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ANALYSIS

"No Wobble": Anonymous Anti-War Street Art in Russia, 2022–2023

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Abstract

In March 2022, Alexandra Arkhipova asked the subscribers to her Telegram channel, "(Non)entertaining anthropology," to send examples of anonymous anti-war street art, on the condition that they had personally seen the pictured object. This request spread widely, and people sent photos from across Russia. The photos have now been compiled into an online exhibition available at www.nowobble.net that features 471 exhibits from more than 50 Russian cities. This contribution provides an overview of the context of ideology, censorship, and repression in Russia and describes the types of messages presented by the pieces included in the exhibition.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A few weeks later, one of the authors of this exhibition found a small, hand-painted "No War" sticker on the floor of his home in Moscow. The sticker had been dropped by his 14-year-old daughter. It turned out that she had been drawing them and, together with her friends, sticking them in the subways and on the streets (taking all possible precautions). After hearing his daughter's story, he asked her to give him the remaining stickers and decided to put them up himself. His daughter gave the stickers to him with pride (they were well drawn) and relief (as he would come to understand).

While sticking the first sticker at the Leningradsky train station, he experienced a great fear: What would happen if, right now, a policeman, a vigilant patriot, or the lens of a video camera linked to a facial recognition system were to see him? His hands were shaking and sweating, his legs were cotton wool, his mouth was dry. Having placed the sticker, he left at once, trying not to run. There were still a few of them in his hands; they were burning a hole in his pocket and he wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible. But he also wanted to place them effectively, so that the inscription would be seen by as many people as possible and they would realize that someone else was against the war—that it was possible to be against it.

This case is not unique and this fear is not accidental.

People who want to speak out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine (and have no other means to do so) have started to paint graffiti, stick stickers, and create installations—and have been seriously punished for it. In an attempt to avoid punishment, they use various methods of disguise. In September 2022, Tyumen resident Alisa Klimentova wrote "Нет в***е" (Net v***e—no to war) on the pavement. She was arrested by the police. When the case was heard in court, Alisa stated that she had actually written the phrase "No to wobble" (*Rutilus caspicus* or "Caspian roach," a type of fish) because she did not like that fish. In Russian, "war" (*voina*) and "wobble" (*vobla*) sound similar and have the same number of letters, which is important for the coded language.

The judge chose to believe the girl and let her go. After the story became widespread, however, she was brought to court again, her case was reviewed, and she was fined. The crossed-out Caspian roach has since become a symbol of anti-war resistance, appearing in all kinds of disguises and coded language (496-SPb-19-11). We therefore chose the wobble as the symbol of the exhibition.

Together with a team of volunteers, the authors of these lines have amassed a collection of anti-war street art—stickers, leaflets, graffiti, and complex installations (471 exhibits)—that began to appear on the streets of Russian cities immediately following the start of Russian invasion.

Not being art historians, we did not aim to select artistically valuable artifacts. That is why the term "street art" that appears in the exhibition's title is somewhat misleading. What is important to us is the creative intention of the authors of anti-war graffiti, their search for their own way of communicating their thoughts to the viewer, their choice of place, and the way in which they play with the surrounding signs and space.

We started to collect graffiti in March 2022. Alexandra Arkhipova asked the subscribers to her Telegram channel, "(Non)entertaining Anthropology" (https://t.me/anthro_fun), to send examples of anonymous anti-war street art, on the condition that they had personally seen the pictured object. This request spread widely, and people sent photos from all over Russia.

We were interested in the diversity of types of expression, placement, and artistic execution, so when selecting examples we were guided by the principle of selecting "every creature in a pair" and did not select repeated texts with the same messages and codes. As a result, we cannot draw any statistical conclusions about the frequency of graffiti distribution by type or city; this is not what we were aiming to do.

