STREET ART AND THE CITY

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This issue of *Laboratorium* features a special section dedicated to street art or, more broadly, to vernacular images in the contemporary urban environment. The idea first occurred to the editors during their collaboration in the "Street Art in Contemporary Society" research group at the National Research University–Higher School of Economics, Moscow, in 2013. It took shape at a conference organized by the International Visual Sociology Association, "The Public Image" (held at Goldsmiths, University of London, July 8–9, 2013), where Natalia Samutina and Oksana Zaporozhets chaired a panel "Street Art, the City, and the Public: Changing the Urban Vision." Presenters from eight countries tried to conceptualize the place of street art in the city, considering it as a relatively new and blossoming urban phenomenon. You will find three of these articles in this issue's special section; in addition, we publish three reviews of recent books on urban imagery in the reviews section.

Over the last 15 years street art's popularity as a research subject has grown considerably: even at the above-mentioned conference our section was not the only one dedicated to it. This is primarily due to the development of street art and its popularity, growing thanks to the dissemination of information and photographs online. In contrast to graffiti, which remains the language of relatively closed communities, street art from the outset addresses as wide an audience as possible. Street art's mostly figurative language and the messages it conveys—whether commenting on controversial social issues, praising daily life, or making it humorously defamiliarized—have quickly become part of the modern discourse on cities, especially metropolises, and have drawn the interest of socially active city dwellers. In the last 15 years street art has come all the way from being a trendy urban novelty to gaining a permanent position in official tourist guidebooks on cities and individual neighborhoods, such as Berlin's Kreuzberg, Parisian Belleville, London's Shoreditch, or New York's Williamsburg.

Many publications on street art and its relationship with other street images have come out, including texts on street art's similarities and differences with graffiti, on stencils' political potential, and on street art's fight against advertising (brandalism). Recent literature on street art can be divided into several major groups. The first includes mostly photographic books and albums. This group of publications maintains and reinforces the canon of big names and employs territorial logic (with typical headings such as "global street art," "street art of London," "street art of Berlin," "most influential street artists"). Academic researchers also do not shy away from this kind of publication, where they can play the role of expert (see, e.g., Schacter and Fekner 2013). Secondly, there are monographs about street art intended to cover this phenomenon's development by detailing its objectives and basic parameters, from its role and function in the city to the changes it makes or is going to make to legal practices, modifying our notions of what city dwellers are capable of in the urban environment (see, e.g., Klitzke and Schmidt 2009; Waclawek 2011; Bengtsen 2014; Young 2014b). Based on the developing traditions of ethnographic research into urban graffiti communities (e.g., Macdonald 2001; Brighenti 2010), many scholars attempt to study the producers of street art—their motivations and individual trajectories and the specifics of their relationships with the urban space—and extract from various local cases a more general social logic. Special monographs and individual articles alike shed light on a variety of aspects of street art's existence in the city: its spatial characteristics and visibility in the urban environment (Chmielewska 2007; Ferrell and Weide 2010; Samutina forthcoming), its politics (Iveson 2011), economics and aesthetics, its acceptance or rejection by disparate urban publics, its impact on the social imagination, and so on (Dickens 2008; Visconti et al. 2010; Samutina, Zaporozhets, and Kobyshcha 2012; Young 2014a). Lately, an important line of analysis has come through with the appearance of works looking at street art in the context of the changing politics of heritage (Edwards-Vandenhoek 2015; Merrill 2015). Overall, street art studies have clearly shifted from the simpler, essentialist questions (such as "What is street art and how does it differ from graffiti?" or "Is legal street art still to be considered street art?") to the more variable contextual logic, and from analyzing only street art to scrutinizing social relations, communicative mechanisms, and problem configurations of contemporary cities *through* street art.

The texts presented in this special section of *Laboratorium*'s current issue contribute to the development of scholarly reflection on the role of vernacular urban imagery, which enhances certain urban processes, simultaneously providing poignant commentary on them. The internal logic of this section aims to highlight and reinforce three principal points.

