

Street art. Social Expression Between Propaganda and Visual Protest

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Abstract: Contemporary street art in Romania functions as a fertile ground for analyzing the relationship between propaganda, visual protest, and social marginality. This article combines a theoretical approach to the functions of visual propaganda with a qualitative analysis of ten interviews conducted with street artists from Bucharest. Their perceptions regarding the role of urban art as a form of counter-discourse, an educational tool, or an aesthetic of resistance are investigated. The conclusions highlight the critical potential but also the structural limitations of street art. The paper argues that, in the absence of inclusive cultural policies and coherent institutional recognition, street art remains a fragmented, ambivalent, and insufficiently valued form of protest. However, at the same time, visual images can influence public perception of social realities and stimulate civic awareness.

Keywords: street art; propaganda; society; marginality; resistance; urban space.

Introduction

In today's urban environments, walls have become sites of interaction between institutional power and street artists. Posters, stencils, and graffiti compete for attention, using color, form, placement, and message to shape public perception and visual culture.

This article examines how street art functions as a mode of communication. It investigates whether street art can be understood primarily as a political act, a symbolic re-appropriation of public space, or a form of individual expression.

The key research questions that guide this article are:

Q1: Is street art a political gesture, an act of symbolic recovery of public space, or just a personal form of expression?

Q2: What motivations, messages, and tensions do these visual practices express?

Q3: Do street artists' interventions transform into a critical discourse on contemporary social realities?

These questions are particularly relevant in a context where the boundaries between public and private space are contested and where memory, ideology, and urban identity remain politically charged. This study thus offers a timely contribution to the understanding of how visual culture mediates social resistance in postsocialist urban landscapes.

In this context, it becomes essential to understand how street art not only decorates urban space but also actively participates in the production of an alternative social discourse. Through spontaneous or deliberate visual interventions, street artists occupy the same symbolic territory that propaganda has historically claimed – that of influencing the collective consciousness.

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While traditional propaganda aimed at controlling perception through official, unidirectional messages, street art proposes a decentralized form of visual communication, often anonymous and unstable, but with high critical potential.

The aesthetics of confrontation

An emblematic case confirming the use of art as a form of social protest and counter-propaganda in a repressive context is documented by Arkhipova and Lapshin (2023), who analyze the anonymous interventions of Russian street artists against the war in Ukraine. In a political climate where critical expression risks criminal sanctions, hundreds of stickers, stencils, and urban installations have been produced by “semiotic guerrillas” – artists who avoid signature but do not avoid risk. Examples such as stencils featuring doves painted in the colors of Ukraine or inscriptions like “No Wobble” become symbols of civic opposition, keeping an alternative memory alive in the public space dominated by official discourse. “No Wobble” was written as “no war,” but when arrested, the artist said it was a no to fishing, a word that is similar in Russian. This clandestine art form stands in direct opposition to glorifying official representations, highlighting the potential of street art to become the “visual conscience” of society, even in the absence of civic liberties.

On a complementary note, Anghel and Zbucnea (2023) offer an extended perspective on artistic responses to the conflict in Ukraine. Exiled Ukrainian artists create works that intertwine trauma, resilience, and hope. Paintings transformed into political manifestos, performances created in bunkers, or collaborative art projects in shelters in Berlin, Warsaw, or Bucharest – all reflect the capacity of art to foster transnational solidarity. In parallel, several Russian artists from the diaspora, such as members of Pussy Riot or rapper Oxxxymiron, assume the role of a counter-voice in the face of aggression, using their notoriety to denounce the regime and support Ukraine.

Keser and Keser (2017) argue that modern art refuses to serve religion, aristocracy, or the state, seeking independence. This gesture is a form of symbolic resistance, of breaking subordination to traditional propaganda. The loss of clear aesthetic criteria has made the value of art manipulable – especially in the art market. The lack of aesthetic standards has opened the door for art to be valued strategically, including politically or economically. Art can become a sophisticated form of propaganda or status symbol, even without an explicit message.