Ideology, Censorship, and Repression in Russia, 2022–2023

Although anti-Ukrainian discourse has existed in Russia for the past decade, the ideology of war was not prepared in advance, despite the Donbass conflict and the annexation of Crimea. Since March 2022, propagandists have been imposing empty, meaningless signs—the Latin letters Z and V—on the public, turning them into ideological symbols. "Z," originally just a symbol derived from the word "South-West" and used internally by Russian troops, has been imbued with new meaning: it is now taken as an abbreviation for "za," meaning "in support of" or "for" the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the help of these propagandists, the authorities have created the appearance of broad support for the "special military operation": these letters appear on advertising billboards and on official buildings, while groups of children in schools and kindergartens are assembled into the shape of a gigantic letter Z.

People with anti-war views often compare Z to the swastika, which is well reflected in the 2022 joke:

"Where did the Z sign come from?"

"This is the first half of the swastika."

"Where is the second half?"

"It was stolen."

The inner obscurity of the sign and its associations with the swastika make Z an obvious target of ridicule by graffiti authors, and there are many such examples in our collection (147-Spb-24-03, 175-Msk-20-04).

In parallel with the imposition of Z-symbolism, Russian propaganda initially tried to convince citizens that "there is no war." This is the uniqueness of Russian propaganda. Yes, "we are surrounded by unfriendly countries" and "the collective West is waging an eternal war against us," but, as impossible as it may seem, the very fact of a real war was denied. The Presidential Administration and Russian federal channels insisted that there was a "special (i.e., 'none of your business') military operation," the goals of which were mythical "denazification" and "demilitarization," with vague and indeterminate concrete objectives. In view of this, one of the graffiti authors, apparently addressing Vladimir Putin, says: "You'd better denazify your head!" (346-SPb-07-05).

Now, in the summer of 2023, the authorities have changed their strategy and, instead of denying the war, they have gone the way of its "routinization" and "normalization." The "special military operation" takes place somewhere out there and does not require excessive sacrifices. Citizens are encouraged to support the war, but within limits acceptable to them. For well-to-do residents of big cities, this means donating money for military equipment; for children, it entails writing letters to the front. The general goal is to "support our boys." Active recruitment of volunteer contractors continues in the regions, although the selling-point of these efforts is gradually shifting from "save the Motherland" to "solve your financial problems." Notably, it is not only recruits from Russian prisons who have become contract soldiers in exchange for early release; so-called "mortgagees" (*ipotetchiki*)—people with low incomes who are trapped paying off loans—see it as a way to pay their debts.

Attempts to openly protest the war were brutally suppressed in its first week. By early March, in the central streets and squares of Moscow and St. Petersburg, police and Rosgvardia (special police force) units were on round-the-clock duty, detaining any "suspicious" passersby.

To prevent further attempts at protest, the Russian authorities strengthened an already repressive system, imposing an information blockade and passing new laws prohibiting talk of war. Rallies became permanently impossible; independent media outlets were banned,

blocked, and declared "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations," while the people who had created and worked for them were subjected to restrictions on their civil rights. Many people opposed to the war fled abroad.

The new laws—effectively military censorship—passed on March 4, 2022, are devised so that any statements about war can be labeled as "false information," enabling the person who spreads it to be fined or imprisoned. Using the word "war" in relation to the current Russian aggression in Ukraine could be considered "fake" because Russia was not engaged in a *war* but in a "special military operation." In 2022, even using the word "front" was considered by courts as "discrediting the Russian army" because we "do not have a front line" but a "line of contact."

Administrative laws (specifically 20.3.3 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses) provide for fines for the first and second instance of any protest against the war, while criminal laws (207.3.2, 280.3.1 of the Russian Criminal Code) allow people to be sent to prison for long terms—up to 15 years—for an anti-war poster, graffiti, a post on social media, or the spoken word. It is therefore no coincidence that a piece of graffiti reading "[This is] an inscription that is going to put me in jail for 15 years" (202-Spb-21-03) appears in our collection.

