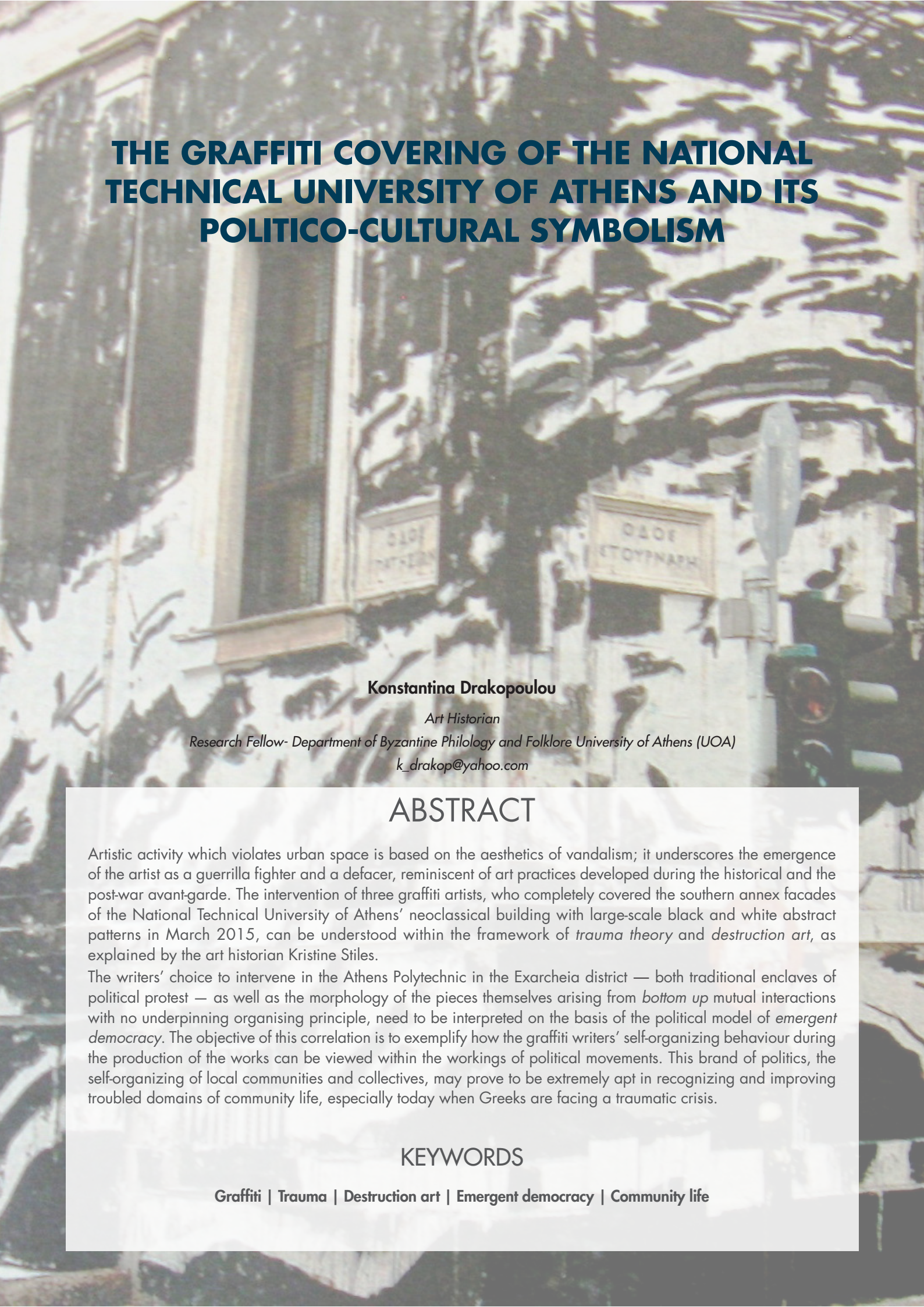

THE GRAFFITI COVERING OF THE NATIONAL TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS AND ITS POLITICO-CULTURAL SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT

Artistic activity which violates urban space is based on the aesthetics of vandalism; it underscores the emergence of the artist as a guerrilla fighter and a defacer, reminiscent of art practices developed during the historical and the post-war avant-garde. The intervention of three graffiti artists, who completely covered the southern annex facades of the National Technical University of Athens' neoclassical building with large-scale black and white abstract patterns in March 2015, can be understood within the framework of *trauma theory* and *destruction art*, as explained by the art historian Kristine Stiles.

