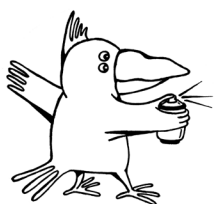International Interdisciplinary Conference

Street Art in the Changing City: Theoretical Perspectives

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ABSTRACTS

Keynote Lectures

Luke Dickens

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Brandalism: Inscribing the City Through Art, Crime or Smart Design?

A major theme in my research into the London street art scene was its synergies with the sentiments expressed by anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements. In this mode, its most vocal proponent, Banksy, coined the provocative term 'brandalism' in order to signal an emerging inscription practice that challenged the mainstream antipathy towards corporate branding of the contemporary metropolis. If graffiti writers in 1970s New York City sought to 'bomb' crumbling public infrastructure with the repetition of tags, contemporary London street artists wanted to directly attack commercial urban media through the subversive re-working of imagery, slogans and icons. Yet, despite these efforts to align the street artist with the roguish figure of the urban vandal, and thus mark distinctions in their work from overt forms of commercial practice, many named street artists have nonetheless come to operate effectively as urban brands in their own right.

In this talk, I use detailed examples of aesthetic form and individual practice in the work of these London street artists to examine the productive tensions between branding and van-dalising urban space. Throughout I argue that on-going theorising and research needs to take a much deeper appreciation of the fundamental role that smart, savvy forms of design play in both the cultural production and consumption of street art of this kind. I conclude by mapping out the implications of such a perspective for reading and, ultimately, knowing the city through the ways it is inscribed.

Andrea Mubi Brighenti

PhD in Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of Trento, Italy

Graffiti and Place Value

In a sense, both graffiti and street art share humble origins. While the first emerged as an essential expressive form of disadvantaged inner city youth in the late 1960s, the second originated from a more heterogeneous cohort of underground artists who, however, for quite a lapse since the 1970s through the 1990s, remained marginalized in the official art system. Such humble origins were clearly mirrored in the fact that, seen from the outside, early street art entertained only a parasitic relationship to the official cityscape, while graffiti was mostly stigmatized as seen as negatively affecting places (a sign of 'urban decay').

Over the last decade, a major counter-trend has made its appearance, whereby street art has moved much closer to the core of the contemporary art system, whereas graffiti has received unprecedented attention from mainstream cultural institutions. Albeit to different extents and not without contradictory or even paradoxical outcomes, both graffiti and street art have been increasingly associated with thrilling lifestyles, urban creativity, fashionable outfits, and hip neighborhoods. A radical transformation has followed concerning the impact these practices have on the value attributed to certain urban places. Rather than value-neutral (invisible) or value-detracting (supravisible) as before, now graffiti and even more pronouncedly street art seem to be value-bestowing (visible). Visibility means they have turned into recognizable and much sought-for items in the urban landscape.

In this context, my aim is to look at recent graffiti and street art events in the context of recent urban transformation. Although such events have popped up almost everywhere in

the world, and in the Western countries in particular, I will refer to the case of Italy, where in the last five years I have been collecting a series of detailed field observations. I am puzzling about the social and cultural significance of graffiti and street art in the changing cityscape and the unfolding urban process. By doing so, I am also inquiring into the economic process of place valorization in the current transformations of capitalism. Finally, I am placing these concerns in the framework of the new political processes of disciplination and urban governance.

Presentations

Day 1

Alisa Maximova

Master student at the faculty of sociology, research intern in the Centre for Fundamental Sociology, Higher School of Economics. Member of Research Group "Graffiti and Street Art in Cultural Cityscape"

City of Ambiguous Images: the Liminal Properties of Street Art Objects

Essays, comments, reports and articles about graffiti and street art are full of controversies. Opposing opinions clash ever and again over the topic of urban paintings and writing. What causes these discussions? What social science can make of them?

It is not only the subject matter of images and inscriptions that makes them controversial. Rather, their form itself (involving anonymity, for example) makes visible boundaries and distinctions, intensifies debate.

