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## Understanding the city as Habitat and Habitus: the case of Stray Art Festival, a Sustainable Street Art Festival

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### Abstract

Our understanding and use of the urban environment is constantly changing. Applied sciences, technology, creativity, design, architecture, art and imagination play an important role in the continuous reconstruction of cities, whether they are a modern megacity or a small provincial town. Graffiti and Street Art have taken on prominent positions in dialectics of urban design, which encourages more views in more and more locations. In an attempt to follow the explosive developments and realize its vision, a group of people created a Street Art Festival in Hermoupolis, Syros, the capital of Cyclades archipelago. This paper presents the design of festival with respects to strategy, vision and values that govern it. In addition, its changing relationship with the concepts of growth and sustainability is addressed and analyzed, and its impact on the day-to-day lives of residents and visitors as well as on the development of cultural capital is recorded. In conclusion, Stray Art Festival seems to be able to be temporally sustainable by being able to attract a critical number of returning visitors and locals, who, like the festival organizing team, live and perceive the city as a vibrant and constantly changing region, for which they are invited to contribute their knowledge, their ingenuity and ideas, or simply their constant presence, thus becoming active members of a creative community that aims to take the city back.

**Keywords:** street art festival, branding, design, creative design, murals, island

### 1. Introduction

In today's global society, due to the diffusion of Street Art and the changes that have emerged in its neighboring fields, its tolerance and acceptance by society is wide. This is further exemplified by the emerging body of professional artists in the field. The artists plan and

undertake projects for implementation in both private and public spaces. In many municipalities and cities, the authorities organize events and give public spaces to the artists, which they can use for the needs of a community or a neighborhood, at times being in the forefront of 'urban revival' projects. "This is mainly about large-scale

visual interventions, organized by public bodies, whose purpose is to reform and remake the new image of the urban center, with the participation of important artists and active artistic groups," (according to the Greek Ministry of Environment and Climate Change) in the implementation of the "Athens - Attica 2014" program, the grey brutality facades of buildings in Athens were designed and remodeled in collaboration between the municipality and street artists. This particular project has been conducting a competition to find multi-dwelling surfaces that have been designed by large-scale students and graduates of the Athens School of Fine Arts.

At the same time in smaller cities in the world, in suburbs, provincial cities, towns, and even villages, the impact of modern artistic creation methods and technological achievements interact by leaving their traces. A footprint that does not simply serve purposeful purposes but often helps to flourish the cultural and economic capital of the region and, above all, allows people, as users of urban space, to discover or experiment with new and different interpretations of their surroundings and local culture. In this paper, we study and explore the association of concepts such as the habitus and habits of people with the city, the application of artistic creation in the form of Street Art and Graffiti to it and the benefits that govern it, and finally, concepts such as gentrification and sustainability that are an example of imitation or avoidance on a case by case basis.

The article is divided into three main sections: the first section presents the city as the framework in which human organisms act and create. There is an analysis of how people work in the city, but also how their daily practices translate into habits and living conditions and the process of shaping it. In the second section, we present the links between Street Art, Graffiti, Gentrification and Sustainability, through presenting and analyzing the current situation and examples from around the world. The third part discusses the emergence of the Stray Art Festival on the island of Syros and its capital, Hermoupolis, in parallel with the activity of the organizing team and the response of the residents and visitors. In particular, the Stray Art Festival and the organizing team behind it are talking about the design decisions and actions they have taken, adopting practices that enable the festival

to grow and find new ways of using and managing the urban landscape. In the light of this study, the festival is not a mere phenomenon but the beginning of the creation of a creative community that shares the objectives and goals of this festival. This perspective brings greater sustainability to the project, democratizing the production of local cultural capital and dissolving power relations between the people and the public governance. In the conclusions, there is a series of reflections on how Design and Street Art can further intervene in the development of the surrounding space and suggest possible pathways for more exploration of the relationship between them.

## 2. Cities as modern habitats

Cities breed contention. Maintaining that the city constitutes a fertile ground for social movements, it acts as an empty canvas where social movement activity unravels (Uitermark et al., 2012). Density, size and diversity being the formative characteristics of cities provide the basic elements for contention to grow (Wirth; 1996). Contention thus derives from small interactions in the city, in the sense that a large amount of people live in close proximity where competing demands vie for domination. Social movements crystallize when people coordinate to conjointly claim urban space. Contention and movements emanate from cities but also stretch outwards as activists broker relations between local and their more geographically distant allies (Uitermark et al.; 2012).

