

## From Street Art to Murals: INO's Subversive Interventions in Urban Spaces

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**Abstract:** The main topic of my research of the Greek street art scene was its synergies with the reactions expressed by anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements. In this pattern, its most vocal proponent, INO, an anonymous muralist from Athens, coined the provocative term "brandalism" to initiate a new artistic practice aimed at cause antipathy towards the corporate branding of modern metropolises. If graffiti writers in the 1970s in New York City tried to "spray-bomb" public infrastructure with a single interpretation of symbols<sup>1</sup>, contemporary Athenian street artists wanted to directly attack commercial urban media by subversively processing images, slogans and icons. However, despite the efforts of the street artist to be declared an undesirable participant in urban vandalism, many street artists have become recognized as a kind of urban brands. INO is certainly one of the most important and most creative actors of this artistic and cultural phenomenon.

In this research, I used detailed examples of aesthetic form and individual practice in the work of this Athenian street artist to examine the creative tensions between branding and the use of urban space. Through personal views, I have tried to determine whether permanent theorizing and research should be much more deeply respected, and whether newly improved forms of design can play an important role in the production and consumption of this street art. The methods used in this research relied on the use of available literature, internet sources, a review of the history of wall painting, and a comparison of the works of other artists in the field of muralism.

**Keywords:** branding, graffiti, ino, murals, wall painting, street art.

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1 - Thinking primarily of Keith Herring (1958-1990), a legendary American artist whose pop art and graffiti works originated from the street culture of New York in the 1980s (Kershaw 1997: 19-25).

### 1. Introduction

Murals are the oldest known form of painting. The word mural comes from the Latin word *muris* - which means wall, or *muralis* - meaning wall. The first murals appeared during the Paleolithic on the cave walls. The most famous preserved wall paintings are in the caves of Lascaux in France (Fig. 1 a), and Altamira in Spain. Then they appeared for religious purposes in ancient Egypt, and at the end of the ancient era as fresco paintings on the walls of villas and houses in Greece and Rome. The best remains are found in Pompeii

and Herculaneum. Byzantine art also relied heavily on wall painting in its architecture and decoration. The walls of the most medieval churches in Serbia are also decorated with figures of saints on fresh plaster (Rouse 1996).

The mural has a narrative, decorative and memorial function. It used to be a symbol of wealth and prestige, and today it is an expression of artistic skill and initiative to transfer the artistic spirit to the wall surface. It carries a universal message, which graffiti does not have. Graffiti consists of signs, signatures, letters, and is often an expression of an individual's opinion on a social topic.

During the Mexican Revolution, murals took on a new dimension and became a powerful tool for visual communication, aimed at promoting socially critical messages (Folgarait 1998). The most important authors of that movement were Jose Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera (Fig. 1 b) and David Alfaro Siqueiras. Elements of pre-Columbian history, as well as Cubism, were applied in their works (Campbell 2003).

At the end of the 20th century, drawing on experiences from avant-garde painting, first of all, futurism, surrealism and radical Dadaism, and even comics, murals became a powerful tool of emancipation, freedom of expression, social activism and propaganda.

Today, murals also play a significant role in the relationship between art and politics. At the same time, they represent an aesthetic element that easily integrates into urban environments and turns them into real cultural artefacts, even monumental works. As urban art becomes increasingly popular, many major brands often collaborate with artists to create promotional campaigns and advertisements, demonstrating incredible skill and talent. The most recognized authors of this period are Keith Haring, Shepard Fairey, OS Gemeos, Banksy, Fail and many others (Jamie 2018).

## 2. INO's Biography and artistic opus

Best known for his figurative murals of monumental proportions, INO is one of the most internationally recognized Greek street artists. Although he began his career as a graffiti artist in the early 2000s, writing messages and critiques intended for Greek society, over the years he developed his distinctive style defined by clearly fragmented forms, photorealistic elements and the use of a range of grey tones with light blue details. His momentary, stylized and easy-to-read murals often deal with social and political topics that affect the average citizen, creating a dialogue between the viewer and art.

Coming from Piraeus, a port suburb of Athens, the anonymous artist prefers to keep his identity private. The only thing that is known about him is that he graduated in fine arts at the National Technical University in Athens. Although his main field of work is painting, INO also attended workshops in photography, typography, multimedia, hypermedia and graphic design. The artist made his first experimental works in his early teens while attending high school. INO's ability to combine and continuously improve his artistic abilities is best seen in some of his latest works conceived from realistically presented forms, usually in black and white.



