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Writing On The Wall - An Investigation of Modern Political Graffiti in France and Italy

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WRITING ON THE WALL

An investigation of modern political graffiti in France and Italy

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by

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Dedicated to my family.

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Introduction

The inception of this project goes back to my first trip to Europe. For the first few stops on the trip, I was taking pictures of the usual tourist attractions—old churches, monuments, museum exhibitions. But when I got to Genoa, something changed. I started taking pictures almost exclusively of graffiti. On our walk from the train station to our hotel, I took about twenty pictures. The graffiti was mostly political in nature—"no borders," "no war but class war," "Stonewall every day," to name a few. For the rest of the trip, I couldn't stop noticing graffiti. In Italy, there was much more of it than I had ever seen in the United States. And it was much more political, rarely being just a tagger's name. I started to think of graffiti as a form of poetry. I put every picture I had taken into a folder, certain I would find an academic use for it someday.

Six months later, in February 2023, I started a semester at the University of Trento in Italy. After three connecting flights and a Flixbus that came an hour late, I was dropped off by the river in the dead of night with no phone service. Luckily, I had saved step-by-step directions from the bus stop to my housing. A fifteen-minute walk turned into nearly an hour as I struggled to carry my suitcases down tight-knit alleyways. I struggled with a completely foreign urban design, going back and forth through piazzas and around corners in vain. The house was on *Via dietro le mura B* — The Street Behind the Walls. I didn't really consider the name of the street during the walk. The closest analog I had encountered, Wall Street in New York, refers to a wall long since torn down. Imagine my surprise when I found myself in front of a medieval stone wall, just a few feet from my destination.

That night, I had a nightmare I was a train on the wrong tracks. I was blind, but I could feel my wheels grinding against the tracks (I later realized that what I was feeling in the dream was what I had felt earlier when my suitcase wheels got caught in the grooves of cobblestone). Though I couldn't see anything, I knew what was wrong. Sure, I was a train. Sure, I was on tracks. But I just wasn't made for the system (my understanding was that I ran on a 'different kind' of electricity. Different voltage? Different amplitude? I have no clue, I'm not an engineer. But the feeling was hopeless nonetheless.) My lack of familiarity and discomfort with my surroundings manifested in a deep unease.

In the coming days I got more used to my surroundings. I could start to visualize the main piazza in the city center and the web of streets that shot out from it. I could picture myself in relation to the river and point north or south without thinking. New friends and tour guides told me which streets had the best shopping, the best bars, which ones to never ever walk down (to many, an African grocery store was more threatening than the fenced-in military base across the road from the student housing). I relied on maps less and less. I let myself wander, taking time to appreciate the view of the mountains or the political graffiti on every store front. I didn't have a word for it yet, but this is what the Situationist International referred to as a dérive. I'll get into this more in Section One. For now, I will just say that I am not the first to make a connection between graffiti and urban design. I couldn't say it explicitly at the time, but I had inklings of some connection between one's surroundings and one's sense of self within a community. (Again, more on this later).

At this point, I knew that I wanted my Senior Project to have something to do with graffiti. I had started to see it as a form of literature – initially, I wanted to pair each picture with

a poem from its respective country, one that I had translated myself. I wanted each piece to be

centered around a theme of division, exclusion, or confinement. At this point, I was focusing

more on the *walls* than the graffiti. This didn't end up working out for a number of reasons—

mostly because I was losing sight of the words themselves. It felt like an afterthought, like I

wasn't really getting to the bottom of what any of the graffiti said. I started over and tried to

build a project out of the pictures I already had. In looking up close at the graffiti, I started to

think about what lay underneath. This is what led me to a much more analytical (and

convincing) paper. Treating graffiti not just as literature, but as a social and historical

phenomenon. Graffiti as a reflection of culture, of counterculture. Graffiti as witness, dialogue,

and archive. Graffiti as an active participant in society, not just the passive traces of an outside

actor.

About a week before I left for Trento, I received an email from the state department

warning me about widespread anarchist protests in Italy. In France, where I had been planning

to visit, there were nationwide protests and strikes over Macron's proposal to raise the

retirement age. I never did see a protest of either of these sorts. But I did see graffiti on the

subject; lots and lots and lots and lots of it. On the bus ride from the airport, on the walk to my

housing, by the university, outside the cafes in every city I visited. "No 41bis" "free alfredo!"

"incarceration is torture" in Italy[1]. "No to 64 years!" "49.3 is a right wing measure!" or simply

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[1] Michela Moscufo, "Italian anarchist in solitary confinement warns of his death", *Al Jazeera*, March 21, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/21/italian-anarchists-imprisonment-sparks-protests. Article 41bis is an Italian law that outlines the use of solitary confinement as punishment and a tool to maintain order. Widespread protests erupted in Italy after its use on Alfredo Cospito, an anarchist militant, and his subsequent hunger strike.

"NO" in France[2]. This was part of the inspiration for taking a more political approach to this paper. I could not study any of the graffiti without thinking of politics and history. I had studied May '68 in class, a French movement that is remembered in part for its use of graffiti as one of its main weapons. Graffiti was but one aspect of the *libération de la parole*, a sense of liberation of and through the written word. I wondered, though, now that I was actually there, how the French remember that month. How did it affect the protests and graffiti I was seeing?

I operated under the assumption for a long time that there was something fundamentally different between American and European graffiti. In a way, I have been operating under that assumption in regard to politics as well. I've always had the feeling that the US could never see a spontaneous revolution that united students and workers like that of May 1968. Part of this project's scope is to explore these assumptions. Is there really a difference between graffiti in the US and Europe? If so, what is it and where does it come from? To answer this question, I limited myself to photos from my travels. Keeping in mind my position and role in these photos—why I was drawn to certain words, which ones I deemed historically valuable, how I framed each image—I began looking for any sort of meaning that went beyond individual words. I started with a close-reading of the words of each piece, but that only told a fraction of the story. To get anywhere close to answering these questions, I had to examine the methods and historical references of these specific graffiti, the possible identity and motivations of the graffeurs, and the inherent nature of graffiti as a collaborative, ephemeral medium.

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[2] Hugh Schofield and Robert Plummer, "France pension protests: Clashes after Macron orders rise in pension age without vote", *BBC*, March 16, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64984374. French constitution article 49.3 essentially allows the government to pass laws without a vote—it was invoked to raise the retirement age to 64, causing widespread strikes and protests.

As a final thought before I get into my analysis, I would like to define some of the terms that I will be using. I am talking about graffiti, an illegal form of writing on walls. Writing being a visual representation of words and thoughts, walls being public-facing structures that line streets and keep private and personal life contained. When I refer to graffiti as a plural (i.e., *this graffito is, these graffiti are*), I mean instances or pieces of this illegal wall-writing. When I refer to it in the singular (i.e., *graffiti is*), I mean the act, ideal, artform, and phenomenon understood as graffiti. I will use the French term "graffeur" to describe anyone performing graffiti. I will call anyone who simply writes their name or nickname a "tagger", and I will use "graffiti artist" only in cases where aesthetic considerations take precedence. Taggers and graffiti artists are both types of graffeurs. A graffeur, in turn, is just one type of person who could engage in wall-writing, with advertising and street-signs being legal forms of wall-writing. "Individual" refers to the singular self, while "collective" refers to community and a connection one's surroundings. Theory from May '68 shows that these are not always opposites. "Public" will mean not just visible or available to the masses, but also funded or sanctioned by the state. Finally, "private" will mean relating to the individual self. Some forms of private writing are public-facing, like tags or confessional forms of graffiti.

My hope is for this paper to demonstrate that graffiti and other forms of wall-writing should not be taken for granted. Today's wall-writing is a historical phenomenon completely dependent on history, politics, and urban design. Above all, though, graffiti demonstrates some sort of relation between the *self* and the surrounding world.

SECTION 1

Graffiti as a medium

My attraction to graffiti lies in its paradoxical nature. It is simultaneously creative and destructive, public and private. It can *destroy* divisions of time and space or, in other words, *create* bridges between separate settings. On the other hand, it can emphasize these divisions, call them into being. A property owner may see the act itself as damaging, destructive. If the wall itself isn't damaged, the property's value may be. Yet when graffiti is immortalized or signed, it becomes something else, something profitable. A piece of graffiti, commissioned by the city or acquired by a museum, takes on a more proper or sophisticated connotation. The creative act in turn dictates culture. And the artist is changed just as much by this institutionalization as the art. The official artist is an isolated, solitary figure. But the street artist is a collaborator, part of a collective social fabric.

Graffiti, when still in the street, is a constantly collaborative medium—not just between graffeurs, but between witnesses. A pedestrian may remember a certain piece of graffiti and discuss it at a later time in another place. Or they may call the authorities to have it removed. Or they may take a picture, like me. It may be covered up or removed at any time, in which case collaboration takes the form of censorship. This constant threat of erasure makes graffiti an inherently ephemeral medium, in addition to its anonymous and collective nature.

