

NON-CONVENTIONAL PERCEPTION AND (TRANS)FORMATION OF URBAN SPACE: THE STUDY OF VILNIUS GRAFFITI WRITERS

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Abstract

This article examines graffiti as the illicit strategy of contemporary urban space formation and presents the non-conventional cityscape perception of the graffiti subculture members. The findings of the study based on detailed interviews with graffiti writers from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, reveal their motivations towards illegal spatial practices and their attitudes towards politics of urban structure and design. The main difference between traditional perception of urban space and the views of graffiti writers lies in the distinction of 'free' and controlled, public and private, *striated* and *smooth* space experience. The social context of the struggles over 'free' urban space is determined by the emergence of symbolic economy in post-industrial city and its hyper-aestheticised and commercialized cityscape that enables the visual resistance – a subversed form of production of symbols known as illegal graffiti practice.

Keywords: urban space, graffiti writers, formation of space, *smooth/striated* space, Vilnius.

«Writers see the landscape as a series of surfaces waiting to be written on.²

I just watch while passing by – oh, that wall is clean, and it... wants to be painted».³

Introduction

The tradition of illicit urban inscriptions called graffiti is an inseparable part of contemporary cityscape in most of democratic states. However, being illegal, usually anonymous and public graffiti challenges ordinary interpretations of urban space as well as patterns of behaviour offering its own non-conventional approach.

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² Halsey M., Young A. 'Our desires are ungovernable': Writing graffiti in urban space // *Theoretical Criminology*. 2006. Vol. 10. P. 283.

³ Quotation from the interview with graffiti writer from Vilnius (*Inf_8*).

Members of illegal graffiti subculture do have a distinctive perception of public urban space. According to empirical data, their approach differs from conventional views of cityscape, the ones reflecting the dominant order. Graffiti writers perceive the space as open and *smooth*, which means – ‘alive’. Such perception enables participation, creativity and active relationship with the urban space and its artifacts, despite the social status of an actor. The sense of spatial *smoothness* is opposed to spaces produced by orthodox perception which reinforces hierarchy and control. According to people involved in illicit spatial practices, when the space is being perceived as open and *smooth*, the biggest part of urban community – ‘ordinary citizens’ and graffiti writers themselves, people without any access to power, – is enabled to act spontaneously and create its own living environment.

The article reflects the most important findings of qualitative study conducted in Vilnius in the spring of the year 2010. The target group of the study was the community of writers and street artists who practice illegal graffiti in the streets of the capital city of Lithuania. The study was based on in-depth interviews with people selected according to the criterion of experience – the number of years spent in graffiti subculture. They are the members of community long enough to have internalized common views and values regarding urban space, to have developed skills and a distinctive style of writing or drawing graffiti. Besides the informants do have strong personal motivations and arguments justifying and rationalizing their illegal practice of graffiti.

Graffiti has not been frequently studied in social sciences until the last decade, when it became a noticeably popular subject, especially among young researchers and the ones devoted to critical theory⁴. Graffiti as a territorial marker and a factor of social segregation of urban space is relevant to a variety of disciplines, such as urban geography⁵, urban sociology⁶, anthropology⁷. Therefore the comprehensive analysis of graffiti is almost inevitably interdisciplinary. However, in the field of Lithuanian urban studies graffiti is not a popular subject yet (apart from one exceptional example, the book by Vytautas Navickas *Graffiti as an Illegal Visual Expression*, 2008⁸). A few remarks on Lithuanian graffiti

⁴ Critical criminologists: Halsey and Young (op. cit.), Stephanie Kane (Kane S.C. Stencil graffiti in urban waterscapes of Buenos Aires and Rosario, Argentina // *Crime Media Culture*. 2009. Vol. 5. P. 9–28).

⁵ Dickens L. Placing post-graffiti: the journey of the Pentham Rock // *Cultural Geographies*. 2008. Vol. 15. P. 471–496 [2008a]; Dickens L. ‘Finders Keepers’: Performing the Street, the Gallery and the Spaces In-between // *Liminalities*. 2008. Vol. 4, № 1. [2008b].

⁶ Cronin A.M. Urban Space and Entrepreneurial Property Relations: Resistance and the Vernacular of Outdoor Advertising and Graffiti // A.M. Cronin, K. Hetherington (eds.) *Consuming the Entrepreneurial City: Image, Memory and Spectacle*. New York: Routledge, 2008. P. 1–18.