Figure 1 a, b, c. The paintings in the cave of Lascaux, southern France, which date back to the prehistoric period, can be unofficially called the first murals. The term was widely used thanks to the artistic movement “muralists” in Mexico. The most important representative of the movement was Diego Rivera. The work in Figure b represents The Detroit Industry Murals series of Diego Rivera murals that include twenty-seven painted panels depicting the work of Ford. The work is exhibited in the central hall of the Institute of Art in Detroit, USA (1933). The last painting in the series presents the work of Gaga Hamilton entitled Forest For The Trees painted on the wall of the DeSoto building, on Broadway, New York, USA (2014).

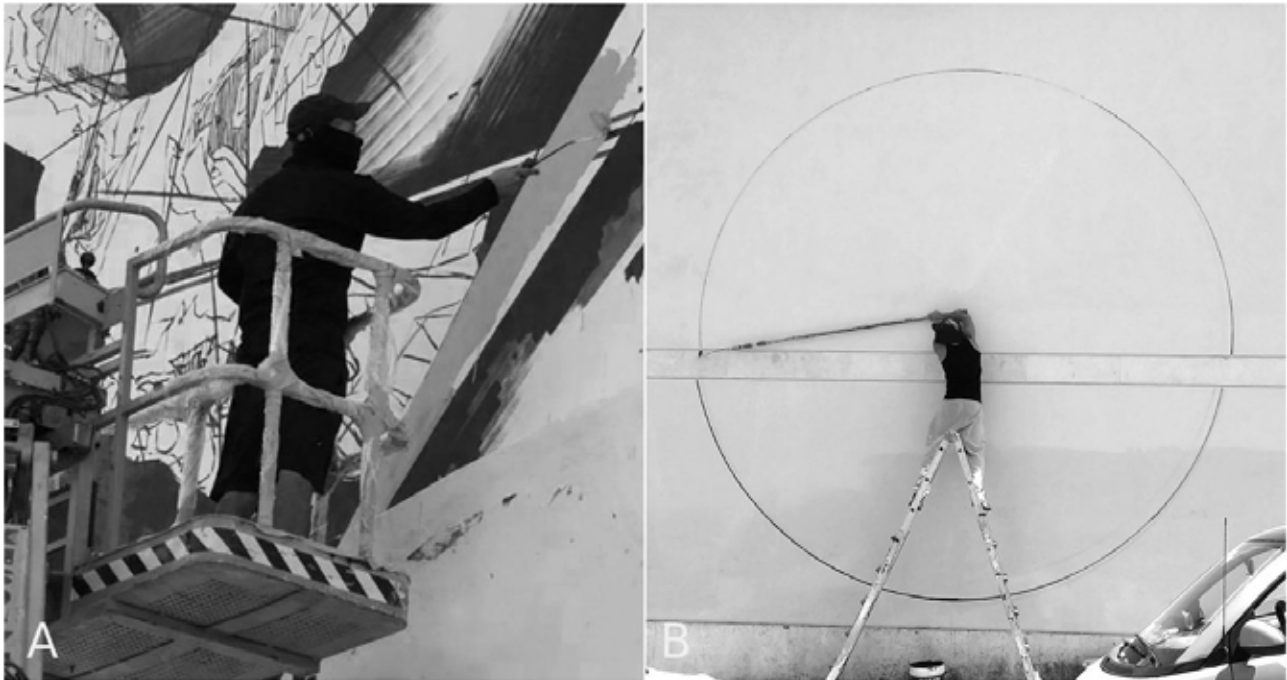


Figure 2 a, b. Greek painter INO during work on his mural *Wake Up*, Athens, Greece (2015)

Whether on the walls of densely populated megalopolises or abandoned factories in industrial suburbs, INO murals inevitably attract the attention of passers-by not only because of its dynamic and unique style but also because of the messages they try to convey. His astonishing work deals with social and political issues ranging from the economic crisis, recession and poverty, to restrictions on freedom of expression, racial discrimination and the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, Syria and other countries in the Middle East. Through Europe and the United States, crowned with international success, he inevitably became one of the most respected Greek street artists. Apart from Athens, his works adorn the walls of London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Stockholm, Rome, Zaragoza, Minsk, Miami, New York, Frankfurt. He has participated in many exhibitions and festivals of street art around the world.