In the traditional (mimetic) aesthetic regime, art is functional – it supports the dominant order and values. In the modern artistic regime, art is autonomous, but it becomes vulnerable to ideological recuperation (e.g., media and advertising in war propaganda). Even in democracies, art and visual culture can function as subtle forms of symbolic manipulation (Keser & Keser, 2017).

“Atrocity propaganda gave both true and false publicity but was often censored from posters due to rules of respectability. Nevertheless, underground leaflets and satirical cartoons circulated to subvert the dominant narrative.” (Aulich, 2017, pp. 4-5) When official public spaces are censored or curated, street art may emerge as a clandestine or alternative form of visual protest. Just as underground WWI material resisted state narratives, contemporary street art can become a form of counter-propaganda that resists mass media or political ideas (Aulich, 2017).

Street art emerging from war propaganda?

According to Scriver (2015), war propaganda is a key tool in warfare, and its study has evolved from an instrumental interest to a critical concern for recognizing and countering manipulation. In the age of social media, propaganda has become even more complex. World War I generated a true institutionalization of propaganda, in which governments established dedicated institutions: Wellington House (Great Britain) and

the ICC (USA). The techniques were inspired by marketing and public relations and included posters, brochures, films, and speeches. World War II brought a refinement of techniques: censorship was central, and the press was maintained under the appearance of independence while being carefully controlled. Cultural symbols (flags, anthems, images) were used to shape public opinion.

Although propaganda has been used since ancient times, the 20th century marked its transformation into a systematic and sophisticated tool for influencing public opinion during war. This development is closely linked to the need for modern states to coordinate support from the population on a large scale in conflict contexts. Propaganda has several essential functions in a military context: convincing the population of the need to engage in conflict, maintaining support during the war, justifying state actions, demoralizing the enemy, attracting international sympathy, and even influencing the enemy population (Scriver, 2015).

The use of posters blurred the line between public duty and market interest. "Governments commissioned printing houses and advertising agencies to propagandize war and influence public opinion at home and abroad" (Aulich 2017, p. 2). In authoritarian or populist contexts, muralists and street artists are often co-opted into state-sponsored visual culture. This mirrors how wartime graphic artists were enlisted to shape public sentiment, raising questions about the autonomy and ethics of public visual production. Just as WWI propaganda posters linked national identity to visual marketing, street art today can serve as both political commentary and a means of commercial or aesthetic appeal. Street artists, like WWI illustrators, navigate tensions between critique and visual persuasion.

The visual narratives surrounding the Vietnam War (whether transmitted through media, film, or protest graffiti) reveal how art became both a site of manipulation and a form of resistance, echoing the street as a canvas of contested memory and political dissent. Majčica analyzes how post-Vietnam American film—through irony, fragmentary aesthetics, and the evocation of suffering—contests the official discourse about war. This function is almost identical to that of street art in relation to institutionalized discourses. Although Ana Majčica focuses predominantly on the media's role in shaping public perceptions of the Vietnam War, her reflection on film and music as instruments of personal and collective experience resonates with the roots of artistic practices of war-affected populations. In particular, she describes how *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) juxtaposes cheerful radio broadcasts with graphic visual sequences of Vietnamese suffering. The scene in which "What a wonderful world" plays over a montage of destruction, daily hardship, and executions (Majčica, 2021, p. 232) is deeply symbolic. It mirrors the raw, direct expressions of loss and endurance found in the street. In this sense, the film becomes more than entertainment; it stands as an echo of popular visual testimony and aesthetic resistance, much like the anonymous wartime art produced by Vietnamese civilians in rural or occupied areas.

World War I (1914-1918): The institutional birth of war propaganda

The First World War marked the beginning of the institutionalization of modern propaganda, particularly through government initiatives aimed at national mobilization. Democratic regimes, such as those of the British and American, resorted to "white propaganda," supported by lithographed posters, illustrations, public murals, and cinematographic productions with patriotic purposes, urging that "the ordinary citizen personally could help win the war" (Staal, 2018, p. 93). The propaganda relied on national symbols and simplified images that glorified the soldier and demonized the enemy, especially the Germans, portrayed as "barbarian Huns" (Staal, 2018, p. 89).