⁷ Schacter R. An Ethnography of Iconoclasm: An Investigation into the Production, Consumption and Destruction of Street-art in London // *Journal of Material Culture*. 2008. Vol. 13(1). P. 35–61.

⁸ Navickas V. *Graffiti kaip nelegali vizualinė raiška*. Vilnius: Eugrimas, 2008.

can be found in particular studies of the philosopher G. Mažeikis⁹ and the ethnologist E. Ramanauskaitė-Kiškina¹⁰.

In following chapters I will present the subject of the study (*What is graffiti?*), the context of urban space (trans)formation and graffiti writers' contribution to it. Moreover, I will cover the features of Vilnius graffiti writers and their perception of urban space.

What is Graffiti?

In the most general sense, any unauthorized intervention into the urban spatial structure is called illegal urban inscription.¹¹ Those may take various physical forms, including graffiti which is defined as an illegal typographic or iconographic¹² urban inscription performing a number of cultural functions, including communication, representation, subculturation¹³. According to Navickas, graffiti is described by four main criteria: 1) anonymity, 2) publicity, 3) illegitimacy, 4) visibility.¹⁴ However, first three criteria are quite problematic.

First, the validity of anonymous authorship criterion is debatable because according to it any non-anonymous work could not be called graffiti. Anonymity is questionable criterion because namely consolidation of own identity, self-branding and *fame* are distinctive features of graffiti (territorial graffiti in particular) culture.¹⁵ In addition, anonymity, at least within the graffiti writers' community, is always pretty relative, given that fact that the writer's *tag* or *logo* or his/her distinctive style is a recognizable 'brand' all over the city or even on much bigger territories and the author himself/herself sometimes gets the status of celebrity.

Second, the definition of graffiti relying on criteria of publicity and illegitimacy is a bit problematic as well. Since 1973, when graffiti was introduced to official gallery exhibition, it occupies both public and private spaces. Besides there is both legal¹⁶ and illegal graffiti, while the combination of the private and the legal reduces graffiti into a particular trend of the official contemporary art¹⁷. Furthermore, legal and illegal graffiti may be produced by the same person (as many informants have indicated). This means that criteria of illegitimacy and publicity do not include all possible forms of graffiti and refer only to graffiti as a deviant

⁹ Mažeikis G. *Filosofinės antropologijos pragmatika ir analitika*. Šiauliai: Saulės delta, 2005.

¹⁰ Ramanauskaitė E. *Subkultūra: fenomenas ir modernumas*, Kaunas: VDU leidykla, 2004.

¹¹ Dickens [2008a, 2008b], op. cit.

¹² Or other forms, such as sculptures, installations, etc.

¹³ Mažeikis, op. cit., p. 182.

¹⁴ Navickas, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁵ Lachmann R. Graffiti as Career and Ideology // *The American Journal of Sociology*. 1988. Sep. Vol. 94, № 2: ProQuest Social Science Journals. P. 237.

¹⁶ Graffiti, legalized in private as well as public space, for example official graffiti competitions or walls where writing is legalized by authorities.

¹⁷ Lucie-Smith E. *Movements in Art Since 1945* (new edition). London: Thames & Hudson, 2001. P. 190–192.

urban inscription. Nevertheless this article focuses namely on illegal graffiti and its impact on urban space with only few brief examples of legal cases.

There are two distinctive traditions of graffiti culture: territorial graffiti and post-graffiti. The former is an initial form of the urban inscription that has appeared around the late 1960s in Philadelphia and New York. It is defined by three main characteristics. First, the content of territorial graffiti is the nickname of a writer or his/her crew, called '*tag*'. Second, it is usually written with aerosol paint or permanent markers. And third, the space where territorial graffiti is being located usually is chosen according to the quantity of possible audience what means writing on the walls of crowded streets or surfaces of public transport (subway, trains, buses, etc).

