Graffiti as a critical encounter of the notions “purity” and “order”: Towards a contingent city

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1. Introduction

Any notion of ideal city should be dealing with reality. So, collective actions that pose a critical understanding of present city should be under consideration, otherwise ambushes the danger for meaningless speculations. Past participatory approaches in architecture (e.g. community architecture, architecture of commitment, advocacy planning) have been forgotten. The legacy and influence of these approaches is highly unnoticed (e.g. DIY etc.). Centralized or institutionalized “participatory” processes have provenly failed. However, a spontaneous participation in the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) has emerged, namely graffiti. “A new type of intervention in the city”, as Jean Baudrillard notes, “no longer as a site of economical and political power, but as a space-time of terrorist power of the media, signs and the dominant culture” (Baudrillard 1993:76). In that point of view, graffiti, by its marginal position, could address this question.

The paper makes the argument that spatial order is still seen as a direct equivalent of social order and vice versa. Architecture, as the dominant and institutionalized discipline of spatial production, is still perceived as an act of imposing order. Moreover, the vast majority of citizens share the same ideas (or ideals). This ‘conviction’ over spatial and social order equation drives to a war in order to exterminate ambiguity and contingency. However, this study is based on Henri Lefebvre’s assumption that “the city is the projection of society on the ground” (Lefebvre, 1996:109). Considering that, city is the place where both dominant notions of society as well as their contestations are expressed. Graffiti substantiates such a contestation, considering space. Questioning the notion of the one and only authority (e.g. institutionalization of spatial production, protection of the authoritative power of spatial disciplines-such as architecture) concerning the way urban space is produced and consumed (not experienced or lived), urban adolescence, using spray-paint, plunge on public. Examining graffiti oppositions, focusing on the notions of “purity” and “order”, we can move forward to unveil the well-established, yet hidden, perception of space which is, oddly enough, still based on modernism. Putting an emphasis on the importance of encounters can actively transform the ways we understand space as socially crafted.

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2. On Dirt - Purity and Modernism

Graffiti is constantly described as “dirt” or “pollution”. As Mary Douglas suggests, “dirt” is socially constructed and is used to describe something that is, or is thought to be, in the “wrong place” (Douglas, 2002:144). Graffiti is therefore described as dirty because it exists in unsanctioned places and should be removed before it contaminates the surrounding environment of the, as mentioned by Baudrillard, “white city” (Baudrillard, 1993:83). This “cleanliness” adds another dimension: it denotes purity, the removal of waste, whiteness. Mark Wigley rightfully wonders, “Why white?” (Wigley 1995:xiv). Why do we, or we want to, surround ourselves with white walls? The white wall is taken for granted, but what if we recall the words of Jeremy Till: “the whiter the wall, the quicker it succumbs to dirt” (Till, 2009:34). White is adopted literally from the avant-garde of the modern movement while is translated as purity or cleanliness from the rest. A huge variety of examples that extol whiteness and purity can be found up to this day, but as Till cites, “Le Corbusier and the others are not inventors of modernism, but an inevitable consequence of modernity […] each one is a symptom not a cause” (Till, 2009:33). It is modernity that established to the collective conscience the fear of ambivalence; modern movement is just an expression of this fear. This constant fear formed the framework in which norms, taboos and stereotypes flourish.

If you describe an action as dirty, in our case graffiti, you disapprove of it and you consider it unfair, immoral, or dishonest. Frequently, dirty, by human creativity, architecture becomes synonym of dirty morals but, as Till states, “this is a shabby and simplistic allegiance”, since it associates architecture deterministically with society, as if the cleansing of one will lead to the cleansing of the other (Till, 2009:177). This conflation of dirt with dirty moral continues to this day. However, this univocal aesthetics-ethics equation impoverishes the wider context simply because it dresses some professions, like architecture, and some actions, like cleaning, with an ethical mantle just by shaping codes of conduct. At the same time, every mode of conduct ‘outside the box’ is assumed as immoral or assault against dominant morality. For example, when architects appeal the ‘honesty’ in structure and detail is like fulfilling a moral purpose; respectively when a neighborhood eliminates dirt is like serving an ethical duty, while when graffiti writers inscribe their names and needs on the city walls is like conducting an immoral ‘war’ just by imposing another spontaneous aesthetics.