Visual propaganda served to forge mechanical solidarity in wartime societies, uniting people under a collective identity and moral code (Figure 1). Dissent was neither permitted nor visible in public space.



Figure 1. Poster in 1914: Britons. join your country's army!. Free of copyright
Source: Imperial War Museums
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/16577>

World War II (1939–1945): Emotional appeals and psychological warfare

During World War II, visual propaganda saw a significant expansion of techniques, including posters, newsreels, feature and documentary films, photography, and design. Visual approaches became increasingly sophisticated, targeting the anxieties of the population.



Figure 2. Poster in 1942: Warning! Our homes are in danger now!. Free of copyright
Source: National Archives and Records Administration

<https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-37-491/>



Figure 3. Poster in 1942: Don't let that shadow touch them: Buy war bonds. Free of copyright

Source: UNT Digital Library.

<https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc205/>



Figure 4. Poster in 1942: We Can Do It! Rosie the Riveter. Free of copyright
Source: Library of Congress
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021669753/>



Figure 5. Poster in 1943: When you ride ALONE, you ride with Hitler!. Free of copyright
Source: Energy history
<https://energyhistory.yale.edu/when-you-ride-alone-you-ride-with-hitler-u-s-government-propaganda-poster-1943/>

American campaigns appealed to fear (e.g., images of Hitler and Tojo threatening: WARNING! Our homes are in danger now! – Figure 2), emotions (children threatened by swastika-bearing shadows Don't let that shadow touch them! – Figure 3), gender identification (mobilizing women through the image of Rosie the riveter, We Can Do It! – see Figure 4), and highlighting atrocities committed by the enemy (Staal, 2018, p. 110).

Propaganda now utilized emotive messages, tapping into both fear and familial empathy (Figures 2-5). The state monopolized visual messaging, rendering public walls, billboards, and print media. Visual resistance still lacked systemic space. In WWII, it was used as symbolic shorthand to condense ideology into imagery. Such tools mirror the visual strategies of contemporary protest art, where abstraction and symbolism often substitute for direct speech under conditions of censorship or surveillance.

Vietnam War (1955-1975): Collapse of propaganda, the rise of visual resistance

"Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG) began ripping at each other's clothing, which released containers of animal blood [...] in a simulation of the horrors brought about by the violence of war" (Staal, 2018, pp. 306–307). The Blood Bath performance in 1969, held in front of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), represented a radical form of visual protest against the horrors of the Vietnam War, symbolizing a new stage in which art became an instrument of political denunciation.

Visual protest emerges to graffiti slogans: "Hell no, we won't go" – a spray-painted declaration of draft resistance (Figure 6). "The whole world is watching" – chanted and painted during student protests.

The inscriptions on the helmets of American soldiers during the Vietnam War served as a powerful means of personal expression. For example, the phrase "War is Hell" became iconic, highlighting the disillusionment and suffering felt by many soldiers. Other

slogans, such as "Make war, not love" (Figure 7) or "War is Good Business, Invest Your Son," expressed sarcasm and criticism of war policies. Symbols of peace were also common, indicating a desire for an end to the conflict and opposition to violence. These inscriptions not only gave soldiers a way to express their individuality and feelings but also served as forms of subtle resistance against military authority and official propaganda.