'Post-graffiti'¹⁸ movement implies an antithesis to territorial graffiti and is defined by a considerable shift of its content, form and spatial dimensions which emerged in the last two decades of the 20th century. First, the content of inscriptions became diverse because personal or collective *tag* was no more the universal message of graffiti – urban surfaces started to be used as a media for a very broad range of information¹⁹. Second, many alternative techniques of graffiti were introduced, including stencils, wheatpasting, stickers, installations, etc. Therefore, graffiti which has been primarily significant as the culture of writing has shifted from typography to iconography²⁰. Finally, the third shift appeared in the field of graffiti-space relationships. New forms of post-graffiti approached urban space by applying totally different strategies – seeking rather quality than quantity of audience and impression, trying to grab the attention of passers-by in unusual, strange, aestheticized locations. What is more, post-graffiti inscriptions are dedicated to all the members of urban community while territorial graffiti is usually understandable and appreciated by graffiti writers themselves.

Aesthetics (Trans)forming Urban Space

Urban space is not merely a geographic location embodied in physical forms. Apart from that it is also filled with cultural symbols. The formation of urban space is a process, composed of these two inseparable parts: physical and symbolic. At the second part an abstract geographic dimension, physical objects and their blank surfaces turn into the cityscape filled with social, cultural, historical meanings and start functioning as a media for collective memory and social experiences. However, it is important to emphasize that the relationship between

¹⁸ Terms, naming the new form of graffiti used in various sources: '*street art*', '*post-graffiti*', '*neo-graffiti*', '*culture jamming*', '*brandalism*', '*urban art*', '*cult art*', '*guerrilla art*' or '*new underground art*' (see Dickens, op. cit., p. 491).

¹⁹ Dickens [2008a], op. cit., p. 478.

²⁰ Manco T. *Street Logos*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004. P. 16–17.

urban space and institutionalised social practices is reciprocal: they constantly affect each other²¹.

The first stage of urban space formation is usually analyzed by macro-sociologists with a focus on political power and economic impact over physical urban structures while the symbolic stage which is called social construction/production of space is explored by micro-sociologists. However, both macro and micro approaches offer two different angles to observe urban space, each of them being just one side of the coin. To have a coherent view we inevitably need a third way which can be found in the theory of the American urban sociologist Sharon Zukin. Combining micro-sociological views and macro-sociological assumptions, synthesizing economic and cultural approaches she formulates a theory of symbolic economy that enables interpretation of graffiti and its functions in a cityscape. Zukin proposes²² an explanation of hyper-aestheticized and visualized contemporary cityscapes which is, in her opinion, caused by a new form of production.

Symbolic economy is associated with a post-industrial shift from manufacturing to service industries that has had a direct impact on the spatial organization of cities because the capital having no new locations to expand territorially had to turn up to endless reconstructions and a spatial re-differentiation (sometimes called urban space recycling).²³ This new kind of spatial exploitation is implemented by *cultural* means because culture supplies the basic resources for nearly all service industries. Culture becomes the base of post-industrial production which is therefore called symbolic economy.²⁴

Symbolic economy is comprised of two parallel production systems: (1) production of space; (2) production of symbols. The former is the first stage of shaping cityscape where aesthetic principles and cultural meanings are incorporated into physical dimensions of space (design of buildings, streets, parks and other public spaces). The latter reflects the symbolic stage of urban space formation when physical space is adjusted to more abstract cultural representations – images, symbols or meanings. Zukin claims that symbolic economy leads to a contemporary condition of urban space: immoderately filled with symbols, patterns and meanings. Accidentally the development of symbolic economy has started at the same time (the 1960s) as the graffiti movement has appeared to propose alternative reflections of the urban space flooded more and more with symbols and its kind of contribution to it.

²¹ Gieryn T.F. A Space for Place in Sociology // *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2000. Vol. 26. P. 465.

²² Zukin S. *The Cultures of Cities*. Malden: Blackwell Publications, 1995.

²³ Zukin S. Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core // *Annual Review of Sociology*. 1987. Vol. 13. P. 141.

²⁴ Zukin [1995], op. cit., p. 11–12.

