

## Ugly Graffiti, Antistyle, and 'Shithole' Post-Socialist Aesthetics

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### Abstract

The development of subcultural graffiti in peripheral contexts such as Eastern Europe or Latin America is tied to globalization and the spread of US American culture in the 1980s-90s. After the first stage of attempts to copy and adopt new trends, the reaction appeared as a form of rejection, protest, self-exotification, and work with the context.

Although anti-style/ugly/ignorant graffiti has been around for about 20 years, its history has never been written down. There aren't many publications and analytical texts – this is probably because ugly graffiti was a subculture within a subculture, so only the participants of this sub-subculture could write its true history. In my current research, I focus on the roots of ugly graffiti in Eastern Europe, primarily on Czech, Polish, Balkan, Ukrainian, and Russian cases, analyze its connection to the post-socialist urban and social environments, and what I call 'shit-hole' aesthetics that became popular in social media in recent years.

### Keywords

Ugly Graffiti; Anti-Style; Eastern Europe; Post-Socialism; Shithole Aesthetics

### 1. Introduction

During the 1990s, the graffiti subculture, which was positioned as an integral component of hip-hop in those years, became a truly global phenomenon and was widespread in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and other regions. New York, the main source of inspiration in the 1980s, was replaced by new epicenters of development, notably Berlin, São Paulo, and Paris.

The popularization of graffiti and street art in peripheral contexts such as postsocialist Europe is tied to globalization and adopting new Western trends. The first local graffiti artists tried to copy examples seen in popular books, magazines, and videos, creatively replenishing missed components due to the lack of information and materials with their innovations.

With the development of the industry of urban culture and advanced materials (such as the accessibility of special graffiti spray paint), artists initially compete to improve

the given form and canon. But eventually (mostly at the beginning of the 2000s) some of them found other sources of inspiration and new trajectories of evolution.

One direction of development was street art, a site-specific urban art practice. Unlike subcultural graffiti, this practice was more inclusive in terms of accessibility of production and consumption. However, I focused our attention on another less-researched direction in this article.

### 2. Ugly, Shit, Sux, and Toy Graffiti

Instead of following the mainstream, artists choose their vectors of development. The once integral phenomenon begins to fragment, and new sub-directions and styles are formed. As mentioned earlier, subcultural graffiti was initially framed as a component of hip-hop culture, but in the early 2000s, more and more artists were challenging this notion, for example, finding their inspiration in other music genres, notably punk and metal.

This sub-movement is called ugly, trash, or ignorant graffiti, which became a manifesto of sorts in the 2007 book by the Prague-based CAP crew – in the introductory article by Václav Magid<sup>1</sup>.

The epicenters of such (anti)style in the 2000s were Paris, Berlin, and the former Eastern Europe with its postsocialist shabby atmosphere. Ugly Graffiti was a response to the professionalization and commercialization of mainstream graffiti.

The epithets ugly, shit, sux, or toy were (self-) characterizations of writers who did not want to play by the rules. This desire for squalor, lame, ridiculous, and childishness suggests a certain level of infantilism and (self-)irony. Humor and irony are the key aspects of Ugly Graffiti, followed by the choice of atypical materials (not spray paint, but a roller with cheap emulsion), and atypical places (not a visible spot, but some abandoned places).

### 3. Characteristics of ignorant/ugly graffiti

In my analysis of this sub-genre, I stick to the following characteristics:

- 1) a return to the origins of graffiti,
- 2) childishness, naivety, primitivism,
- 3) humor and self-irony,
- 4) unfinished, spontaneous works.

In my previous articles, I was mostly focused on street art<sup>2</sup>. I consider it an evolution from the graffiti subculture to democratize and localize one's artistic practice. This democratization provides post-graffiti artists access to a much wider audience of people in their societies. Unfortunately, this was also a reason for the rapid appropriation of street art by different actors, such as brands, municipalities, and art institutions. So by the end of the 2000s (in many peripheral cases by the end of 2010s) street art as a consistent artistic movement generally ceased to exist.