The writers' choice to intervene in the Athens Polytechnic in the Exarcheia district — both traditional enclaves of political protest — as well as the morphology of the pieces themselves arising from *bottom up* mutual interactions with no underpinning organising principle, need to be interpreted on the basis of the political model of *emergent democracy*. The objective of this correlation is to exemplify how the graffiti writers' self-organizing behaviour during the production of the works can be viewed within the workings of political movements. This brand of politics, the self-organizing of local communities and collectives, may prove to be extremely apt in recognizing and improving troubled domains of community life, especially today when Greeks are facing a traumatic crisis.

KEYWORDS

Graffiti | Trauma | Destruction art | Emergent democracy | Community life

INTRODUCTION

The aesthetics of destruction, often manifested in the current trend of contemporary art exhibitions -occasionally reduced to a mere curatorial fashion- has served as an essential means of: questioning art institutions or challenging the very meaning of art itself; understanding trauma and promoting individual and collective healing; representing, documenting, or even aestheticizing pressing political and sociocultural issues in the historical and post-war avant-garde. (Gamboni, 1997; Brougher et al, 2013).

Art historian Kristine Stiles, who has specifically dealt with the art of destruction, has coined the terms *destruction art* and *terminal culture* with the aim to show that these terms signify relevant spaces where aesthetics, power relations, and political practices are intertwined with the issue of survival (Stiles, 2016). This paper theorizes destruction art in terms of traumatic experiences, within the framework of survivalist discourse, which is intensively felt in contemporary Greece that is plagued by depression due to persistent political, economic and existential uncertainty. Stiles draws on the important work on trauma and survival as analyzed by the psychologist Robert Jay Lifton. According to Lifton, one of the symptoms of trauma is the *psychic numbing* that inhibits the individual's ability to feel and reflect on conditions, effects, and processes repressed by the mechanisms of terminal culture, consequently becoming unable to dynamically react. Survival, however, as Lifton argues, triggers the sense of guilt to survivors and, accordingly, "the sense of debt and responsibility to the dead" (Lifton, 1987: 236-240). Although I do not intend to examine trauma further, I will try to understand its impact on unsettling common ways of communication, and in particular on artistic activism. I regard graffiti writers in Greece as trauma survivors, and as trauma survivors are unconsciously identified with the dead. Death, may be the natural termination of life; the loss of control of everyday life; the annihilation of the sense of Self; and suicidal behavior, often depicted in several rallies with the main slogan "We won't get used to death" (Avramidis, 2014: 296).

When confronted with death, artists undertake responsibility for the dead and the forgotten by putting destruction art in the service of survival, that is, resisting mass-mediated narratives constructed so as to forget, to leave out people and events that do not fit into or would upset the narrative structure. According to the official narrative, the European financial recession and social disintegration—and, precisely, the causes of the *southern problem*—are repeatedly attributed to each country's internal fiscal and budget failures, while uneven geographical developments and uneven relations among social classes, firms, places, and institutions are left out of the picture and altogether forgotten. (Hadjimichalis, 2011: 257-264). Additionally, blaming for this degradation the people who are in reality the victims, as well as the *Other*, i.e. the marginalized and the immigrants, constitutes a usual practice of explaining Greek reality today.

Holding these thoughts in my mind, I would like to be in this paper a little more definite by applying these ideas to investigate the reasoning behind the intervention of graffiti artists on the Athens National Technical University (Metsovion Polytechnic) in March 2015, a renowned building of Athenian classicism (1862-1876), designed by the Greek architect Lysandros Kaftantzoglou (1811-1885) and located at the center of Athens.[1] Subsequently, I will attempt to explain the morphology of the graffiti pieces; the artists' intentions; the tempestuous reception of the works by the traditional cultural gatekeepers; and, finally, the values assigned to the pieces by the surrounding neighborhood in which the pieces were created and became the area's symbol.

1. Part of this paper was originally presented at *Aesthetics and Ethics*, a two day conference organized by the Technological Educational Institute of Athens, School of Graphic Arts and Artistic Studies, June 12-13, 2015, at Technopolis - Municipality of Athens.

THE GRAFFITI AT THE ATHENS NATIONAL TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

The edifice is emblematic as its classical grandeur defines its ideological purpose; at the same time, it conveys a space infused with historical meanings. In nineteenth-century Greece, after the creation of the modern Greek state in 1832 and the establishment of King Otto's rule (Duke of Bavaria), an idiosyncratic architectural historicism emerged that was rooted in ancient Greek orders. "The morphology of Greek classicism arrived in Greece through circumstantial ideological and artistic processes directly connected with German influence" (Biris and Kardamitsi-Adami, 2004: 18). Neoclassical aesthetics had to fulfill a twofold objective: one attempting to acknowledge the classical past as an important constituent of the urban architecture itself; and another using neoclassical typology as a means to emphasize *Greekness*, i.e. for the official promotion of nationalism and in order to generate a new socio-cultural construct of the Greek state being reborn after many centuries of subjugation to the Ottoman Empire. (Biris and Kardamitsi-Adami, 2004: 18, 256). The Athens Polytechnic has also played an important role in the history of contemporary Greece as the epicenter of the anti-dictatorial student uprising (1973), as well as during the extensive riots in the country's post-dictatorial era (1974-present) (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011: 78-79).