Firstly, street art is understood here broadly, as a communicative factor that has radically changed what we notice (and thus research) in the urban street environment. In the era "after street art," that is, since the beginning of the new millennium, researchers have come to realize the need to review the entire system of contemporary urban imagery, as well as our notions of those who produce it, either officially or informally, and those who perceive it with varying degrees of intensity. Street art has helped us take a fresh look at portraits on Abidjan buses (*gbaka*) described by Jor-

danna Matlon, the children's drawings scotch-taped to apartment building entrances in Berlin mentioned in Samutina and Zaporozhets's article, and many other things whose communicative functions we have previously been unable to "read." Graffiti and street art researchers like to use the metaphor of "talking walls": indeed, the walls of modern cities have lately been telling us many new stories, and we are steadily learning to listen to them properly.

Secondly, the emergence of street art has made abundantly clear the necessity of paying close attention to the correlation of the global and the local in studying and understanding contemporary cities. Street art is global: it is present in any metropolis; anyone interested can contribute to developing knowledge about it and elaborating on its canons online; street artists keep track of each other's work and general trends. Furthermore, street art all across the globe faces common problems, such as preservation, exhibiting in galleries, the issue of the "authenticity" of work not produced in the street, the problem of dominant aesthetics preventing critical and "unconventional" art from appearing, and so on. That said, street art is also local: it is inscribed into urban history, social relations, architectural forms and textures, and the economic and power relations in a given city. This local character and the accentuated individuality of the street art landscape in every case allows us to learn much about the city, especially if, having started with street art and vernacular street imagery, we move on to consider the entire network of public visual communication.

Finally and most importantly, it is impossible to study a multilayered cultural phenomenon such as street art from within just one, narrowly defined discipline. An adequate understanding of a specific work of street art in its urban environment necessitates taking a multitude of factors into consideration. It may require simultaneous familiarity with local communities' ethnographic background, the logic of gentrification, along with the philosophy and aesthetics of contemporary art, not to mention the economics and principles of legal regulation of property relations in a specific city. Our colleagues' latest works make this patent: while speaking of street art, geographers refer to sociologists' works, scholars in cultural studies turn to linguistics, and those in urban studies do not limit their consideration of contemporary processes to the context of changes in the specific city's history but take the historical culture of the city and the entire surrounding country into account. Research into street art does not tolerate reductionism, haste, or peremptory statements. This is largely why all three articles included in this special section present the results of long-term fieldwork and a quest for interdisciplinary methods.

How do the articles handle these and other matters? How do their authors define the range of major problems? Articles in this section deal with the visual culture of cities that, at first, seem to have little in common. Jordanna Matlon speaks of the barely-scraping-by Abidjan with its intense street life, Myrto Tsilimpounidi considers Athens with its crisis and protests, whereas Natalia Samutina and Oksana Zaporozhets talk of the "poor but sexy" and, compared to the others, relatively well-off Berlin. Differences between these cities become tangible thanks to detailed descriptions making the reader truly feel their local specifics, whether these relate to a general mood, agenda, spatial organization, social fabric, or something else. This sensitivity to differences is reflected in the authors' conscious refusal to interpret urban visual phe-

nomena as a set of universal, fixed forms with a similarly universal, determined set of meanings. Although almost every article talks about street art in one way or another, and even the less familiar (for Europeans) *gbaka* portrait art in Abidjan is viewed as a "mobile expression of street art," the authors show that street images take different forms and play different roles in their respective cities. Thus, *gbaka* portrait art is a key to understanding the status economies of an African city. Street art and graffiti, taking on the role of social diaries, allow us to see the balance of power and the course of events in the seething Athens, whereas a somewhat different configuration of street images in Berlin reveals the specifics of the development of this city's saturated visual environment and its communicative and temporal cultures.

While using images as an instrument to understand the forever changing, contradictory, multilayered, and multitemporal city, the authors nevertheless emphasize that urban visuality possesses a certain independence and inherent value.

Although treating different subject matters, the authors ask similar methodological questions. As a result, they (intentionally or serendipitously) define similarly the zones of tension and the potential for further research into street art by trying to overcome the limitations of the existing research questions and analytical vocabulary. Each of these articles proves beyond doubt that contemporary studies of urban visuality, with their rapidly accumulating body of the most thrilling fieldwork data, have largely "outgrown" any existing analytical vocabularies. To solve this problem, one could "create a new visual vocabulary," as Tsilimpounidi proposes, or at least draw attention to the search for new analytical languages.

The desire to question established theoretical schemes is a popular analytical move. Sometimes the suspense, provoked by questioning, is protracted on purpose, as when one's questions address future studies. However, in the case of our section, the plot is vibrant yet short-lived, because the authors not only pose questions but also offer a number of answers.