In his essay Ornament and Crime, modern architect Adolf Loos introduced a sense of the “immorality” of ornament, describing it as “degenerate”, its suppression as necessary for regulating modern society. In one of his key examples, namely “the tattooing of the Papuan”, considered the Papuan not to have evolved to the moral and civilized circumstances of modern man, who, should he tattoo himself, would either be considered “a criminal or a degenerate” (Loos, 1908). We should not overlook Loos’s “passion for smooth and precious surfaces”, which underlines once again the dominant ethos of modern era. As we see, each stigma of personalization is perceived as mere primitivism; every dirt in modern times should be eliminated. “By tattooing walls”, graffiti writers, Baudrillard cites, “free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter, into the moving body of the city before it has been branded with functions and institutions” (Baudrillard, 1993:82). Loos states that “the modern man who has tattoos himself is a criminal or degenerate” (Loos, 1908). However, graffiti writer Zedz would answer “I consider graffiti to be the tattoos on the skin of the city” (Schlee, 2005:33), but Loos would insist that “a tattooed body do not increase the aesthetic value, but reduce it” (Loos, 1908). The important word here is value, since it authorizes the modern system of valuation as the dominant, with profound ethical consequences.
Graffiti is also frequently cited as ‘ugly’. This means that something else is assumed as ‘beautiful’ and the latter is considered to have redemptive ethical purpose. Still, the anxiety over graffiti comes directly from its placement rather than its aesthetics. Graffiti is considered dirt because is situated in the wrong place, the wrong time and consequently is something ranked at the bottom of a hierarchical scale of values ¹ (Douglas, 1966). According to Susan Stewart graffiti writers have put their subjectivity in the wrong place and this utterance out of place has often been considered by the public and law to be obscene. “All display is a form of exposure and just as the spaces of reproduction in society are maintained through the regulation, by means of taboo and legitimation, of places and tomes for sexuality, so, in this case, do writing and figuration in the wrong place and time fall into the category of obscenity” (Stewart, 1987:169).

The notions “order” and “purity” are both fundamental in a modernist’s vocabulary. Kristin Ross, in her book Fast Cars-Clean Bodies ², begins to historicize the relation between cleanliness and capitalist modernization in postwar France (Ross, 1996). She often recalls Roland Barthes’ remarks concerning the new French vocabulary to denote the desired of a “shine” automobile. The desire of the car’s shine, according to Barthes, is the desire to “remake the virginity of the object over and over again, to give it the immobility of a material on which time has no effect” (Barthes, 1963:45).

Barthes links here the will to cleanliness with a desire to immobilize time to understand the object outside history, untouched by the time. Still, graffiti writers do not conceive of their role as one within a larger narrative; rather they place their pieces within the interruptions and interstices of social life, marking off a space for a time and inscribing it within an individuality both unique and ephemeral. By doing so, graffiti resembles the “cut” frame of cinema refusing permanence.

A name that “gets around”, that “goes places”, must be seen against a background of the controlled, rationally created environment³, of the fixed society it traverses and that society’s continually deferred promise of personal mobility. (Stewart, 1987:169). More specifically, graffiti can be seen as a permanent soiling of the environment simply in its constant replicability, its emphasis upon repetition and replacement. Graffiti is widely considered to be a defacement, a threat not only to the surface upon which is applied, but rather a threat to the whole system of meanings by which such surfaces acquire value, integrity and significance. Thus the former New York mayor Lindsay said that he and his staff had never really wondered whether graffiti was “anything but defacement” (Mailer, 1974). And the head of the police-gang control-unit in Los Angeles declares that “graffiti decreases property value and signed buildings convey the impression that the city government has lost control, that the neighborhood is sliding toward anarchy” (“Clamping Down on the Gangs in the Graffiti Fight”, The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 21, 1982, p. 2-A.). The public square-the public space of the city- is in this case “read” like a newspaper’s crime-reporting section. The important item that was being read in the public square is according to the sociologist Nathan Glazer the city’s defeat in the war on graffiti⁴ (Glazer, 1979). The writing on the walls gave the resident/reader the uneasy feeling that the city was ‘out of control’. Once again we see that this ‘uneasy feeling’ concerning graffiti and ‘dirt’ is constructed, based on modernistic recipes. In this

² Kristin Ross, in her book Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, attempts to show how the discourse of hygiene provides the link between those neoracisms and the ideology of capitalist modernization. She argues that the logic of racial exclusion dominating French society today is itself the outcome of the accelerated capital modernization the French state undertook after the war.
³ Rationally created environment, meaning an ordered and clean environment in a modernistic context, is seen as rational and logical because it has been created out of the rules of reason and logic.
formulation, vandalism is represented as a disruption (an ‘unauthorized’ writing) in the ‘text’ of the city’s officially sanctioned order. This ‘reading’ has a profound effect on the residents/readers, making them into passive, retreating victims. Furthermore, it creates the impression that the city administration and the powers are helpless and uncaring about the fear this ‘uncontrollable’ situation produces. This ‘uncontrollable’ or ‘threatening’ situation is, in other words, the direct result of a city where contingency is back, since space and time are once again contested. Besides, retreatment and fear are reflex actions towards the unknown.

