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VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY: GRAFFITI MURALS AS AN INDICATOR OF GROWING GLOBAL CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN POST-SOCIALIST BULGARIA

Murals were both late and recentcomers to the Bulgarian graffiti scene. They began to appear in the USA in the second half of the 1960s, going through strong stylistic development in New York in the 1970s before spreading to Western Europe in the 1980s. Graffiti in Bulgaria, however, only started to increase in the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, and the type of graffiti that emerged was quite different from the prevailing styles in the USA and Western Europe.

Though the official identities of the authors of these works remained hidden, the Bulgarian style of graffiti conveyed a wide range of meanings, at times even intimate ones, in which attitudes, feelings, and cravings were shared with a wide public. Consisting of simple and well known abbreviations, these graffiti nevertheless varied in terms of their thematic scope: popular wisdom or humor, including anti-socialist or other political statements; support for a particular football team or band; and signs of belonging to non-formal youth groups, such as hippy, heavy metal, punk, skater and skinhead groups. After existing almost undisturbed for more than a decade on school desks, in public lavatories and, increasingly, on the exterior surfaces of larger towns, graffiti became an important element of Bulgarian cityscape and the city imaginary. Some played an important role in the political and social transformation of the country, both during the final years of socialism and the first years of post-socialism. To a large extent, this all became possible because they were able to be quickly and directly understood in broad social circles.¹

In contrast with the Bulgarian graffiti of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as many of the earlier forms of graffiti, murals are more difficult to read and understand. This new type of graffiti – though unknown on the Bulgarian scene until the late 1990s, it recently became the predominant form throughout the country – is now also found in big cities all over the

world. It is called variously tagging, murals, American graffiti, New York style, subway graffiti or hip-hop graffiti, and contains within it a name, written in embellished letters, that is often distorted to the point of illegibility. This form of graffiti is suited to secret communication while using public space as its medium, and it developed gradually out of more legible forms of graffiti, such as the early graffiti writers in Philadelphia, New York and some other American towns, who wrote their names in simple, well formed Latin letters. Unlike gang graffiti, which involved a pseudonym followed by the gang name, graffiti loners would only draw or inscribe their aliases. This form of graffiti soon began to grow in number and size, including application by spraying involving increasingly sophisticated calligraphy to mark them out from the rest. The image component of the writing began to grow in importance, and by the 1970s graffiti names had already become relatively intricate murals. Different individual and local styles began to appear gradually, though in most cases they were recognizable only from within writers' circles. Thus, though practiced in public spaces, this type of graffiti facilitated a means of communication between writers, while generally excluding outsiders. Murals went on to enjoy international popularity, and by 2000 they had become a global phenomenon.²

When the first writing experiments in graffiti labels and logos began to appear in the second half of the 1990s, the lettering used was more or less legible. The first visible change,³ however, came in the mid 1990s with the calligraphic experiments that took their inspiration from advertising and involved naming favorite football clubs, bands, or youth groups, such as those of the hippies, punk or metal fans. These were written almost exclusively in the Latin and not Cyrillic script, and often featured outlined contours or were ornamented with arrows, arrowheads and other elements, and made a substantial contribution to the development of a taste for the embellished Latin letter. More importantly, they provided ample opportunity to future mural authors to hone their writing skills. Indeed, the older and more respected Bulgarian graffiti masters claim to have started their careers in precisely this way, and it was only in their late teens, and in some cases even in their early twenties, that they invented graffiti names and began writing tag signatures.⁴ Soon after, their production underwent important changes due to the direct influence of the global graffiti model. After initially imitating foreign examples seen on television, in American films such as "Wild-style", or specialist West European graffiti magazines, they gradually appropriated the various forms

and elements of mural imagery between 1998 and 2005. The result – in similar vein to foreign examples of graffiti murals – was alien to passers-by, but legible and highly appreciated in writers' circles. Just like the foreign examples, the Bulgarian murals were able to hide not only the official identity of the writer but also the majority of the meanings they conveyed – i.e. though existing directly in the public realm, they in fact served to facilitate communication between writers, while hampering communication with the others at the same time.⁵ Moreover, by developing an apprenticeship system and the skill of mural evaluation, the young men involved formed a circle of practitioners and connoisseurs with specialist knowledge that was more or less inaccessible to outsiders. They also attempted to construct the history of the Bulgarian graffiti mural movement as a new and still developing branch of global graffiti muralism that had nothing to do with earlier Bulgarian graffiti. Thus the graffiti scene conceptualized itself as an individual self-sufficient entity that was highly dependant on the international scene and for the most part independent of wider Bulgarian society.

Remaining true to the basic principles and practices of graffiti mural writing was considered a sign of authenticity. Still, given the nature of the tradition and the way it was acquired in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian scene has many individual traits. The graffiti murals in Bulgaria not only sought to hide their meanings, and even their content, despite being in the public domain; they were also increasingly executed in the style of the global graffiti tradition as a sign of respect and belonging.

The authors of Bulgarian murals are mainly young men aged between 12 and 28. They all made conscious decisions to do graffiti, in contrast to some of their peers. This is usually explained by the high level of pleasure associated with making murals, regardless of the ever-present moral, physical and legal hazards.⁶ Inter-writer collaboration exists to a great extent for practical reasons of reducing the risks associated with their hobby, especially among those who run the risk of public condemnation or criminal prosecution. At the same time, and precisely because of the high risks, the willingness to get involved in mural writing is fueled by a need to prove themselves in difficult conditions combined with a strong sense of belonging to a secret masculine entity. The act of mural writing is highly praised and respected, mostly because it opens the door of the writer to a close circle of graffiti writers that belong to an international tradition, within which the writer proves his bravery, reliability, devotion, and creative potential, and which offers the writer the opportunity to win

respect and fame among respected peers. All these possibilities are available to he who dares chose and follow a hidden career and identity within mural writers' circles.