Graffiti, to be considered as such, *must* remain within the confines of anonymity, secrecy, illegality. I think it's fair to say that this is part of the allure for graffeurs. Picture the stereotypical American tagger—a disgruntled urban teenager, in baggy clothes and a ski mask, angry at the system. In its anonymity, graffiti offers an outlet for what cannot be said aloud, whether at home or school or in city hall. Perhaps the graffeur hopes someone else will see their

work, be inspired, and build community with them. Of course, anyone entering this underground social contract must accept the anonymity of the other. A graffeur must accept the potential for anyone else to disagree, perhaps violently. In a distorted reflection of society at large, disagreements multiply and factions arise. The landscape can quickly turn into a barrage of angry, violent words; the war is won, at least in spirit, by the side that can write more, bigger, louder. Of course, the words themselves are not the end (or the beginning) of the story. They have real-world inspirations, consequences, and—at times—demands.

Space and Time

Any instance of graffiti must be considered within its context. What is important is not just the words but where and when they were written. Any graffiti that recalls past wars or revolutions opens a discourse of time or timelessness. Through juxtaposing the architectures and rhythms of modernity with centuries-old images, the graffeur asks the passerby to reconcile with local or global history. Still other graffeurs play with a piece's immediate surroundings, either incorporating architecture into a design or writing a political message on the walls of an institution they wish to fight against. These tactics push back against the inherent threat of ephemerality present in graffiti. A divisive message can be erased, painted over, or rebuked at any time. But by being aware of this threat and playing around it, graffeurs can make a piece whose impact lasts longer than its physical presence. The more provocative a piece of graffiti is, the more likely it is to inspire discussion and repetition. As for a piece's spatial context, we can think of the legacies of Keith Haring or Jean-Michel Basquiat, or the still-developing legacy of Banksy. When art originally meant for the street is memorialized in an exclusive institution, removed from its intended space, the threat of erasure disappears. In being "preserved", graffiti loses its initial character and any meaning to the term is completely nullified. Thus graffiti, while still in the street, lies in a delicate balance (or all-out war) with the media of space and time. Its meaning is more than just the words, images, colors, and shapes—it lies in where and when a piece was written, where and when it references, how long it survives, where it is granted the right to survive, etc. And graffeurs are aware of this. Even the most innocuous graffiti has some relationship with its context. But the more provocative sort can actively bend

these factors to its needs, and I believe there is a deep political and historical knowledge that informs this.

Since the widespread protests, strikes, and occupations in France in May 1968, the liberation of words has been a tool of countering the order and orders of the state. This liberation took place both on a physical and abstract level. In *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Kristin Ross considers not only the events of '68 but how their memory has changed throughout the years. She describes the movement as a fight against state-ordained spatial segregation:

> The movement took the form of political experiments in *de*classification, in disrupting the natural "givenness" of places; it consisted of displacements that took students out of the university, meetings that brought farmers and workers together, or students to the countryside— trajectories outside of the Latin Quarter, to workers' housing and popular neighborhoods, a new kind of mass organizing (against the Algerian War in the early 1960s, and later against the Vietnam War) that involved physical dislocation[3].

Political actions consisted in breaking down perceived barriers between social classes as well as the physical walls and streets that kept these classes apart[4]. It is no surprise then that graffiti became one of the movement's main tools of protest and communication. While protestors gave speeches and passed out pamphlets during occupations, graffiti became part of the landscape itself. No longer restricted to the given space and time of a certain demonstration, revolutionary messages exploded over the city.

This explosion or liberation of the written word has become one of the main legacies of May '68. As May's political momentum spread throughout Europe—Prague, Bologna, Trento—

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[3] Kirstin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 25.

[4] All this while building barricades. May, forever contradictory.

so did its words. I believe that this multicultural, multilingual, collective mindset still lingers in

political graffiti of today. Supported by English's status as a lingua franca and the internet's

space-denying power, slogans and images are no longer confined to individual streets, cities, or

countries.

This is reflected by graffiti written in a non-local language. Multilingualism in graffiti

can either highlight or subvert an area's demographic makeup. French messages in Venice,

English in practically every tourist city, English by universities—are these meant to reach a

touristic audience, or are they merely a reflection of a city's cosmopolitan nature? In these cases,

it is important to look not just at the language but precisely what is being said.

BARRICADES EVERYWHERE

Venice

This short phrase's strength is in its ambiguity and its out-of-placeness. One could read it as a command (*build barricades everywhere*) or an indictment of the current nation-state world system (*there are too many barricades/borders/divisions*). This ambiguity highlights the paradoxical nature of the barricade, a favorite tool of French revolutions from 1789 to 1968. On the surface, these messages seem to be contradictory—one calls for more divisions, one calls for less. Yet the target audience, for lack of a better term, of the two interpretations I have listed may very well be the same. The barricade as a tool of self-defense (from forces of the state) has a neutralizing, horizontal effect on its creators[5]. Out of everyone walking around Venice, who would be drawn to a mention of barricades, written in French no less? Someone who has studied French language and history, someone with revolutionary aspirations, someone who considers themselves well-traveled, cosmopolitan, subversive, a citizen of the world…[6] This wanderer, fascinated by the barricade, probably admires spontaneous popular revolution and probably despises the idea and consequences of national borders. Are these values incompatible? I won't pretend to give you an answer—I'm not the first to ponder it and I certainly won't be the last. All I will say with certainty is that if this were written in Italian and "barricade" were replaced with a related but less ambiguous word—border, division, militia, etc.—it would be much less thought-provoking. If this photo were in black and white, it could pass for an archive from 1968. This message, unrooted from time and space, takes on a new meaning in its environment.

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[5] Ideally, that is. Yet the idea of proletarian solidarity is often co-opted, becoming performative at best. More on this in Section 2.

[6] Someone who would take a picture of said graffiti and include it in his Senior Project, maybe?

Paris

Here too, space and time themselves are part of the medium of this message. The writing is not just on a bank's front window, but on the shutters protecting it. So, not only has the graffeur called out the bank's relationship with the surrounding community, but they have also left hints as to how—and *when*—they acted. The shutter would only be accessible outside of regular bank hours, telling us that the graffeur probably wrote this blunt message by the cover of night (benefiting from its anonymity). We must take into account both the graffeur's conscious choice of *where* to write the piece and the unconscious, implicit hints that show *when* the graffeur acted. In this case, the passerby is called to resituate themselves in another time, but stay put in space. On a mobile canvas such as this, one can feel the graffeur's presence longer than on a stationary wall. Trains are also a favorite of graffeurs, with their mobility allowing for a message or tag to be spread across continents. As viewers, we must account not just for the words, not just the location, but the graffeur's choice—conscious or not— to leave a trail of evidence for how and when they acted. There is no doubt that this was written at night. This graffito, unlike "Barricade Partout", offers no illusion of timelessness.

During large waves of protest, graffiti interacts with time in more direct, hyper-contemporary ways. The graffiti on the bank offers clues to *time of day*, but could have been written a day or years before I saw it. On the other hand, graffiti about a specific protest is easy to pinpoint to the present. In the case of the anti-41bis and anti-retirement-reform protests, I could pinpoint them to the past few weeks. They all speak to specific values and movements that were taking place as I saw them. Who knows how many of these are still legible a year later? In any case, while these graffiti were fresh, some of them drew on more legendary

LONG LIVE

THE STRIKE

Paris
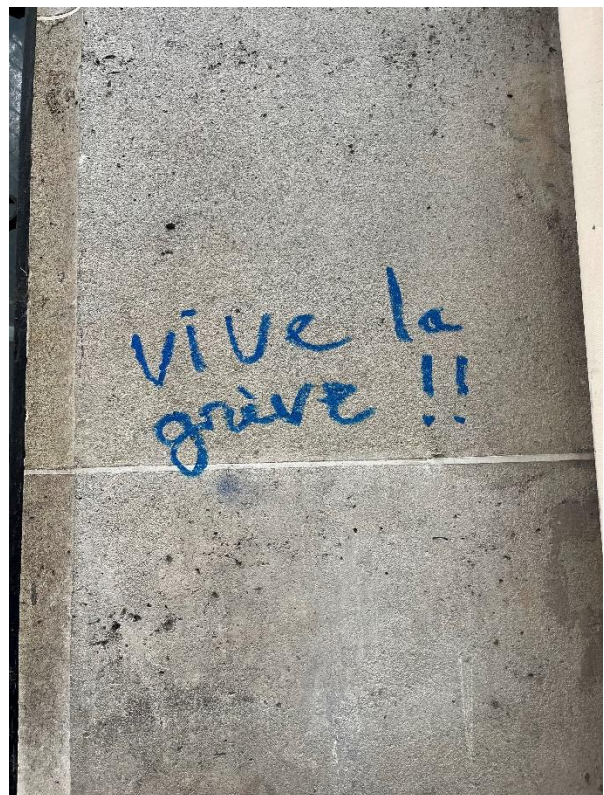
iconography—for example, the "Long live the strike" tricolor or this anti-41bis graffito next to a towering militaristic bas-relief in Trento. These graffeurs drew meaning from juxtaposition both in space and time. So while the words themselves are hyper-contemporary, the juxtaposition of space opens a discourse on time and national history. In the French context especially, this is not the slightest bit unique. Every modern movement in France draws comparisons to May 1968 or conjures the barricades of the old Revolutions. Even as cliché, these juxtapositions give meaning and fuel to movements. By calling the viewer to situate themself in their historical and geographical context, the graffeurs ask "Whose side would you be on then? Whose side are you on now?" It is an effective way of building momentum and determining who is or isn't part of one's community.

