the most common forms of street art and graffiti in urban environment of Riga. The author of the article also provides analysis of street art and graffiti artists' motivation of their activities and describes street artist's one-night run that was studied during conducted inclusive observation thus allowing understanding the characteristics of typical Riga urban environment artist.

Keywords: *graffiti, street art, street artist, graffiti writing.*

Introduction

Classical graffiti is one of the most common forms of art in urban environment which originated in the United States of America (USA) around 1960. During that period a distinct culture of advertisement existed in the USA that encouraged marginal groups of society and other "ignored" members of society to advertise themselves with wall drawings and signatures. Initially graffiti served as territory marking instrument for various deviant groups. Nowadays, too, graffiti writers have created or marked their territories continuing the original traditions.

Whereas, street art in Europe originated in France at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s in the so-called Student Events of May as manifestation of social protest using

artistic means. Soon after, it spread also to Germany, the USA and elsewhere in the world [Sebastian 2009: 20]. Still both graffiti and street art often serve exactly as a form of protest, besides fulfilling city beautification function.

In Latvia, graffiti and street art developed later – a couple of years before collapse of the Soviet Union the first graffiti piece was created [Sedliņa 2007]. With regaining of independence and access to new types of artistic expressions, e.g., colour sprays, both forms of art have slowly changed and developed.

The techniques used in street art include stencils, stickers, posters, video installations and three-dimensional art objects (e. g., sculptures, installations), etc. Graffiti and street art are included in the so-called *guerrilla art* genre that is deeply connected with surroundings and city, which in this case is the background and foundation of art piece [Delacare 2018]. They cannot be moved and are exhibited in the place of their creation – on the street, which is part of the art piece. Graffiti writers and street artists quite often travel to spread their work elsewhere in the world. The main difference between classical graffiti and street art is that graffiti historically is “writing” meaning letters, words and signatures created in various artistic expressions, while street art is image-based message delivery to the society [Lu 2014].

The aim of this article is to highlight a portrait of typical Riga urban environment artist by analysing graffiti subculture agents’ and street artists’ types of activities, motivation and other characterizing aspects.

Despite the efforts to define street art, this concept does not have a specific definition. Street art is perceived as various art manifestations found in urban environment. It is rebellious art form that is independent from popular culture or galleries and possibly best understood when seen in its original location. For majority of the society street art is an obstacle, but for street artists it is a way to show dissent, to ask difficult questions and express political concerns. The definition of street art changes. Initially it was a tool to express protest against the existing polity, but for the current youth it is also a tool to beautify and renovate urban environment [Art radar 2010].

However, graffiti can be defined. Graffiti is graphic depictions of letter drawings or drawn, coloured or scratched letters that can be found on various surfaces and walls mainly in public spaces [Zeynep 2012]. Graffiti representatives have clear cause of their action and purpose of created work. Possibly, precisely, because graffiti “writers” manifest themselves exactly within the subculture, the society does not understand their goals and motivation [Sebastian 2009: 20].

Methodology

To understand graffiti and street art manifestation forms and artists’ motivation to act, empirical research based in qualitative methodology and using two

qualitative research methods – in-depth, semi-structured interviews and inclusive observation – was conducted.

In total four interviews were conducted with aim to understand street artists' and graffiti writers' viewpoints about graffiti and street art as element of Riga urban environment.

Length of each interview was approximately one hour. Additionally, inclusive observation was conducted during which author was able to observe street artist at his activities.

While recruiting respondents who would agree to share their viewpoint and experience with illegal artistic forms of expression, it was concluded that not only these artists were very cautious, but also mostly, they did not want to be researched.

In total three respondents were interviewed face-to-face. Out of these three respondents, one positioned himself as street artist who worked only underground. The second respondent positioned himself as graffiti representative who preferred legal projects, but worked also on illegal ones. The third respondent who positioned himself as graffiti representative worked with one pseudonym on legal projects (mainly spray art), but used a different pseudonym that was not disclosed during the interview when working on underground projects. Another graffiti representative who worked very actively on legal projects, collaborated with other artists and with various companies (both large and start-ups) replied in written form. Answers to interview questions were given in written form as during the research study he was not in Latvia.

Inclusive observation in framework of such research study is quite a unique opportunity. During inclusive observation, it was possible to delve into peculiarities of street artists' subculture by understanding all processes street artist carried out before going to his activities, as well as asking questions about all issues of interest to which artist answered by sharing his experience. This method allowed understanding how activities are carried out in real life.

Graffiti and street art manifestation forms in Riga

Street art and graffiti manifestation in Riga city. In Riga street art and graffiti manifests the same as in other countries – it is a way in which artists present their message to society, and the society likes it or does not like it. Despite the fact that this phenomenon in Latvia is topical comparatively recently, there are talented artists in Riga capable of creating original ideas and surprising not only the society, but also their fellow artists.