In August 2016, he took part in the *Art United Us* Project in Kyiv, where he painted *Instability*, his largest mural to date

(Fig. 6 a, b, c, d). INO's striking street art has attracted the attention of international media, including Reuters, Guardian and New York Times. His client list includes Nacional Geographic, Coca-Cola Company, Onassis Cultural Center, Story Miami Nightclub and Dj Avicii.

INO very effectively uses public art as a specific platform for building a universal cultural identity, which we can use in any community, anywhere in the world, but also as a seal of one's identity. His work primarily stems from the need and desire to improve and define a more humane urban environment.

The main features of his work can be considered as his readable visual language, very comprehensible messages, carefully analyzed themes of the work, critical attitude towards today's burning social problems, monumentality and scale of the work in space, unique colours (or absence of colour), as well as the use of new tools and technologies.



Figure 3 a, b. Mural: Pray, Athens, Greece (2010). The study of the hands of the apostles (studie Zu Den Händen Suavemente apostels) this time presented downwards undoubtedly indicated the pessimism and apathy of the society in Greece at that time. At the same time, this mural opened the door to new projects for INO.

The first significant work called Prayer was created in Athens in 2010 amid during in the economic recession in Greece. It was also the first mural of monumental proportions in Greece. Inspired by the work *"Praying"* (German: *Betende Hände*), the masterpiece of German graphic artist, painter and theorist Albrecht Dürer dated from 1508, INO created a new composition by placing a spiritual model in one provocative contemporary context (Fig. 3 a, b).

### 3. Working with context

The street is not a blank canvas. It is an accumulation of objects, and each of them has a special potential that arises from its physical qualities and relationship to the functions of the city and local history. In properly designed street works of art of INO, these forms and meanings are not the backgrounds, they are the working material. First of all, the artist has to choose the location, and this is half of the work. Of course, the location can be chosen from the desire to work with existing textures and colours, or the history integrated in them. But in the case of INO, there are many more nuances in that game. The mural can be placed high or low, close to the spectator or at a certain distance. It can be placed so that it is very visible and reaches a large number of people, or in such a way that it is barely visible, in which case the message reaches a smaller number of people, but when it does, it reaches deeper. It can be very visible, but only from a certain point of view. All these choices are effective ways to modulate the message, which makes INO a successful street artist (Fig. 4, 5).



Figure 4 a, b, c. Work on the mural Atlas, supported by the Urban Forms Foundation in Łódź (, Poland (2016)



Figure 5 a, b, c, d. Work on the mural *The Entrepreneur*, Part of the project: Art United Us, Kyiv, Ukraine (2016)

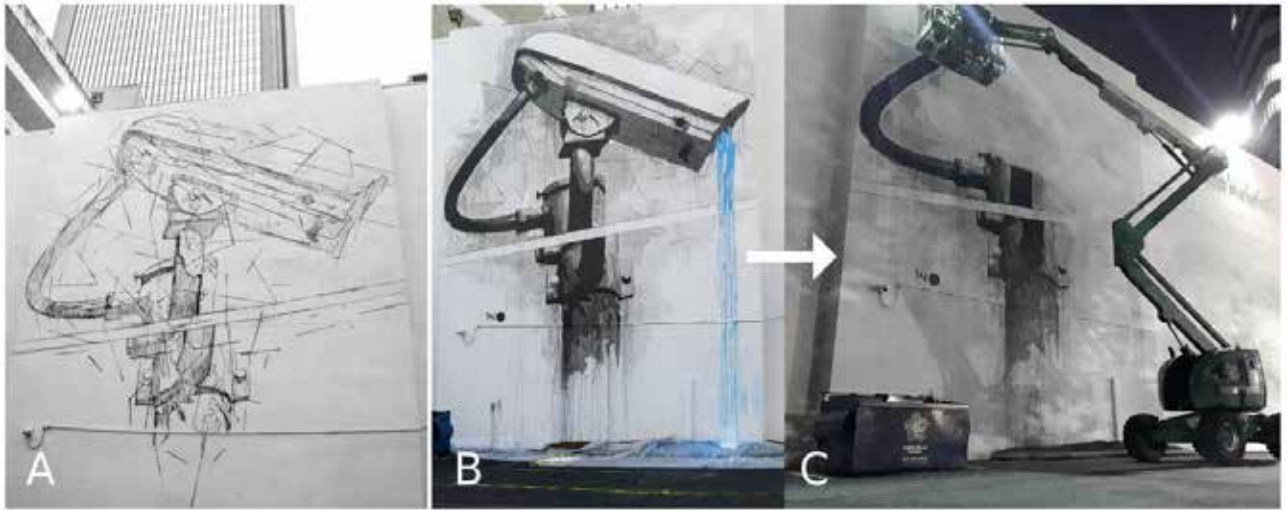


Figure 6 a, b, c. Realization of the mural Capital Control, on the wall of the Thrust company in Jacksonville, Florida (2016)

By making meaningful use of context, INO has devised various ways to achieve maximum visibility and durability, while taking little risk as possible in the execution itself. He uses architecture carefully by finding places and choosing points where he can work unhindered. He skillfully uses the advantage of the chosen place, for example waiting for a certain time of day, week or year when the place is left.