Of course, these communities can be situated on both extremes of the political spectrum. The following tag, which I saw in the port-a-potty at a Pride festival, touches upon all of the aforementioned aspects—anonymity, ephemerality, and mobility—to an even greater extent. It is simultaneously the most private, most fleeting, and most violent instance of wall-writing I came across in Europe.

Trento

Like all graffiti, there is little chance of me determining who wrote this and when they wrote it. In this case, though, there is no way for me to tell *where* it was written. Who knows how many events this company rented out this toilet to? The portable toilet is an unlikely location that erases division. Unlike in a bar, or toilets in most buildings, there is no age or gender restriction to entrance. All one needs is a sharpie to transmit a message throughout an entire region. Whether it was a drunk teenager, an elderly fascist veteran, a polite office worker, someone from Trento or Rovereto or Bolzano, I don't know and I frankly don't care. Its mere presence shows that Nazism has deep roots, even and especially in societies that avoid open conversation about their fascist past. This graffito, like all others, speaks for itself—more so because of the circumstances of its inception. The claustrophobic toilet invites secrecy. Inside, there is no chance of being caught by a security camera. And yet, one is at their most vulnerable in a toilet. When engaging in the oldest social taboo (even cats hide their waste), surrounded by its sights and smells, alone yet mere inches from the fetid traces of hundreds of others, writing and speaking become profoundly human. Whether it's due to our nature or our upbringing, there is a sort of shameful secrecy surrounding human waste. Sickness, decay, and shame can be an illuminating setting for discussions on our humanity[7]. To affirm one's existence (and threaten another's) in such an environment— hyper-anonymous, mobile, shameful— says almost as much as the words and symbol themselves. So, paradoxically, the mobility of the toilet reinforces a sort of space-dependence. A new type of place emerges—the mobile, liminal

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[7] Here, my mind also goes to the near-constant recurrence of dirt and waste in some post-World War II literature, such as Primo Levi's *If This is A Man* or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five.*

space. Space due to function. Function due to space. A space inside of which anonymity allows

for violence. The Nazi pinwheel spins in the eternal wind of secrecy.

In taking these photos, in writing this section, I think of all the graffiti I *didn't* see. All the

graffiti painted over by the landlord an hour before I woke up. The graffiti one street over

where I didn't walk down because I was in a rush. The graffiti in the next stall over. The graffiti

faded by rain, pierced by bullets, covered in rubble. The graffiti we see paint a picture, albeit

incomplete, of the culture in which they appear. What we do see is certainly related to what we

don't, stemming from the same political groups and same economic conditions and same

artistic traditions. Yet we necessarily omit from our worldview that which we cannot see. That

makes the gaps in the picture even more important. If we acknowledge them, we can look

directly at them. Lack can be presence, if we recognize our position in time and space. By

recognizing *why* we lack, we get closer to knowing *what* we lack. The present contains

reflections of the past, and by acknowledging our position and blind-spots we get a fuller

picture of the world around us.

The Death of the Graffeur

Jules Hardi's YouTube documentary *Vandal Graffiti: Invisible Approaches* follows several groups of French graffiti artists. They each have different inspirations and approaches to their craft, though common threads include the wish to create community and the wish to remain anonymous. These seemingly contradictory ideals lead to the creation of a wholly new figure—*le blaze*. Each artist's *blaze*—meaning nickname, street name, or *nom-de-spraycan*—comes from a different source as well. Manoush, who chose to anonymize herself with a keffiyeh for her interviews, uses a *blaze* that literally translates to "gypsy". By pointing towards two identities historically marginalized in France, she claims these heritages of domination (or perhaps just sympathy with the struggle, or an idealized appreciation of a bohemian lifestyle, living freely despite it all). An interview with her and her crewmate, who went a step further by not even stating his *blaze,* reveals their view of writing as a collective action. With muffled and distorted voices, they speak of why they do what they do. "When we do it as a team, we laugh and have fun together, these are actions we do among friends," the anonymous graffeur says[8]. For these artists, writing is more than an abstract product. It is an ideal, a collective activity, the *act* of writing itself. The decentralization of an individual writer—through the very existence of "crews", through the efforts towards anonymity, through the collective messages the crew aims to spread—is not a phenomenon unique to graffiti.

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[8] Hardi, "Documentary - VANDAL GRAFFITI, INVISIBLE APPROACHES," 2:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1esLZa7Mhho.

Perception of the role of the author changed dramatically throughout the 1900's, specifically among French philosophers. Roland Barthes proposed a complete reversal of the notion of authorship in his essay *The Death of the Author*. He argues that writing exists not to "spread a message", but to signify, build on, and play with the concept of "writing" itself.

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins[9]

We can view graffiti as a sort of writing that functions for itself only, like literature. As opposed to street names or signs declaring that posting on a given wall is forbidden, graffiti cannot dictate behavior. It has no functional goal. Instead, it intends to play with the medium itself; like poetry, it imparts as much meaning in as few words as possible; it manipulates and takes advantage of the very shapes of letters; it devours, digests, and transforms the surrounding architecture, creating meaning through the act of writing itself. In extreme cases, graffiti can lose all "meaning", like a *blaze* posted on a wall just because the tagger thinks it sounds or looks enticing. The act of writing for writing's sake, putting aside meaning and function to prioritize the act itself, was also recognized and practiced by the Surrealists.

Building upon Surrealist tradition, Barthes analyzes its role in 'killing' the author. On both a philosophical and physical level, Surrealism put aside the subjective *I* of the author and presented *writing* as a subject in and of itself.

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[9] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image | Music | Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.

> Surrealism… contributed to the decentralization of the image of the author … by entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head is unaware of (automatic writing), by accepting the principle and the experience of several people writing together. [10]

By valuing body over brain, action over identity, and a collective-anonymous voice rather than individual authorship, Surrealism set the foundation for the author's death (or at least the recognition thereof). Graffiti is a perfect setting for this type of automatic writing—when the police sirens start, there's no time to *think* before writing; best to have a few friends as lookout, or to speed up the process; with limited time, space, and freedom, the act of writing itself is what imparts meaning into the final piece.

Later in Hardi's documentary, other graffeurs and crews with no association to the first share similar perspectives on the thrill of working as a collective. Zen, a member of D3, says, "In Mexico, I painted the subway alone. It was good, it was my challenge, but I would have preferred to be with a friend of mine. When you share with someone, you share your emotions. But when you're alone, you don't share anything."[11] All of the artists interviewed seem to value anonymity and community as well as accept the fate of the words once they leave their hands. Zen, for example, watches giddily as his train-canvases take off into the night, bringing cargo or passengers to any number of possible destinations. Yet this is where the trouble begins: when the author dies and the reader is born.

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[10] Barthes, "The Death of the Author", 144.
[11] Hardi, "Documentary - VANDAL GRAFFITI, INVISIBLE APPROACHES," 28:10.

While following KRADE, an artist who combines visual art with phrases from literature, psychoanalysis, and poetry rewritten in a phonetic "street language"[12], the documentarian encounters a passerby who shares her opinions on KRADE's art.

> PASSERBY: Excuse me, who asked you to do this?
>
> KRADE: I think it's nice.
>
> PASSERBY: Yes, it's nice. It's better than graffiti.
>
> KRADE: Do you like it?
>
> PASSERBY: I'll tell you honestly, I don't like anything. I would have liked the shutters all clean. I'll be honest, it's shocking.
>
> KRADE: Oh, yeah?
>
> PASSERBY: [gasp] It's *shocking*. I prefer the little graffiti that was already there. Honestly.
>
> KRADE: It's a bit of a change.
>
> PASSERBY: Tastes and colors are not debatable, it's shocking, shocking. It's a store, when they see it …
>
> KRADE: Maybe they will like it?
>
> PASSERBY: [Here] in Lyon it's really a mess, with all this graffiti. Anyways, have a nice day![13]

A recorded conversation between a graffeur and a passerby is a rarity. This woman, who seems to change her mind every few seconds, gives an interesting perspective into the "public" opinion of graffiti. She shows us firstly that the initial reaction is not always the one that lasts, that someone witnessing graffiti may have an internal debate over its value and respectability. Furthermore, she shows that the artist's intention *does not have the final say* in a piece's meaning.