The graffiti, which contains three large scale aerosol painted pieces consisting of black and white patterns, namely a non-chromatic palette of an abstract visual idiom, so different from the familiar colorful lettering of New York-style graffiti, was executed by three graffiti writers respectively over the course of three nights [fig. 01].[2] This experimentation

Fig. 01· Aerosol paint on wall, Athens National Technical University, Prytaneum building. Patision Street and Stournari Street, Athens March 2015. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou.

2. Personal communication with the creators of the graffiti pieces on the Athens Polytechnic. April 14, 2015.

in black and white tones had already preoccupied the writers in executing illegal works in downtown Athens as early as 2014 [fig. 02]. And just after the pieces on the Athens Polytechnic they continued to work on abstract, monumental in size patterns of the same colour contrast, as shows at least one piece I spotted on a large surface in the same neighborhood while conducting my field research [fig. 03]. Stylistically they have also exerted a strong influence on the younger generation of graffiti writers as is visible in the piece opposite the Polytechnic, created by the crew 420 [fig. 04]. The pieces completely covered the southern annex facades of the National Technical University and expanded to nearby street lamps, bus stations, and even on sidewalks, leaving unpainted just the Doric entablature and pediment. The intact whiteness of the triglyphs and metopes reveals in a profound way the writers' attention to the site and the political signification of the building's neoclassicism. Against the black surface, shaded white and gray shapes were interrupted by a sweeping linear configuration and paint splatters à la Pollock. On closer view, the continuousness of the allover massive composition seems to be deceptive; despite the appearance of intertwinement, loose looped contours frame three separate pieces. The gestural application of paint, the controlled (to a great extent) flow of paint, the thoughtful thinning and thickening clusters of lines, the general rhythm caused by sweeping dancelike movements of the whole body, and in general the denial of chance in handling of every detail justify comparisons with action painters' practices. However, at this point the similarities with the Abstract Expressionism idiom cease.

Fig. 02· Aerosol paint on wall. Ayia Irini Street, Athens 2014. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou.

Fig. 03· Aerosol paint on wall. 28th October Street, Athens 2015. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou.

Fig. 04· Crew 420, aerosol paint on metal gate. Patision Street, Athens 2015. Photo by Konstantina Drakopoulou.

THE ARTIST'S INTENTIONS

In contrast to the "apolitical rhetoric of transcendence in both Abstract Expressionism and Tachism", (Kurczynski, 2007: 124) the creators of the graffiti pieces under consideration are fully aware of the social reality of local communities in an era of globalized recession. The dark grotesque imagery in such monumental scale is, in my view, the means of a sensory address; a dynamic effect on the viewers that increases their capacity to think politically, to reflect on all those who are silenced and invisible within the framework of the existing hegemony, and subsequently invent ways of resistance. To put it in a nutshell, artistic activism of this kind is not an expression of denunciation. The graffiti writers here go a step further: they offer other forms of consciousness and do not simply dissipate false consciousness by denunciation; most importantly, they offer the ability for new models of sociability.

The latter showcases another important parameter I would like to further tackle, especially because it reveals particular intentions on the part of the graffitists. Graffitists' choice to intervene in this building is a political one. The National Technical University conveys the heavily dependence on foreign patronage, from the nineteenth century regency *Bavarocracy* to the current European Union's interference in national politics in Greece, such as tackling the debt crisis or the influx of immigrants; it encompasses the surrounding poor and marginalized communities, all forming part of Exarcheia's population (where the National Technical University is located), that have altogether disappeared from official representations, save as contributors to the decline of Athens.

The artists strongly inspired by Steven Johnson's book *Emergence* (Johnson, 2004) that introduces different types of self-organized systems applied to interdisciplinary fields. In particular, in the field of politics, the model of emergent democracy enables a more participatory form of government, and defends collectives that struggle to eliminate the centralization of power (Ito, 2007). The graffitists' aim within the surrounding Exarcheia community is to identify and improve problematic situations through self-learning and self-organization of the community. I believe that several analogies can be detected in the compositional structure of the pieces themselves. They are designed collectively according to the concept of *swarm intelligence*-adopted from the collective behavior of social swarms in nature (Merkle et al, 2008: 253-255). That means that predetermined major patterns do not exist; on the contrary, the composition stems from a bottom up, decentralized system. Each piece influences the formation of the others, and the combination of all effects (feedback) operates so as the whole can gain more significance than the sum of its parts. The curves, the straight or free lines, as well as the distribution of color patches result from multiple interactions among the pieces. Most importantly, the graffitists imply that, when applying the non-authoritarian bottom up principle of the works to the urban planning, the nature of the Exarcheia neighborhood may change. City planner Jane Jacobs argues that neighborhoods that have thrived have done so through a kind of emergence. The interaction between people on the sidewalks and streets creates a street culture and intelligence more suitable than central control for managing neighborhoods in cities. (Jacobs, 1993).