In a recent study of New York murals and their authors from the 1970s, Ivor Miller pointed out the importance of the choice of graffiti name for the creolized identities of the majority of the writers. Self-chosen to be suitable for writing and, more importantly, to win respect and dignity, all Bulgarian graffiti names are based on English language models and wordplays. Since many writers were of Caribbean or African origin, their name choices correlated quite closely with the wishes of their respective immigrant groups or countries of origin. The choosing of a name represents the symbolic act of acquiring the identity aspired to.⁷ At the same time, the mural writers were able to linger between an English based graffiti tradition and their native one, thus enabling them to find the most appropriate graffiti name to suit their identity aspirations. The tradition of choosing a graffiti name is suited to different cultural contexts and it therefore comes as no surprise that it reappears when transferred to Europe, thereby further strengthening and developing the graffiti tradition of name choice. When the first taggers and crews in Bulgaria began to use graffiti names, the results were a strange combination of orthodox names in the Cyrillic script and graffiti names borrowed from the global tradition. Later they began to signify naming practices so removed from the mainstream trend that many would not imagine that the strange Latin letters on the streets of Sofia were anything other graffiti aliases. This peculiarity strongly differentiated these writers from the rest of the society and allowed them to form a specific group of their own.

By contrast with previous forms of graffiti, instead of inscribing the names of their preferred groups, bands and teams, these writers began using their own graffiti names or those of their respective graffiti crews. All these names demonstrate a close phonetic and visual resemblance to the pseudonyms used in global graffiti traditions. Following a well established pattern, they sound American, make wide use of word play and are written in Latin script, marking a radical difference from traditional Bulgarian names (based on Orthodox models and written in Cyrillic script). Also, the names the Bulgarian crews chose for themselves were quite similar to mottos or graffiti promotions – e.g. Crazy Bombing Crew or Flash the Dark Crew. Other writers are expected to know only their abbreviations, CBC or FDC. Nevertheless every new crew is more or less expected to choose a name, basing itself on a similar principle.⁸ Thus

the choice of the name already implies in itself an aspiration of belonging to the international graffiti tradition.

These preferences are clearly in keeping with name choices in the global tradition, but they also accord with certain tendencies in wider Bulgarian society. Evgeniya Krăsteva-Blagoeva points out that, in the last three decades of the twentieth century, there was an increasing trend among parents of choosing West European and American names for their children. She also notes that many Bulgarians with traditional given names also have unofficial aliases based on the same foreign pattern and sounding similar to their given names. This author advocates that these choices are not only anticipations of future successful contact with the West, but that they are also expressions of a wish for a western quality of life.⁹ The adoption of graffiti names runs along similar lines, while also signifying an appreciation and belonging to the global graffiti tradition. One example is the Bulgarian writer, Blade, who took the name of a famous American writer. Another, SirGo, is the name of a Bulgarian king but also closely resembles the trend among some early American graffiti writers of placing the prefix "sir" or "lady" before their names in order to sound 'cool'. Other examples include Naste (which sounds phonetically similar to the English "nasty") and Argot, chosen due to the writers' regular use of words with negative connotations to signify high quality. As a rule, individual graffiti names sound phonetically similar to the name of the writer – e.g., SirGo and Blayz, which start with the same letter as the given names of the writers.¹⁰

Despite their similarities with child naming and alias preferences in Bulgarian society as a whole, special graffiti names clearly signify a belonging to a separate group with distinct and secret preferences and tastes. Still, the fact that writers coexist with a cohort of peers to whom the basics of these principles are clear – in so far as their own names or aliases are also based on similar, albeit non coinciding models – already facilitates the existence of links of mutual understanding and even connoisseurship in youth circles. At the same time, the more recent practices of naming reflect aspirations to belong to the global graffiti culture in general and as such also a common philosophy of estrangement from traditional Bulgarian male naming patterns.

Processes of differentiation from mainstream culture are also directly observable in the specific language used by the writers. In naming their works, as well as a hierarchy of mastership among the writers, they adopt and use specific terms, all of which are based on the English language

and used as such, even in Bulgarian, albeit in many cases adapted slightly to the native tongue. Writers who do not speak English nonetheless know the meaning of terms like *writer* (an author of graffiti murals), *crew* (a collective of writers), as well as the terms used to name the different variants of mural images, and the terms *toy* (a beginner), *king* (a respected master) and *shit* (a good mural). These terms were incorporated into the language of the first Bulgarian writers through self-study using graffiti films and graffiti magazines, as well as the Internet, all of which were an important source of information.¹¹ The terms were learnt diligently and put into practice and no attempt was made to change their meaning; they were understood to be part of the tradition, and as such were to be readily adopted rather than used provisionally, as was the case in the USA in the early stages of the mural tradition.¹² In this respect, the Bulgarian scene bears a close resemblance with other countries – e.g., in Germany, France and the Croatia, where muralism was appropriated as an already well developed tradition.¹³ Of course, it should be mentioned here that these terms in use in Bulgaria and all over the world are used exclusively in writers' circles. As such, unified terminology enhances direct and indirect contact with writers from other countries and strengthens the sense of belonging to a global subculture. On the other hand, regular use of special terminology, based on a foreign language and restricted to a limited group of "specialists", differentiates the writers from other Bulgarians, making them feel special, while novices must make special efforts to learn the terminology – a tribute every beginner is expected to pay early on in his career.¹⁴