"Semiotic Guerrillas"

Anti-war-minded Russians were fated to protest in solitary acts. People wrote posts and comments, put Ukrainian flags on their online avatars, wore yellow and blue ribbons on their backpacks, and went on solitary pickets—risking serious punishment for all of this.

To avoid both judicial and extrajudicial prosecution (for instance, being fired from their jobs or having their children taken away by the foster care system), the lone protesters began to use the "weapons of the weak," in the terms of anthropologist James Scott (1985). Deprived of a public voice, Russians have created anonymous messages in urban space: on the walls of houses, fences, poles, at bus stops, and on the pavement.

The authors of such statements try to move beyond their circle of intimates and tell the Russian public what is going on around them. In this way, they violate the hegemony of Russian authorities in broadcasting the "correct" signals about the "special military operation." To slightly paraphrase Umberto Eco (1986), we call the anonymous authors who use such techniques "semiotic guerrillas."

Like real train-breaking guerrillas, the anonymous creators of stickers, posters, Instagram posts, and nano-figures are trying to undermine the information blockade around Russians: to talk about what the Russian government is hiding; to show that support for the war is by no means the lot of the majority; and to pull depoliticized Russians out of their comfort zones. "I want," one of the graffiti painters told us, "for my neighbor, going to the shop for bread, to know and see, starting with the inscriptions in the lift, that we started the war and that we should be ashamed" (male, 19 years old, St Petersburg).

Sometimes the motivation for creating a protest sign is not so much a desire to make a political statement as a desire to evoke empathy. For example, the maker of small figurines of Ukrainian women and children, which she places on the streets of her hometown at night, hopes to evoke the sympathy of passersby for those who are currently being bombed in Ukraine:

> I try to make them cute so that people will want to take my dolls in their hands, maybe bring them home, put them on the table, maybe give them to a child… Then maybe they will notice the yellow and blue ribbon in her braid and something will move them… And they will feel sorry for these people in general… (woman, 37 years old, St. Petersburg).

Semiotic guerrillas are not a unified group; they are first and foremost anonymous loners. From speaking with those graffiti writers who agreed to talk to us, we know that they have very little in common. Graffiti is done by both teenagers and very old people in different cities. Some of them have participated in oppositional political activity before; others have never been interested in politics. Graffiti is also created by both professionals (artists, designers, etc.) and people who have no inclination toward such activities.

Who are the semiotic guerrillas talking to? The addressee of their messages is not unified either. Some address Putin, some address Russian soldiers, but most often they address the Russian people, both those who support the war by their silence and those who think like them.

Repression against Graffiti Artists

This is not to say that the semiotic guerrillas are taking no risks at all. On the contrary: Russian law enforcement agencies are actively pursuing anti-war anonymous street art precisely because it attempts to break the hegemony of public expression.

Police look for graffiti artists using street cameras, while vigilant passersby, neighbors and janitors denounce them. In May 2022, V.B., a student at St. Petersburg State University, pasted pictures of bombed-out Ukrainian houses on a playground with the caption "And children? And children [killed]." A woman who was walking past with her child saw this and immediately reported him to the police, alleging that the pictures traumatized her son.

Between March 2022 and June 2023, Russian police detained and fined at least 653 people caught applying anti-war stickers or doing graffiti: these figures are taken

from our database of court cases for anti-war statements, which contains a total of 7,227 cases of detainees under Article 20.3.3—"discrediting the Russian army."

Moreover, 34 more graffiti artists and sticker creators have found themselves involved in criminal cases, and most of them have been awaiting trial or sentencing in temporary detention centres for months.