In addition to all these physical aspects, working with a certain context in the INO's work includes playing with the meanings and connotations of the objects that make it up.

#### 4. Transversal quality of INO street art

One important aspect of INO's work with contexts is the fact that they can be easily rearranged. Due to the unregulated nature of mural-making practices, street artists may ignore property-dictated boundaries to determine where they may or may not operate. A work of street art can cover two or more adjacent surfaces of different functions at the same time.

Street art can, therefore, make visible how arbitrary and cultural these boundaries of action and physical demarcations are. Space and matter can return to their natural state. Murals affirm the limitation of the money where architecture and property dictate it. Instead of questioning the logic of money, municipalities and real estate agencies again denies it in its murals and does so in a very recognizable way.

Another key to INO's muralism lies in the fact that in his work, street art changes the environment only symbolically. His street art uses modest, temporary materials such



Figure 7 a, b, c. Work on the mural Sign, Thessaloniki, Greece (2017)

as paint or paper, which simply transform the space into a symbolic level. For that reason, it can be read as a kind of parody of the capitalist order of the world, a presumed order that inevitably returns to the amalgam from which it originated. Street art can, therefore, be a kind of prediction of the future state of the building. This is one of the reasons why INO's art can sometimes be disturbing because it can emphasize the beauty of a building that is essentially just an unfortunate ruin (Fig. 7 a, b, c).

## 5. Human size

Physical size is one of the crucial characteristics of INO's works, as well as the relative position of the spectator-audience. The manipulation of size and distance opens up a huge field for nuanced expression. Great work can surpass the viewer, or it can move over great distances and can still be read. Small work can go through the cracks of the landscape and suddenly appear, creating surprisingly intimate

experiences. But here it is most important to note that all this INO's play with the size of a mural, necessarily, takes place within human dimensions. His art always works on the scale that refers to the human body (Fig. 8 a, b, c).

To reach beyond its body, the INO also uses the features of the architecture surrounding the selected location. Taking advantage of this type of architectural feature is also useful for modulating the distance between the work and its viewer, and is often used to increase the visibility of the work. It allows the viewer to measure the physical dimension of their environment by projecting their physical dimension onto it. Therefore, every street work of art is a visible human presence. It naturally becomes part of the environment, as one of many human interventions on it, openings or damage, as is the case with the mural "Snowblind" from 2016 (Fig. 9 a, b). As a consequence, street art has a particularly pronounced potential for intimate engagement of passers-by.



Figure 8 a, b, c. Mural Last Supper on the wall of the overpass in Athens, Greece (2018)



Figure 9 a, b. Work on the mural Snowblind. Association supported work: Prometheus Liver Patient, Tision suburb, Athens, Greece (2016)



Figure 10 a, b, c. Mural Nobody, Reykjavík, Iceland (2016)

In the realization of murals, in most cases INO is not forced to understand the working environment, muralism is technically used by tools and devices such as scaffolding or cranes, which in turn allow the artist to ignore the context of the work, but helps to create a shape based on the characteristics of the terrain and the needs of its inhabitants. From this point of view, the mural is another instrument for controlling the environment and its population.

The mural does not reveal anything about the possibilities and limitations of the relationship between the human body and the built environment. It is no longer a portrait of the relationship between a person and his environment, which is usually open to dialogue. An important consequence of this is the fact that viewers can react to a work of street art, can correct it or promote. The street art of INO is, therefore, a call to action - it empowers the viewer. It takes us back to a time when each person was able to rearrange their environment as much as their potential would allow. On INO's murals, it is clear that the audience is not a passive spectator and consumer. Street art can be a dialogue between people, while murals are a single communication channel.

## 6. Tactile dimension

The spectator-consumer of public art must also physically touch the work. It also activates his consciousness towards a new level of reality and prolongs the duration of the experience. For others, it helps to build a subjective environment different from the one imposed on us by the imposed projected space. One of the valuable aspects of INO's networked works is that the viewer, experience the entire work of art, must be analytical and searchable. And since his street works of art are ephemeral, sometimes only temporary, they initiate the audience to explore on their own. Thanks to the techniques and textures that INO uses in its work, his murals also have a high tactile value.