Social Aspects of Representation in Urban Space

The system of symbolic economy is based on culture, which equalizes significance of finance and cultural capital. Capitalist economy, powered by cultural consumption, commodifies urban space. This is why any cultural representations in urban space are shaped in accordance with the preferences and values of a consumeristic middle-class. Consequently, the public space is more and more controlled in order to ensure safe and imperturbable consumption, and the selection of symbols accessible to public is immanently involved in politics of cultural representation.²⁵

The categories of social structure, such as segregation and exclusion, hierarchy and differentiation, are conceptualized in public spaces, neighborhoods, types of buildings or even architectural details²⁶, social meanings are institutionalized in architecture, laws and rules regulating practices of public space. Therefore, all the visual artifacts of material culture do have the ability to reinforce (or otherwise – question) the *status quo*. Thus all the possible options of visual representation are usually limited to only a few dominant strategies, subordinated to tourism industry and heritage policy and any non-conventional form of visual representation – for example graffiti – is being destroyed and displaced, excluded from visible public places and located in conventional space of an art gallery.²⁷

The conception of urban space production by Henri Lefebvre²⁸ emphasizes the space as an integral part of all social practices. The production of urban space is always related to circulation of capital. On the level of social relationships space is being manipulated in order to exploit the labour force and increase the value of a real estate. Lefebvre's objective was to show that space was political, and for him the urban was the field of power relations, apparently bringing to the light the mechanisms of social control. However, he understands urban space as a constantly changing, active process of everyday life. Lefebvre emphasizes the everyday experiences of urban space, described by the conception of 'the right to the city' – the personal right to act and to re-make the urban in a very practical sense.²⁹

The symbolic production of urban space is directly related to the problem of 'the right to the city,' what is expressed by asking 'Whose cul-

²⁵ Zukin S. *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. P. 223–230.

²⁶ Schorske C. *Fin-de-siecle Viena. XIX a. pabaigos politika ir kultūra*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2002. P. 27–122.

²⁷ Gieryn, op. cit., p. 479–480.

²⁸ Inspired by the aesthetics of surrealism Lefebvre himself was an inspirer of the Situationist International movement which has contributed to radical urban initiatives, shaping and researching urban space by non-conventional methods, for example, *urbanisme unitaire* (integrated city-creation), *derivé* (drift), *détournement* (diversion), rhythm analysis and psychogeography (see Lefebvre H. *Writings on Cities*. Malden: Blackwell, 2000. P. 12).

²⁹ Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 34, 42, 147–160.

ture? *Whose city?*³⁰. This question illuminates serious social problems concerning privatization and commercialization of public space, spatial control and surveillance³¹ destroying the right to experience the contemporary city spontaneously.

Graffiti and (Trans)formation of Urban Space

Selection of publicly acceptable symbols and the right to mark the city is determined by the subject's position in the field of power. Therefore, economic and political elites have the most direct approach to the control of a physical shape, social interpretations and an access to public space in the city. The other privileged social group is the space-professionals, people directly involved into either production of space or production of symbols: architects, urban and regional planners, landscape architects, designers, historic preservationist, etc.³² They mediate the relationship between political, economic elites and the places that they want to be built. Space-professionals filter interests and agendas of diverse clients through culture, and the 'discipline' of design, which means they are able to control the shape of urban space and its symbols to a much greater extent than the third social group involved into politics of urban space – the 'ordinary people'³³ who 'extract from continuous and abstract space a bounded, identified, meaningful, named, and significant place'³⁴, but do not have the right to transform urban spatial structures.

Graffiti writers and street artists are related to two social groups mentioned above. On the one hand they are non-sanctioned space-professionals, but on the other hand they are ordinary passers-by who may reshape only few fragments of urban surface, illegally change its symbolic dimension but not the physical structure.

Illicit graffiti writers add non-conventional meanings to urban space that function without any accordance with orthodox spatial patterns. Post-graffiti inscriptions more than territorial graffiti *tags* express the right to the city in practice and give voice to otherwise invisible cultural traditions of ordinary people. There are many instances of the street art representing the images of ethnic minorities, urban subcultures or various social movements³⁵ and this is how graffiti realizes the right to mark the living space, to fill it with symbols and thus consolidate cultural identities of powerless communities³⁶.

The city dwellers, ordinary passers-by and organized communities use distinctive strategies of cultural representation, for example, ethnic street festivals, spontaneous street performances, urban theatre and urban music, etc. Consequently, the space of a post-industrial city is usu-

³⁰ Zukin [1995], op. cit., p. 1–47.

³¹ Dickens [2008b], op. cit., p. 23, 25.

³² Gieryn, op. cit., p. 470–471.