In March 2022, Mikhail Sukhoruchkin, a student from Kaliningrad, wrote "Putin = war" on a war monument and was immediately arrested and beaten by the police. A criminal case was opened against him. Fortunately, he managed to escape by illegally crossing the Russian-Polish border. St. Petersburg artist Sasha Skochilenko has been awaiting trial in a detention centre for almost a year—she faces about eight years in prison for substituting price tags in a shop with stories about mass killings in Bucha (093-Spb-13-04). The artist E. Ledyakin (pseudonym Leonid Cherny) of Yekaterinburg was given six months of "restrictions of freedom" for the banner "GruZ 200." ("Cargo200" is a Soviet military slang term for "killed in action" used during the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It became popular again at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The "z" sound of the word "GruZ" is displayed in Latin script and capitalized in reference to the letter "Z," one of the symbols of Russia's invasion).

When this paper was almost finished, we found out that graffiti artist Philip Kozlov (aka Philippenzo) had been arrested on July 29, 2023, while trying to return to Russia from abroad. He was detained, first receiving two consecutive administrative arrests and then criminal charges of "vandalism motivated by political hatred" for his numerous anti-war graffiti, including "Russiassault" (504-Msk-12-06-23) and "Zinc is ours!" (350-Volgograd-09-05). "Zinc is ours" is a reference both to the 2014 government slogan glorifying the annexation of Crimea ("Crimea is ours") and to the zinc coffins used to bring home soldiers who have died in action.

In August 2023, the entrepreneur and civil activist Dmitry Skurikhin was sentenced to 1.5 years in prison for writing the names of Ukrainian towns destroyed by the Russian invasion on the walls of his small store in a village near St. Petersburg.

And of course, public utilities officials are ordered to immediately destroy any war-related inscriptions they come across. Thus, semiotic guerrilla actions are dangerous, ephemeral, and immediate, while also being a challenge to document.

What Weapons Do Semiotic Guerrillas Use?

Graffiti artists often experience the conflicting motivations we described at the beginning of this article: to avoid being caught and to keep the message from being destroyed, on the one hand, and to make it conspicuous in order to share it with as large an audience as possible, on the other hand. This contradiction gives rise to a huge variety in terms of both forms of graffiti and the choice of locations for its placement, serving as an engine for the author's creativity. Some make their messages as open as possible ("No war"), while others disguise them, writing "Two words" instead of "No war" (411-SPb-13-06).

Therefore, although the messages in our collection could have been organized in a variety of ways, we chose to categorize messages by the type of message (content) and the type of code (how the message is encrypted) that anonymous authors use to address other citizens or the authorities. Of course, this classification is two-dimensional, but in the conditions of the exhibition it is difficult, and even redundant, to show two-dimensionality.

We distinguish messages into five main types of content: simple **direct messages, rebuke, emotional sharing, commemorative messages,** and **counter-messages.** We also identify five codes of encryption: **camouflage, coded message, pseudo-text, meta-text,** and **double bind.**

Direct messages reject any disguise or allegorization. They are as clear and usually as simple as possible. The most typical example is "No war!"

Direct messages have two imaginary addressees. One of them is a Russian who believes the propaganda or considers himself uninvolved in what is happening ("You know I am outside politics"). To such people, the authors of the graffiti say, "Ukraine is not our enemy" (010-Spb-27-02); explain that what is happening is called "war" (451-Novosibirsk-06-06); emphasize that there is no justification for it (418-SPb-13-05); and point out that the war is senseless ("What for?" 455-Msk-21-06) and Ukrainian territories are not Russian ("Mariupol is Ukraine" 463-Volgograd-22-06). In other words, this is counter-propaganda.

The second imaginary addressee is Russian President Vladimir Putin. To him, they say, "Go away" (124-Spb-03-03) or "Z(F)ed up with" (484-Spb-18-07), where Z is a reference to Z-ideology itself.

Often, in such graffiti, Putin is not referred to by name. After all, it is clear to everyone who started the war. Examples include "You've made a fucking mess!" (068-Spb-13-04) and "You're dragging us to hell" (215-Moscow-28-02). Sometimes he is contemptuously called "old man," as in "The old man's time is up Z" (082-Unknown-13-04) and "No to the old man. No war" (066-NNov-17-04).

