

# Graffiti in Greece at the Time of Covid-19

Stella Mouzakiotou<sup>1,\*</sup>, Dionysios Anastasopoulos<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Art Historian, Hellenic Open University & University of West Attica, Athens, Greece

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer University of Nikosia, Cyprus & Visiting Professor Ionion University, Greece

**Abstract** The first (and maybe the only) topic of discussion during the last month worldwide is the coronavirus pandemic. Most of the world's cities have been put under a state of emergency, thousands of people have been sick and the economy of many countries is on the verge of collapse. This data is more than enough to inspire a street artist to express himself through the art of graffiti. Street artists have the great skill to depict in a unique way aspect of everyday routine, life, political situation in a way that we often cannot express in words. As citizens, mainly of cities, they depict on these walls their own experience (which is also ours) using colors, messages, humor, sarcasm, irony. So how could they not wander in the streets in the midst of a pandemic, like this with the global spread of corona virus, which is changing our daily lives to a point that affects the heart itself of our culture. The aim of the research study is to highlight the relationship between street art and the health and social developments that happening around us. It also highlights a tacit interaction in the art of street artists in different countries of Europe and the rest of the world. The symbolism of graffiti created in this health, economic and political crisis is the fundamental research field of this article. The inventiveness, the causticity, the re-interpretive approach of the important works of art of the past, the ridicule, the acidity and the explosiveness are some of the visualized messages perceived by the viewer.

**Keywords** Graffiti Art, Covid-19, Communication, Writers, Street art, Corona virus, Health developments, Visualized messages

## 1. Introduction

*«We have to be very careful with freedom. Both in painting and elsewhere. Sometimes we're freer than ever, at a time when we feel more captive than ever! If there is any freedom in what we do, then there is nothing but to free something from within, to resist, even if you have to be on your own, do not stop loving. That's freedom.* The text is an excerpt from Pablo Picasso's book *"Thoughts on Art"*...

Kissing was one of the prevailing erotic motifs - including the embrace of the couple pictured - that dominated Pablo Picasso's agenda during the last years of his life. In "Kiss" (1969), the creator portrays a bearded man passionately kissing a young woman (fig. 1). The unbroken lines that make up many elements of the composition - the woman's ear and the man's hairline, for example - indexes the experienced artist's playful cubist proposal, while the ecstatic, huge eyes seem to complement the sensuality of this passionate contact. Picasso chose to paint a kiss that is not a romantic touch of the lips, but a game using the tongue. It is clear that this is not a simple kiss, but an ecstatic allegory for all kinds of mating that someone can remember or imagine.

\* Corresponding author:

stellamouzak@yahoo.gr (Stella Mouzakiotou)

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[1]



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso. Kiss, 1969. (Source: <https://www.pablocassio.org/the-kiss.jsp>)

## 2. The Art of "Exclusion" and Embrace

Poel is the nickname of one of Norway's most important artists, coming from the latin word "Populus", meaning "people". His artistic proposal includes paintings, photographs, sculptures, installations, street art, etc. His work has been presented and analyzed in conferences and

many media in recent years. It was first nationally recognized and awarded Norway in the mid-2000s for decorating abandoned buildings in the Lofoten Islands of northern Norway, bringing a phenomenon of urban street art to rural areas, thus sparking a debate about the concept and targeting of "street art". His public artworks are found all over the world, including Scandinavia, UK, Iceland, USA, India, Thailand, China, Japan, Russia, Peru and more.

The mural "Lovers" which was painted by the street artist Pobel on March 20, 2020 in the Norwegian city of Bryne, has been characterized as an iconic creation. (fig. 2). A young couple kisses or rather tries to kiss each other because they both wear a protective mask. This is a resounding differentiation from Picasso's kiss, which we mentioned before, since here, in the love touch, a mask is between their mouths!!!! "In these difficult times, I hope this work will be a positive contribution and spread a little joy. Be safe and take care of each other," is what he posted on his Instagram account.



