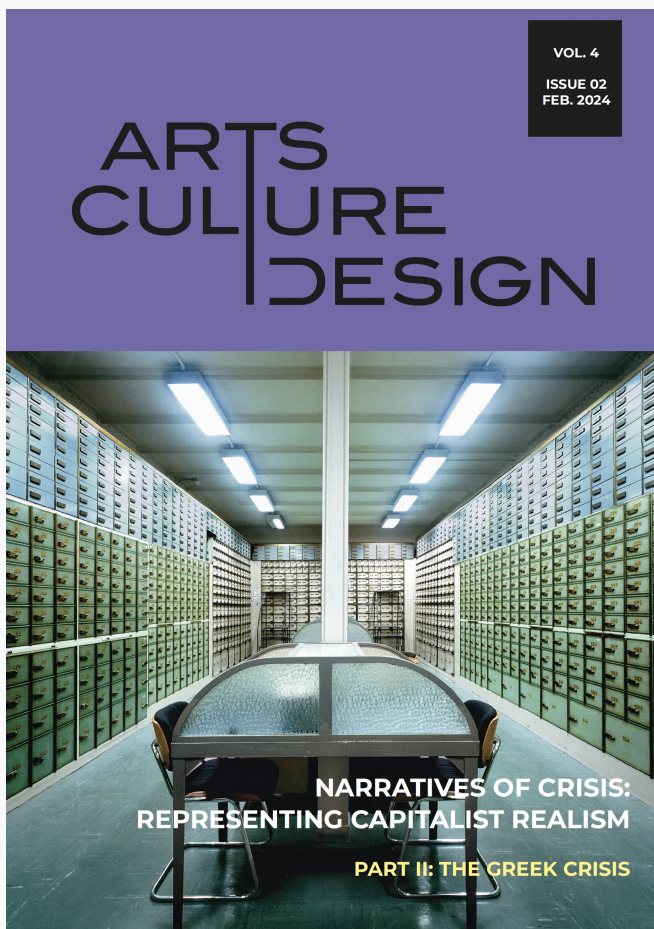


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NARRATIVES OF CRISIS: REPRESENTING CAPITALIST REALISM PART II: THE GREEK CRISIS



Athens

*Io Chaviara*

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# ATHENS:

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# A TEXT UNDER EDITING

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## ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Athens

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City-as-Text

The city of Athens, with its urban landscape adorned by graffiti, murals, and non-institutional interventions, serves as a living text constantly under revision and editing. These interventions, whether in the form of political slogans or artistic expressions, disrupt the city's narrative and engage its users in an ongoing dialogue. Drawing parallels to text editing, these interventions act as annotations, deletions, and corrections, shaping the urban experience. Phosphorescent pink markings document the aftermath of clashes between protesters and security forces, offering a socio-political narrative that combats collective forgetfulness. Vandalized historic monuments, like the Polytechnic building, become focal points, sparking debates about public art and state tolerance. Just as text editing can be a tool for care or manipulation, interventions in Athens reflect the complex relationships between citizens, the state, and public space. In this dynamic interplay, the city becomes a negotiated text, continually reinterpreted with each editorial act, reflecting the diverse voices and perspectives of its users.



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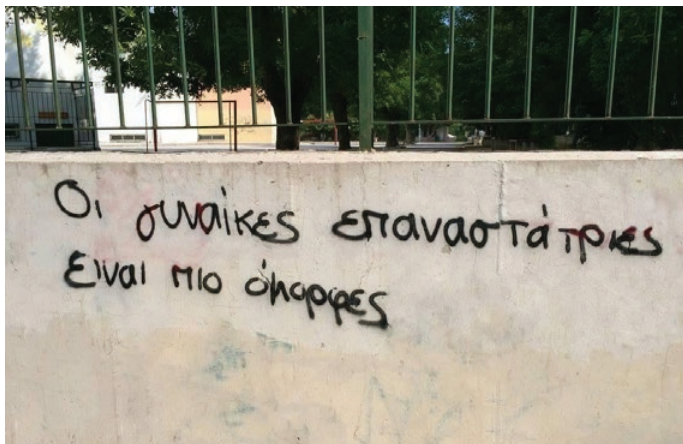
**1. ATHENS: A TEXT UNDER EDITING?**

Non-institutional interventions in the city, “destruction of foreign property”, smudges and dirt, government indifference, street art, graffiti, or all of these combined?