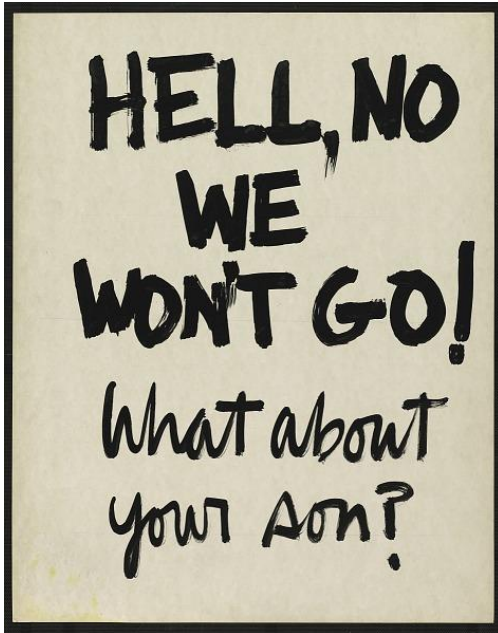


Figure 6. Poster in 1969: Hell no! We won't go! What about your son? Free of copyright
 Source: National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_1398028



Figure 7. Graffiti on soldier's helmet during the Vietnam War. Free of copyright

Source: Rare historical photos

<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/helmet-graffiti-vietnam-photos>

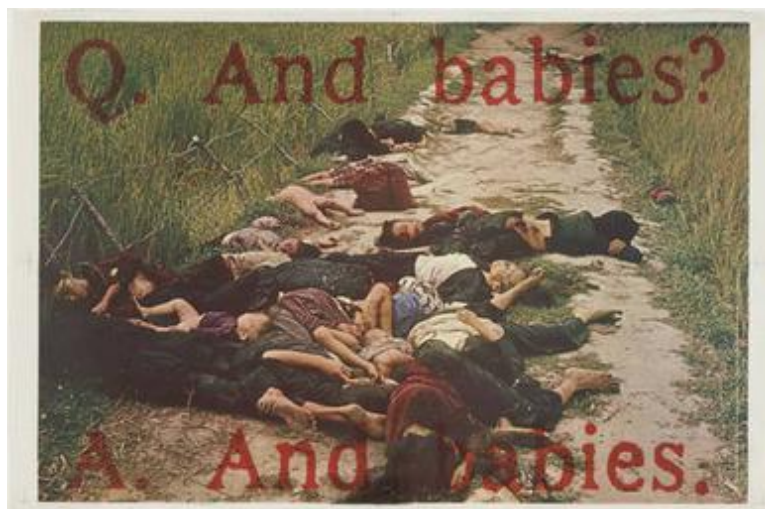


Figure 8. Lithograph poster in 1969. And babies? And babies. Free of copyright
 Source: Smithsonian American Art Museum

<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/q-and-babies-and-babies-111524>

The anti-war poster "And Babies?" by the Art Workers Coalition (1969) used the My Lai Massacre photo to confront viewers with atrocity (Figure 8). The Vietnam era marked a rupture: the street became a counter-public space for expressive dissent. Visual forms shifted from centralized propaganda to decentralized visual protest, mirroring societal fragmentation and declining state legitimacy (Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Photos from April 27, 1968. Free of copyright

Source: Harvey Richards Media Archive.

<https://estuarypress.com/hrma-photo-post/gis-for-peace-march-april-27-1968/>



Figure 10. Photos from April 27, 1968. Free of copyright

Source: Harvey Richards Media Archive.

<https://estuarypress.com/hrma-photo-post/gis-for-peace-march-april-27-1968/>

An illustrative example of how art can become a vehicle for symbolic propaganda and political education is that of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. During the post-revolutionary Mexican period, Rivera created hundreds of square meters of public murals that glorified class struggle, manual labor, and the indigenous history of Mexico. Although Rivera has been praised as one of the "los tres grandes" of Mexican muralism, recent interpretations emphasize the ambivalence of his work: between authentic revolutionary art and an instrument of a new centralized state project (Carter, 2019, pp. 39-47). Art historians observe that artists such as Rivera thus manage to become simultaneously an opposition artist and a bearer of the dominant ideology, a contradiction specific to many forms of politicized art in the 20th century. Later, Rivera was partially eclipsed by the postmodern rise of Frida Kahlo, whose image was recovered by feminist and anti-colonial currents (Rivas-Carmona & Balsera-Fernández, 2015, p. 182).