Cities not only breed contention; they also breed control (Uitermark et al.; 2012). The governing side, in their eternal battle to maintain compliance and control, develop strategies and techniques to mediate the ebbs and flows of contentiousness coming up from the civic grassroots, even going as far as finding ways to neutralize the radical dimensions of the movements that oppose the hegemony. The city is a fruitful place of movement, making it the perfect ally for change, it constantly generates new methods to obtain social order including repression, surveillance, clientelism, corporatism, and participatory and citizenship initiatives.

The central idea is that the right to the city entails the capacity to remake ourselves by remaking cities. (Harvey; 2003). The emergence of design in transition studies is very welcome. Design is often marginalized as utilitarian

and/or decorative largely due to its ubiquity—virtually everything we interact with every day was designed by someone; the clothes we wear, the tools we use and the buildings we inhabit. (Irwin et al., 2015) However, design can be defined as “devising a course of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (Simon; 1988) it is this view of design that enables it to act as a tool for societal transition.

The commons is usually understood in two primary senses: as a paradigm of governance and resource-management, and as a set of social practices in virtually all fields of human endeavor. As a system of governance, the term refers to the norms, rules, and institutions that enable the shared management of specific resources. Commons aren't simply material or intangible collective resources, but processes of shared stewardship about things that a community (a network or all of humankind) possesses and manages in common or should do so. These things we are entitled to use collectively may be gifts of nature or collectively produced resources like knowledge and cultural techniques, urban spaces, landscapes, and countless others. A resource becomes a commons when it is taken care of by a community or network. The community, resource, and rules are all an integrated whole (Bollier et al., 2015). To accomplish this kind of transformation considering the members of a community not as ‘consumers’ but as citizens participating alongside the functionaries in the deliberations and decisions that concern them is necessary. (Dardo et al.; 2014)

A service can be a regulated form of co-production of benefits between two or more parties, aiming at providing a solution through the application of knowledge and skills creating value in use. Thus, a service results from an interaction. (Meroni & Sangiorgi; 2011) When referring to collaborative services one can understand that the level of the cooperation is higher in building the service itself. There is a form of cooperation to its core that is of complementary nature. Due to that complementary nature ideally, we would be talking about Deriu's conviviality in the context of degrowth: "Conviviality refers to a society in which contemporary tools are used by all in a comprehensive and common way, without being dependent on a body of experts who control them" (Deriu; 2015). This difference between collaborative services and standard services (Manzini & Cipolla; 2009) exemplifies the

dichotomy of symbiotic and non-symbiotic tools. A tool is considered symbiotic if it can be used and adapted easily for the purpose chosen by the individual and if it results in the extension of freedom, autonomy and human creation. The structure of social relationships and the structure of the tools are co-defined and evolved in a circular way with no unified direction. In the intimate society, all social phenomena, regardless of whether they are impersonal in their structure, are transformed into personal matters in order to have meaning (Sennett; 1977).

At the center of collaborative services lie creative communities. Groups of people that get together around a common interest and through collaboration they co-create convivial tools. According to Manzini (2017) social forms are made possible, durable and, where appropriate, relocatable by acting on a social ecosystem to make it more desirable. This can be done through two main courses of action: the design of dedicated enabling systems that foster the existence of a specific family of social forms; or through the modification of the characteristics of the environment as a whole, so as to make it more desirable for a multiplicity of social forms.

The theme of collaboration refers to a way of living in the home, the neighborhood and the city that includes the sharing of spaces and services in a framework of self-organization, mutual-help, friendship and good neighborliness (Manzini and Jegou, 2003; Meroni, 2007). The application of this framework of creative communities fosters the creation of tools and approaches that enable people to ‘take back the city’ through the expression of narratives that are left behind or hidden by the hegemonic managers of cultural capital in a city.