Riga street art and graffiti differ mainly with the fact that there are no accessible legal locations in urban environment where street artists could work legally and express their ideas at any time of the day. Such solution has been found in other

European cities by making such territories as tourist attractions, therefore Riga artists see the lack of such opportunity to have legal place to work as a problem. According to the author of this article, if such space were provided for graffiti representatives and street artists, it would be appropriate solution, e.g., for useful utilization of degraded city territories. Artists deem to think that in Riga there are many young, talented self-taught artists who have developed their talent on their own without acquiring education in art schools. They emphasize that Riga street art is rich in ideas, but exactly because quite often it reflects real opinions of the society, inhabitants of Riga do not notice it, condemn it and are, according to respondents, ashamed of themselves. Nevertheless, in spite of the disapproval by the society, there are people who like this form of art; that is why they are interested in it, follow street artists' progress and graffiti development in Riga, or engage themselves in this art form.

“In general, it happens the same as everywhere else in the world. This art is found in public space and affects passers-by. Some hate it, some are indifferent, some become fans and start to do it themselves. In Riga and Latvia this phenomenon came in comparatively recently, if we look at the world's background. But despite the fact that we are small and kind of helpless, we quite often “turn up trumps” against big countries by surprising them with our styles and ideas.”

According to artists, graffiti and street art is also a medium. It fulfils media function when artist by leaving his message shows to the society visually on the street topics that are pressing at that moment for public. One of the artists stressed that it is mass medium in its core as street art is not subject to censorship or affected by any political power, it is exactly the same as the society is and sends to the society messages that are not broadcasted by traditional media. Looking from historical viewpoint, already in the settlement centres of Ancient Greece the most current information was scraped straight into the walls of buildings, nowadays it is done with different methods, but according to artists, the idea stays the same.

“It is one of the means. It is medium. It is.... Basically stencil, graffiti, street art – it is medium. I don't know, it is called the fourth power, right?”

One can observe internal hierarchy between graffiti representatives in Riga. There are one or several so-called kings or leading graffiti writers whose work can be seen all over the territory of Riga. Graffiti writers earn the place on top of hierarchy mostly with large-scale and qualitatively done pieces in open spaces. Then there are the so-called toys – graffiti beginners who are trying to gain visibility on the streets at first with classic tags and simpler works to show themselves and gain their spot and recognition among graffiti representatives. However, in this case toys have to be careful, because if any beginner by accident or intentionally damages or overwrites a work by king, all future toy pieces and signatures will be demonstratively painted out or wiped out.

Therefore, every graffiti representative must know particular hierarchy, and, according to information collected during face-to-face interviews, graffiti representatives are confident that people who follow graffiti activities on the streets are familiar with current hierarchical structure. Graffiti representatives acknowledge and explain that in cases when work of toys is painted out it is done not out of antipathies against a particular person, but because there are allegations against which the toy is acting, probably also due to his own ignorance. This proves that graffiti subculture is very active in its internal structure, despite the opinion that in Latvia and Riga this subculture has not developed yet or probably is already lifeless without even having started. Subculture as such has developed, but it has not been accepted by the society yet even in its legal expression forms, as in society's mind graffiti is mostly associated with trivial bumbling on building walls and other public spaces.

“Well, if seven years ago you once sprayed on Faro graffiti, then... (laughing) Then soon you could feel what fame is and offend the one in charge.”

“The principle is that, let us assume that there is crew and some toy tags over to someone from the crew. Toy is alone and crew, let us assume, consists of three people. All those people will simply shut you down. And nothing will be left over from you.”

Graffiti and street art forms in Riga urban environment. The most widespread in Riga is graffiti. Notwithstanding the fact that there are many stencils and stickers in Riga urban environment, graffiti is the most developed and best known of these forms. One can conclude that graffiti in Latvia is very advanced because graffiti writers have developed their own style without copying foreign graffiti writers as it had happened before. More widely known forms of graffiti in Latvia are tagging or signing and writing, as well as more qualitative, neat signatures that are painted out.

“The most there is bombing, of course, as it takes two to five minutes – to leave your nickname, signature or you call it – it is the most as it really takes neither resources, nor time, just a small daring or craving for some sort of adrenaline. Next is writing. Namely, it is when a person paints out their nickname neatly until the end, when he starts to work for quality. And we have very little art.”

Topics expressed in works of art. In street art works, mainly current political, social and everyday common topics, important at that particular moment in society or for particular artist, are portrayed. However, graffiti works as already mentioned earlier do not portray any topics important for the society and often are not comprehensible to society in everyday life.

“Everyday life, routine, but you do not see it at first view. Then there is first of all something populistic, then – political and both mostly are joint. And then from that at the end comes out that, what there is on that street.”