In the paper I will describe how usually street art and graffiti are understood concerning their ambiguousness and in what sense the notion of liminality has been used in street art research. Then I will reapproach anthropological and cultural sociological theories to describe urban images in the framework of liminality. My aim is to show that ambivalence of street art objects reveals and actualizes cultural categories, which are relevant to broader context. I will focus on some of these categories, such as legality, beauty, authorship, ownership, using cases of Russian and foreign street art as illustrations. Consideration will be given to the ways of finding these categories, putting them in order and analyzing possible connections between them. Finally, I will clarify the implications of adopting this perspective and suggest strategies for future empirical research.

Varvara Kobyshcha

Graduate student at the Faculty of Sociology, research intern in Centre for Fundamental Sociology, Higher School of Economics, research fellow at the Moscow Institute for Social and Cultural Programs. Member of Research Group "Graffiti and Street Art in Cultural Cityscape"

Encounter with Graffiti: Breach and Normalization

Being a part of rich urban visual landscape, graffiti usually remains almost invisible for dwellers that do not have special knowledge and skills required to note and discern piece of graffiti. Although writers attempt to occupy the most remarkable and unexpected spots to place their objects, dwellers' perception conforms to the principle of 'blasé attitude'. Meanwhile, there are a number of circumstances when it becomes noticeable, significant and estimated. For instance, when it becomes iconic, gets into tourist guidebooks or media and people intentionally approach to look at particular graffiti spot; or when it appears in some inappropriate places (memorials, historical buildings etc.) and immediately catches the flaneur's eye.

In my paper I will focus on the cases when graffiti is considered as a breach in routine order, something that for some reason suddenly interrupts everyday perception. Such situations produce the space of uncertainty that preceptors have to cope with. Accident happened in the end of January in Moscow area is one the most illustrative example. The group of teenagers (about 70 people) stopped the commuter train with passengers on the station in Moscow area for 20 minutes using the emergency brake and painted the whole train with graffiti. Train bombing is quite popular thing, but that case was outstanding, so the reports on this news immediately emerged in Moscow city newspapers and internet media. Moreover, two famous bloggers posted their own reports on this event and provoked public debates. Thousands comments were posted by internet users in response. The accident was the cause to toughen local anti-vandalism law.

There are at least two reasons why such kind of cases is crucially important for the sociological exploration of graffiti perception. First, these are situations when the process of perception is available for observer without specific interference into the situation. Blasé attitude is suspended; people have to make sense of what they encountered with. Second, there is a long sociological tradition of study the breakdowns in social order which include breaches in everyday routine communication (frame analysis, ethnomethodology) as well as liminal rituals, ambivalent objects and transgression (anthropology and cultural sociology). General principle of analysis refers to the idea of revealing the structures that underlie 'normal' social order and make it possible. Extreme situations bring out these structures and demonstrate how they are produced and revisited.

The main subject of my study is the strategies of normalization which people use having faced graffiti in sudden and uncertain situation. I analyze discussion concerning graffiti and the circumstances of particular event. I will focus on interrelation between different systems of meanings and collective representations (moral, aesthetic, rational, corporal etc.) which are actualized during the process of normalization and mobilized to overcome the uncertainty.

Elena Trubina
Doctor of Philosophy, Professor of Philosophy in the Institute of Social and Political Studies at Ural Federal University in Ekaterinburg

The Audience for Public Art

The problem that concerns me is the constellations of contradictions and confusions surrounding works commissioned for sites of open public access. The embellishment and symbolization of city space through the provision of memorials and monuments, public sculpture, and city furniture, produces densely material additions – often both unmovable and unmemorable – to the already dense materiality of urban life. The decisions about these additions are usually made in professional and political contexts that inevitably remain remote from the ordinary city dwellers' lives. On the one hand, the values and aims underlying the decisions of authorities to fill the vacant city places with new art works can be quite independent of the urban space and the problems of its dwellers. On the other hand, the artistic strategies involved in making and management of public art very often presuppose the opposition between aesthetic realm and everyday urban activities.