### **3. Street art, Graffiti, Gentrification, Sustainability**

#### **3.1 Street Art and Graffiti in the Public Space**

According to Waclawek, Graffiti and Street Art are special forms of art for three main reasons. Above all, as non-standard intrusive practices, they challenge art institutions and "legal" urban art. Secondly, these practices are driven by and lead the visual identity of the city, assimilating the environment and recreating it. Thirdly, writers and street artists criticize the meaning of ownership through the creative process at a fundamental level, because they perceive the city through an alternative visual (Waclawek, 2011: 9). By privatizing public space and re-processing



Figure 1. A mural created by the Greek street artist INO, inside the Greek - Cypriot Parliament.

the spots used by advertising companies, street artists critically explore modern urban life. Just as the streets are transformed into spaces through the movement of people, it is precisely Street Art that transforms the urban fabric through its transient materiality and the imaginary narrative and spiritual dialogs it raises (Waclawek, 2011: 186).

Street art, regardless of the way it is done, sometimes openly and freely, legally or illegally, other times commissioned and other times not, continues to decorate the cities of the world. Although Street Art is present today across the globe, from America to Australia and from Asia to the southern edge of Africa, preserving a variety of expressions and showing signs of locality, one thing that has changed in recent years is the public criticism and disposition against the phenomenon. Large events, often supported by public or private sectors (as in the case of Philadelphia Murals, Wynwood Walls in Miami or the Bushwick Collective in New York), invite artists, and while a few years ago smaller societies faced the expression in the streets with suspicion, today they tend to embrace such actions or even create them in their neighborhoods.

From different perspectives, Graffiti and Street art produce different meanings, but also perform different purposes. While there are still strong supporters of the creation of Graffiti and Street art outside the legal frameworks in many places worldwide, there undoubtedly exists the phenomenon of commercialization of these types of expression. This commercialization does not refer exclusively to the collection and distribution of works in galleries but also to in the commission of artists, either by public (such as the Cypriot Parliament commissioning the Greek artist INO) or by private bodies for advertising or recognition purposes, touristic development or simply economical profit.

Street artworks are the derivatives of the passer's-by contact with the inscribed surface of a wall: it is direct and ephemeral. "These works cannot be 'held'; they can only be seen". Irvine endorses Bochner's concluding argument with the opinion of a street artist: "By collapsing the space between the artwork and the viewer, a wall painting negates the gap between lived time and pictorial time, permitting the work to engage larger philosophical, social, and political issues". The orientation of the walls has changed: what was previously a discussion of a

work done in an institutionalized art space has been shifted to the public space. If the zones and boundaries are completely removed, a continuity can be recognized between the institutionalized space of art and the public space that surrounds everyday life (Irvine, 2012).

In her article, 'Public Space: Open to Everybody but How?' Emma Paulsson (2009), uses Street Art (and Graffiti) as an example for portraying different interpretations of the right of free expression in the public space. On the one hand, she argues, there are those who believe that uncommissioned works or personal expressions of Street art constitute threats to the public character of the public space. On the other hand, there are those who see Street Art and other alternative local interventions as fundamental prerequisites for a democratic city and as a contribution to the development of cities in general. Street and Graffiti Art practices cause intense controversy in political and urban circles: Illegal art is considered a threat to the organized class and is associated with insecurity. Those who view Street Art as a threat often have an interpretation of the right in public space that differs from that of people who use the city in an alternative way.

To sum up we posit that Street Art and Graffiti are artistic expressions of activism in the city. The goal of this guerilla paint war is to take the city back, to combat gentrification and to prove to the people that they can take charge of the commons around them and enforce their collective values to them. However, for this process to be fruitful continuous sustainable social processes have to be put in motion. A war after all is nothing more than a collection of battles.



Figure 2: Left: a 3D crafted logotype of Stray Art Festival below the iconic building of the town hall of Hermoupolis marking the beginning of one of the many different pre-events of the festival held in Syros throughout the year. Right: An exhibition (Stray Art Fest pre-event) under the title “Mixed Guests” presented artworks by the Greek street artists Kez, Puppet and Same84 in Syros (June 2018).