The first question, more or less articulated by all the authors, touches upon the possibility and practicality of using generalizations to describe distinct visual phenomena. The popularization of street images, as well as studies of graffiti and street art, has raised awareness of their multiplicity and diversity. For this matter, street art, graffiti, inscriptions, installations, and many other visual forms ought not to be mingled, as they have different creators, aesthetics, economics, communicative modes, and logics of perception. At the same time, urban researchers constantly feel the lack of umbrella terms. This need for more encompassing definitions is justified either by the apparent proximity, overlapping, and interlacing of graffiti, street art, and inscriptions on city surfaces, or by their embeddedness in the city's everyday life and visual environment. The authors come up with different umbrella terms according to their research foci. Matlon uses the concept of "city's vernacular," thereby shifting the emphasis from the images' visuality to the way of their functioning—as everyday practices. This puts bus portraits among other city's vernaculars such as spontaneous street trading, daily routes, navigation through the spaces where "rules are not written in clear signage but understood collectively through the trials and errors of time and experience" (Matlon, this issue, 73). In contrast, Tsilimpounidi stresses the visuality of various street phe-

nomena and characterizes them as "visual markers" and "street-level language." Samutina and Zaporozhets follow the same route by speaking of "street imagery."

The second obstacle, successfully overcome by the authors, is the sparseness of analytical language for portraying the complexity and diversity of urban visual cultures. In some cases authors use rich and succinct descriptions, such as "dense," "abundant," "variety of colors and conditions" (Matlon, this issue), to grasp a general but nuanced state of urban visuality. In others, they "upgrade" the existing but rather undeveloped categories to describe the new qualities of urban visual environment such as "saturation" or "oversaturation" of cities and walls (Tsilimpounidi, this issue; Samutina and Zaporozhets, this issue). This enhancement of visual vocabulary is a step forward from admitting the multiplicity and diversity of street imagery to questioning and, consequently, understanding them. Authors' implicit or explicit willingness to coin a word is based on the assumption that some types of visual environment, and forms of urban life overall, can both accentuate and conceal particular images as well as legitimize (or not) their actual existence. According to these articles, the vividness and dynamism of urban visual culture are caused by both humans and nonhumans. Images bomb; their carriers, such as walls, scream (Tsilimpounidi, this issue). "Screaming walls" is not only an impressive metaphor but also an example of the intertwining events, actors, and modalities of urban life. Tsilimpounidi tells us that in recessionary Athens some wall inscriptions are the slogans citizens chant during protest marches; thus, in fact, Athenian walls do scream.

The authors have one more concern in common: namely, an interest in those whose voices are heard and messages seen thanks to moving or static street images. Matlon and Tsilimpounidi believe that accessibility of city walls or city transit surfaces allow marginalized urban groups to claim their right to public space and public speech. In Abidjan, these are the *gbaka* drivers. Their employment in the informal economy, lack of work stability, and low income disallow them adequate recognition by society. In this case, the status economy "entail[s] investment in status-bestowing material practices, thus offering an alternative to employment as a means of gaining distinction" (Matlon, this issue, 66). By portraying black celebrities—politicians, sportsmen, musicians—on their buses, these men who socially "remain boys" (65) stake a claim to a different identity and an illusory participation in the international success stories of Michael Jackson, Barack Obama, or their own compatriots. In Athens, city walls give a boost to the protesters' voices. Street artists and graffiti writers express commonly felt discontent through specific words and images. At the same time, Athenian visual makers are a far cry from the stereotypical notion of "disaffected and rebellious youths fighting against the system" (Tsilimpounidi, this issue, 20). Tsilimpounidi describes them as men and women between 25 and 35, from middle-class families, often with university educations and permanent jobs.

In addition to a question of "Whose voices get heard thanks to city walls?," Samutina and Zaporozhets ask, "Who helps these voices sound stronger and assists with a cultural translation of these diverse statements?" Mediators, be they individual enthusiasts or organizations, play this essential urban role of translators in Berlin. They make graffiti and street art an important part of public discourse and public space and preserve their own history, which is intertwined with the unique history of the city.

In sum, it is fair to assume that the study of street art and other forms of urban visual imagery is unlikely to become an overresearched area any time soon. This phenomenon's multifaceted nature—and endless changeability—pose a constant challenge for researchers.

Authorized translation from Russian by Elena Lemeneva

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