Normative theory of the public sphere and the reality of public life were never supposed to go hand by hand yet there is a sense in which the discrepancies between them have never been so significant. On the one hand, notion of the public sphere remains a norm in liberal political system. On the other hand, the expansion of the public sphere into the realm of electronic media and the Internet and the transformation of its function in practice com-

prise one of the paradoxes of the development of the public sphere. The political aspect of this transformation lies in the disintegration of the coherence of "the public". Two decades ago a prominent social art historian T.J. Clark has emphasized the inevitability with which "public" figures in an art historical discourse as "a shadow, an occlusion", as a "phantasy". One is reminded of the title of a famous collection of essays, The Phantom Public Sphere, in which from the perspective of political and social theory it is stated that the notion of public has been reinvented as "an urban space of aesthetic self-presentation, sociability, theatricality, and pleasure" and one is reminded as well of Jacques Derrida's definition of public opinion as "the silhouette of a phantom". All of which leads one to ask, if naively: for whom was "The Tilted Arc" erected? For whom ever-multiplying site-specific outdoor sculpture, street art, permanent public installations, performances or rituals, political art, environmental art, media-based arts? One possible answer would be "community" but it is clear that community, too, is as open to appropriation and mythologization as public is. As a result, "People are dots sprinkled across the floor; one dot slides into another and slips past another to continue on its own… every person for him- or herself here, every group for itself…" –Vito Acconti's description of a piazza can be used as metaphor of the way subjectivities figure in the current public art discourse. Not that the proponents of such work were not concerned with the actual people that comprise public art audience: for example, subjectivity (along with empathy, information, reportage, analysis and activism) figures as a major possible component for constructing a new public art critical language in one of the recent volumes on public art. Is it possible then to create non-quasi-public sphere (or not-private public sphere) in which to invite actual spectators? In my presentation, I critically focus on the work of the American art critic and cultural theorist Rosalind Deutsche who believes that it is exactly public art that is capable of constructing such a sphere.

Natalia Samutina
Candidate of Cultural Studies, Head of the Center for Studies of Contemporary Culture at the Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities in Higher School of Economics, Moscow. Head of Research Group "Graffiti and Street Art in Cultural Cityscape"

"Always Already Lost": Street Art and Other Archives of Ephemeral

The main task of this paper is to look at the temporal dimension of street art, instead of meditations on space which have become more conventional in the fast-growing field of the studies of street art. As street art becomes more and more popular in big cities, it meets traditional and not-so-traditional practices of archivation (on the internet, in books, in a form of exhibitions and their documentation, as a material for city tours, as the lists of canonical names, and so on). But street art resists all our efforts to put it into order and preserve, and there is something essential about this. I will demonstrate on different examples (from fragile street art techniques to complex cultural clashes on the ground of the preservation of street art in Moscow) this tension between different logics of street art reception, and pose some questions about the important characteristics of street art as contemporary "new media" concerning its ephemerality.

Boris Stepanov
Candidate of Philosophy, research fellow at the Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities, Higher School of Economics

Graffiti, Street Art, Historicity in Metropolis

This paper is aimed at rethinking graffiti and street art in the context of memorialization practices and multiple historicity of urban environment. Ambiguity of street art and graffiti,

as well as differences in their status, serves as a starting point. On the one hand, graffiti often collides with significant historical objects (for example, writing on monuments). On the other hand, graffiti and especially street art sometimes increase economic and cultural value of objects and sites, serving as attractions in place marketing. They are ephemeral, and at the same time efforts are made for their preservation, documenting and museumification. It is worth mentioning that graffiti may be used by researchers as data for archaeology of modernity and by certain communities as the tool for defending their version of collective memory in urban space (cases of museum-reserve Tsaritsyno and NGO "Memorial"). Properties of graffiti and street art can be understood within typology of historical objects proposed by Rudy Koshar: monuments, reconstructions, ruins, traces. We will try to describe modes of historicity and forms of presence linked with certain types of graffiti and street art (for instance, ruin-objects by Vhils) and their relation to other elements of urban environment.