When analysing topics expressed in street art works, earlier mentioned is verified, i. e., this form of art serves as medium in Riga because actual topics are

visualized in works. Surveyed artists did not specify distinct topics that they publish on the streets. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that for graffiti representatives, exposure of illegal works is more related to the essence of the process itself, rather than to provision of specific message. While street artists in their works express visually an idea or opinion of what is important to the society.

Motivation of graffiti writers and street artists to expose their work. There are various motivations for specific actions. Mostly they believe that in this way they beautify the environment and make society observe something creative besides the advertisement. Another opinion stated was that street art nowadays is used for marketing activities. However, primarily artists express their thoughts, feelings and opinions both to themselves and to the society and reasoning depends on each artist individually.

“One highlights, another expresses opinion, other one simply wants art, the other one wants simply to paint something over, somebody is irritated about something (smiles). Practically motivations are different. For example, “Саша я тебя люблю!” (Sasha, I love you!)”

“Definitely, everyone has their own reasons. One is angry with the world and therefore draws. Other does not know what to do therefore tries all in a row. Graffiti is a lifestyle, just like rockers on the bikes or anglers. Every man needs something to be keen about and what to do in spare time.”

In addition, adrenalin and awareness of illegal action are important aspects both to street artists and graffiti representatives and to their actions. They enjoy the process itself that police can arrive or they might be interrupted. Legal street artists do not find adrenalin so important in their actions.

“Sort of not approved, but it is also nothing legal and it is somewhat a little adrenalin [...] Vandalism, it is exactly towards the action (pressure), not about self-manifestation or how to advance yourself. Of course, development takes place – nicer lines, faster work and like that – improves as well. But mostly it is adrenalin and nightlife [...] There is the thing that there are artists who are like individual artists or at least consider themselves graffiti artists or some graffiti person, and then there are people who simply seize the adrenalin.”

Once can conclude that all the best-known street art and graffiti forms – stencils, stickers and mainly classical graffiti – exist in Riga. The research study showed that classical graffiti and all manifestations related to this art form is leading and most popular in Riga urban environment. Tagging or signing one’s name is the most popular of them. Graffiti writers’ hierarchy has developed and exists in underground exactly in relation to graffiti in Riga urban environment, but it is very pronounced and mostly known to its representatives. Topics expressed in street art works are mainly related to everyday life, politics and other topics related to processes important to

the society that are visualized by street artists on the street in their own way. Reasons and motivation of artists' activities, according to their opinion, are mostly related to beautification of urban environment, addressing society, as well as the process itself that creates adrenalin for artists.

Inclusive observation. Street art work exposing process

An unstructured observation method was also used to carry out an empirical part of the study to understand how in this case street artist executes his actions during the night. Observation report holds wide, holistic activity description based on previously established guidelines.

Observation guidelines:

- 1) to understand street art artist's activities before going out in the streets;
- 2) to observe street artist's choice of route;
- 3) to observe the choosing of place where street art work will be created;
- 4) to cognize street artist's previous experience in conducting the same activities;
- 5) to observe street art work creation process.

Street artist's activities before going out in the streets are specific – at first city district where activities will take place is chosen. In this particular case, it was Purvciems district. The artist claimed that choice of district was important as he liked to get to know the city, therefore he, in his opinion, risked and went to such city districts he was not familiar with. Thereof mostly when he was not going alone in his activities, district well known by other person was chosen and other person stood on watch or looked after the artist so that at that particular moment of creating the piece he would not be interrupted by, e.g., arriving police.

Dark, comfortable, inconspicuous clothing that would not attract people's attention is chosen. One, particular, previously cut out stencil (in this particular case one) is chosen and will be used.

The artist pointed out that in his case stencil was chosen according to his mood. Also, colour of the spray is chosen according to the mood (in this particular case – black).

The stencil is placed in opaque folder held by the artist during the whole period of activity. The artist takes also a backpack containing paint spray. Gloves are worn so that next day the artist does not have to explain at work why hands are black.

When the artist is ready, activity route is chosen. Choosing of route is random. The artist claims that choice of route depends on the city district. But choice of district is very important because this particular artist knows Riga very well, therefore he chooses the darkest and least inhabited city areas at night. In this particular case the district was known approximately. It was decided that by walking down Vaidavas street, we will reach Ūnijas street, there will be several small bystreets and walking

down those we will reach the territory of VEF that is well known to the artist. Next plan of the route was not decided at the beginning, it was planned randomly – according to the artist – where the eyes are showing, there we are going.

Street art work location choice – random. Initially location is looked for on the basis of the lowest possibility of people or cars passing by. So, the location should be as dark, inconspicuous as possible, but open enough space. Open space because the artist according to his opinion beautifies environment, so he wants his work to be seen by people who will wake up in the morning and go to work.