#### 4. Case study: Stray Art Festival

##### 4.1 A Street Art festival in a small Cycladic island

The Stray Art Festival began to be created at the beginning of the year 2016. Since then, it has been organized twice, in 2017 and 2018 with the third edition being prepared at the moment. The main core and aim of this festival is the creation of murals in abandoned, neglected or "indifferent" parts of the city. The festival lasts for three days, in which artists create their works - though some of them start earlier than the predetermined dates - and in this weekend the creation of murals is accompanied by live music, performances and other types of artistic or even sporting spectacles. Stray Art utilizes different surfaces of the urban landscape every year, adhering to all the legitimate processes and providing all the necessary licenses, aiming to spread Street Art to as many points of the island as possible. One of the slogans of the festival is "we want to leave something behind every year", which has become fact with the murals created by famous street artists in the Greek and the international Street Art scene.

The undertaking of the festival exists within the doctoral project of the Author that aims to explore the extent and depth of interaction and cross pollination between Street Art and Design. The main research question and one of the main objectives of this research is the study of cases where designerly theories, methodologies and techniques can be used to contribute to the development of processes and works of Street Art. Stray Art Festival is such a case, bringing together design practitioners and methods relevant to the overall objectives of said doctoral project.



Figure 3. Stray Art Festival 2017: at the first edition of the festival, the chosen wall to be painted was the main wall of Neorion, the shipyard of Syros.

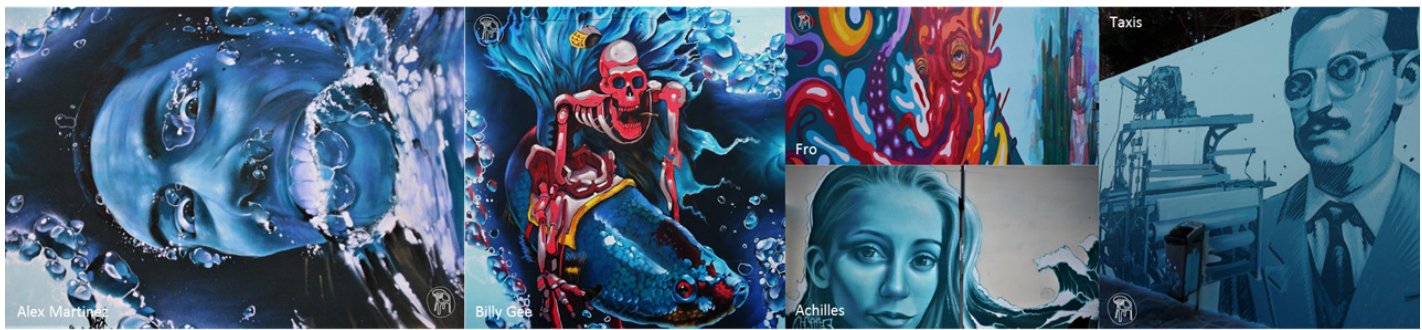


Figure 4. Final artworks on the wall of Neorion (Stray Art Festival 2017). From left to right: Alex Martinez, Billy Gee, Fro, Achilles and Taxis (on random order, not the actual one painted on the wall).

The objectives and the core values of the Stray Art Festival include creation, culture, expression and communication. More specifically, Stray Art tends to become a festival that is:

- Open to all: addressed to everybody, regardless of color, gender, age, inviting them to participate. It is based on freedom, accessibility, openness and hospitality.
- Contemporary: refers to an organization that is modern and 'hip' while being diachronic and can be a meeting point for communication and culture.
- Respecting the environment that hosts it: Ideally, it will leave the space in which it is hosted, cleaner and more beautiful than it was. It fosters cooperation, harmony and adaptability.

- Trusts its heritage: if history is repeated, let's try to repeat it, avoiding mistakes and focusing on the positives. As tradition teaches; authenticity, wisdom, and finally, family.

Already two years old, Stray Art Festival is the opportunity to invite Graffiti artists and muralists, musicians and other performers to the island of Syros. Following the imperative of branding and strategic planning, Stray Art Festival, with the effort to remain firm in its vision, values and specifications, succeeded in a short time to become a Street Art "stop" for one of the many islands of the Greek archipelago, but also managed to allow the inhabitants of Hermoupolis to see Street Art in relation to their own city with a different set of eyes.



Figure 5: Stray Art Festival 2018: on the left, artists working on the walls (and a car!) at the Public Sports Center 'Dimitrios Vikelas' in Syros, at the third and final day of the festival. On the right, the very same place at night, full of people dancing and celebrating the end of the festival.