The existence and use of graffiti terminology in writers' circles is clearly congruent with the widespread use of English vocabulary among Bulgarian teenagers. Though graffiti terminology is used most proficiently by writers themselves, many young people are also familiar with a handful of basic graffiti terms¹⁵ – e.g., both use figures instead of words when writing. Still, Internet forums and the regular insertion of comments in English within the murals themselves clearly demonstrate that graffiti writers have developed special skills in terms of producing and reading iconotexts ("an image which depends for its interpretation on the texts incorporated within it"¹⁶). Consequently, names, written using lettering that is hard to read, are usually reinforced by a more readable signature. Many murals also combine iconic texts with human figures or faces, which further helps to imbue the name with emotion.¹⁷ Alternatively, the letters of the names are sometimes distorted, tilted or interwoven

with one another to convey elements of the author's self-representation as well as concrete moods and attitudes – e.g., in a crack in the middle of a letter, upper and lower sides are joined at an angle that repeats rhythmically within the letters of the name, but differently for other names. Murals can thus convey different dynamics and illusions of motion,¹⁸ while lines, colors, faces and human figures also contribute to the expression of perceptions, attitudes and feelings. Mural writing might look like an illegible mass to an outsider, even to young people; writers, however, are able to differentiate the myriad details, individual or crew peculiarities, or occasional inventions, and then to borrow certain features from each other.¹⁹ Since each piece is considered an individual act of genuine self-expression, novelty and originality is highly praised,²⁰ and close “readings” of the work of others and a day-to-day following of the local graffiti scene is taken for granted.²¹ The act of detailed and specialized reading is thus proof of belonging to the writers' circles and as such serves as a specific, insider mode of communication which remains virtually inaccessible to outsiders.²² This is then usually reinforced by personal contacts and discussions of sketches and works, further enhancing the growing knowledge of individual graffiti writers and crews and their own specific ways of writing, not to mention awareness of current trends in the development of the graffiti murals in general.²³ Mainly thanks to the advent of the Internet in recent years, global and local levels of indirect contact are becoming increasingly interwoven. Early American inventiveness, as well as recent German and, more generally, West European precision, are highly praised and even considered examples that are difficult, if not possible, to match on Bulgarian soil.²⁴ Praising foreign murals above their own is a clear sign that Bulgarian writers consider their national tradition a “toy” one. In interviews I conducted, many writers made explicit statements on these matters.²⁵ Nonetheless, an ability to read murals and attempts to follow recent trends already show a sense of belonging to a common whole and provide a source of courage and willingness to advance and develop.

The use of lines, as well as various forms of underscoring, ornamenting and fading colors are all powerful means of self-expression. In the early stages of the murals scene in the New York subways, writers were also expected to express their individuality and distinctiveness by inventing new styles of writing. From the 1980s onwards, however, and especially on the European scene, innovations were only considered appropriate if they did not exceed the limits of the established graffiti tradition.²⁶ As a

result, later developments were marked not only by a mandatory process of acquisition, but also by a stage of perfecting older styles or gaining insights from previous achievements in the tradition.²⁷ Since Bulgarian writers were quite late in joining their foreign colleagues, they were forced to learn the basic styles of graffiti writing not only on individual basis, but also to establish the beginnings of a national tradition as well. It can be safely said that this is still a wholly unfinished matter, though it is also true that the basic “styles” of writing on walls were acquired between 1998 and 2000. Even toys are today expected to differentiate between tags (calligraphic signatures, based on the graffiti name),²⁸ throw ups (where a name or its abbreviation is quickly sketched in letter outlines and often filled in with a different color),²⁹ pieces (short for masterpieces and a highly embellished and multicolored writing of names),³⁰ wild-style (in Bulgaria typically a flat style of writing which can only be read only with difficulty due to the prevalence of arrows, arrowheads and other ornaments),³¹ 3D (conveying the illusion of three dimensions, often abstract or constructivist in nature), and characters (human faces and figures of the writers themselves or others who they encounter in their everyday lives).³² The partial appropriation of the peculiarities is due to the fragmented adoption of a tradition already at a certain stage in its development. There are, for example, no subway train graffiti in Bulgaria and even freight train writing only gained momentum after 2002 – although writers know its “styles” and history, they rarely practice this form of graffiti. Still, some of the peculiarities of mural writing, developed in the subways of New York and Europe, already existed in Bulgaria on the walls of traffic tunnels and other walls. It therefore comes as no surprise that certain themes from the history of the murals are known on a simplistic level – e.g., even Bulgarian writers who regularly practice the 3D style tend to believe that it was invented in Germany, while in fact it was invented on the old New York subway scene.³³ And last, but not least, some elements, such as the characters, have been honed to near perfection by Bulgarian writers, while letter styles tend to be monotonous. The Bulgarian tradition is thus already well established within the global tradition and features signs of its development, as well as signs of its further fragmentation. At the same time, even where fragmented, the global graffiti tradition as it exists in Bulgaria is practiced such that it is more easily understandable to foreign writers than to ordinary Bulgarians with no experience of mural reading. The best proof of this is the gradually developed insider system of evaluating mural quality.