Roman Abramov

Candidate of Sociology, lecturer at the department of social institutions analysis (faculty of sociology), Higher School of Economics. Member of Research group "Graffiti and Street Art in Cultural Cityscape"

Graffiti as a Tool of Political Struggle: an Introduction

The presentation focuses on graffiti as a tool of political struggle in urban spaces. History of graffiti is closely related to the transformation of the forms of political and civic activity in the second half of the twentieth century. Graffiti is analyzed not only in the aesthetic and cultural context, but in perspective of political analysis as well. Intercommunication between graffiti and politics is a dynamic process. On the one side, graffiti are the result of writers' activity and civil activists, and on the other side, graffiti and street art objects wake up the subjectivity of citizens. It can be compared with the work of the mechanisms of the interpellation described by Louis Althusser. Subjectivity is created as a reaction to the "hails" from the institutions and political actors. Contemporary street art and graffiti can serve as instruments of political mobilization, and the city walls are sites of political struggle. The genre of the paper thus is analytical introduction to the topic.

Ekaterina Riise

Candidate of Sociology, research Fellow at the Centre for Fundamental Sociology, Higher School of Economics. Member of Research Group "Graffiti and Street Art in Cultural Cityscape"

Rediscovering the Abandoned: Street Art in the Ghost Cities

If we consider street art a practice that presupposes communication in the city and with the citizens, abandoned cities seem to be an alien place for an artist to fulfill a project. However, abandonment becomes attractive and of high interest among street artists and gives the researcher an opportunity to question specific features of street art as a form of communication. Using as an example two abandoned soviet cities in Russia and Germany I will focus on several aspects of street art as a form of communication. The first goes together with artists' professional communication about discovering new places and creating the new works. Another aspect deals with the nature of pieces of art themselves or "characters". Conditions of abandonment give unique opportunity to create complex and large-scale works. Finally, I will focus on viewer's perspective. Its main characteristic of street art perception in our case is an absence of occasional viewer, the city citizen that just passes by. The task is therefore to picture "professional" viewers and their interaction in- and with the context.

Oksana Zaporozhets

Candidate of Sociology, leading research fellow at the Institute for Theoretical and HistoriСal Studies in the Humanities in Higher School of Economics, Higher School of Economics. Member of Research group "Graffiti and Street Art in Cultural Cityscape"

Tsoi Walls: Unfolding Post-Soviet Cities

So-called Tsoi Walls, the collections of thousands inscriptions on urban surfaces, which appeared more than twenty years ago as a spontaneous people's tribute to Victor Tsoi (a popular soviet rock musician died in car accident in 1990), still remain noticeable landmarks in post-soviet cities. Invading public spaces since early 90s, Tsoi Walls made visible collective efforts and affections to wide audiences, became and still are the passionate claims for urban space. These porous urban objects will be considered as a detail that reveals the net of relations shaping the urban life. I will address the breakthrough that Tsoi Walls have been made in visual cityscape and usage of urban space by forming and enhancing a link between the visual (inscriptions) and public performances/commemorative rituals, the increasing role of affective communities in creating, maintaining, and archiving the public performances and spaces. Tsoi Walls as an encounter of past and present simultaneously works as a commemoration and a signification of collective experience, urban creativity, and particular urban places, they affect and are affected by the broader spatial and symbolic contexts. Bringing to life the materialities, places and experiences, which are more or less common for different cities, Tsoi Walls contribute to the synchronization of urban life from below and creation of shared symbolic scape and collective history that makes the general notion of post-soviet cities possible.

Anna Zhelnina

Candidate of Sociology, senior research fellow of the Center for Youth Studies, Higher School of Economics, St.-Petersburg

Reinterpreting the Public Space: Creativity in the City

The recent political and social developments in major Russian cities have provoked public interest in the issues of urban public space, rights to the city, and citizens' participation in urban development and change. There has also been a tangible increase in the number of citizens' initiatives addressing the public space of the cities: many of them involve artistic and creative approach to urban change and elements of guerilla activities. In this presentation I will attempt to address such questions as: Why has the interest to the urban transformation grown? Who are the people involved in creative transformation activities? What are the outcomes of these actions, and how they can be analyzed in the wider social and political context?