#### 4.2 A sustainable Street Art festival

In its first year, the festival used an initial capital, a small amount of money donated by local authorities and local stores, which allowed for initial running costs. Subsequently, much of the volunteer work of the team members focused on creating products and services that would allow for a development of financial resources. Those products and services varied from food to drink and merchandise (clothing, stickers, bags etc.) on sale during the festival and other design or artistic services throughout the rest of the year, in exchange for in kind or financial sponsorship.

At this point, it is important to stress that Stray Art Festival is open and free of charge to all visitors who attend. There is neither an entrance fee, nor tickets for the concerts or the parties. Additionally, all the invited muralists and Graffiti artists - 13 on the first year (2017) and 20 on the second (2018) - had their transportation, accommodation and food for the three days of the festival secured by the organizing team. The same applies to the invited musicians and any other performer invited by the festival.

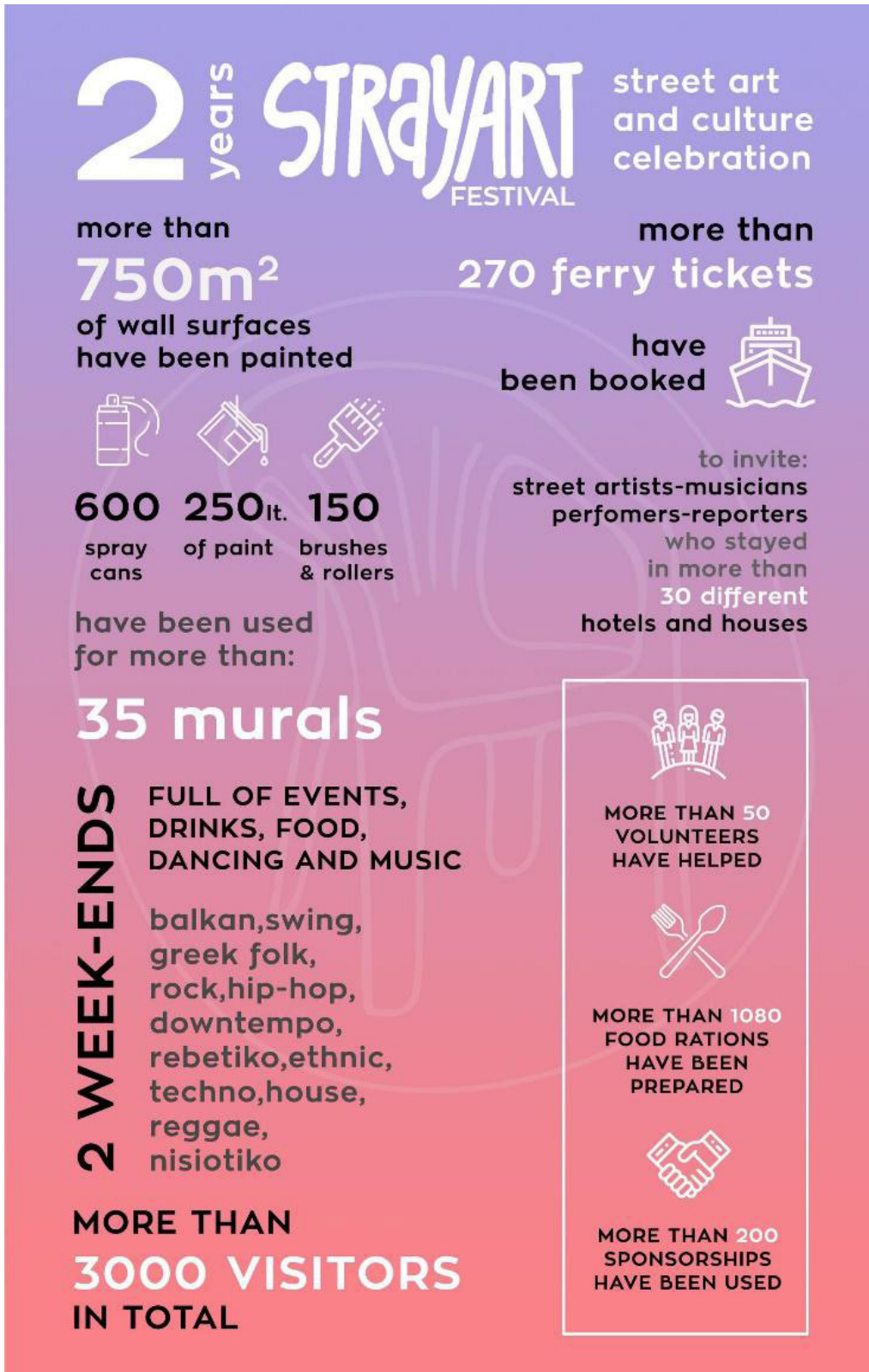


Figure 6. An infographic created by the branding team of Stray Art Festival.

In this way, every year, the response of both the public and the prospective artists is greater - few are the ones who gave a negative response on the prospect of spending a weekend with everything paid on an island in the Aegean and in which they have the opportunity to advertise their work, whether it be music, painting or even seminars or workshops that can be hosted. Moreover, when the turnout is bigger, so the publicity for the festival is bigger. More ferry tickets are cut, local shops have more traffic, the summer season is lengthened: all these are reasons that, over time, make the municipality and the local community trust and support even more the organizing team and the festival itself, either financially or by other types of action. Additionally, word of mouth is another kind of advertising that makes the festival and its identity become stronger.

This is the power of Street art: it has the ability to transform the urban environment, while on a larger level and at the same time with the aid of design processes it can bring profit to all the stakeholders involved. It must be stressed that stories like this are “written on the walls”, and as a starting point, the walls are transformed into colorful palimpsests, which appeal to more devoted fans, who do not hesitate to visit Syros again and again, to admire the artworks and to attend the festival. The economic, social and cultural benefits are indisputable; apart from historical indicators, they are also instruments for the promotion of Syros in Greece and the world. The value of these murals therefore invaluable. The trump card of Stray Art Festival and of any other Street Art festival whatsoever, is that when it continues to evolve year after year, artworks in many different public spaces on the island will be created; or in other islands also if Stray Art Festival succeeds