Declarative graffiti are best known for being placed at important topoi and also for the creative insights of their content, which rely on signs or linguistic expressions. Similarly, many authors consider some murals on prestigious and well guarded buildings in the central city space as original, in so far as their creation involves bravery and inventiveness,³⁴ such as the graffiti that appeared in 2004 on the newly painted wall of the headquarters of Post Bank in central Sofia.³⁵ At graffiti forums, writers themselves speak about tags made on the desk of a military recruiting office and on the walls of the National Assembly.³⁶ In parallel with the increasing sophistication of Bulgarian murals over the course of time, other criteria – e.g., originality, technical accuracy and specific creativity within the already existing graffiti styles – have gained ground, especially among respected mural masters. For example, the direct borrowing of the image of a flame from a foreign graffiti magazine has been strongly criticized as plagiarism, and technological mastery of the spray blast is a mandatory skill to be achieved long before a piece can be seen by thousands of people. As a result, young writers are already expected to have developed their styles, conceptually and technically, through hard work on paper and hidden walls before doing graffiti in well seen locations.³⁷ The criteria mentioned above seem to be the most important and to have been commonly accepted, while others – such as the general esthetic impression the mural creates – are observed by some writers (mainly those specially trained in art) and omitted by others.³⁸ In so far as some of these qualities are widely considered important, respected graffiti kings have, as a rule, chosen to master piece production rather than rely for their fame on abundant tag or throw-up production. Bulgarian graffiti kings enjoy an authority that could be shared with their foreign counterparts. For example, evaluation of Bulgarian graffiti contests by foreign writers has been readily accepted and praised.³⁹ Although these attitudes were partially connected with the dissatisfaction over the inclusion of artists, sponsors and organizers in the graffiti juries, as well the rivalries between crews and groups of crews in Bulgaria, foreign kings are in fact welcomed as jury members in contests precisely because they are considered the most competent. As a result, the criteria and abilities used in judging graffiti production were not only developed gradually in Bulgaria, but these criteria and evaluation were believed to be identical with those found in the international graffiti tradition.

Today, though already in their late twenties, some of the early Bulgarian writers are still practicing their art. They gained their knowledge and

skills on their own, learning from foreign models in a process of indirect communication. A lot of young writers seek their help, especially at the start of their graffiti careers. The graffiti shops belonging to two of the most respected kings in Sofia, for example, have become places beginners go to not only to but spray paint, but also to seek technical advice, approval, inspiration and moral support.⁴⁰ It is very important to be able to meet a person whom you respect and admire for having turned his hobby into a way of earning a living.⁴¹ The authority of the kings also places them in a mentoring position, enabling them to demand a certain level of devotion to graffiti writing as well as allowing them, at least partially, to exercise control over the graffiti production and quality. Respect for those who have “paid their tribute” is common to different national traditions and also present on the global level. It is also not uncommon for Bulgarian writers to show respect for certain foreign kings. Although they usually measure their own successes and failures in comparison with other Bulgarian writers and collaborate with them in order to minimize risk and fear, even the youngest Bulgarian writers still think of themselves as a part of the global graffiti tradition. By belonging to the wider scene, and believing in its self-sufficiency, it is easier to ignore some of the uncomfortably different values and priorities of others, even if they are directly present in the immediate urban reality. All this helps in achieving the inner freedom needed to practice mural painting on urban exteriors, including in central topoi.

At present, large and medium-sized Bulgarian towns are being increasingly saturated with images conveying limited information to outsiders, while at the same time offering a means of intense indirect communication for insiders. These murals, with their own history of proliferation, are nevertheless a form of cultural production, and one which is performed directly in a certain space and shared with others – though a new phenomenon, they have already found a social niche, and by doing so graffiti circles have profited greatly from previous visual regimes in the urban space within the country.

The spread of graffiti murals in Bulgaria happened after a mass outburst of declarative public graffiti in the 1980s and early 1990s that were often considered genuine signs of protest and expressions of grassroots’ indignation, and as such helped promote favorable attitudes towards murals.⁴² These positive perceptions were to a large extent transferred directly to the murals. The murals themselves also benefited from a certain amount of artistic and intellectual appreciation, which was heavily based

on foreign examples and initially appeared long before the appearance of the Bulgarian murals themselves.⁴³ All this created ample conditions for the rapid growth of the murals, while also affecting their nature and helping them become a relatively widespread hobby.

Media comments about graffiti murals are even more abundant than representations of other, earlier forms of graffiti writing. While the appearance of some of the declarative graffiti – most of all the political graffiti – constituted news in its own right and was reflected in the media, journalists now use reports on graffiti contests and events as an opportunity to inform the public about the peculiarities of this type of graffiti and its respected writers.⁴⁴ This is also accompanied by reports of occasional arrests of writers and measures taken against mural writing in foreign countries.⁴⁵ As a rule, journalists tend to sympathize with the authors and show an interest in their hobby, only occasionally doubting their creativity and artistic merit. Yet, despite the fact that murals form an unquestionable part of the graffiti found in the streets of Bulgaria's large towns, media reports and Internet sites alike have also continued to provide information on other, declarative types of graffiti. Thus, though very rare today, general articles written on graffiti tend to pay more attention to the previous forms of political, sexual and live graffiti than they do to murals, while literature and the Internet are full of information on student, soldier, political, activist and other forms of declarative graffiti. Most of these tend to appreciate the older type of graffiti and are silent when it comes to murals – alternatively, some openly declare that they do not understand them.⁴⁶ It is also worthy of note here that one particular teenage forum, during the short time it was engaged in discussing graffiti production, contained an abundance of different attitudes towards graffiti murals – from the strongly positive to the strongly negative. This shows that only a small number of young people have a reasonable understanding of murals – normally teenagers who have developed a certain fascination for murals. The attitudes found in the forum, though very limited in number, are not misleading and are confirmed by a partial answer-sheet investigation performed in an MA thesis writing project that shows that pupils and students aged between 12 and 18 have widely varying attitudes to murals. Moreover, only a small minority of these knew any writers personally or have tried writing any form of graffiti themselves.