Figure 2. Pobel. *Εραστές*, 2020, Norway. (Source: <https://streetartnews.net/2020/05/pobel-the-lovers-print-release-may-10th.html>)

The mural had appeared on a wall under the railway in Bryne on March 12, 2020, just a day before Norway announced the lockdown due to the pandemic. In addition, "Lovers" was released in May on print and on canvas. The project attracted a lot of interest and was also featured in the New York Times and many other media.

Also, a copy of the work, signed by the artist, was designed to be used at auction to raise charity money to support Amazon natives suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The work was sold for \$11,000 to a collector in Los Angeles, California.

At the same time, some prints of the work were also given as a gift to a local charity called Ø nsketransporten and put up for sale. All project earnings go to the aforementioned organization with the aim of continuing its effort to provide care to people who are seriously ill or have significant

mobility problems. Through the presentation of this work we find out that the goal of the original artist, regardless of the space he chooses to express himself artistically, is not the promotion of a course of social psychology or self-promotion, but the creation of an art that can undoubtedly be called "politics", through its contribution to the community. [2]

At the same time, the artist "TV Boy" represents the famous scene from the film "Holidays in Rome" with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn holding a painting with the slogan "Clean Air Now". This graffiti appeared on a wall near the Colosseum in Rome on March 14, 2020 (Fig. 3). [3]



Figure 3. TV Boy. *Clean air now*, 2020, Rome. (Source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/mural-masks-coronavirus-inspires-global-graffiti/30527353.html>)

Banksy is an elusive contemporary artist who is believed to have been born in 1975. He first drew attention in the '90s for his graffiti and distinctive iconographies that commented on sociopolitical issues. Based in Bristol, United Kingdom, one of his earliest large-scale murals is The Mild West — depicting a teddy bear throwing a Molotov cocktail at riot police — painted in 1999 in Bristol's Stokes Croft. In 2009, in an interview with Swindle magazine, Banksy reportedly said, "I come from a relatively small city in southern England. When I was about 10 years old, a kid called 3D used to paint the streets. I think he'd been to New York and was the first to bring spray painting back to Bristol. I grew up having seen spray paint on the streets long ago I saw it in a magazine or on a computer. 3D quit painting and formed the band Massive Attack, which may have been good for him but was a big loss for the city. Graffiti was the thing we all loved at school — we all did it on the bus on the way back home from school. Everyone did it." [4]

Banksy's tribute work to Johannes Vermeer's famous painting "The Girl with the pearl earring" adorns a Bristol wall and was updated with the addition of the now famous blue surgical mask (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4. Banksy. "Girl with pearl earring", 2020, United Kingdom: Bristol. (Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-we-know-about-street-artist-banksy-who-keeps-his-identity-a-secret-6558547/>)**

### 3. Covid and Graffiti Art in Greece [5]

The Greek street artist Lefteris Toulis, an artist from Drama with studies in the Department of Fine Arts of Thessaloniki, influenced by everyone's daily battle to halt the corona virus pandemic, created an impressive graffiti on a wall of an apartment building, on Hephaestion Street of Drama and the result is riveting. It is an ancient Greek statue depicted wearing a mask and holding a pole as a weapon. Its creation captures the harsh and unprecedented reality that the world is experiencing today in just a few square meters of surface area. [6]



**Figure 5. Lefteris Toulis. Ancient Greek statue and Covid, graffiti, Greece. (Source: <http://www.proinos-typos.gr/mia-tichografia-pou-allazi-ti-n-opsi-tis-polis-mas-o-draminos-kallitechnis-lefteris-toulis-milai-ston-p-t/>)**

With the backdrop of the poles of Olympian Zeus and the traditional houses, a modern ancient Greek wearing a mask "fights" in the neighborhood (Fig. 5). He fights for his life, to

stand on his feet having his pole, which is his weapon, as a crutch. The past and the present of Greece of today meet in 2020, in the face of corona virus, poverty and uncertainty. "I show the personal struggle of each of us every day. A new God, a fantastic friend, is looking forward to a brighter future," Mr. Toulis pointed out on Greek public television (ERT), describing his work. It is an interesting artistic proposal that is a field of conflict between the Republic-Freedom of ancient Athens and the internment and mutilation of freedom today.