Ugly graffiti, a much less researched sub-movement, was a turn inward to create a radical core within the subculture, a kind of under-underground. Both directions were opposed to mainstream graffiti and had similarities and differences. Both street and ugly graffiti artists tried to work with context, experiment with new materials, ironically comment on graffiti canons, and make their works in new locations. However, street artists were much more open and accessible to the wider audience, who were the main target of their messages. They kept the connection with their graffiti roots, but eventually left the subculture and turned mainstream or found other forms of self-expression and spheres.

Meanwhile, ugly graffiti artists were attacking mainstream graffiti, trying to reclaim it, by returning to the origins of this youth subculture. It is worth mentioning here, that ugly graffiti radicalism was a provocation for other graffiti artists, but it fitted the expectations of the conventional contemporary art curators, who started to pay attention to a relatively new art movement and wanted to see a dirtier more provocative form of art rather than high-quality production murals and wild-styles that were made by mainstream graffiti artists by that time.

Both street and ugly graffiti artists searched for new spots for their works. It wasn't that much about quantity and high visibility of their works, so many of them started to rediscover abandoned industrial post-socialist heritage that was treated as something that had no value by that time. My thesis is that those post-graffiti artists were the first to work with this heritage and most importantly create new value by adding their art comments and reinterpretations of the post-socialist past.

Probably, they were the first who were inspired by something, that I call 'shithole' aesthetics of the post-socialist environments – a trend that became a widespread phenomenon in post-socialist states and societies. Ugly graffiti also influenced another more recent phenomena.

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1 - Magid, V. CAP – Crew Against People, 2–24. Prague: Bigg Boss, 2007.

2 - Polsky, A. Specifics of Periodization in Russian Street Art. SAUC – Street Art and Urban Creativity, 4(2), 2018.

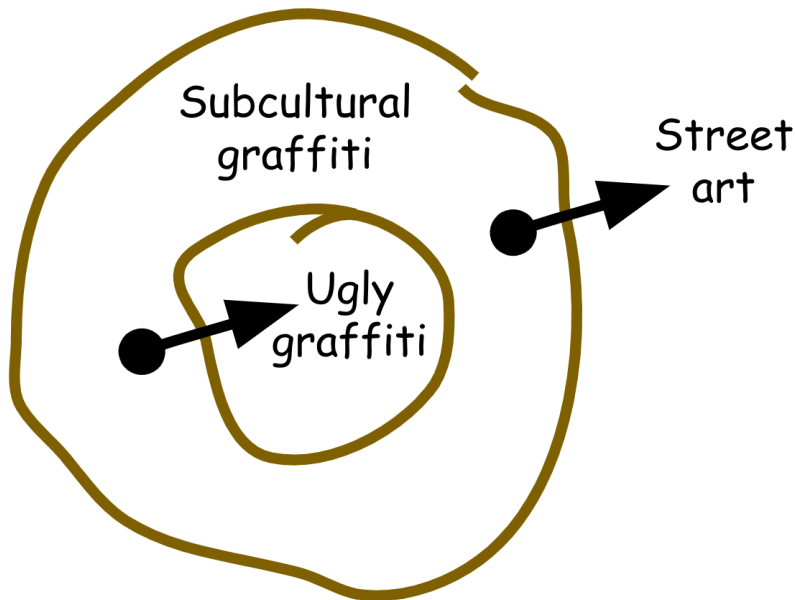


Fig.1 - Diagram by the author

#### 4. #Antistyle, Communal Service Art, and Buffangarde

The concept of antistyle in urban art emerged in the 2010s thanks to social media. Antistyle is essentially a #hashtag that allows one to attribute graffiti online that does not fit into the mainstream (but eventually becomes part of it).

Because of the popularity of antistyle and its stylistic similarity, many of the ugly graffiti pieces of the previous decade are now beginning to be seen as examples of antistyle. Antistyle has manifested itself not only in urban art, but also in fashion, contemporary art, the Internet, and other cultural fields.

Communal service art became a widespread phenomenon in post-socialist cities in the 2010s. This contemporary folk creative practice includes D.I.Y. decoration, infrastructure, and repair of the post-socialist typical courtyard, incl. playgrounds, flowerbeds, small architectural forms, etc. made of found and recycled materials, the most popular of them being old car tires.