At the same time, a number of Internet sites representing mural production have gradually appeared. They belong both to writers and connoisseurs and contain information about the history of the murals,

contests and mural production in different towns by different crews and individual writers. Writers typically advertise their production or small graffiti writing businesses here, but these sites also offer possibilities for further contact and sometimes provide advice to younger writers. Regularly updated photographs of murals serve to demonstrate artistic qualities as well as to attract potential customers and admirers. Sites and forums organized by outsiders are predominantly aimed at expressing positive attitudes towards graffiti art in general, but are often criticized by the writers themselves for lacking a critical eye in the evaluation of graffiti products and are accused of not understanding what real graffiti is. In addition, an internet forum moderated by a group of NGO activists for the Foundation for Youth Culture, often challenges writers, forcing them to show a high level of disrespect for outsiders entering the graffiti scene with the intention of organizing and managing its needs. While clearly using the site to search for information about graffiti competitions, workshops and other similar initiatives, and then using the forum as an additional space for hidden insider communication by writing iconic texts, the writers also use it actively to criticize interference in the self-organization and self-evaluation practiced within writers' circles. At the same time, they regularly refuse to engage in debates and discussions on the nature of their art, thus demonstrating that it is neither important nor even acceptable to them that outsiders understand their motivation or inspiration for writing as well as their attitudes towards graffiti as both art and crime. Consequently, it can be said that writers' circles often turn their backs on public discussion and instead engage in closed discussions on the quality of various aerosol paints and images, self-affirmation, mock rivalries and toy educational efforts. An almost complete neglect of the obvious public hunger for information about the content and motivation of the murals is also seen in the advertisements for chemical cleaning products designed to remove graffiti as well as the information provided by voluntary NGO initiatives for graffiti cleaning. We can therefore conclude that, on the one hand, public discourse on graffiti tends to show a wider willingness to understand graffiti murals; while, on the other hand, the discourses of writers and cleaners tend not only to exist separately and to ignore each another but also serve to neglect and discourage discussion in wider circles. The overall discourse thus shows signs of increasing fragmentation, to which writers are themselves actively contributing, even though, at the same time, they try their best to profit from positive attitudes and the general interest in graffiti. This is best

seen in that they actively look for outsider postings of information on legal graffiti events and also make use of any direct or indirect opportunities for contract work.

Initially, all graffiti was illegal in Bulgaria. Later on, however, with the active collaboration of people who do not practice graffiti, numerous possibilities appeared for the creation of legal murals. Writers were then able to work freely without fear of being accused of committing a crime and were provided with the necessary space and sometimes even spray cans. Graffiti contests are the oldest and the most popular form of legalizing graffiti as modern youth art. They have become popular among writers and wider youth circles and are often organized as events. The first such contest was held in Tărgovishte in 2000. The initiators of the contest were graffiti writers themselves and disciples of the art department at the University of Veliko Tărnovo. Right from the start they received permission and understanding from the municipality of the town, and it is no surprise that the North-East Battles, which were also occasionally held in other parts of east Bulgaria, already have a long history. In 2002, in a modern art gallery, the experienced graffiti photographer Evgeni Inanov exhibited a series of photographs of murals in Sofia entitled *Street Voices*. In parallel, and together with a group of young intellectuals, he also staged an exhibition of graffiti murals on canvas. This same group, which formed an NGO called the Foundation for Youth Art, has since 2003 been at the heart of the organization of the annual summer graffiti event called *Aerogressia*, which is staged in front of Sofialand, as well as the Sprite graffiti festival sponsored by *Coca-Cola Bulgaria* held in front of the National Palace of Culture. Evgeni Ivanov and other members of the foundation also recently worked on the *Radar* project, which included a series of practical and theoretical graffiti workshops. In 2005, the traditional Sprite graffiti festival was held together with the regional Write-for-Gold competition in which eight crews from Bulgaria and Romania went head to head to fight for a place in the annual finals in Germany. Local enthusiasts also organized a big graffiti festival on the waterfront in the town of Varna in 2004. All this would have been impossible without the active initiative of the youth NGO activists, with the occasional support from modern artists, art historians and curators. Similar efforts also made possible an exhibition of graffiti at the largest and most prestigious art gallery in Bulgaria, the Union of Bulgarian artists, popularly known under the name of its location on 6 Šipka Street in Sofia. The exhibition included graffiti on canvasses created by the best

Bulgarian writers, which were exhibited together with modern photographs. Local municipalities, for whom the existence of graffiti in urban exterior spaces is a serious problem, were not initially very keen to help with graffiti contests and events. In the summer of 2003, however, initiated by the FM+ radio station and with the permission and support of the Municipality of Sofia, a series of legal graffiti works were performed in the underground passageway of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia and the mayor of Sofia officially opened the *Graffiti* tram and trolley bus stop. Reports of this initiative appeared in the electronic and print media, setting a further important example that was then followed by many high school administrations and other institutions that offered writers the possibility to write freely on their outer walls that were already covered with tags.⁴⁷ Corporate organizations and local administrations were also quick to declare the traditional child drawing competitions as graffiti contests, thus allowing occasional graffiti lettering to be included in the images.