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[12] Hardi, "Documentary - VANDAL GRAFFITI, INVISIBLE APPROACHES," 42:46. For example, "Ce qui me rassure, c'est qu'on meurt tout seul" becomes "ce ki me rasur ce kon meur tou seul" (What comforts me is that we all die alone).

[13] Ibid, 45:30.

While KRADE's stated intention is to "take literature out of the context of the book and put it in the street to make it more instinctive,"[14] this lady seems to ignore any literary merit that KRADE wants his piece to have. However, she still gives him a polite and cheery farewell. There is an immediate separation between KRADE-as-person and KRADE-as writer. Once again, Barthes illuminates this point.

> The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text…; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*.

For the woman in the interview, KRADE-as-scriptor is inseparable from the writing. When speaking of the "shocking" writing, her tone of voice seems to condemn, condescend. The scriptor himself embodies this transgression, takes part in the responsibility of the "mess" that is Lyon. To the reader, KRADE only exists in relation to his art. His prior inspiration, his literary drive, his hope that the store-owner likes the art are all irrelevant to the scandal of the artwork. As the writing's past and meaning slip away, so does KRADE-as-person. With a fake name and a mask, he disappears down the street. The lady remembers only KRADE-as-graffeur. "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."[15]

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[14] Hardi, "Documentary - VANDAL GRAFFITI, INVISIBLE APPROACHES," 41:10.
[15] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142.

Here we can return to Venice. In the first image of this section, I showed a tag that defied the very definition of the space it was in. In cases like these, we can consider the city itself as the new author, risen from the ashes of the dead graffeur. This is a point most easily explained by multilingual graffiti, but one which can be applied anywhere. While the body that paints is anonymous and ephemeral, the social identity of the city is expressed through the graffiti. Venice's cosmopolitan and political history peak through those two words. In transgressing the concept of space, this graffito only reinforces it. Could this be written anywhere else, with the same material, at the same position on a wall, at the same speed, at the same time, from the same inspiration …?

In a more general sense, though, we can point to the inherent anonymity and *excess* of graffiti. One of my initial reactions to European graffiti was the sheer amount of it compared to American graffiti. At first, this intrigued me; I understood it as a wealth of voices. Eventually, though, it just seems *excessive* and easy to ignore. Foucault touches upon this while also building upon Barthes's decentralization of the author. His highlighting of the author's role during transitory periods of society echoes my first-hand perceptions on the excess of graffiti.

> … I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in
> the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such
> a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function
> according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one
> that will no longer be the author but will have to be determined or,
> perhaps, experienced [*expérimenter*].

> All discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur.[16]

I do not believe that we have reached the point of total collective anonymity. But the transition has begun. Technological advances have had a double effect on power and freedom of speech. On the one hand, social media has increased anonymity and potential nuclei of discourse. On the other, easier access to high-definition security cameras, file storage, and facial recognition have increased police surveillance and (the perception of) danger among graffeurs. It is not as simple as to define our current period as conducive to anonymity or not. Depending on the context—public or private, physical or digital, day or night—different opportunities and obstacles interact in different ways. Going further, this technology gives us a live-streamed perspective into all the difficulties of modern warfare, global capitalism, neocolonialism…   If nothing else, we are more aware than ever of the sheer number of *others* in the world. Technology and history have problematized the very notion of identity and anonymity, and I believe that graffiti—in all its forms—will have an ever-growing presence in the way we *experience* ourselves and the world around us. Like spreading fog, the "anonymity of a murmur" clarifies less as it grows more.

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[16] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *Essential Works of Foucault*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 222.

Site secured by -rodomo: ACCESS FORBIDDEN TO PUBLIC[17]

-'VE FOUGHT FOR A 60 YEAR [RETIREMENT AGE] WE WILL ~~FIGT~~ FIGHT (oops) FOREV-

Paris

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[17] The sticker covering the camera symbol lists the names of five street artists in Moscow, a crew called A.D.E.D (All Day Every Day) who distribute the stickers themselves. There is little information written *about* them online, though their website aded.club contains blog posts as well as merchandise for sale. The "About" section, social media posts, and art designs are all anonymous and dateless due to the nature of the collective.

Dialogue and Censorship

Face-to-face dialogue goes against the anonymous forms of communication inherent to graffiti. To be effective, it requires fixed space and time. Graffiti is a new playing ground, erasing one or both of these constraints. Can dialogue progress effectively through graffiti? In *The Names of History*, Rancière ties the proliferation of discourse to the volume of potentials for speech:

> Every event, among speakers, is tied to an excess of speech in the specific form of the displacement of the *statement*: an appropriation "outside the truth" of the speech of the other (of the formulas of sovereignty, of the ancient text, of the sacred word) that makes it signify differently… [18]

In essence, graffiti is this action outside of the formula of sovereignty and détournement is the action outside of the truth of the sacred word[19]. A lack of power or resources to 'control' graffiti leads to its "excessive" repetition. An open arena, so to speak, leads to a palimpsest of debates and disagreements. When the state does not censor, individual actors take it into their own hands. Censorship in some cases takes the form of pure denial—a white patch covering a piece of graffiti. In other cases, it leans closer to debate, reappropriation, or détournement.

Censorship is an important factor to consider in any discussion on dialogue. With graffiti, it becomes physical. Walking by any off-color patches outside houses, one can't help but

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[18] Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge,* trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 30.
[19] Détournement is a technique theorized by the Situationist International that involved manipulating previous writing, usually advertisements, to create new meaning.

wonder what was written underneath. Was it too offensive to the general public? Did it

promote hate and violence? Or was the idea of vandalism itself too violent and disrespectful for

the property owner, regardless of its message?

In other instances, we see spontaneous community action to cover certain messages.

Trento

This destruction is creative. Rather than painting in solid colors over the graffiti, the silencer

painted other letters to confuse the eye. This accomplishes a few things: first, there is no

denying what is being covered up. Off-color patches could be covering repaired plaster or

natural stains[20]. Second, the censor reaffirms their creative potential. Even with nothing to say,

the gesture acts as a signature even in its anonymity, sticking out to any passerby. Simultaneous

denial-creation is one of the peculiarities that makes graffiti so dynamic.

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[20] Though one could argue graffiti is a natural stain.

SET FIRE

Paris

This simple "SET FIRE" is written over a patchwork of white and gray, surrounded by other graffiti in different handwriting. What was covered up? Who covered it? The written message of destruction is reinforced by the methods used—damage of property as well as the silencing of another graffeur. Urban graffiti is a constant two-step; deny the other, affirm yourself.

Dialogue, then, may not be the right word to describe the phenomenon of political graffiti. The excess of opinions with no mediator quickly becomes a constant drone. Each petty manifesto floats through the streets, waiting to be erased, covered, or immortalized. Do the

graffeurs have any hope of convincing an ambivalent public? Or is the goal just to write more, write louder? In an urban context, I think the "value" of graffiti runs deeper. Somehow, even through the haze of anonymity and ephemerality, the graffeur affirms their existence, pulls themself out of the masses, becomes a social, political, and sometimes revolutionary subject.

Competing Perspectives

There are, and of course always have been, conflicting opinions about the value and efficacy of graffiti as a political tool. In May 1968, political graffiti exploded all over Paris and soon spread to the rest of Europe. Talk of revolution on the walls of the Sorbonne, police stations, subway stops, banks, courthouses, factories. The spontaneous actions have since become a pariah of both working class power and intellectual revolution. The Situationist International closely aligned themselves with the movement. They were a decentralized group of artists and activists who applied avant-garde aesthetics and theory to everyday life, seeking to revolutionize urban design and fight capitalist ideology. Their work always centered collectivity; they organized group experiences such as dérives[21], distributed writings signed by

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[21] Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," trans. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkely, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm#1. An experience (whether individual or collective) where the subject follows the city streets with no set itinerary, allowing oneself to be affected and guided by the architecture and urban design, with the goal of being led to a "situation" which snaps the walker out of the hypnotizing illusion of capitalist society and reminds them of their 'right' to the streets.

a collective writer, etc. At times, this collectivity overlapped with anonymity—graffiti with no identification, for example. At others, they hoped to affirm individual identities through this collective action. But this did not start in May '68. On the contrary, May sprouted from the ideological seeds already planted by the SI.