The contemporary image of art as a form of visual and symbolic protest is represented by Banksy's graffiti. With an accessible and ironic aesthetic, his messages stencil public space with themes such as inequality, armed conflict, consumerism, or urban alienation. Banksy's art has been described as "a tool of the unheard" (Jabeen & Carter, 2023, p. 390), transforming city walls into supports for social demands. The work "Keep your coins, I want change" has been interpreted not only as a critique of facade charity but also as a symbolic demand for a profound social transformation. By using visual and semantic contrast (coins vs. change), Banksy manages to catalyze critical reflection in public space, thus functioning as an actual agent of counter-propaganda (Jabeen & Carter, 2023, pp. 395-396).

In the post-communist context, artistic interventions in urban space assume a multifaceted function, simultaneously associated with the symbolic regeneration of the city and the expression of identity. After 1990, graffiti became a constant presence in the urban landscape, gradually being assimilated into cultural and tourist initiatives (such as mural art festivals), but at the same time maintaining a dimension of civic claim. By

inscribing names, marking territory, or formulating social messages, street artists participate in the reconstruction of public space as a terrain of visibility, expression, and urban solidarity. In the logic of Henri Lefebvre's theory, which defines urban space as a social product and introduces the concept of the "right to the city" (p. 60), street art becomes a legitimate form of participation in the symbolic and political reconfiguration of public space. (Lefebvre, apud Cojocaru, 2024)

The difference between propaganda and protest is emphasized: the former utilizes art to support a dominant ideology, often in a manipulative manner, while artistic protest expresses opposition to power or the status quo, frequently from a marginal or critical perspective. Street art, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a form of expression for marginalized communities and a way to reclaim urban space, has transformed into a visual tool for social and political protest, including in war contexts, where it becomes a means of propaganda or resistance – as Banksy's works in Gaza show (Cojocaru, 2024, pp. 79-90).

Methodology

Qualitative analysis of interviews with street artists

To understand how street art is perceived and practiced in Romania as a form of expression in the current social context, we conducted qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with 10 active street artists in Bucharest (Table 1). The aim was to investigate their perceptions of the social and political functions of urban art, as well as its potential to support marginalized communities and counter stigmatizing discourses.

The qualitative method was chosen because the research objective is to explore the perceptions, subjective meanings, and personal experiences of street artists – aspects that are difficult to quantify or standardize. As Babbie points out, qualitative research is particularly suited "to understanding how social actors assign meaning to reality" and to capture the process of its symbolic construction (Babbie, 2014, p. 287).

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees

No	Pseudonym	Gender	City of activity	Type of street art	Working method	Years of activity	Dominant theme/motivation
1	T.	M	Petroșani / Bucharest	Graffiti, mural	Legal + illegal	11	Figurative scenes, identity, psychic escape
2	Orhan	M	Bucharest/ London	Stencil, mural, paste-up	Predominantly legal	14+	Human rights, political reflection, common space
3	E.	M	Bucharest	Graffiti (bombing)	Illegal	7	Lettering, notoriety, validation
4	ERPS	M	Bucharest	Graffiti, sticker	Illegal + legal	20	Personal signature, a form of freedom
5	H.	M	Bucharest	Graffiti (train writing)	Legal + illegal	18	Lettering, style, tension with authority

No	Pseudonym	Gender	City of activity	Type of street art	Working method	Years of activity	Dominant theme/motivation
6	M	M	Bucharest	Train writing	Exclusive illegal	15+	Aesthetic vandalism, belonging
7	NEON	M	Bucharest	Graffiti, mural, digital	Legal (recently)	20+	Portraits, social messages, reflection urban
8	B.	M	Bucharest	Muralism, graffiti occasional	Preponderent legal	21	Messages about marginalization, urban contrast
9	Faux	M	Constanța / Bucharest	Graffiti	Legal + illegal	10+	Lettering, abstract compositions, figurative
10	P.	M	Bucharest	Graffiti	Legal + illegal	3–4	Urban regeneration, environmentally inspired themes