³³ Ibid., p. 471–473.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 471.

³⁵ Miles, Miles, op. cit., p. 48.

³⁶ Schacter, op. cit., p. 51.

ally saturated with plenty of different (ethnic, sexual, subcultural, etc) identities.³⁷ Graffiti as a media of everyday urban practices also evokes the sense of place *belonging* and becomes one of many urban identity markers, established in the perception of urban space³⁸, and that is one of the reasons why it is being exploited in the pop-culture, advertising, cultural industries, city image campaigns³⁹.

In symbolic economy illegal graffiti exists as a subverted form of official production of symbols since the images it produces subvert the dominant cultural forms and conventions. The best examples of such a transformation of mainstream meanings and ideas are '*subvertising*', '*adbusters*' or '*The Billboard Liberation Front*'⁴⁰ – the movements visually subverting textual and visual content of outdoor advertising and branding systems in public. Graffiti escapes subordination and social control by rejecting official production of symbols and thus the writers' symbolically expressed resistance against social disorder should be interpreted as '*semiotic disobedience*'⁴¹ – a socially productive act ensuring their right to the city.

The Community of Vilnius Graffiti Writers

The study was based on nine in-depth interviews with graffiti writers and street artists all of whom have the broad experience of illicit writing in public space of Vilnius. The informants were selected through recommended-contact by deploying snowballing sampling technique which was the most relevant in order to reach the experienced members of a relatively small and closed community.

The majority of selected and interviewed writers and post-graffiti artists have studied arts or are currently working in the field. Their motivations and aesthetic criteria of shaping urban space significantly differ from the other sub-group of graffiti writers who have nothing in common with professional arts and those whose motivations are based on political rather than aesthetic criteria. Thus, the occupation is one of the most explicit categories that divide graffiti writers into two groups: the ones who perceive graffiti as a form of artistic expression and the others who consider it as an alternative media.

The mean age of the informants (24.4 years) does not represent the whole population of Vilnius graffiti writers. All the informants have extensive experience in doing graffiti and in subcultural communication (5 to 10 years) and thus they represent the 'elite' of the writers' community.

The American founders of graffiti in the 1960s and the 70s were predominantly young working-class non-white (African American or His-

³⁷ Zukin [1995], op. cit., p. 20–23.

³⁸ Cronin, op. cit., p. 10–11.

³⁹ For example, graffiti competitions in the programme of «Vilnius – European Capital of Culture 2009» cultural events, the exterior of performing arts venue 'Arts Printing House' or the chapter dedicated to Vilnius graffiti in the un-tourist guide 'Naked Vilnius'.

⁴⁰ Cronin, op. cit., p. 8–9; Dickens [2008a], op. cit., p. 474.

⁴¹ Kane, op. cit., p. 10–11.

panic) males with strong ties to marginal neighborhoods. These days ethnic and social distinctions of graffiti writers are not that clear – they do not belong to some socially isolated groups or categories only. The social profile of a graffiti writer has considerably changed – while they remain almost always male, practitioners today are generally older, more occupied in media and art-world, upwardly mobile and entrepreneurial in their approach than the early graffiti writers⁴². Such a social shift illustrates the change of a graffiti status itself as it draws closer to conventional creative industries and commercial pop-culture.

Graffiti subculture in general and community of Vilnius graffiti writers in particular are usually ethnically and nationally mixed. Practitioners collaborate with Lithuanian writers as well as colleagues from other countries (all the informants mentioned such cases). For instance, two of the interviewed graffiti writers do not constantly live in Lithuania and participated in Vilnius graffiti scene while temporarily visiting the country.

Graffiti Writer's Perception of Urban Space

The majority of people who have no connections with graffiti culture, do not understand (and therefore do not accept) non-conventional perception of the urban space that causes various motivations for creating graffiti. Obviously, interpretation of graffiti practice and perception of urban space is not equal to all the members of the community. Only writers and street artists who have broad experience of writing graffiti and those who are involved in subcultural communication consciously consider graffiti as a method of approaching urban space and debating dominant rules of public behaviour.