3. On Disorder - Order and Contingency

‘Dirt’ is also linked to ‘disorder’. Graffiti, for those outside the subculture, is often considered to be lawless and chaotic; an action that threatens order and signals indifference. As for those who are not intimate with its complex codes and hidden communications, it is appreciated simply as dirt and disorder. Furthermore, as Rafael Schacter notes, “the indecipherability of visual representation, its seemingly disordered, disorganised arrangement, seems to have an actual physical affect people, an ability to make them feel genuinely uncomfortable, to give the impression of being under personal attack by the graffiti” (Schacter, 2008:45, italics added). Considering that, it is downright that its indecipherable representation, or its ‘disordered aesthetic’, is seen to give rise to the threat of the undesired or ‘unexplained’ content, and this in turn gives rise to fear of losing order. Graffiti is frequently condemned for not only providing an unpleasant, ‘ugly’ and ‘disordered’ aesthetic, but also “for the way it violently confronted the viewer in a bodily manner”, since it seems to “put fear on your doorstep” (Schacter, 2008:43). This means that graffiti, through its ambivalent nature, has the capacity to ‘touch’ its recipient and to create even a bodily response. That illustrates the reason why graffiti is so often considered to be ‘violent’ or even identified with ‘vandalism’.

The assertion that the fear of shared public space experienced by the residents of big cities is directly related to the appearance of spray-painted names on the city walls and on the subways was subsequently reinforced in the academic work of several criminology scholars who formulated the “broken window” theory. This theory also approaches the public square as a text, like a newspaper, implying that civic order is a fragile text, one that contains a powerful “preferred reading”: tolerations of visible disruptions in the normative aesthetic order of urban space could lead to a general collapse into lawlessness (Hall, 1980). But as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman cites, order, “the typically modern practice […] is the effort to exterminate ambivalence” (Bauman, 1991:4). Order is the situation that exists when everything is in the correct place or expected place, or happens at the correct or expected time. The important word here is expected. By whom, someone would ask. This means that someone is assumed as authorized to produce and control space, to put everything “in the correct place”, and someone else is expelled from this process; that someone has the right to form reality and another does not.

The concept of order is not new, neither is the notion of contingency, since “awareness of the world’s contingency and the idea of order as the goal and the outcome of the practice of ordering were born together, as twins; perhaps even

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5 The “Broken Window” theory was introduced in the article of the criminologists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, “The Police and Neighborhood Safety”, in Atlantic Monthly, n. 249, 1982, pp.29-38. This theory states that unapprised disorder is a sign that no one cares and actually invites both further disorder and more serious crime. It received a great deal of attention and was very widely cited. At the same time it has also been the subject of a large body of criticism. The broken window thesis has been a cornerstone of Rudolph Giuliani’s (the NYC Mayor elected in 1993 and 1997) governing and crime fighting strategies, including cracking down on graffiti. See also: MURRAY J., MURRAY K., Broken Windows Graffiti NYC, Gingko Press, Berkeley, 2009.
Siamese twins” (Bauman, 1992:xii). From Vitruvius to Le Corbusier the notion of order is always present. It is a notion that haunts humanity because it is regarded as the only antidote against the plague called ‘unknown’. Order, as well as purity, is at its apogee in the era of modernity. Bauman describes the modern state, in a thriving metaphor, as a gardening state (Bauman, 1991:30), bringing the unpredictable and the fearful (nature) under the rule of order and control (garden). The gardener gets rid of weeds as part of the controlling of nature, but as Till strikingly notes, “weeds always come back” (Till, 2009:34). ‘Weeds’ here symbolize contingency and if we extend the metaphor in spatial terms means to understand each social, unsanctioned, practice as a ‘natural’ action. As Jeremy Till notes, there are two key aspects of Bauman’s analysis of modernity and its ordering tendencies; on the one hand he argues “that the will to order arose out of a fear of disorder” (Bauman, 1992:xi), but this is an illusion because, as he explains the second aspect, to achieve order one has to eliminate the other of order, “but the other of order can never be fully erased” (Till, 2009:34). In that point of view, by removing graffiti only a resemblance of order is created while inherent disorder still smolders. By identifying contingency as something of a threat to society, as unequivocal menace to society, means to remove from any possible dialogue the opposite opinion. Any argument supporting its existence is simply implied to be acquiescing to the inherent ‘threat’ to ‘natural’ order (Schacter, 2008:46). Here, as “natural order” is considered the dominant notion of order, meaning the modernistic one.