Another category, close to the previous one in form, is a rebuke, or denunciation, of others. The imaginary addressees here are Russians who support or participate in the war. With the help of graffiti, they are told: "The price of foreign land is paid from your wallet" (485-Spb-28-07); "In Ukraine it's the people that are dying. In

Russia it's Russia that is dying" (176-Spb-23-04); and "Pay, fight, die or build a massive anti-war movement" (017-Spb-24-02).

Often, graffiti authors resort to quotations from literature and cinema that are well-known to mass audiences in the hope of conveying authority. We have categorized such statements as **authority-based messages.** These include a quote from a famous poem by Osip Mandelstam, who died in Stalin's camps—"We live, not feeling the earth beneath us. At ten paces our words evaporate…" (047-Spb-10-04)—and a line from a song by the Soviet bard Bulat Okudzhava: "Monster war, are you pleased with your handiwork? No more weddings—just love laid to waste" (107-Spb-19-04).

Authority-based messages, as a rule, avoid mentioning the war directly: the educated viewer should guess what they are talking about. Sometimes a quotation is a hidden call to action. For example, a line drawn from the biblical Psalm 27—"Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident. Psalm 27:3" (114-Msk-19-04)—urges those who want to stand up against the majority who support the war not to be afraid.

The use of such quotes is more than an effort to show one's education. If opponents of the war cannot physically come together, they can at least enlist authoritative figures of the past as imaginary allies. Through references to their texts and biographies, the graffiti authors aim to demonstrate that poets, writers, scientists, and Nobel laureates would also oppose the war if they were living now. "You don't want to hear *us*, so hear *their* voices"—such is the principle behind these graffiti. For example, on the monument to the famous dissident and Nobel Prize winner Andrey Sakharov at the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute was placed a banner bearing the following inscription: "I was once stripped of all insignia and awards for speaking out condemning the war in Afghanistan. Today I would have been stripped of them for the second time" (193-Msk-18-04).

Propaganda makes people lonely: it tries to convince every single person that all those around them support the war (Huang and Cruz 2021). As such, lone protesters often want to make an emotional connection by sharing what they feel: "you are not alone in feeling this horror;" "there are many of us like you." We categorize such graffiti as **emotional sharing.** The authors seek to express their feelings (indignation, despair, hopelessness) and share them with the addressee: "I want to live, not to shiver" (062-Spb-15-04). These are personal messages displayed in the hope of an equally personal response: "My mom has disappeared in Mariupol" (372-Spb-07-05). Sometimes the authors directly address the viewer's own experiences—"What you are seeing is normally reserved for nightmares" (373-Kaliningrad-09-05)—or tell him or her that they are experiencing the same thing: "I'm afraid too" (138-Spb-16-04); "Dear passerby, I am against Z too" (115-Msk-20-04).

Learning about the deaths of Ukrainian civilians under shelling and bombing, and about the crimes of the Russian military in Ukrainian cities, people felt the need to express their grief, horror, and shame and encourage others to commemorate the victims of Russian aggression in the public sphere. Therefore, people began to create **commemorative messages** that included the names of the cities where deaths were known to have occurred: "LOOK AND REMEMBER. Children play in our yards, and people bury their relatives in the yards of Mariupol. 20,000 civilians were killed. NO WAR!" (341-Omsk-07-05); "Bucha—our pain!" (254-Ekat-24-04). Some simply state the name of the city: "Bucha" (431-Perm-25-05) or "Mariupol" (413-Msk-18-05).

Public expressions of empathy for war victims are also prosecuted: we know reliably of at least 35 cases of prosecution for such public commemoration. These include, for example, cases where the police detained those who placed flowers and even a small bar of candy at the monument to Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka in Moscow, or photographs of bombed-out houses at the Samara monument to the victims of political repression.

Another category in our collection is the **counter-message:** a protest statement created *inside* an official text or object (a poster, a monument, a road sign): "We are Russians and God is with us."—God is weeping while watching us." (013-Spb-29-03). The task of the counter-message is to emphasize a contradiction between propaganda and reality.