Figure 11a, b. Mural Wake Up on the wall of a residential building in Monastiraki, a suburb of Athens, Greece (2014)

Another key point of his work is also that in many cases his murals use the margins of the landscape. During the creation and search for street works of art, both the artist and the spectator often come to explore parts of the city that they would otherwise rarely visit. Places such as alleys or abandoned residential areas, dead spaces under and around bridges (Vargas 2015). Theorist Gilles Clement<sup>1</sup> describes the recognizable value of these places as unique parts of cities freed from the control of a market economy and consumer society, and how they thus become the only chance for a city dweller to find space for natural and human needs such as gathering and creativity.

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1 - Gilles Clement (born 1943 in Argenton-sur-Creuse, Indre, France) is a French gardener, garden designer, botanist, entomologist and writer. He attracted attention by designing public parks in France, such as Parc Andre-Citroen. In 1998, he was the winner of the French National Landscape Award (Jones 2010).



Figure 12 a, b. Mural Fail, part of the RAW project, painted on the wall of an elementary school in Miami, Florida, USA (2018)

## 7. Emotional dimension

Comparing street art and traditional painting, additional differences can be identified in what could be called the emotional dimension of the work. In the case of INO's work, the most obvious of these differences has an element of surprise: his street art can appear in unexpected places and then disappear unexpectedly at any moment. But most of the differences in this emotional dimension would have to do with the energy embedded in his artwork during his preparation and performance process. The preparation of a work of street art requires a practical approach to its context. In a large number of cases, INO is forced to improvise. The situation is often uncertain and tense, the artist must work and be awake at the same time. This is certainly an exciting aspect of his work, especially when the end of a long and complicated preparation process. Some of his works were done during the night, such as a mural called *Fail Performed* in Miami, USA 2018 (Fig. 12 a, b).

Because of all these differences, street art and murals have contrasting emotional content. Contrasting processes, situations and values fit into the mentioned emotional dimension of the work, something that the attentive viewer

can certainly notice. There is little in common between traditional-exhibited painting or virtual art created digitally, insecure work on murals with improvised tools, and work in difficult physical conditions, therefore, in both cases, the resulting energies are very different (Latzke 1999).

## 8. Freedom of thought

One of the last features of INO's work listed here, probably much more obvious, has to do with freedom of thought. Corporations and institutions that tend to stand behind the production of murals and the dictates of the market usually have their interests, which can easily be translated into censorship. Although in recent years his work has been largely sponsored by international institutions, INO carefully chooses the themes of its murals, but more interestingly, it also in some way censors its work only because it feels it is its responsibility to work on the prominent, permanently financed with public money. In contrast, in the conception of smaller, ephemeral street works of art, he is usually more free to use much more critical messages (Fig. 14 a, b).



Figure 13 a, b, c. Mural: Face on the facade wall of the Onassis Center in Athens (2017), Mural: Dan, Naoussa, Greece (2018). Mural detail: Pamet, Benaki Museum, Athens (2018)