in “wandering in other neighborhoods” in the future. This spatial spreading of stray art acts as a reminder that both the commons, public spaces in the city, and the cultural production and character of a place belong to all of us. By going beyond the ephemeral character of a festival and investing time and effort in fostering the emergence of a bottom up creative community we believe that a long term strategy for managing and negotiating who the city belongs to has been created.

But what are the benefits for the people who are planning and implementing this festival? What is it that makes the organizing team and the volunteers come back each year to spend precious time and energy on this endeavor? The answer is not one-dimensional. Each and every person returns for his own reasons. However, one of the things that every member of the group shares with the others, more or less, is the opportunity to be empowered, to leave their mark in the place where they live and study, or work. This kind of engagement allows them to look at the public space as an extension of their everyday life and as a fertile ground to cultivate their ideas and reap the spiritual fruits of their labors. This may also be the true concept of cooperation, through the design process. This is an example of a method for designing a service that furthers local sustainable cultural capital by investing in Street Art.



Figure 7. Stray Art Festival 2018: artists Apset and Dem working on the 'final touches' for their mural.

## 5. Conclusions

The juxtaposition between ephemeral and permanent has long been discussed in art theory. In this setting we see the same interplay take shape in a different way. Is the festival or the creative community and the ongoing transformation of the city the central offering of the whole process? The festival is a three day happening that transforms the urban environment with color and sound, and it is this transformation that communicates the possibilities to the standerbys. At the same time the festival would never take place without the self-organized community of people to support it. The team itself would fail to grow and include more citizens without an offering, or a touchpoint, a time and place to interact with society. In short, neither the festival nor the creative community are the ends for this process they are simply the means. Each operates in different timescales and temporalities acting in a complementary way in the dialogical process of living in the city.

The strategic and tactical lessons of this approach highlight the ongoing process of mediating the city and the production of social capital in it. Street Art, just like any other tool, has the capacity to emancipate city dwellers and to act as a catalyst for the reconstitution of the public. However, at the same time it can become a tool of Gentrification creating bland, boring, corporate junk spaces devoid of any essence of place, grassroots participation or soul. In the words of Ken Liu "Every dystopia is a utopia for somebody else. It just depends where you are."

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