While organizing legal writing opportunities, some of the initiators also co-opted respected Bulgarian writers. That said, almost all of the aforementioned initiatives would have been impossible without the participation of the writers. Many reacted positively to these initiatives based on their belief that legal contests and events could contribute to the development of graffiti mural art in Bulgaria. For example, the members of the young CBC crew believe it is extremely important to use the opportunity the contests provide to produce sophisticated murals, in so far as there is an abundance of time and space. Some of the writers even managed to save some of the aerosol paint and use it elsewhere.⁴⁸ SirGo, a well known writer from Sofia, also confesses that contests sponsor bombing in various ways, but also sees the substantial opportunities they can offer. Although he dislikes being assigned the wall in a contest, rather than being able to choose it himself, he maintains that the best examples of graffiti in Bulgaria are the legal ones, because contests offer opportunities for self-expression and demonstrations of spray mastery.⁴⁹ Another respected writer, Naste, a writer who is personally involved in organizing different graffiti contests and battles, also believes that only the legal opportunities can support the development of graffiti mural art in Bulgaria.⁵⁰ A counterargument to this point of view is that some writers are not happy being evaluated by non-writers. Additionally, there is dislike for some of the organizational matters, allowing writers' official identities to be exposed on public. At the first Sprite graffiti festival in 2003, for

example, the crews were asked to climb on to the specially built stage in order to be presented. This resulted in confusion as the writers did not want this exposure and the organizers were forced to compromise by providing the crews with their paint in a quiet fashion off stage. Although very happy when their work is highlighted by newspapers reporters and TV cameras, most writers go to considerable lengths to cover their faces when being filmed – many are responsible for a substantial amount of illegal mural production and fear condemnation and punishment, sometimes to the extent that they refuse to accept prizes. Thus collaboration between writers and insiders, though crucially important at contests and big events, is far from unproblematic. While it demonstrates that certain intellectual circles are co-operating actively with writers in order to produce graffiti events, writers nonetheless see them as organizers, not connoisseurs, despite their declaring a deep interest in graffiti as an art.

Some examples of collaboration between graffiti and business are also worthy of mention. For example, the advertising campaigns for *Absolut* vodka shown abroad made use of graffiti murals long before their arrival in Bulgaria. It therefore comes as no surprise that in the mid 1990s, when calligraphic experiments in graffiti writing had just started to appear, *Absolut* was among the first to stage a commercial graffiti event on the walls of the Art Gallery of Sofia. Discotheques and night clubs – e.g. the *Graffiti* discotheque in Blagoevgrad and the *Lancelot* music club in Rouse – were still hiring graffiti writers to decorate their walls in the late 1990s and, in the case of the Karamel discotheque in Sofia, at the beginning of the new millennium. A number of other commercial areas, such as youth tourist agencies and Internet clubs, are also continually being covered with murals and as such easily turn their respective products into cultural goods. The most common of these today are kiosks. Eventually, kiosk owners started to prefer to have their walls covered with graffiti rather than pay for continual re-painting, after discovering that graffiti murals improve their sales of simple sandwiches, coffee, soft drinks and cheap alcoholic drinks. Some writers report regularly accepting such jobs. The cost to the owner is very low or non-existent, and at the same time the kiosk offers the writer a legal way to practice murals. Some writers have also been involved in creating murals from which images are then used in advertising campaigns for paints, beverages, clothes, hip-hop concerts and other goods aimed at the youth market. Incorporating graffiti murals into these market strategies is not exceptional, but advertising agencies usually tend to work with a handful of respected authors. Last, but not

least, a limited number of authors, already at the end of their graffiti careers, have aimed to make their hobby not only a way of life but also a way of earning a living. The history of graffiti writing abroad is full of cases of resistance to writer commercialization. The respected Bulgarian writers, on the other hand, who have chosen to open graffiti shops selling paint and graffiti designs, are seen examples that other writers aspire to follow.⁵¹ Thus, successful collaboration between business and graffiti can be seen to lead to the extensive use of graffiti murals – both as photographs and directly produced on the spot as their images are commonly considered attractive to certain groups of young customers.

Both insiders' and outsiders' appreciation of graffiti murals in Bulgaria has been strongly affected by understandings and tastes that came from far away from the country. At the same time, all knowledge about murals has been essentially fragmented. In addition, local discourses on murals have further contributed to the marginalization of the society, based neither on ethnic, religious nor economic grounds, but on the basis of a choice of identity by the mural writer and its appreciation in the wider society.