Do such interventions, regardless of how one labels them, share common characteristics? How do the writings on the city walls relate to each other and to the city itself as an institution when viewed through the prism of writing and editing a text? If one regards the city as a text undergoing editing, not only by institutional and governmental mechanisms but also by other subjects, readers, and users, how are these interventions recontextualized within this framework?

Through this exploration, correlations emerge between interventions in the city and the editorial process of a text. These correlations are proposed as a potential indicator of how the relationships between the subjects using the city and the city itself unfold. These subjects include the state, institutions, public entities, architects, urban planners, contractors, citizens, tourists, immigrants, or refugees. During a stroll through the center of Athens or any neighborhood, one can observe traces of appropriation on the walls. Texts, slogans, paintings, sketches, graffiti, stencils, and image and poster pastings are integral parts of the Athenian landscape. However, most of the interventions on Athens' walls fall into the category of slogans. These slogans typically pertain to politics, football, religion, love, personal thoughts, or are a combination of the above. Some of them often attempt to communicate their message to different audiences, while others target specific individuals, and in the case of just writing personal thoughts, it is often unclear if they are ultimately ad-





dress to anyone. The written slogans are all imprints of gestures exposed to interventions by other users, readers, or governmental mechanisms, which either supplement or erase the existing text. Based on various elements such as the themes of the slogans or their graphic character, we can make assumptions about the age, political beliefs, and other convictions of those responsible. Heterogeneous slogans sometimes engage in dialogue with the institutional text (the city), i.e., they either critique the dominant discourse or use it, while at other times, they have no connection with it. They can be statements and personal thoughts or dialogues between subjects, perhaps even unknown to each other. Athens serves as the space/text where users keep notes. Does something similar not happen, for example, with school textbooks? In a school textbook, in addition to the printed text, one can read notes related to the content, statements related to emotions, drawings, and dialogues for communication with others.



## 2. INTERVENTIONS AS EDITING

What would happen if readers had the ability to edit the text they read themselves, while this process could be documented and presented to other parties? How would it impact future readings and interventions? Editing encompasses the concept of care but also manipulation. The city's residents take charge of the text—the city of Athens—by contributing new content, erasing, or commenting on existing traces of appropriation. In this process, the government's intervention could also be considered, as it cleans up by removing some of the traces. Intervention upon intervention, correction upon correction, placement upon placement, create a sense of ongoing dialogue. It's as if the text is continuously negotiated. Such an approach appears to expand the definition of text editing. In this case, editing isn't bound by rules beyond those defined by each user; it's in a constant state of evolution, it's collective but not organized, not coordinated, and doesn't have a single purpose.

Under these conditions, the city of Athens could be seen as a text under negotiation, constantly reinterpreted with each editorial act. Looking at Athens, especially in comparison to other European cities, the appropriation of public space seems de facto justified by quite a few users who disregard legislation, prohibitions, or "good manners." However, in addition to the multitude of traces of such appropriations, it's noteworthy that state intervention is selective. Essentially, not all traces in public space are "erased," but rather points or areas are chosen with unclear criteria. Some interventions on the walls of Athens have become a source of controversy concerning the specific relationship between citizens and the state, as it's inscribed in public space. Emphasizing the relationship between Athens' users and the city itself as a material, I will delve into three examples of non-institutional interventions in more detail. By non-institutional, I mean all interventions that haven't obtained the necessary permits from the state to exist in public space. Annotation, deletion, and correction are the fundamental aspects of editing that I will reference in these examples.





## ANNOTATION

Athens, November 2012.

Phosphorescent pink elements disrupt the urban landscape of Athens. They are scattered across Syntagma and Klauthmonos Squares, in the Exarchia neighborhood, and along Stadiou, Panepistimiou, and Amalias streets. These elements literally document and describe the traces and ruins resulting from clashes between police forces and protesters during demonstrations in the center of Athens. Broken marbles on walls and sidewalks, shattered glass on doors and windows, damaged stairs and marble surfaces at subway entrances and residential buildings, burnt trash cans, scorched facades, removed sidewalks, remnants of paint splashes, and vandalized monuments. These descriptions have been made using phosphorescent pink spray and are accompanied by the marker's symbol, which we typically use for making notes in a text (highlighter). From the map that records this artistic intervention, as published on the internet, it is evident that these markings create a rhythm within the urban space. This rhythm varies in frequency in different areas, being more pronounced, for example, in the areas around Syntagma Square or Stadiou Street near the Propylaea. Due to its extent, this intervention could be

perceived as a large-scale artistic installation spread throughout the city. The way these phosphorescent notes encircle the city's users during their movements and the connections they create allude to how an artistic work is managed. Navigating within this "installation," within the city, induces different sensations depending on the narrative established by the rhythmic patterns of the phosphorescent elements. These annotations essentially function as references of socio-political significance. They aim to combat social amnesia by reminding passersby of the recent history of the city.