The research employs an inductive approach tailored explicitly to qualitative thematic analysis, in which semantic codes were extracted directly from the respondents' data and subsequently organized into relevant themes and sub-themes. The data was processed manually.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners active in the street art scene in Bucharest and, in some cases, with those who have extensive activity in other cities or abroad. Data were collected between June and September 2024 through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which lasted 45–90 minutes, in locations chosen by the respondents. The selection of respondents aimed to capture the internal diversity of the phenomenon. Respondents are between 23 and 43 years old and have been practicing urban art for 6 to over 20 years). The respondents are all male.

The interview guide was constructed within a semi-structured framework, adaptable to each respondent, to capture not only the artistic practice but also the social and personal meanings associated with it. The structure of the guide included:

- Artist profile: biographical data, artistic training, educational path;
- Artistic practice: types of art practiced, legal/illegal, preferred techniques;
- Motivations and personal meaning: beginnings, transformations, psychological functions (therapy, expression, belonging);
- Relationship with public space: choice of places, unwritten rules, interactions with the public;
- Relationship with other artists: solidarity, rivalries, symbolic hierarchies;
- Social and institutional perception: reactions from passersby, family, police, institutions;
- Socio-political dimension: social themes addressed, activism function, perceived impact on the community;
- Aesthetics and messages: symbolic intentions, coded messages, identity.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed under conditions of confidentiality, with the protection of their identities. The data was processed manually.

Findings

Street art as a form of visual counter-discourse

The first significant direction identified in the artists' discourses is related to the perception of street art as a form of symbolic social criticism. Respondents believe that street art has the potential to convey messages and themes into the public space that are overlooked by official discourse or conventional press. One of the artists emphasizes: "The walls say what television cannot say. It's about the message, not the style. When you write '2+2=5' on a wall, it's not beautiful art; it's a cry against madness." (B)



Figure 11. Project that had not started at the time of the interview
Source: Artist's Instagram.

In this sense, urban art serves as a parallel channel of communication, challenging institutionalized forms of propaganda, particularly those that distort social reality and conceal inequalities. Another participant explains his intention to create stencils with the message "2+2=5" as a direct reference to Orwell and the post-truth era. The stencils with "2+2=5" or ironic messages about the pandemic and war reflect a critique of the mechanisms that dislocate public attention (Figure 11). This statement highlights the artist's deep perception of manipulative media cycles.

The social functions of art – between civic education and the recovery of public space

Most respondents acknowledge that street art can generate dialogue, tension, or social reflection. Some speak of art's ability to "open up taboo subjects" (such as breastfeeding, minorities, poverty), even in unconventional or discreet forms:

"You can change a person's mood; you can inspire someone." (E.)

"It's not just a drawing on the wall; it's a form of informal education - you force people to see what they don't want to see." (T.)

At the same time, urban art is described as a form of informal education and a declaration of belonging. Even in the absence of an explicit political message, the simple fact that an artist has intervened in a neglected space is perceived as an act of symbolic resistance. As another respondent states:

"It's a fight for the independence of the individual. In the end, the world is ours." (M.)

"When children paint, they perceive the neighborhood differently. The space is no longer hostile." (Faux)

For many artists, the act of creating in public space is a claim for collective ownership of the city, in opposition to excessive privatization and visual control imposed by authorities or commercial advertising. This opposition creates productive tensions and, in itself, becomes a gesture of revealing hegemonic visual propaganda – whether in advertising or politics.

Art as a form of resistance for the marginalized

The question of the role of art in supporting the marginalized has generated diverse and sometimes contradictory answers. Some artists believe that, yes, street art offers a space for personal and collective affirmation:

"Graffiti brought many opportunities... I went from being an illegal artist to being contracted." (ERPS)

Others, however, express a more skeptical view, stating that in today's Romania, urban art has been depoliticized, becoming more of an act of style, not of resistance:

"Now, it's not a revolt; it's just a lifestyle." (M.)