One popular technique is to supplement the official message with a contradictory statement. In Volgograd, there is a famous war memorial, "Motherland Calls," which was unveiled in 1972 and is dedicated to those who died during the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II. The woman with a sword represents the Motherland calling her sons into battle. In April 2022, activists lined up near the monument with letters forming the succinct message "She doesn't call" (351-Volgograd-20-04).

Sometimes a counter-message is created spontaneously: in May 2022, a certain supporter of the war in Vologda put a Russian flag in the window (apparently for Victory Day on May 9) and an anonymous semiotic guerrilla wrote under the window "Everything is just like in the 1940s, but this time we're the fascists" (400-Vologda-14-05).

A counter-message is a way of playing with everyday space. On the streets of Moscow, there are new pedestrian signals with the straightforward inscription "Wait" (of course implying "until you can cross the street"). Across the city, semiotic guerrillas have begun to complete these official messages: "Wait *for*

peace" (279-Moscow-01-05); "Wait *for his [Putin's] death*" (461-Msk-12-06). Putin, characteristically, is deliberately stripped of his name.

The graffiti writers partly resort to **camouflage**—a hidden message lurks within an outwardly innocent text. For example, a passerby may see a flyer with the innocent text "IKEA sale" (136-Spb-16-04) on a city street, but the QR code leads to a website calling for an anti-war rally (which was subsequently violently dispersed by the police).

Some of these messages are disguised as typical "lost dog" posters. The words "LOST DOG" and "Help Retrieve Dog" or "Reward" are in large print, with a call for anti-war protest in small letters between them (248-Msk-23-04).

> LOST! A dog called Peace! [photo of a dog]
> On February 24, a not-so-pretty man with traces of Botox on his face [Putin] stole Peace from us! Without Peace at home, prices rise, bank cards are switched off, and it is very difficult to get important medications. If Peace is not brought back, he will steal Freedom, Tranquillity, and Hope!
> HELP US BRING PEACE BACK! [QR-link]

Imitating street ads is a popular technique. It may save an anti-war statement from mandated removal by janitors and public sanitation workers, but it will attract the attention of those who read such adverts (186-Spb-24-04). Such a false flyer is built on the contradiction between the commonplace, almost domestic form of a household ad ("COMPUTER REPAIR TECHNICIAN…") and the acutely anti-war content ("…won't come, he was taken away for military exercises"). The tear-off leaflets on the ad ironically invite those who wish to "believe that there is no war."

Some of these camouflaged messages require knowledge of a certain cultural code. During the late Soviet years, the ballet "Swan Lake" was an important part of the mourning events following the deaths of political leaders (Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko). Entertainment shows were cancelled, and television and radio broadcast classical music—and specifically Swan Lake—for hours. In 1991, during the coup attempt, Swan Lake replaced entertainment programs, while the news was cancelled. After the start of the war, references to Swan Lake—and particularly to the most famous piece of this ballet, the Dance of Little Swans—became widespread. The phrase "When will they show *Swan Lake* already?" can be found on social media, and a pendant with four ballerinas is sometimes worn. Thus, graffiti with headless ballerinas performing the Dance of Little Swans symbolizes the artist's hope for Putin's removal or death (119-Spb-21-03).

In addition to camouflaged messages, some examples of graffiti contain messages that have no meaning in themselves. They can be understood only if you know the code. For example, the meaningless text "*htrae no ecaep*" [*urim rim*] is written on a baseball cap; you have to guess that it must be read in reverse: "Peace on Earth" [*miru mir*] (287-Moscow-02-05). This is a form of anagram. We call these types of hidden messages **coded messages.**

The most common form of coding is the manipulation of the word "war." Since this word is actually forbidden, graffiti writers use all possible ways to convey the phrase "no war." The most famous and popular way is a text comprising eight asterisks [*** *****], corresponding to the eight letters in "no war" [*net voine*]. There are also more complex constructions: 3*+5*, "35," and even just "Two words" (419-Msk-20-05).