“Who knows, maybe I will create a smile for someone, thereby will improve the day with my work!”

Later, when according to the artist, adrenalin had reached its high, no more noticeable caution was observed, and more attention was paid to presence of people, cars or police. The artist started to display his work in more open spaces.

The street artist's experience in this field is approximately 10 years.

The process how street art work is created is the following – stencil is placed on the chosen surface, spray is taken and sprayed on the surface smoothly. Afterwards the stencil is removed and the chosen art piece is left on the surface. Paint cannot be put on in too thick layer, otherwise it will drip down and the work will fail. Once a tendency of the artist was observed (which he also stressed) – he liked to *frame* his work, e.g., spray-painting it in a place that looks like frame. The artist tells that street artists who have reached particular level of quality start to match up their work to the environment or environment to the work. He added that despite the fact that stencil artists do not sign their work he is thinking about his pseudonym at the moment. The artist justifies it with the idea that the more qualitative art works become, the more desire to be noted among other artists increases.

As the street artist knows hierarchy among graffiti writers in Riga, he tries not to exhibit his works at places where currently dominant graffiti representatives have left their signature. The artist mentioned that graffiti representatives quickly notice and start to differentiate also stencil artists despite them mostly not signing their work as they have their own style with nuances. Therefore, there is a possibility that his work can be impaired because he might have offended some graffiti writer or crew. The worst scenario according to the artist would be if he offended a writer from union, as there are at least three people in every union that would rally together and demonstratively would paint over his works everywhere in Riga.

Due to information gathered during inclusive observation, various factors researched during in-depth interviews were confirmed. One of the factors confirmed was that in street art work (in this case in stencil) represented topic depended on the artist himself and his internal emotion at particular time, the same way colour of art work was chosen. It was concluded that also motivation fully depends on the artist –

he beautifies the environment hoping that next morning he will improve mood for some Riga inhabitant. Thinking of choice of the location, it is not intentional or personal vandalism. The artist does not even think if it is state or private property. For him the main factors are that (1) the work does not offend any of graffiti kings, (2) the work is not exhibited on a freshly painted or new façade, (3) the work is visible enough and, (4) in this case, the exhibition process or adrenalin was also important. Besides, the technical process was cognized allowing to understand which items and tools were needed to exhibit stencil work.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that street art and graffiti quite often seem to be the same to the society, these are two different distinguishable art forms and should be researched separately. In practice as well as often combinations of these techniques are made. This can be explicitly seen in, e.g. street art work "*Saule, Pērkons, Daugava*" ("Sun, Thunder, Daugava") where both techniques – graffiti and street art – have been used. Notwithstanding street art is based on pictures and drawings, while graffiti mainly (though not always) is an art form based on calligraphy. These art forms overlap in other activities by the artists; although street artists do not create crews and they do not have their own tag, they are aware of and follow hierarchy prevailing in graffiti subculture.

Graffiti writers differ from street artists for several reasons. Firstly, target audience of their work is different (graffiti artists' audience is often other graffiti writers, while street artists' audience is the public or society). Secondly, message they want to deliver is different (marking territory or existence in particular place versus social or political message). Thirdly, communication style is different (calligraphically developed words versus various artistic manifestations). And, fourthly, motive of creating art (bad reputation versus socio-political problem exposure to the society) [Kimvall, 2006]. However, all these forms of artistic manifestations undoubtedly should be perceived as art. According to one of the various definitions of art, we can define art as various forms of human actions related to creation of different material and non-material items that hold any value for mental capabilities (psyche or mind), senses and emotions. Thus, art is created when person expresses himself in any way.

The artist of Riga urban environment with his actions addresses society and his fellows. This artist is talented, original and capable of surprising the society. One of the main obstacles for artists is the fact that there is no legal space in Riga where one can express himself creatively and practise, as well as show his ideas. Albeit he has developed his talent by self-study, has created his own style without special education.

The artist of Riga urban environment is capable of inspiring both the society to follow topicality of graffiti and street art and attract new people to particular art

forms. This artist, in his opinion, fulfils the function of medium as neither graffiti, nor street art is subject to censorship or any political power. He shows the society both the existing topicalities that affect it and mirrors the society itself.

Graffiti writer in Riga is a representative of subculture. This subculture has internal hierarchy that is followed not only by graffiti writers themselves, but also by street artists. Hierarchy is pronounced and known to everyone who illegally operates in Riga urban environment. If someone is not aware of it, he learns it quickly.

Motivation of why a particular artist is working can be different for every person, but typical artist believes that he beautifies environment and/or delivers message to the society or fellow artists with aim to suppress the leading advertisement culture in urban environment. He leans on creativity, but the main reason for artist's activities is adrenalin that rises during illegal creative expressions.

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