Petr Ivanov

Social researcher, research attendant at Graduate School of Urban Studies and Planning, Moscow

Signs of Shadow Economy

The cityscape is a fruitful soil for both tomato and datura. Visual analysis of urban surfaces brings us not only to the realms of official and unifficial cultures, but also to the realms of transparent and shadow economy. In my speech, I want to talk about guidelines to sociological analysis of shadow economy and job occupancy in this sector through visual methods. Pilot case for further insights into this topic concerns graffity related to drug-dealing business and graffity that mimic those related to drug-dealing, but, in fact, are related to legal

business. The case is based on photos from various cities in Central Russia and Western Siberia, which picture kind of look-a-like strategies of graffity placement and fonting. With this case, I want to show how black market not only persists within the urban space, but also provides new styles for DIY-advertisements.

Oleg Pachenkov
Candidate of Sociology, Director of the Center for Applied Research (CeAR), European University at St.-Petersburg

Liliya Voronkova
Coordinator of Art-Science projects in Center for Independent Research, St. Petersburg

What's Wrong with Street/Public Art in Russian Cities?

Incomplete list of 5 challenges, based on the reflection on St.-Petersburg experience:

1) Eternity obsession vs Temporally approach
2) Large scale obsession (megalomania)
3) Curse of the "good" taste & "high" quality
4) Perversions of democracy: dictate of the individual & right of veto vs. diversity & "right for the city"
5) Fake perfectionism: "the best or nothing" (fear of conflict, responsibility & communication)

By addressing these 5 challenges in details we are going to locate the phenomena of public/street art in contemporary Russian cities into a wider context of urban space, of the social order of the cities and political habits of their inhabitants, of DiY culture and its relations to art. We would like to raise a question about the limitations imposed to the public/street art by urban culture and artists' potential (or a lack of it) to overcome it. This reflection is based on the experience of art-social science collaborative projects and numerous discussions the authors have been involved in St.-Petersburg, Moscow, Kaliningrad and Helsinki during 2011–12.

Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk
PhD, Director of Humanities Research Center of Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Associate Professor of History and Theory department of Russian State University for the Humanities

The Myth of Interactive City: The Network Society Theory and Public Spaces in Megapolis

The general research question of the paper is how new media have changed the social (private as well as public) and political environment of megapolis after 2000. The main methodological focus is on productivity of applying key concepts of new media and the network society theories in the research in order to understand the specificity of functioning and reproduction of contemporary city, the roles of citizens in definition and re-directing of these processes as well as possibilities of alternative grass-roots decision making system in the field of city planning.

In my paper I speculate on the overlapping field of research using the notion of "the network city" or "interactive city". In more detail I study the case of several Moscow parks. To illustrate some points of popular understanding of "the network city" I analyze representations of "the network city" in popular cinema.

Evgeny Terentev
Graduate student at the Faculty of Sociology, research fellow in the Center of Institutional Monitoring, Higher School of Economics

Rethinking the "City as Text" Metaphor in Urban Studies and Cultural Geography

Cultural turn in geography and urban studies produced the conceptualization of urban landscapes as socially constructed and contested entities. The theoretical re-orientation toward the study of cultural and political aspects reflected on the emergency of new analytical metaphors. Contemporary scholars widely use the textual metaphor (city as text) for the analysis of urban space.

In the presentation the main theoretical foundations and assumptions of the textual approach will be reconstructed. Then the critics concerning the reductive, contradictory and engaged character of the "city as text" metaphor will be provided. Finally, the ways of overcoming the presented shortcomings using the theoretical recourses of sociological concepts of discourse and methodological toolkit of discourse analysis will be suggested. Some examples from the study of Russian toponymic landscape in Saint-Petersburg conducted by the author in 2011 will be given to show the practical implication of suggested re-conceptualization.