At the Situationist International's founding conference in 1957, Guy Debord delivered the "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency". In it he lists the SI's founding principles: "First, we believe that the world must be changed. We desire the most liberatory possible change of the society and the life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that such change is possible by means of pertinent actions."[22] The political goals of the group involved changing the wider world through changing one's immediate surroundings. From the beginning, their tool of choice was détournement, the repurposing of language, visuals, or ideas for revolutionary motives. To truly change the world, the SI believed in the power of widespread détournements, coordinated action to resist narratives imposed upon 'the people'.

> We must introduce everywhere a revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture; coordinate all the enquiries that are happening at this moment without a general perspective; orchestrate, through criticism and propaganda, the most progressive artists and intellectuals of all countries to make contact with us with a view to a joint action…[23]

This "revolutionary alternative" involved community action as well as films and books. On the eve of May '68, Debord published *Society of the Spectacle*, a text that evades all definition.

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[22] Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. and trans. McDonough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), 29.
[23] Ibid, 49–50.

The pages aren't numbered, but rather the paragraphs; satirical photographs are woven

throughout; the theory touches on cinema, urban design, Marxism, religion. From its very first

page, which in the English version proudly states "No copyright, No rights reserved," the book

goes against the grain. One theme that is repeated throughout the nine sections is that of

separation—the separation from workers and their products, ideological separation between

social classes, or physical separation of their living quarters.

20

Philosophy, the power of separate thought and the thought of separate power, could never by itself supersede theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispelled the religious clouds where men had placed their own powers detached from themselves; it has only tied them to an earthly base. The most earthly life thus becomes opaque and unbreathable. It no longer projects into the sky but shelters within itself its absolute denial, its fallacious paradise. The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of man.

172

Urbanism is the modern fulfillment of the uninterrupted task which safeguards class power: the preservation of the atomization of workers who had been dangerously brought together by urban conditions of production. The constant struggle that had to be waged against every possible form of their coming together discovers its favored field in urbanism. After the experiences of the French Revolution, the efforts of all established powers to increase the means of maintaining order in the streets finally culminates in the suppression of the street… [24]

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[24] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 2018), 20, 172.

The spectacle, Debord argues, is an ideology that has infiltrated every level of human experience in capitalist society. By alienating the worker from their work, by separating the citizen from the city through hostile urban design, by degrading "*being* into *having*" and "*having* into *appearing*[25]", capitalist society turns life itself into a spectacle, merely a representation of true experience. The SI's body of work fights against this separation and alienation. On an individual level, this involves the creation of *situations*, serendipitous events that break the spectacular illusion. On a collective level, it calls for revolution. These revolutionary ideas laid the foundation for May '68. The student and workers' movement resisted all forms of power, fighting against De Gaulle's republicanism just as much as Stalinism. Essentially, the movement sought to break all norms and reclaim the right to the streets, to language, and to violence. Aside from constructing barricades and occupying buildings, the militants spread their gospel through pamphlets, posters, books, and, most importantly, graffiti.

During the quasi-revolution, SI members published an amorphous collection includes essays on the movement's efficacy as well as photos of the actions. Torched cars, barricades, and graffiti. Some shots show overtly political messages: "NO GOD NOR MASTER! DOWN WITH THE STATE". Others are more vague, almost poetic, while building on themes of the riots: "the cobblestones pleasure me[26]." On their own terms, the Situationist International (SI) emphasizes the importance of graffiti during May 1968.

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[25] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 17.

[26] The paving stone is important due to its use as an improvised weapon against police. It eventually became a metaphor for resistance in general. This specific slogan is most interesting due to its sexual ambiguity. "je jouis *des* paves" would mean "I enjoy the paving stones", while "je jouis *dans* les paves" has a literal meaning closer to "I come/finish on the paving stones"

NO GOD NOR

MASTER!

DOWN WITH THE

STATE

the paving stones pleasure me[27]

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[27] Photos from *Enragés et situationnistes dans le movement des occupations* (Paris : Gallimard, 1968), 62-63.

The goal or inspiration of these graffiti, one could say, is to build community and keep the revolutionary momentum going. Even graffiti with an outright political message touches on shared community value. In the Situationist tradition which became mainstream in '68 and later '77[28], graffiti becomes a communal political tool. Its strength lies in its ability to be understood by comrades, to enter the arena of public conversation, to be recapitulated and built upon, to communicate its political stances clearly. Like the paving stone, graffiti's spontaneous and destructive nature make it a practical manifestation of Situationist ideology. Others, though, found any revolutionary pretense of graffiti to be naive and illusory.

Primo Levi, in "Decoding", tells of his experience walking down a hill and seeing Nazi symbols and slogans on a sign post. His essay problematizes the anonymity which I have repeatedly cited thus far. In it, he explores the supposed anonymity of the spray-painter, while also using physical hints left behind to determine who it could have been.

> As for the family history [of the graffeur], the information was scant:
> maybe the father, too, was a Fascist, because among the green
> inscriptions there was a "To Us!", universal during the Ventennio[29] but
> discredited among the younger generations; and this father must own a
> greenish-brown car, because someone who buys a can of spray paint just
> for writing on walls is more likely to choose red or black.[30]

He continues to go to a hardware store to ask the clerk who had recently bought paint in that color. She tells him, and it turns out to be the family of a boy he recently tutored. (Already, he is

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[28] In the Spring of 1977, a movement sprung out of Bologna, Italy that very closely mirrored May '68.
[29] Literally meaning *a period of twenty years*, though usually referring to the fascist period Italy.
[30] Primo Levi, "Decoding," in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, vol. II, trans. Ann Goldstein, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 1528.

doing much more detective work than the majority of passersby). He later runs into the boy

who painted the slogans and subtly interrogates him to understand his motivations.

> … He had to retake the exams in October, even in mathematics.
> He said it with an air of rebuke, as if it had been my fault, not as a former
> instructor but as other, as not-Piero, and hence a member of the
> conspiracy against him…
>
> I asked if he had seen the green inscriptions down the road. "I
> did them," he said simply. "I've had enough, it's got to stop."
>
> "Enough of what?"
>
> "Of everything. of school. Of being fifteen. Of this town. Of
> mathematics: what's the use for me? Since I'm going to be a lawyer;
> rather, a judge."
>
> "Why a judge?"
>
> "To… so, to do justice. So that people pay; each one pays his
> bills."[31]

The boy's motivation was an internal rage, an insecurity in the face of every not-Piero in his life.

His anger is fueled by a need for revenge, a transactional and mathematical ideal of justice.

Rather than collective rage, like what the SI and other '68 revolutionaries claimed, Piero was

inspired by an individualist need for self-actualization. Levi doesn't believe that this is an

uncommon motivation for writing on walls. In fact, he claims it is inherent to the medium:

> All writing on walls, not just Fascist slogans, saddens me,
> because it's pointless and stupid, and stupidity is damaging to human
> society. Apart from the revolutionary exceptions that I mentioned
> earlier[32], it's acceptable only if it's done by children, or by those who
> have the mental age of children: more generally, those who are unable to
> foresee the effects of their own actions. In fact, this cumbersome and
> *untidy*[33] vehicle of propaganda has never led anyone to change his mind,

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[31] Levi, "Decoding," 1530.

[32] Earlier in the essay, Levi mentions an "arrogant public official" being doused in yellow paint (Ibid, 1525).

[33] English in the original

not even the most ingenuous reader, and not even about the excellence
of a soccer team.[34]

The SI would perhaps say the goal is not to change anyone's mind, that direct action

towards shutting down the means of production was for material gains rather than ideological.

The graffiti is just to reinforce an already existing sense of community. Levi, however, sees

graffiti as inherently individualistic because it is incomprehensible to everyone accept the one

who wrote it. After finding out the identity of the perpetrator, Levi notes that the anonymity

was always an illusion. Anonymity, in this case, does not produce a collective voice. It just

reinforces the personal motivations of the graffeur. The layers of complexity do nothing to quell

the boy's insecurity and only escalate the tensions between him and the not-Pieros around him.

Graffiti, in its anonymity, strengthens the ever-present difficulties in communication. Levi states

that language, on or off of walls, is imperfect and private, a "code" unique to each person. It is a

sharp contrast from the idealist aspirations of the SI and other revolutionaries. Levi finishes the

essay by evoking the wars and revolutions of Italy's past and the graffiti born out of them.

> But I thought also of the misunderstood power of the weak, the unfit: in
> our unstable world, a failure… can provoke others in a chain reaction,
> one frustration, other frustrations. I thought of how disagreeable it is to
> help disagreeable men, who are most in need of help. And finally I
> thought of the thousands of other writings on Italian walls, faded by
> forty years of rain and sun, often riddled with bullet holes from the war
> they helped unleash, and yet still legible, thanks to the vicious obstinacy
> of paints and corpses, which break down in a short time but whose
> macabre remains endure into eternity: writings that are tragically ironic,
> and yet perhaps still capable of inciting errors from their error, and
> failures form their failure.[35]

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[34] Levi, "Decoding," 1526–27.
[35] Ibid, 1531.