"For many of us, it was the only form of being seen. There were no real alternatives." (H.)

However, even in these cases, it is recognized that involvement in graffiti or street art involves a form of aesthetic autonomy that is difficult to control by the institutional system. The artists tell how they grew up under challenging conditions, selling clothes at the fair to buy spray cans, and how art offered them an alternative to exclusion, even if not one formally integrated into public policies:

"There were about 30 of us graffiti artists... almost all from modest families." (Neon)

This biographical feature lends a concrete dimension to the concept of silent resistance, as defined by Scott (1990): non-official, unorganized forms of expression through which marginalized groups preserve their dignity.

Involving marginalized communities – between potential and inaction

An interesting aspect is that although artists recognize the potential of urban art to engage vulnerable groups in symbolic and educational activities, very few point to concrete examples of collaboration with these communities. Some mention children participating in collective paintings or independent initiatives:

"When children paint, their view of the place changes." (M.)

Others, however, point out that the marginalized often remain excluded even from these forms of expression:

"Art could encourage... but no one gets involved. The marginalized remain marginalized." (Orhan)

This finding suggests that street art can function as a vehicle for inclusion, but only when accompanied by organized social interventions supported by institutions or community networks. Otherwise, it remains an untapped potential.

Therefore, street art has a valuable educational and symbolic role, but without coordinated interventions from social welfare institutions, this impact remains limited.

The connection to the theme of propaganda: a symbolic counter-narrative

The analysis of the interviews clearly reveals that street art in contemporary Romania functions, in the perception of practitioners, as a space for counter-propaganda. It challenges dominant narratives about order, morality, merit, and identity, producing an aesthetic of the "invisible" and offering a symbolic alternative to the stigmatizing discourse about the marginalized, the "assisted," the Roma, or the poor.

In the context where democratic propaganda is subtle, infiltrated into language, media, and everyday visual representations, urban art offers micro-acts of resistance that cannot be easily neutralized:

"You don't have to ask permission on the walls." (E)

"You use their exact language – but you turn it upside down. It's a kind of semiotic turn." (B)

Thus, the interviews demonstrate that, although fragmentary and often non-institutionalized, street art is one of the few accessible forms of symbolic intervention for those on the fringes of social visibility – and, precisely for that reason, it represents an important dimension of the fight against stigmatizing propaganda.

Symbolic critique of social reality

A major direction identified was the perception of street art as a means of critical expression in relation to the socio-political context. The interviewed artists state that street art provides a communication platform for themes and subjects often avoided in mainstream media, such as marginalization, poverty, Roma identity, or abuse of power. The messages transmitted through the works are often allusive, ironic, or explicitly contestatory, being perceived by practitioners as forms of counter-propaganda:

"Covid was like an atomic bomb of disinformation... now the war has come, and the subject is different." (Neon)

"You don't have to write 'Down with the system' to be disruptive. It's enough to be where you're not supposed to be." (P.)

"Many works are no longer political. But the fact that they appear in public space is, implicitly, a political position." (M.)

Street art appears as a visual counter-discourse, challenging the symbolic hegemony of modern propaganda.

Symbolic reclaiming of urban space

Another recurring element is the perception of street art, which can generate dialogue, social tension, and community participation. Artists talk about how their works become catalysts for reflection, even in the absence of an explicit political message:

"You can change a person's mood, you can inspire someone." (E)

Furthermore, street art is described as a form of symbolic re-appropriation of public space in the face of pressures of privatization, advertising, and institutional control. This dimension is visible in the assertion of the right to use collective space for artistic expression:

"In the name of freedom, rights are being restricted." (M)

"We give life to dead places. We try to make the city more ours." (E)

"Regarding my street art, which is sometimes shocking due to its more "macabre" style, most people who interact with my works have the first instinct to photograph the installation." (Orhan)