Compared with the American and West European examples, Bulgarian murals still don't possess straightforward and easily distinguishable national peculiarities and have not produced any remarkable achievements. Despite this, having studied the Bulgarian graffiti scene for the last 10 years – both in terms of careful documentation of graffiti images and in terms of conducting interviews with some of the writers – I advocate that these murals have already developed a specific nature of their own and are thus remarkable not only because of the sheer number and the fast growth of their images in the urban space. I also advocate that they have appeared and have developed as a phenomenon not only parallel to other processes of globalization in Bulgarian society, but have also occupied a position in a wider social niche which would have been impossible without earlier global influences, not to mention the more recent processes of globalization. Both analyses of the mural production as a self-sufficient entity and as a phenomenon nested in wider social discourses and acts offer an opportunity to explain and clarify the mechanisms laying behind this rather complicated cultural practice based on an intimate internalization of the global model and its "creolization" on Bulgarian terms. Consequently, the study of graffiti murals and their social pigeonholing provides an example of a phenomenon indicative of the increasing appropriation of fragmented traditions which appeared

and first developed at a considerable distance. They are also remarkable because of further contributing to both the fragmentation of society and the appreciation of marginal cultural production within the wider social milieu. I would also like to pay special attention to the ways in which graffiti writers invest considerable effort in their estrangement from others, as well as their alternative co-opting of dialog and negotiation over a space in which to practice their hobby in the public realm. Consequently, newly acquired Bulgarian mural writing can be viewed as a phenomenon not only signaling continuing globalization because of the nature of its images, but also because of the social relations involved in the production and appreciation of murals as well as the identities and sophisticated modes of inter- and intra-group communication focused in their images.



Illustration 1: Tags "Sited" on a Sofa Advertisement Image (Detail).
Photo Miglena Ivanova, 2005.



Illustration 2: RIPERIC. Throw-Up. Photo Miglena Ivanova, 2005.



Illustration 3: Nd2Nd. Legal Piece on the Facade of a Public Building.
Photo Miglena Ivanova, 2004.



Illustration 4: CBC. Graffito – Wild-Style Winner on the Second Sprite
Graffiti Fest in 2004. Photo Miglena Ivanova.



Illustration 5: SirGO. Graffito - 3D Winner on the First Sprite Graffiti Fest in 2003. Photo Miglena Ivanova.



Illustration 6: Aerogresia. Graffito Written during Varna Street Graffiti Fest in 2004. Photo Miglena Ivanova.

NOTES

- ¹ Cf. Kraev, G., "Gradăt? ... na velikolepnata sedmorka" – In : Izkustvo, 1988, No. 9, 11 –14; Kraev, G., "Naivăt". – In: Izkustvo, 1989, No. 5, 42-45; Mihaylova, K., "Fotorazkaz za novoto lice na mavzoleya". – In: Bylgarski folklor, 1991, No. 4, 104 –109; Rangočev, K. and O. Tunčeva, "Grafiti - opit za analiz". – In : "Bălgarski folklor", no. 4, 1994, 44 - 48; Varzonovcev, D. *Fenomenologija na grada*, Universitetsko izdatelstvo Sv. Kliment Ohridski, Sofia, 1992, 78-81; Ivanova, R. *Sbogom, dinozavri, dobre došli, krokodili : Etnologija na promjanata*, Akademično izdatelstvo Prof. Marin Drinov, Sofia, 1997, 96-105; Šopov.R. and S. Vălkova, "Graffiti War". – In: Problemi na bălgarskata sociolingvistika, V. 5, 1997, 89-93; Yarulina-Todorova, T. "O neoficial'noj pis'mennoj kul'ture sovremennogo polisa". – In: Problemi na bălgarskata sociolingvistika", V. 5, 1997, 102-105; Ivanova, M. *Vizualno-antropologični karakteristiki na săvremennine bălgarski grafiti*. Ph. D. Thesis, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 1998.
- ² Austin, J. *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became and Urban Crisis in New York City*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001; Bushnell, J., *Moscow Graffiti. Language and Subculture*, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1990; Castleman, C., *Getting up: Subway graffiti in New York*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass, 1982; Cooper, M. and H. Chalfant, *Subway Art*, Schwartzkopf and Schwartzkopf, Berlin, 2002 [1984]; Felonneau, M.-L. *Tags et grafs: les jeunes à la conquête de la ville*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001; Ferrell, J., *Crimes of style. Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Garland, New York and London, 1993; Ganz, N. *Graffiti World. Street Art from Five Continents*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004; *Graffiti Art*, Schwartzkopf and Schwartzkopf, Berlin, 2001; Henkel, O., T. Dennant and R. Westhoff. *Spray City. Graffiti in Berlin*, Akademie der Kunst und Scwarzkopf, Berlin, 1994; Keim, S. *Surf the City. Graffiti in Subways in Germany and Europe*, Aschaffensburg, 2000; Kokoreff, M., *Le lisse et l'incisif. Les tags dans le metro*, IRIS, Paris, 1990 ; Kreuzer, P., *Das Graffiti-Lexikon. Wand-Kunst von A bis Z*, Heyne, München, 1986; Lalić, D., A. Leburić, and N. Bulat *Grafiti i subkultura*, Alinea, Zagreb, 1991; Macdonald, N., *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002; Meyer, B. *Graffiti - eine Kunstform Jugendlischer?: eine empirische Studie über die Akzeptanz von Graffiti bei Schülern unterschiedlicher Schulformen und Jahrgangsstufen*, Tenea, Berlin, 2002 ; Miller, I., *Aerosol Kingdom : Subway Painters of New York City*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Miss., 2002; Morley, S., *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2003; *On the wheels of steel...end2ends*, Aschaffensburg; Publikat-Verl., 2002; Peteet, J., "The Writing on the Walls: Graffiti of the Intifada". - In: *Cultural Anthropology*, 1996, 139-159; Phillips, S. *Wallbanger. Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1999; *Power of Style: Berlin Stylewriting*, Publikat-Verl.,