Graffiti, for Levi, is a complete failure in communication. It is inherently private, incomprehensible, and counterproductive. It does not create community as the SI hopes and claims. On the contrary, it increases division and inhibits progress. In a post-war or post-revolutionary period, Levi promotes direct communication. Only in having a face-to-face conversation with the boy does he truly know what he feels and why.

The student demonstrators of '68 would have been terrified at Levi's decision to communicate with someone on "the other side". Though the written word of '68 promoted collectivity, it was an exclusive collectivity. The liberation of the written word was coupled by the refusal of certain forms of communication—namely, communication with forces of power.

> ... perhaps it is best to return to Sartre's observation that the power of the students lay not in their seizure of speech but rather in their refusal of it. The refusal of speech was just as much a part of May culture as its seizure. After all, it was the refusal to negotiate with the state on the part of insurgents ("no dialogue between *matraqueurs* and *matraqués*"), the refusal of what one tract called "the stinking *seduction* of dialogue", that accelerated the disarray and terror of the state; negotiation would, after all, have kept conflict within limits tolerated by the system.[36]

Here we return to the discourse of dialogue from the previous section. Levi's view of graffiti promoted face-to-face dialogue, refusing the deception and secrecy of graffiti. The popular view of '68 and later '77, on the other hand, found dialogue to be a dead end. Graffiti was the adrenaline in a system whose goal was physical, material power. What would "convince" the state of the students' and workers' rights were not kind, understanding words, but collective

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[36] Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 187.

action that would shut the economy down. Graffiti, somewhere between caffeine and opium, was an alluring route through which to express rage and inspiration.

Graffiti, thus, is a reflection of its writer, not a goal in and of itself. People will always write—what must be analyzed is where, how, and why. It is naive to say that Piero wrote *because* he was a fascist, or that the '68 demonstrators wrote *because* they were communists[37]. I prefer the view of graffiti as a reaction, an instinct, one of innumerable methods of human communication that reflects, not creates, its historical context.

Self-defense and Self-actualization

I have said before that graffiti is a reflection of its writer. In the case of May '68, it is often a very indirect representation. Graffiti from the period often handle subjects of location or the idealist aspirations of the protestors—the street, the paving stone, liberation. But these were all metaphoric, roundabout ways to talk about oneself and one's community. During and after of May '68, police and militants took on metonymic identifiers—for militants, 'the street' or 'the paving stones'. For police, the *matraque*, or baton. Instrument of choice for suppressing dissent, the *matraque* quickly became the most immediate physical danger for protestors. Ross describes its transition from tool to symbol in the wake of '68.

> … A typical militant tract entitled "How to Avoid the Matraques,"
> distributed on the bloodiest night of the May events, May 24, instructs

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[37] Approximately.

> demonstrators on how best to fold sections of newspapers like *France-Soir* or *"Figaremuche,"* as militants called the right-wing newspaper, *Le Figaro*, to use as a protective coating for the shoulders and neck: "The thickness should correspond to that of the 'matraquable' skin—about twenty-five pages of bourgeois press."[38]

Other than the tongue-in-cheek qualifiers of the newspapers, the description in the tract is quite literal. In the most physical sense, the *matraque* is the threat and the printed word is the shield. Words, even another's, become a tool of self-defense. The power here lies in the reuse and transformation of the printed word. Not used in its "intended" manner, the newspaper gains an entirely new importance for its "reader" through a sort of physical détournement. Throughout the years following '68, the symbols of *matraque* and *written word* take on wider, abstract meanings.

The *matraque*, once only a physical object to watch out for, becomes first the police, then the state, then any powerful structure to resist. The written word—not the paper it is printed on—becomes the first line of defense.

> The verb "*matraquer*" that appears so frequently in the literature of May–June takes on a figurative meaning for the first time only after '68. It is then that the French begin to speak, for example, of the *matraquage* of televisual images, or of other sensory experiences of incessant repetition: no longer literal blows raining down, but the draining staccato of repeated advertising jingles, the refrains of popular music.[39]

Printed advertisements rotating at every bus stop. State-sanctioned plaques dictating memory. Road signs dictating where to go and where it is forbidden. You get the picture. Graffiti as an act cuts through the droning, or *matraquage*, of the "official" written word. For blatantly political

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[38] Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 27.
[39] Ibid, 31.

messages, graffiti can be a defense of an identity, a call to action, or a way to fight back against perceived hate or exclusion. Even more incisive is the détournement of these advertisements. Essentially, though, graffiti is an affirmation of the self. Tags that say no more than a name, usually a false one at that, highlight this underlying function. Remodeling one's landscape, taking words into one's own hands in the most literal sense, spreading a message or simply affirming one's existence—all of these are the same process, one of building the self in barrage of others. Thus, graffiti does not necessarily need to be political in nature to count as a self-actualizing act. No matter what the graffeur says, the process itself is what counts.

Section Conclusion

Graffiti, as a medium, is built on paradox; creation/destruction, collective/private, anonymous/self-affirming. French and Italian graffiti, in their modern form, take inspiration from the movements of 1968 and 1977 (whether consciously or not). But as Ross explains in the last quote, the modern perception of 1968 is not an exact recreation of the movement. The broader meaning of *matraquer*, which implicitly informs modern graffiti tactics, only took hold after the fact. What does this say about the legacy of 1968? What are the implications for modern politics and writing? Through graffiti, even history becomes paradoxical. The anonymity and ephemerality of graffiti make it the perfect playing ground for alternative memories to compete. In the following section, I will investigate the role of memory in modern graffiti. This touches not just upon the hectic and spontaneous nature of '68 and '77, but on broader questions of state authority, violence, and perseverance.

SECTION 2

Festivity, authority, and memory

About once a month, the Centro Sociale Bruno in Trento would host parties—almost raves, though in such a small city you must take that term with a grain of salt. I looked forward to these events more than any other when I was in Trento—I felt I fit in here most, both because of the type of music played and the political messages that adorned the walls.

Other bars played music, but nothing that truly excited me. It was all pretty standard, status-quo. The walls in and around these bars also contained writing, usually signatures from students past and present. These sometimes centered around national identity, or explicitly highlighted the experience of being a foreigner studying in Trento. Usually, though, it was simply a name. At Bruno, however, the messages were more explicitly political, and it was a politics I could get behind. The gender-neutral language, multilingualism, communist insignias, etc. created an atmosphere that felt familiar, rebellious, productive, liberating.

The Centro Sociale, a glorified squat, was a space outside of authority[40]. Across the river from the main city, politically active, contrarian, active at night; it was like a carnival. Social regulation went out the window, but only on certain days, only under the cover of night. Once a month, I felt like I could dance the way I do in New York. I didn't have to worry that the host would reveal a few drinks in that he was proud to have voted for Giorgia Meloni, completely oblivious or willfully manipulative of her party's fascist history (this did happen to me once, about a week into my stay. From that point on, there were very few spaces where I didn't feel the threat of fascism lurking).

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[40] Steve Wright, "In the Shell of the Old - Italy's Social Centres," *Black Flag* 209 (October 19, 1996) https://libcom.org/article/shell-old-italys-social-centres. The Centri Sociali grew out of 77's Autonomia Operaia—though not directly advertised, C.S. Bruno in Trento has origins in 1977.