Postsocialist cities might look brutal and not people-centric, so people tend to go to the countryside in summer, and in cities, they try to add a little coziness by expanding

and privatizing the space. The home territory is considered by people as part of their fiefdom, on which if not to plant potatoes (and this was not uncommon in the most scarce years), then at least to break up a flowerbed.

Many people point to the socialist roots of the phenomenon of communal service art associated with the shortage of goods and materials at that time. People were forced to create necessary household items from improvised materials.

People are pushed into unauthorized construction by the inaction of the authorities unable to maintain the urban environment and yards in proper condition. In other cases, this could be a response to the standardization of, for example, playgrounds, which forces people to compete with authorities to bring some variety and add more humanity to the surrounding landscape.

Graffiti removal or Buffangarde is another popular trend in post-graffiti that fits 'shithole' aesthetics. As with communal service art, buffs are often made by communal service workers and can be seen as another similar form of contemporary folk street art.

## 5. Open Call: Graffiti and Street Art Heritage in Post-Socialist Cities

As part of my ongoing PhD research at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, I focus on ugly graffiti and 'shithole' anti-aesthetics of postsocialist cities, and theory and history of street art in post-socialist Eastern European contexts in general. My research strategy is to invite academics, artists, and researchers interested in this topic to join the collective research group and participate in the conference in Berlin in late 2025 – early 2026.

At the conference, I propose to answer to the question: What are the specifics of periodization, institutionalization, and politicization of street art and graffiti in the peripheral postsocialist European context?

Graffiti and street art are relatively new urban creative phenomena of youth underground subcultures. These are very ephemeral forms of somewhat outsider art that city administrations, art markets, and youth brands effectively coopted. In recent years, interest in the heritage of graffiti and street art has increased<sup>3</sup>.

The conference is dedicated to the heritage of graffiti and street art in the post-socialist cities (of former Eastern Europe). The main focus of the conference is on how graffiti and street artists discovered and aesthetically appropriated industrial ruins of towns and post-socialist outskirts.

I invite colleagues from Prague, Warsaw, Dresden, Ljubljana, and other cities who research peripheral forms of this global youth creative subculture that became widely spread in the former Eastern Bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Berlin was a role model and an epicenter of the development of graffiti that went from here to the former East. It is an ideal place for researching graffiti and street art heritage today.

The conference will be dedicated to the topics including:

1. Specifics of periodization and terminology: for example, proto-street art in Odesa, Moscow, and Ljubljana, graffiti in DDR, and post-street art practices (incl. participatory street art and socially engaged art).
2. Politics of street art in the Former East: political art on the streets (incl. various artistic groups that were active in public spaces blurring the boundaries between art and politics).
3. Street art and postsocialist legacy: street art on abandoned buildings, 'shithole' anti-aesthetics, ugly graffiti, street art, and post-socialist heritage.
4. Feminist graffiti and street art during the war in Ukraine.

## 6. Conclusion

Graffiti and street art in post-socialist Eastern Europe have their specifics and periodization tightly related to the collapse of the communist regimes. Post-socialist cities have unique DNA that is instantly recognized by those who were born in such environments. These standardized post-socialist (and post-industrial) landscapes were slowly ruined in the 1990s until artists born on those streets started to rediscover them and bring new life.

Post-socialist street art and graffiti aren't well-researched. The focus of my dissertation is not only to analyze the specifics of this peripheral artistic field, but look at the post-socialist heritage through a new lens, and based on that material contribute to the history and theory of street art and graffiti in general. As part of my research strategy, I propose artists and researchers interested in this topic, join forces, collaborate, and share our insights at the upcoming conference.

3 - The Tag Conference 2024 was titled Framing Graffiti Heritage: Link: [www.thetagconference.com](http://www.thetagconference.com)



Fig. 2 - APL 315 - 2023 Former East Berlin Germany



Fig. 3 - Communal Service - 2019 Chisinau MoldovaArt



Fig. 4 - DIY Balcony - 2019 Chisinau Moldova