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- 3 Ivanova, M., “Grafite – izobraženija, s koito se sblāskvame v zabārzanija si delnik. – *Vox Literarum*, 2004, No. 2, 54.
- 4 Interviews conducted by the author with Naste in November 2004 and SirGo in December 2004.
- 5 Interview conducted by the author with CBC crew in August 2004.
- 6 Interview with SirGo; Interview by the author with an anonymous graffiti crew in July 2004.
- 7 Miller, I., *Aerosol Kingdom*, 53-69.
- 8 Interviews conducted by the author with the FDK crew in July 2004 and with CBC in August 2004; interview with Naste.
- 9 Krāsteva-Blagoeva, E. *Ličnoto ime v bālgarskata tradicija*, Akademično izdatelstvo Marin Drinov, Sofia, 1999, 148.
- 10 Interview with CBC; interview with SirGo.
- 11 Interviews with Naste, SirGo, and CBC.
- 12 Miller, I., *Aerosol Kingdom*, 53-69.
- 13 Felonneau, M.-L. *Tags et grafs: les jeunes à la conquête de la ville*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 2001 ; Ferrell, J., *Crimes of style. Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Garland, New York and London, 1993; Ganz, N. *Graffiti World. Street Art from Five Continents*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004; Kreuzer, P., *Das Graffiti-Lexikon. Wand-Kunst von A bis Z*, Heyne, München, 1986; Lalić, D., A. Leburic, and N. Bulat *Grafiti i subkultura*, Alinea, Zagreb, 1991; Macdonald, N., *The Graffiti Subculture:Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002; Meyer, B. *Graffiti - eine Kunstform Jugendlicher? : eine empirische Studie über die Akzeptanz von Graffiti bei Schülern unterschiedlicher Schulformen und Jahrgangsstufen*, Tenea, Berlin, 2002 ; Schiemann, H. and P. Watzl *Munich Graffiti:100 Pieces*. Dagmar-Verlag-und-Film-GmbH, München, 1986; Schmitt, A., Irion, M. *Graffiti – Problem oder Kultur*, Beust, München, 2001; Stahl, J. *Graffiti : zwischen Alltag und Ästhetik*, Scaneg, München, 1990.;

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- 14 For example when SirGo, while addressing younger writers, offers explanations of those terms on his Internet page – cf. <http://graffiti-mania.hit.bg>, 24 June, 2005.
- 15 Cf. Dimiev, B. *Grafitite kato fenomen na masovata kultura*. Didaktičeska preценка. MA Thesis. University of Sofia, 2003, 38-47.
- 16 Briggs and Burke Briggs, A. and P. Burke, *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to the Internet*, 44.
- 17 Cf. Illustration No. 5.
- 18 Cf. Illustration No. 4.
- 19 Interviews with anonymous crew, FBC, CBC, Naste and SirGo.
- 20 Interviews with CBC, Naste and SirGo.
- 21 Interview with CBC.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Interviews with Naste and SirGo.
- 24 Interview with SirGo.
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- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Cf. Illustration No. 2.
- 29 Cf. Illustration No. 3.
- 30 Cf. Illustration No. 5.
- 31 Cf. Illustration No. 6.
- 32 Interview with CBC; interviews with Naste and SirGo.
- 33 Cf. Miller, I., *Aerosol Kingdom*.
- 34 Interviews with CBC and SirGo.
- 35 Documentation by the author of graffiti murals in Sofia in 2004 – Electronic Archive of the Institute of Folklore at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, signatures MI – graffiti 26/V/26 and MI – graffiti 26/V/27.
- 36 *Graffiti – glasove on ulicata* forum – www.dir.bg, accessed on 30 June 2005.
- 37 Interviews with Naste and SirGo.
- 38 Interview with Naste.
- 39 Cf. comments on the foreign writers' jury on Write-for-Gold regional competition - *Graffiti – glasove on ulicata* forum – www.dir.bg, 30 June 2005.
- 40 Interviews with CBC and Naste.
- 41 Interview with CBC.
- 42 Cf. Ivanova, R. *Sbogom, dinozavri, dobre došli, krokodili*, 96-105.
- 43 Cf. R. Ivanova's comments on graffiti on the Berlin Wall - Ivanova, R. *Sbogom, dinozavri, dobre došli, krokodili*, 96-105.

- 44 E.g. "Grafiti fest sãbra hiljadi kraj NDK" - *Dnevnik on-line*, 14.07.2005; the Internet, [http:// www. Dnevnik.bg](http://www.Dnevnik.bg) ; "Pobeditelite v Sprite Graffiti Battle bjaha izbrani po vreme na nacionalen Sprite grafiti Fest" - *Slovesa*, 14.07. 2005; the Internet, [http:// www. slovesa.bg](http://www.slovesa.bg); "Grafiti v njakolko stila prevzeha oficialnite prostranstva okolo NDK". - The Internet - <http://www.stroitelstvo.bg>, 23 June 2003; The Internet -, [http://www. razkazzivkartinki.com/novinite.html](http://www.razkazzivkartinki.com/novinite.html) - 10 May 2005.
- 45 E.g. "Nemskata policija vključi i helicopter v borbata sreštu grafitite". - *Dnevnik*, 24.04.2005. the Internet, <http://www.dnevnik.bg>
- 46 E. g. Stoyanova, S., "Životat e kratak, grafitite večni - *Standart*, 5 May 2005.
- 47 Interview with Naste.
- 48 Interview with CBC.
- 49 Interview with SirGo.
- 50 Interview with Naste.
- 51 Interview with CBC.