The 16-year-old Greek street artist S.F. paints graffiti [7] on a theme inspired by the new coronavirus on a rooftop of Vouliagmeni Street. It is a visual proposal that exudes a strong emotional charge when the viewer encounters the sad gaze of the face covered by a mask (Fig. 6).



**Figure 6. S.F. Face with mask, graffiti, Greece. (Source: <https://www.iefimerida.gr/zo/koronoios-graffiti-16hronoy-se-taratsa-tis-athinas>)**

And a second work by S.F. on the rooftop of Vouliagmeni Street inspired by the pandemic (Fig. 7).



**Figure 7. S.F. Stay home, graffiti, Greece. (Source: <https://www.newsbrreak.gr/ellada/88118/nearos-stelnei-minyma-aisiodoxias-kata-toy-koronoioy-me-gkrafiti/>)**

A large exterior mural on the façade of the AHEPA hospital, representing an overworked nurse in a mask and right next to the message "Thank you" (Fig. 8), is the first

work of the UrbanAct team, as part of its new action "Color In Hospitals" and as a sign of gratitude to the hospital's nursing and medical staff, who worked hard during the difficult months of the pandemic of the new crown.



Figure 8. Same84. "Thank you", 2020, graffiti, Greece. (Source: <https://www.iefimerida.gr/ellada/ahepa-eyharisto-se-giatroyis-nosileytes-me-gkrafiti>)

Urbanact artists create a large mural that "decorates" the reference hospital for covid 19 and is dedicated to the staff of AHEPA.

This mural, which depicts doctors and nurses in masks, was created by the artist Same84, who has implemented hundreds of murals all over Greece and abroad with his distinctive style. "Our team receives from time to time invitations for the implementation of murals in hospital premises either by the administrations or by the heads of clinics or by associations and we have already completed projects such as at AHEPA with the Association of Kidney Patients for organ donation, in Janio Hospital with the initiative of Okanytimemarkets with frescoes indoors, in Hippocratio Hospital, in Children's Hospital Agia Sophia etc.

On the occasion of covid-19 we decided to implement a more comprehensive program in Hospitals the "Color In Hospitals" in proportion to the program we implement in another public space since 2005, that of education, the "Painting School Buildings". It will concern external and internal murals with the cooperation of administrations and staff and the support of sponsors, companies, etc.," Urbanact Programme Coordinator Kyriakos Iosifidis tells in Thestival. (a local festival in Thessaloniki, Greece).

Urbanact consists of a group of artists from Volos, Athens and Thessaloniki. A small circle of collaborating artists from the field of graffiti and street art from Greece and abroad also

participate in the group. The group was started by a group of people who love the art of graffiti [8], and were the first batch of graffiti artists in Greece. "This fermentation led to various projects called "carpediem" such as festivals, publications, exhibitions and also the first public murals, where we had the combination of "tools" and techniques of graffiti and traditional painting. Over time we moved on large public murals, the claim of public spaces, the creation of aphorisms - see programs - that always involve artists who operate outside the norms and forms of classical painting. Also, we moved on exhortations to involve communities, neighborhoods, causing motivation of local companies and institutions to support actions etc", Mr. Iosifidis explains.

Today, Urbanact implements a variety of public murals programs, collaborations with institutions from Greece and abroad, exhibitions, publications, etc. Some of them are "Painting School Buildings all over Greece", the "Color On Islands" program, the "CityCall" wall painting festival, the Open-air Museum of Public Murals in Volos, etc.

The second large outdoor mural will take place in a hospital in Attica, the name of which will be announced in September. New frescoes will follow in Thessaloniki and other cities.

## 4. Conclusions

Street art artists come to give in their unique way, color, beauty and hope in yet another public space, such as that of hospitals. [9]

They try to either promote the basic messages of the time, such as "stay home", or "go home", and "wash our hands" or pay tribute to the heroes of the front line for the battle against covid-19. There are also not a few of them who approach the subject with humor by placing a medical mask on important works of art (e.g. the girl with the pearl earring) or commenting on the required social distance, love in the years of covid-19, and of course the necessary accessories of the time, such as mask and antiseptic liquid. Finally, even the most artistic performances with emphasis on the depiction of the virus and references to the damage it causes to the lungs of man are not lacking. [10]

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