Taken to the extreme, the cipher turns into a **pseudo-text:** a deliberately absurd code (rearranged letters and syllables, or even a blank sheet of paper instead of a poster with text at a solo picket) ironizes the very intention to hide the obvious meaning. Thus, such a message captures the reader's attention and creates an emotional response: "Puck you Futin" instead of "Fuck you Putin" (041-Spb-10-04); "Ckuf the awr" instead of "Fuck the war" (429-Irkutsk-11-09).

But that's not all. In rare cases, graffiti artists do not write anything about the war at all, either explicitly or allegorically. Instead, these semiotic guerrillas talk about the unwritten text and its fate. The graffiti "An inscription that is going to put me in jail for 15 years" (202-Spb-21-03) implies any anti-war statement that the reader can imagine in its place and which would result in the author receiving a prison sentence. It is a **meta-message.** In simple words, it is graffiti about graffiti. The text "don't paint over everything!" implies that the utilities have already painted over a lot of the anti-war statements on this wall. Following another attack on anti-war graffiti displayed on a wall in St. Petersburg, this message appeared: "They painted over all anti-war inscriptions but did not touch the swastika. That is all you need to know in 2022 about the country that defeated Nazism" (428-Spb-09-07).

Finally, the last—and rarest—form in our collection is a **double bind message**, for example, the text "Erase me" under a portrait of Putin as Hitler (354-Perm-06-05). This is a classic "double bind message" addressed to the censor, who faces a difficult choice: to destroy the image of the president (and thus violate the law on the desecration of state symbols) or to keep it (and thus support Nazism).

Why Cipher?

Already from these examples, we can see the great diversity of allegorization. It is less easy to answer unequivocally why people prefer disguises and ciphers to direct statements.

First, there is a utilitarian explanation: it allows the graffitist to "lengthen the life" of the message. At least some graffiti writers are convinced that utility workers who have to tear down and paint over anti-war messages on walls may miss a cleverer message.

Second, there is a cognitive interpretation: more complex messages take more effort for our brains to decipher. Plus, if a serious text is accompanied by a pun, the probability that it will be remembered is much higher (Summerfelt, Lippman & Hyman 2010; Carlson 2011). People who have seen and finally deciphered those coded messages also feel more motivated to spread them.

That being said, many of the examples of encryptions and disguises are actually easy to read. In general, it is clear to everyone that eight asterisks (*** *****) means "no war." This means that such messages are more an ironic play on the principle of encryption—a demonstration that censorship shuts people up and forces them to disfigure their language. Such irony ("I'm forbidden to talk about the war directly—look, I'll mock the prohibitions with the prohibitions themselves") allows semiotic guerrillas to find allies. People leave intricately coded messages that can only be deciphered if you are familiar with the same political or cultural context. Those who have seen the seemingly incomprehensible messages and then managed to decipher them feel that invisible allies exist somewhere.

> I used to hang stickers [reading] *** ***** [no war] on poles in Yekaterinburg, and then I walked past on purpose and looked at them. And I saw that someone had put up another sticker next to it, also with asterisks and about the war. I was happy all day—I am not alone (woman, 24 years old, Ekaterinburg).

About the Exhibition

The exhibition containing all the street art described here is available online at www.nowobble.net. The underlying data collection has been archived in open access at www.discuss-data.net.

A team of volunteers (social anthropologists, psychologists, folklorists, and sociologists) worked on the creation and publication of the collection of anti-war street art: Alexandra Arkhipova (Visiting Scholar, Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (FSO Bremen), April–May 2022; EHESS, Paris, 2022–2024), Yuri Lapshin (Le Sallay International Academy School), Irina Kozlova, Alexei Kupriyanov (Visiting Scholar FSO Bremen), Anna Chernobylskaya, and Alexei Muk.

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