Australian criminologists Halsey and Young have conducted a detailed analysis of Melbourne graffiti writers⁴³ and the findings of their study correspond to inferences drawn from Lithuanian informants' interviews. Researchers emphasize graffiti writers' distinctive perception of urban landscape. First, their point of view differs from the orthodox appreciation of clean or 'blank' walls – urban surfaces that are not covered with graffiti or other 'visual trash'. Writer's gaze upon the cityscape does not capture clean objects in order to damage them or 'blank' walls to deface them. It is more likely that there is no such category as 'clean' in the urban space – 'the surfaces which make up the city are always already marked by signs of deterioration and decay (such as rusted facades, storm-damaged roofs, cracked stonework, weathered timber), and constituted by competing and questionable aesthetics (such as the signs telling of the presence and nature of business, or of political candidates, or of speed limits, no parking zones and one-way streets). The consequence of such a view is that orthodox notions of cleanliness and purity undergo something of an implosion'⁴⁴. Therefore, urban inscrip-

⁴² Dickens [2008b], op. cit., p. 8, 10.

⁴³ Halsey, Young, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 286.

tions are never completed either by the illicit writer or by any of the city's more legitimate authors – it is a never ending urban dialogue between people and institutions.

The study of Vilnius graffiti community has indicated that there were two main motivations deriving from the distinct writers' perception of the urban space (apart from general motivations such as aesthetic appeal and peer recognition). Motivations justifying and rationalizing illegal practices of graffiti are: 1) the belief that graffiti has positive aesthetic impact on urban space and 2) the notion that illicit urban inscriptions produce public, vibrant social space, open to all the people living in the city despite their social status. According to writers, graffiti is not supposed to be chaotic and an irrational territorial marker as it is usually perceived in public discourse. On the contrary, it has inner logic and ethical taboos indicating proper and prohibited surfaces.

Graffiti writers themselves do not consider their activity as harmful. Apparently, they claim that graffiti brings 'tedious' and 'lifeless' walls to life. According to Halsey and Young, 'a uni-coloured wall is considered 'boring' – as 'negative space' – and therefore as something to be filled out or brought to life'⁴⁵. The informants from Vilnius seem to mostly agree with these ideas:

Inf_7: It [street art] brings life to the space. Even if there are some destructive or violently invading pieces, the sarcasm of the street art often just precisely describes the situation. For example, the message "This wall is boring" on the concrete wall in the suburbs... because it *is* really boring.

The conceptions of a 'live' city or space are quite frequently used in the interviews with other informants as well:

Inf_1: If there is no graffiti, it seems that something is wrong with the town. The town is dead, nothing happens, no economic or any activity. Because people, they live and while they live they produce garbage and make all kinds of nonsense. Because if you look... from the social point of view... it [graffiti] is nonsense. And you come to some town and you see that there is nothing, not even a single tag anywhere... You take a look around and everything is clean: there isn't anything, this lad is an alcoholic, another one is a prostitute, just nothing happens at all.

So an illegal urban inscription is not perceived as harm, but on the contrary – as a positive influence on urban space: its improvement that 'beautifies,' 'colours the city' and 'rejoices some tame places' (*Inf_5*), 'gives warmth, ... personalizes the space' (*Inf_8*).

In the graffiti writers' perception the urban space is always open to the spontaneous intervention, surfaces are replete with possibilities, they are 'canvasses permanently in waiting'. According to Halsey and Young, this is 'accomplished through the nature of the writer's gaze, which does away with the actual (banality) and ushers in the virtual (creativity)'⁴⁶ A

⁴⁵ Halsey, Young, op. cit., p. 288.

⁴⁶ Halsey, Young, op. cit.

blank wall has no informational or aesthetic surplus value and that is why 'it... wants to be painted' (*Inf_8*).

Thus the graffiti intervention into urban space is perceived as an active participation in public sphere, its transformation into a collective event where every passer-by is allowed to leave his or her mark and thus personalize cold and 'abstract' anonymous urban space.⁴⁷

Smooth and Striated Urban Space

According to Schacter's study of the writers from London, UK, graffiti is experienced as a form of 'appropriation'⁴⁸ and altering of urban space for the citizen's discrete intentions. This transformation of the environment empowers the writer, gives an active role in producing and constructing their lived-in surroundings that makes the urban space more personal, more inalienable.⁴⁹

Halsey and Young suggest that 'illicit writers spend much of their time using, creating and locating *smooth* spaces while an 'ordinary' citizen (in so far as he/she exists) spends much of their time acting in accordance with the dictates and pre-established schemas of *striated* space.⁵⁰ This insight is based on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's distinction between *smooth* and *striated* types of space, examined in 'A Thousand Plateaus'⁵¹ where *smooth* space is generally characterized by action 'free' of social control, while *striated* spaces are associated with work and strict hierarchy.