THE RECEPTION OF THE GRAFFITI

Another issue I would like to raise concerns the conflictual critical discourse of the works' reception that preoccupied public media and the dominant art institutions in the several months that followed. Of course, space limitation does not allow to examine in detail every single report, but I will focus on two aspects of the response articulated by Nikos Xydakis, then Deputy Culture Minister, since they mostly represent part of the negative reception. Xydakis claimed that the darkness of the graffiti pieces reflects the microclimate of the neighborhood; the artists have aggressively occupied and vandalized an architectural monument and, consequently, the Ministry of Culture is concerned about the gradual disintegration of the urban fabric. The monolithic reception and demonization of the intervention as aggressive vandalism by the official institution was more or less expected. But the assumption that the toleration of infractions will increase the general collapse and lawlessness echoing the *broken windows* thesis (Wilson and Kelling, 1982: 29-38) leaves core conditions responsible for the urban decline unexamined: poverty, unemployment, racial conflict, deteriorating public schools, unrepaired streets, and a decaying infrastructure. The announcement of the Ministry of Education, which read "The spontaneous artistic expression of the young generation, no matter how respected it might be – demands limits and a sense of measure," (Vatopoulos, 2015) is also of interest. I agree with Chryssanthi Petropoulou who claims that "the notion of the spontaneous way of expression is not an outcome of pressure, nor of the politico-economic crisis—but that it comprises instead an outcome of the years-long process partially related to the 'tradition of rebellion'" (Petropoulou, 2014:118). Put it in other words, spontaneity presupposes a culture of resistance that is so typical of Exarcheia's rioting streets. Art historian Thanasis Moutsopoulos considers the issue from another perspective. He believes that the crisis, the experience, the new situation have brought to light a new phenomenon, that is guerrilla artists that prove to be more sufficient than the professional ones to stand up to the present circumstances when Greece is still spiralling down (Moutsopoulos, 2016: 121).

It is clear that government agencies, other institutional bureaucracies and most part of art criticism interpreted the graffiti pieces solely as vandalism and decided their removal without examining other values and intentions. They did not consider whether history, culture, and expression of local communities is in danger to be erased, especially given the fact that the work's unique monumentality and politically charged content enhances its undeniable historical value. They did not consider whether the works is a paradigm of destruction art and the characteristics it entails, i.e. awareness of motivations, intellectual approaches, creative attitudes, and psychological stances on the part of the artists. Going back once again to Stiles' analysis, I would like to stress that "destruction art is not an aesthetic, nor a method, nor a technique. Destruction art is an ethical position comprised of diverse practices that investigate the engulfments of terminal culture" (Stiles, 1999: 124).

FINAL REMARKS

I believe that the three abstract graffiti pieces constitute an outdoor community mural that belongs to the long history of graffiti and murals executed without permission in the Exarcheia district, usually rendered in a photorealistic manner. It is equally important, of course, to clarify what community murals are, especially in Greece, a country with limited mural art history. The conservators' perspective may prove to be very useful, since they often have to face conflicting interests and practices by the governmental agents and other involved parties related to illegal community murals. According to Timothy Drescher, "[w]e use the word *community* for this social field in which community murals exist. It refers to the daily audience of the mural as well as to its producers and to the painting itself. […] This determination requires a complex interaction with the people who live or work with the mural on a daily basis. If the mural's meaning is not discussed and debated in the community, then the mural is not really public" (Drescher, 2003). The determinant sociopolitical context surrounding the mural on the Athens Polytechnic has been excessively discussed; additionally, it should be situated within the broader tradition of existing politicized murals in Exarcheia, which preserve marginalized or devalued narratives specific to this particular neighborhood.

To summarize, the graffiti writers of the mural on the Athens Polytechnic were aware of the ephemeral element of their expression, and they did not create it with an emphasis on durability, as is of course the case with destruction art. Yet, the impact of the work lasts beyond its loss and remains in memory until the very moment I am writing this paper. I hope this paper provides a wider framework for value assessment. Addressing the issue of value—community values, historical values, and the artistic intention to place a specified value on the mural's message-bearing function—may provide us with a better understanding of the work; it may offer a better balance in assessing the decision-making process by several agents and factors, among them legal requirements and restrictions. In any case, the mural on the National Technical University has already been inscribed on the multifaceted symbolisms the Institution has offered in contemporary Greek political history and art.

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