In the case of a text, when annotations are numerous, they play a disruptive role. The abundance of annotations interferes with reading, maintaining the reader's attention on a particular issue. Similarly, in Athens, pedestrians encounter these repetitive phosphorescent elements, which disrupt their attention and capture their interest, directing it toward the socio-political situation in the country, as it unfolds in the public space through demonstrations, gatherings, clashes, and mobilizations.



## DELETION

Athens, March 2015.

"Graffiti aggressively took over the National Metsovion Polytechnic and vandalized the architectural monument. It not only altered its form but also its historical identity. Moreover, it damaged the marbles, hopefully not irreparably."

Minister of Culture, Nikos Xydakis

The Polytechnic has always been, and still is, an incredibly information-loaded building - posters on top of posters, slogans written over slogans, stencils, graffiti, hung banners, etc. In short, it was by no means a clean and well-maintained building befitting its claimed historical and aesthetic architectural value. The Polytechnic building at the intersection of Stournari and Patission streets became the center of attention because, in early March 2015, it was vandalized in a way that "crossed the line." The Polytechnic building was chosen for a large-scale artistic intervention. Obviously, this choice was not random, just as the plan itself wasn't, considering the historical significance of the building, the Exarchia district, and the political context (two months after the first electoral victory of a left-wing coalition in Greece). An unclear black and white design spread across the entire surface of the two external facades. This massive intervention was completed in one night, indicating collective work, good organization, and perfect execution of an

illegal act as such in the center of Athens.

Does this design, or this "smudge", referencing comic aesthetics, function as deletion? Or does it ultimately work in exactly the opposite way? The extent covered by the design is quite large, making the building prominently present and dominant in the surrounding urban landscape, thus highlighting it. Similarly, in a text, the deletion or highlighting of an entire chapter wouldn't carry the same weight as deleting a word or a sentence. Such a gesture could mean rejection or even censorship. In any case, it would focus on the point it covers, arousing the curiosity of passersby. After this intervention, the specific building, through the media, regained its monumental identity, architectural significance, and historical character. Inspired by this intervention, architects, artists, politicians, residents, and passersby made public statements. These statements were mainly disseminated through the press and social media, and mass media dedicated considerable time to the issue, sparking a discussion about public art and state tolerance. The only facades of the Polytechnic that were quickly restored were those occupied by the "graffiti." According to some, the responsible authorities cleaned the traces of vandalism, while others claimed they destroyed the artistic intervention of the creators, leaving the interventions (writings, graffiti, posters, etc) in the rest of the building untouched. The publicity given during the cleaning process by the Mass Media was similar to the initial coverage the issue received.







## CORRECTION

Athens, October 2011

The forty-eight-hour strike mobilization, jointly declared by GSEE-ADEDY (The General Confederation of Greek Workers and Supreme Administration of Unions of Public Employees) on October 19th and 20th, 2011, was one of the largest mobilizations of the post-memorandum period. Similarly, police presence was very strong, as has been the case in such situations in recent years. Many clashes occurred between demonstrators and law enforcement during the protest. On one of the two days of mobilization, the following intervention took place: demonstrators sprayed with pink paint on MAT (Riot Police) units using fire extinguishers as spray cans. The result was to change the customary color of some uniforms from greenish khaki to pink. Simultaneously, with the change of color, the possibility of camouflage that khaki provides is weakened, while the imaginative pink makes law enforcement bodies visible from a distance. Thus, it points out their location, drawing attention to the protesters. Riot police officers, as replicas, could be seen as letters within a text.

Does this particular intervention resemble a correction similar to that of a recurring typographical error in a text? How is a persistent "error" interpreted? As the writer's oversight or intention?

Treating Athens as a shared notebook within this framework, it is an inextricable part of daily life. However, the city is closely connected to the dominant discourse, so it is not a blank, unwritten notebook. In this notebook, actions-traces/evidence are recorded individually, both personally and collectively. The city is a personal diary but at the same time an indelible record of socio-political events. Deploying protest, humor, literature, and visual language, notes in the urban space are offered to all users (institutional or not) as an open archive. Each note implies a reading. In the city, reading is embodied and collective, while each note reinterprets readings. This process is bidirectional and represents a continuously curated text. Subjects are subject to the text and vice versa.