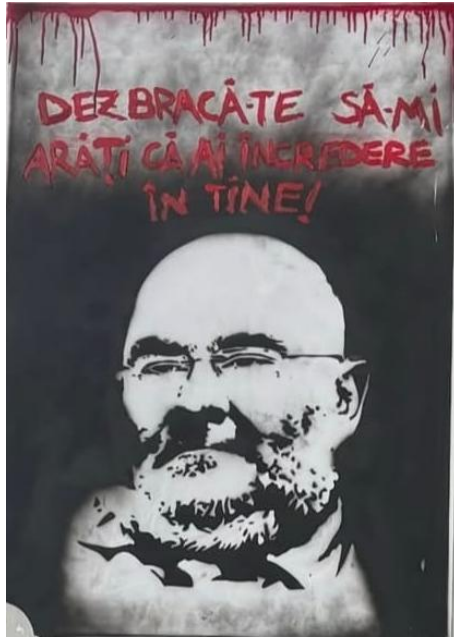


Figure 12. Dezbraca-te
Source: Author's archive

These practices can be interpreted as forms of silent resistance (Scott, 1990), in which individuals act subversively to maintain symbolic control over their social reality.

The ambivalence of resistance: between protest and lifestyle

The answers offered regarding the function of art as a form of resistance for marginalized groups are varied. Some artists argue that street art serves as a mechanism for social revalorization, enabling economically excluded individuals to gain visibility, establish relationships, and achieve recognition.

"In the beginning it was rebellion. Now it's an aesthetic of rebellion, but without substance sometimes." (Faux)

"It's cool to be a writer. But many people forget why they started." (M.)

At the same time, others emphasize the loss of the revolutionary dimension of the phenomenon, arguing that street art has evolved into a lifestyle rather than a protest movement. This ambivalence reflects the tension between the critical potential of art and its cultural assimilation into a capitalist system in which alternative forms of expression can be quickly absorbed and blurred.

Conclusions

The evolution of propaganda from World War I to the Vietnam War reveals a trajectory from centralized to decentralized discourse. In World War I and II, propaganda operated as a centralized mechanism of persuasion, orchestrated by state institutions and disseminated through posters, cinema, newsreels, and controlled media. The imagery was direct, symbolic, and often nationalistic, aiming to unify public sentiment, glorify sacrifice, and demonize the enemy. By contrast, the Vietnam War marked a turning point: the public sphere fragmented, and trust in state narratives declined.

This study shows that street art in contemporary Romania functions as a form of visual and symbolic counter-propaganda. It challenges dominant narratives, supports the expression of marginalized groups, and offers a space for re-approaching the city.

However, the lack of institutional support, ideological ambivalence, and the risk of commercial recuperation limit the social and political impact of these interventions.

The first aspect highlighted is that practitioners perceive street art as a form of visual counter-discourse. It positions itself in opposition to political propaganda, invasive advertising, or the official aesthetics of the city. Through ironic messages, critical insertions, or simply unauthorized presences, artists reclaim public space as a territory of alternative expression.

The following aspect that we can observe from the interviews is that the practice of street art involves a series of major tensions: between illegality and public recognition, between authenticity and cultural co-optation, and between social message and decorative aestheticization. Many artists oscillate between the status of an outsider and that of a collaborator with cultural institutions.

The third aspect that emerges is that although the protest discourse is present, some artists note a transformation of street art into an aestheticized lifestyle, sometimes emptied of critical content. This ambivalence reflects the tensions between intention and reception, as well as the difficulty of maintaining a radical message in an urban context dominated by commercialism. Another aspect we see in the artists' discourse is that abandoned, dirty, or ignored spaces become, through visual interventions, places with meaning and collective expressiveness. Artistic practice thus becomes a form of urban micropolitics.

Coherent cultural policies are necessary to recognize the critical potential of urban art and establish genuine bridges between creativity and social inclusion. Without them, the walls will continue to speak – but their speech will remain, perhaps, all too easily ignored.

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