WE ARE ALL ANTIFA

Trento

(The text, in Spanish, uses an @ as a gender neutral suffix rather than -o or -a)
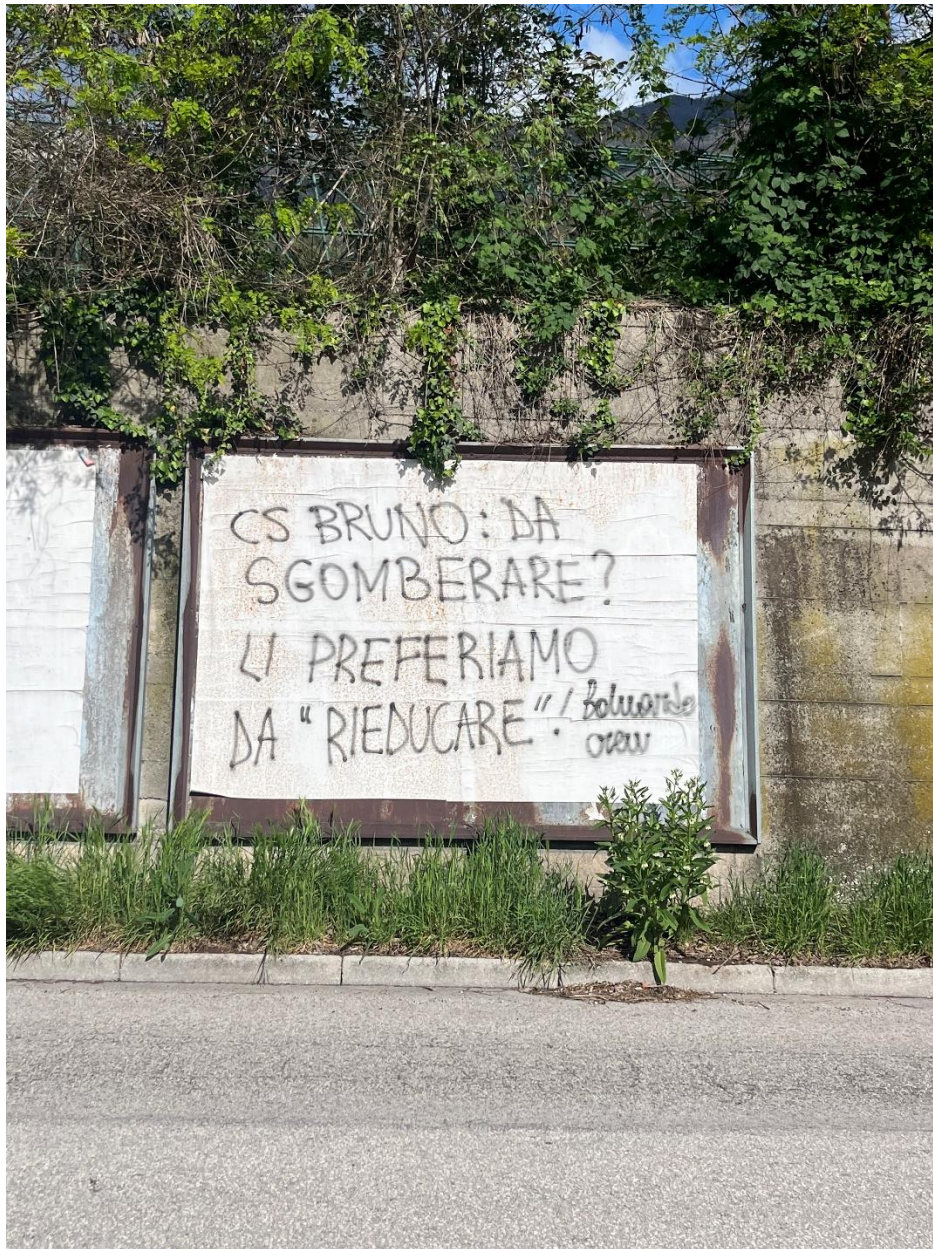
EVICT C.S. BRUNO? WE'D RATHER "RE-EDUCATE" THEM! – BALUARDO CREW

Trento

(*Il baluardo* is an extreme-right social center that opened in Trento in 2013, always at odds with Bruno)

During one of these parties at Bruno, I saw a man asleep on the couch that we had all thrown our coats upon. He was an older Black man, and I assumed he was a migrant—immigration from Africa to Trento is a relatively new phenomenon, given its seclusion and distance from the Mediterranean. In all honesty, I assumed every Black person I saw had arrived in the past few years. Part of me was glad he had a place to sleep, albeit in a loud and stuffy venue. Part of me was worried for the other homeless migrants I had met during my stay. Part of me reproached myself for assuming anything about this man's ethnicity and personal history.

Being a white American student gave me a unique perspective and privilege in Trento. By the most technical definition, I too was a migrant. But I knew that I wasn't really part of the discussion. I wasn't under threat by any anti-immigration rhetoric. I wasn't the subject of the countless graffiti of "no borders" or "immigrants welcome". In the immigration office, scanning my fingerprints for my residence permit, I couldn't help but feel different than the Ukrainian, Nigerian, and Syrian families surrounding me.

Naturally, this led me to ponder my presumed rights—my right to the country, to the city, to the streets. My right to study. My right to write…

I could take out a sharpie to scribble on the walls a bar without a second thought. I could probably get away with larger acts of vandalism, too. I started to wonder who was writing "no borders," "refugees welcome," "antifascist action," etc. ad nauseam. I don't think it's too presumptuous to say that these were mostly students; most likely northern Italian; almost certainly white Europeans. All the African immigrants I knew had more pressing matters, like finding work or food. I found it hard to imagine that the homeless immigrants around me

would risk arrest or fines for vandalism, much less have the time, money, or energy to follow through with it. I'm curious as to how writers of "no borders" would act when passing a homeless Black man.

Trento is a city full of historical contradictions. The 16th century Council of Trent, held at the Castello Buonconsiglio, was a formative and definitive event in the Counterreformation. In the 20th century, after its annexation from Austria, Trento was the focus fascist efforts at 'Italianizing' the northern border and securing a national identity[41]. Against this backdrop of Catholic tradition, social regulation, and reactionism, the University became a site of revolution. Students in Trento were active in May '68. In a city with such a history, it's hard not to ponder questions of authority. And at a well-funded university with a few thousand international students at any given time, it's hard not to notice economic disparities, privilege, and pretention that come with.

The past goes much further back in Trento than anywhere else I've lived—at least, it's more visible. Taking the bus by the Castello Buonconsiglio on my way to class, or walking past a memorial for Simon of Trent[42] on the way to the bar, the past and present blend together. And while attending a dance party outside the once-occupied sociology department, I connected

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[41] McLean, Eden K. "The Un-'Common Sense' of National Identity: Luigi Molina, Trentini and the Fascist Italianisation Campaign in Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol." *Contemporary European History*, 2023, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777323000139.

[42] A young Christian boy whose death in 1475 fueled accusations, attacks, and the eventual execution of much of the local Jewish community. Paul Oskar Kristeller. "The Alleged Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent (1475) and Its Literary Repercussions: A Bibliographical Study," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 59 (1993): 103–4. https://doi.org/10.2307/3622714.

with a more recent, yet equally pertinent, past. Patterns of privilege, pretention, and resistance

by those on the margins repeat. The graffiti in the city reflects this heritage, even indirectly.

Another '68?

At times, graffeurs evoke May '68 directly through slogans. "Under the paving stones,

the beach", "No god nor master", "Never work" and more show up in different forms and in

different languages to this day[43]. The memory of '68, emblematic and mythologized, continues

to evolve through its recapitulation. Modern political movements in France and Italy adhere to

a certain memory of May '68 which offers an optimistic sense of camaraderie and autonomy

through spontaneous collective action. The essential question is how far we can take this

comparison, if at all. May '68 and 1977 have been mythologized to such an extent that any

memory, any comparison is inherently skewed and modified. On the other hand, this shift in

memory gives the events an ambiguity that lends itself to comparison with just about anything.

Based on pure chance I was in Europe in Early 2023, so this paper focuses on the movements

against 41bis in Italy and the raised retirement age in France. If I visited during a different year,

I would have different benchmarks of comparison. Still, I think these protests touch on

important themes that can be applied to protest and graffiti in general—namely, state power

over economics and personal freedom.

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[43] I recommend doing a search of any of these terms on the Twitter account @GraffitiRadical and browsing through the international examples.

Through the anti-pension-reform and anti-41bis protests that surrounded me during my stay in Europe, visions of 1968 peeked through. I'm not the first to draw this comparison—many slogans from the protests directly referenced May, or dubbed March '23 the new May '68[44]. Today, 1968 has become the benchmark for all French protests. It's no surprise that the retirement age protests invited comparison. It also goes to show just how mythologized the events of May '68 have become. For many French people, they symbolize spontaneous autonomy, effective revolution, broad coalitions beating the odds to come together and (nearly) shut the government down. Yet last year the retirement age was raised, and the protests died down. To call the protests ineffective may tarnish any comparison to '68. From another perspective, though, we could say they ended up exactly the same. Even during 1968 (and later 1977), there was internal debate over the movements' efficacy.

1977 in Italy was seen as a reprise of 1968, and many participants expected it to have a more damning outcomes. Franco Berardi (AKA Bifo) was a professor and Marxist intellectual in Bologna highly active during 1977. He had an optimistic view of the movement, comparing it to the best parts of 1968 and saying that, ideologically, it went even further. The following poem, from the collection *Finalmente il cielo è caduto sulla terra (Finally the sky has fallen to Earth)*, reflects the conception of 1968 during 1977.

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[44] Hannah Steinkopf-Frank, "'Borne to Be Dead': The slogans of the Protests against the French Pension Reform," *Le Monde*, March 16, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/03/16/borne-to-be-dead-the-slogans-of-the-protests-against-the-french-pension-reform_6019633_7.html

Another '68
Bifo

There is motion and e/motion
Power is not just
where horrendous decisions are made
        but wherever discourse
removes the body the rage
the scream the gesture of living.