According to informants from Vilnius, graffiti writer's role in the urban space is conceived in accordance with *smooth* space conception. The *smoothness* of space is defined by rejecting the distinctions between public and private, individual and collective urban spaces:

Inf_9: Public space is one space more or less, and not many different places within the city. ... You interfere into public space everyday, but you don't have the ability really to interfere. Only in the way this kind of society allows you to do it, which is almost always related to commercial uses of space. This is why in the beginning it is very important to feel that this space is your space. Like in your house, your environment is built in way you imagine it. For example, the decorations or the way you put the things in the kitchen. The same you can slowly develop in your relationship with environment in the city.

Inf_8: Yes, and if everybody starts to interfere like in their house... because actually it is like our house, but extended, it's like all the people's house... So if we all feel free to interfere, then it's more natural. It should

⁴⁷ Schacter, op. cit., pp. 50–55.

⁴⁸ Lefebvrian term defined as a practice where space has been modified in order to satisfy and expand human needs and possibilities.

⁴⁹ Schacter, op. cit., p. 51.

⁵⁰ Halsey, Young, op. cit., p. 296.

⁵¹ Deleuze G., Guattari F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. P. 361–374, 474–500.

be like this. Because it's a part of social control that we cannot interfere in the space and there are some people who are higher and they control this interfering, but actually it belongs to all people.

The social control of urban surfaces, privatization and commercialization of public space is usually criticised in the interviews with graffiti practitioners and has an effect upon justification of illicit writing. Particularly commercial spaces ascribe the passive roles of consumer, spectator and worker which restrict the ability of creative and spontaneous act and thus space becomes lifeless and *striated*. This is why the graffiti writers criticise commercialized urban spaces, especially outdoor advertising and other legal urban inscriptions (it is, however, important to note that informants were not asked to talk namely about commercialized urban space, outdoor advertising and other critical aspects of the topic):

Inf_5: But this public space... It's not only graffiti that violates all that visually. Many things do. Advertisements, for example. No one asks you. For example, I don't want to watch that man in briefs all the time. And still they violate you visually.

Inf_3: The things I did and still do sometimes they debate with those... the thing that irritates me the most, ads. ... All those people with white teeth, they act as if it's oh so perfect, just the only thing you lack in your life is to go to some shopping mall or buy toothpaste or get plastic surgery...

Inf_8: This cult of beauty and youth, it has influenced me a lot. ... And maybe that is the reason why I dislike advertisements so much and I think that we also have the right to do things in the street. If those people who pay for advertisement space can do it, we can do the same. Because – who do they buy from? The state. But we get nothing from that, we are exploited. They change our values. This is why we have the right to pay back, finally to exploit the same space too.

By illegal intervention into the urban graffiti writers create the space open to social critics and civic engagement. Consequently, illicit urban inscription is perceived as positive aesthetic or informational impact over space, the city and citizens. Graffiti is interpreted as a struggle for the publicity and *smoothness* of the urban space, considered as public good, that must be accessible to every person, despite his or her social characteristics. Thus, the illegitimacy of graffiti practice is opposed to legal urban inscriptions such as outdoor advertisement that *striates* and commercializes the space *that belongs to all the dwellers of the city*.

Conclusions

Formation of urban space is a dual process composed of two parts: production of space and production of symbols. Illegal graffiti is a subverted form of official production of symbols invading public space with non-conventional symbols, despite any legal and social restrictions.

Graffiti writers are illicit space-professionals who create alternative cityscapes according to their distinctive urban space perception.

Graffiti practitioners do not perceive illegal writing as harmful behaviour. They find urban inscriptions as a neutral or positive aesthetic impact on urban space and the communities of city dwellers.

According to writers, graffiti turns urban space into 'live' and *smooth*. *Smooth* space exists in between of the public and the private, the individual and the collective, creating a utopian vision of the city open to civic participation and 'free' actions.