The modern man is “a cosmic puritan, who is afraid of his own power to explore anything that he cannot control in advance” (Sennett, 1992:106). The key word here is in advance. The ‘unpredictable’ or the ‘unknown’ generates fear to the modern man. So, to establish order we should eliminating contingency. Bauman underlines the argument when he insightfully writes that “the struggle for order […] is a fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness. The other of order is not another order […] is the uncertainty, that source and archetype of all fear” (Bauman, 1991:7). So, graffiti is fearful simply because it lessens order. By doing so, increases uncertainty and in turn fear. As we shall see with any project of the modern age, the more one attempts to eliminate the other of order, the more it comes back to haunt one. “The kind of society that, retrospectively, came to be called modern,” Bauman writes, “emerged out of the discovery that human order is vulnerable, contingent and devoid of reliable foundations. That discovery was shocking. […] it prompted an incessant drive to eliminate the haphazard and annihilate the spontaneous” (Bauman, 1992:xi). Spontaneity is one of the key-characteristics of graffiti. Graffiti writers themselves care little for order, and in the words of Baudrillard “a thousand of youths armed with spray-paint are enough to scramble the signals of urbania and dismantle order” (Baudrillard, 1993:80).

In other words, contingency ‘liberates’ space as well as time. So, to speak about contingency means to consider space and time both as the result and the precondition of social action. Space, as Doreen Massey suggests, “is never finished; never closed […] always under construction” (Massey 2005:9). Space ‘happens’ does not univocally exist. So, graffiti writers as they write the city they ‘invent’ space. These ‘performed spaces’ as they ‘happen’ acquire totally different and distinctive meaning. This kind of logic seems actually postmodern in its attention to the surface appearance of social order. It implies that the cause of collective social order is a matter of appearance, a matter of aesthetics located in the surrounding spectacle of the urban environment. It implies that what undermines the social order of a community is not 6 Here the notion of ‘entropy’ seems quite relevant. On entropy see also ARNHEIM R., Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1971.
the lack of jobs, the uneven distribution of scarce resources, social inequalities or some flaw in the social fabric, but the clean, proper appearance of an area. In this framework, government officials must reinforce the preferred aesthetics in terms of what is considered normal and acceptable. After all, postmodernity can be seen as an attempt to ‘restore’ the world that modernity, unintentionally or not, had taken away, as “a re-enchantment of artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning—the world that modernity tried hard to dis-enchant […] the dis-enchantment of the world was the ideology of its subordination; simultaneously a declaration of intent to make the world docile to those who would have won the right to will, and a legitimization of practices guided solely by that will as the uncontested standard of propriety” (Bauman, 1992:x).

4. Learning from Graffiti: Towards the contingent city

Architecture has systematically avoided engagement with the uncertainties of the world through a retreat into an autonomous realm. Architects developed a defense system against the overwhelming forces of modernity through maintaining barriers behind which an ordered and moral world can be erected. Although, as we already saw in Bauman’s writings, this defense is futile since only a semblance of order is created. The same has been the case for the large majority of citizens worldwide. Furthermore, graffiti is highly misapprehended simply because it is examined through the dominant, non-critical (since takes order and purity for granted), framework. Participating in such activities, like graffiti, or even thinking of their occurrence, is not a matter of expressing an opinion or an opposition; it is a matter of helping to produce both the spaces for public use and a new culture of public use. A bunch of kids, in our case graffiti writers, realized that. In the end of the day, graffiti turns out to be an energizer of social relationships because it “connects bodies known and unknown through the proliferation of images” (Hasley and Young, 2006:278). Besides, it forges connections between writers and those thinking about its occurrence. The illegality of the medium may give the work a performative aspect which makes spectatorship an interactive occurrence. Viewers become potential agents and much more aware of their, as Lefebvre puts it, right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996:63).

Graffiti contests aesthetics and politics of authority by collating its own. By doing so, space ‘happens’. Thus, space can be conceived as a process rather than an object. Bearing that in mind, process could never exterminate contingency since it is wide open to possibilities. Our contemporary understanding of the notions ‘order’ and ‘purity’, as superannuated as it can be, should be re-examined. Besides, disorder, as Richard Sennett puts it, should be the key element to approach the notion of ‘community’ (Sennett, 1992). The ideal city should be polyphonic and communal, where individual desires and collective actions may flourish. “Mess is the law” (Till, 2009:xii) and graffiti is a good example to discover that this is an opportunity and not a threat. The aim of this paper is to show how individual desires, written onto the urban fabric, could fire collective actions that critically encounter the dominant, and well-rooted, modernistic perception of space. Graffiti, due to its ambivalent nature, could be a starting point to address the question of a sincere participation. Graffiti is not an answer to our established cultural understanding of the notions ‘order’ and ‘purity’. Graffiti is just another question.
References