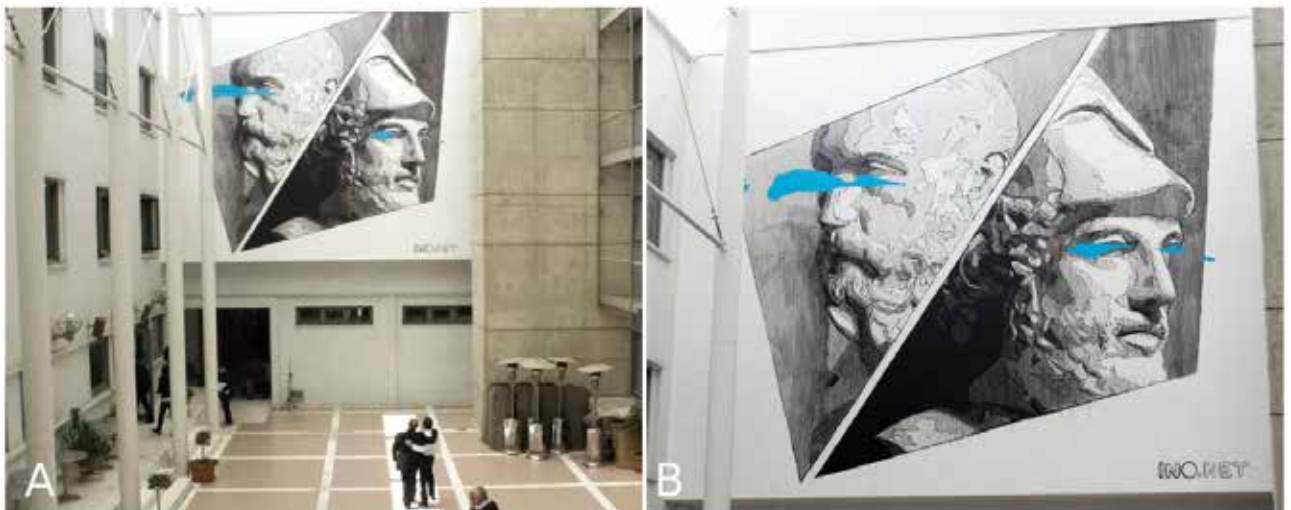


Figure 14 a, b. Mural: Ignorance is Bliss on the wall of the atrium of the Parliament Building in Nicosia, Cyprus (2016)



Figure 15. Mural: *Funk The Power*, Ibiza, Spain (2018)

### 9. Did INO's murals achieve the expected goal?

A significant portion of the many new artists that have emerged in recent years come from the fields of illustration, design, and have no background in street art or murals. It has also been mentioned that the wall as a surface and medium provides visibility for the work of street artists. And, of course, their work somehow becomes more noticeable. But the visibility of murals is different from the visibility of street art. Furthermore, although street art is usually smaller and less prominent than monumental murals, it is also closer to people, so its visibility can be understood as more valuable. On the other hand, murals owe their easy visibility and readability to practical experiences of architecture and advertising, billboards, a type of visual language derived from the commercial sphere of society that we have been consuming for decades (Donegan 1987).

Another argument in favour of INO's work is his successful transition from the field of street art to muralism. Unlike other authors, he skillfully uses basic artistic elements, clear composition, but at the same time inherited experiences from previous artistic periods of Dada<sup>2</sup> and European avant-garde. In his works, the outlines of the styles of the German creator Max Ernst and Man Ray are sometimes recognized (Figs. 16 a, b). But although his murals possess their inherent values, there is a problem when they become so prominent creating harmful terminological confusion, defying the political establishment that they often disappear from the media and even from the streets (Rubanu 1998).

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2 - Dada Or Dadaism was the artistic movement of the European avant-garde in the early 20th century, with its first headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland, at the Cabaret Voltaire; New York's Dada began around 1915, and after 1920 Dada flourished in Paris, France (Bergius 1997: 12-12).



Figure 16 a, b. Mural *No Future*, in collaboration with Stigma La, Athens, Greece (2018)

## 10. Conclusion

The works of art of a site-specific site, in this case, murals, are created in a certain place, and their content depends entirely on the way they are placed in that spatial environment and do not function separately. The sources of the basic idea, and later the project that the artist should realize in that place, spring from the research of the place itself, and although it may contain sculptural elements, it cannot function in a gallery or other spatial setting in the same way as in a specific place (Rubanu 1998).

In the case of INO, contextual specificity is derived from the research of specific locations, which in methodological

terms included different types of contextualization mechanisms that this artist took over from the field of history, social theory, sociology and daily political reality. The contextual specificity of visual expression so far outweighed the specificity of location that his artistic messages focused on the notion of the urban community and the public artist as a man whose work responds to the questions, needs, and concerns that define that elusive, hard-defined entity. Thus, issues such as social exclusion, economic recession, or intergenerational communication gain as much importance for the artist as the problems of formal organization and spatial installation of the work in a specific institutional and historical context. During his work on murals, Ino collaborated with hospitals, community centres, prisons and

social workers. In his works, Ino also re-examines the audience: who has the right to vote and maintaining an active civil society, asking whose cultural needs and practices are recognized, legitimized and respected, and whose are not. In other words, in his work, he shifted his interest from the public site itself to the public sphere.

Photography, unfortunately, captures only a very small part of the process of creating INO murals. It captures only one specific moment in the life of the work, goes beyond the visual context, fails to notice any other sensory features of the environment and the part of the city to which it belongs. Due to its ephemerality, his street art is understandable to a wide audience. Thanks to the direct and wide exchange of photographs of works via the Internet, INO's art has greatly expanded the potential publicity of street works of art and thus inspired a large number of young muralists around the world.

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