        The language
of the ordered assemblies where the order
of discourse reproduces
the order (out of respect) of things.

        So say the gray corpses
of politics-culture-hegemony:
the danger of DISINTEGRATION.

        Disintegration is the life
that flows from the ordered
chains of family
of work of time
predestined for the factory.
        What is exploding now
is the compressed wealth
of new social forces
which by their very formation
break the horrendous order
of the cycle: performance/
reproduction of the body /
performance of value.

What is exploding now
is the sexuality-gesture-sign
that interrupts language—
codified, closed—

in the sense-assembly
line.
      The complex path
of the subject in liberation
moves elsewhere, not within
the understandable cycle
of motion-assemblies.

      Desire is now making itself
movement.
For this we are already beyond
'68. You are not seeing students but rather
the Subject who moves
via/cross[45] orders, given then
separated: factory school culture.

      CRIME PAYS.

      Disintegration, a proletariat that embodies
in its own existence
the refusal of every
innocence: work-salary
work-salary-work
      still more work?

FROM THE MASS ASSEMBLIES OF THE UNIVERSITY EMERGES THE NEW PROLETARIAN
SUBJECT.
THE SOLIDIFICATION OF THE PRODUCTIVE REFUSAL OF WORK WITHIN A CONCRETE
SOCIAL FIGURE, CAPABLE OF MOVING VIA/CROSS THE ENTIRE SOCIAL BODY IN A
REALISTIC AND COMMUNISTIC LINE: GENERAL REDUCTION OF THE WORK
SCHEDULE - WORK, EVERYONE, BUT NOT TOO MUCH. PROLETARIAN ASSAULT ON
WEALTH, SOCIALLY PRODUCED AND EXPROPRIATED BY THE BOURGEOISIE.
REVOLUTION IS POSSIBLE![46]

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[45] Originally *a/traverso,* also the name of the revolutionary newspaper of the '77 demonstrators.

[46] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Un altro '68," in *Finalmente il cielo è caduto sulla terra* (Milan: SquiLibri, 1978), 99-100. From here on out, any text sources that do not list a translator have been translated by myself.

The last paragraph of this poem, verging into prose, reads more like a manifesto. One can imagine Bifo shouting this through a megaphone to a cheering crowd of students. His description of 1977 is definitive, productive—the students form a proletarian mass assembly, and this assembly changes society. It's a revolution. Critics of 1977 and 1968 would argue that these terms should not be taken for granted. Even the idea of who is fighting, and what is being fought for, is debatable. Certainly, the memory and conception of '68 and '77 have changed since the actions finished.

In *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Kristen Ross describes how the "New Philosophers" of the mid-70's (André Glucksmann, Alain Finkielkraut, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Françoise Giroud, among others) discussed and manipulated the memory of May '68[47]. The New Philosophers, or *Nouveaux Philosophes*, were the generation of mainstream French philosophers who disavowed Marxism. Many participated in 1968 and had previously been part of the communist party, but had left after the 'revelation' of the gulag, in an effort to break with a totalitarian Soviet Union[48]. Ross summarizes Nouvelle Philosophie's politics as "verbal support for voiceless 'marginals' accompanied by a deep commitment to bourgeois liberalism."[49] This bourgeois motivation to help the helpless *other* is in line with today's figure of the *white savior*—one who makes a name for themselves off the suffering of the colonial *other*, taking it upon themself to help the helpless poor, feed the starving African children, because they-can't-do-it-themselves-and-I-want-to-

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[47] Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 208
[48] Ibid, 170
[49] Ibid, 180.

feel- good-about-myself, goddammit! In fact, Ross notes that the New Philosophers shifted

focus from *worker* to *colonial subject* throughout the 70's:

> Where the New Philosophers in their first guise labored to counteract
> and ultimately replace the figure of the worker with the all-suffering and
> silent pleb, the anti-third-worldists of the 1980s—many of the same
> people—take on the figure of the colonial other, modifying its features
> into that of the adoptable child, the people-object, in need of emergency
> rescue…[50]

Thus, through an active manipulation of the memory of 1968, its supposed participants take on

a paternalistic, pretentious responsibility to help those who supposedly lacked the motivation

or means to help themselves. This perspective is relevant to today's world, whether to dismiss

legitimacy of political institutions or popular, extra-political movements. The New

Philosophers, though, promoted their ideas as the only true path—moving past militant

Marxism-Maoism was the only way to revive the left.

Much of their philosophy involves a repudiation of 1968, a criticism of its ambitions, and

a change in how the events are understood.

> Best known for their radical anti-Marxism …, the significance of the New
> Philosophers for us lies in their successful manufacturing of a certain
> representation of themselves as the emergence, ten years after the event,
> of the "true voice of May '68." It is through them that the watchword of
> '68, namely "equality", is definitively changed to "liberty".[51]

According to Ross, the emphasis on *liberation* and *liberation* alone is a retroactive description of

May '68. Liberation of the written word, through graffiti and literature contemporary to '68, is

one of the main ways that May '68 is remembered today. Bifo, by emphasizing the "complex

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[50] Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 180
[51] Ibid, 169.

path / of the subject in liberation" shows how solid this conception of '68 was only nine years after the fact. Bifo and his militant cohorts seemed to follow some of the same trends as the Nouveaux Philosophes, namely a focus on liberty/liberation. However, the 1977 Movement never disavowed Marxism, branding their movement as a form of 'Maoist-Dadaism'. 1977's whole structure showed a reinvigorated commitment to militant Marxism while echoing the general liberatory aspects of May '68. And by using graffiti and language as a weapon in much the same way as '68, the participants in 1977 carried on several (perceived) traditions at once.

The cover of Falciola's history on 1977 shows a demonstrator with a jester-like painted face, a large graffito reading "CRIME PAYS", and several smaller pieces including the words "MAO DADA" under a hammer-sickle-and-rifle insignia.[52]

Yet by working towards and abstract goal of liberation, the movement of 1977 still reflected a shift in 1968's memory. Changes in values are perhaps inevitable when remembering any revolutionary moment. Despite their differences, though, both movements were susceptible to the same criticism by outsiders.

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[52] *1977 Protestor with Facepaint and Graffiti reading "Il Delitto Paga". Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, Luca Falciola, Carocci Editore, 2015. Front Cover.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, the ever-contrarian writer and filmmaker, was much less impressed

by the militant action of May '68. He published an open letter in the form of a poem to the

protestors of 1968[53]. In "Il PCI ai giovani" ('The Italian Communist Party to the Youth'), he

reproaches the militants as being naive bourgeois kids, playing pretend in an attempt to obscure

their social class and feel like they are part of actual change:

> [The policemen] are twenty years old, just like you, dear boys and girls.
> We are obviously in agreement against the institution of the police.
> But take it up with the court and see where it gets you!
> Those policeboys
> who you, daddy's boys, clubbed in the
> sacred name of delinquency (constructed tradition
> of the Risorgimento[54]),
> they belong to the other social class.
> In Valle Giulia, yesterday, there was a fragment
> of class struggle: and you, my dears (albeit
> in the right) were the rich,
> while the police (albeit in the
> wrong) where the poor. Nice victory, then!
> …
> Occupy the universities,
> but admit that the idea came
> from young workers.[55]

Pasolini notes two important shifts here; first is the opposition between the PCI and 'the youth'.

The second is a shift from proletarian militancy to bourgeois spectacle. The militants of 1968

were against the institutional nature of the Communist Party and believed it was no longer able

to affect real social change. In criticizing the economic backgrounds of the militants, he points to

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[53] He was killed before 1977. I'm sure he would have had a lot to say about those protestors, too.

[54] *Risorgimento,* or Resurgence, refers to the unification process of the Kingdom of Italy.

[55] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il Pci ai giovani," *L'Espresso*, June 16, 1968, https://temi.repubblica.it/espresso-il68/1968/06/16/il-pci-ai-giovani/?printpage=undefined

a paternalistic, pretentious desire on the part of bourgeois intellectuals to be the ones calling the shots. This desire manifested itself, according to him, in the student protests and occupations (which he argued they co-opted from the true working class). In the years that followed, there was no illusion of bridging this divide between the PCI and the youth. By 1977, the militant group Autonomia Operaia (lit. "Workerist Autonomy") had firmly established itself as an opposing force to the Italian Communist Party.

Throughout the movement, the rift between groups militant groups and the PCI grew more and more. Debates and violent clashes between the PCI and groups such as Autonomia Operaia and Lotta Continua ("Continuous Struggle") reached a boiling point, signaling a definitive break among the left[56]. As the main proponents and agitators of 1977, Autonomia Operaia embody this post-68 emphasis on *liberation* in the name of Marxism. As one contemporary, Marco Grispigni, noted:

> The centrality of desire and the subject who desires break up any focus on objectivity. Desire becomes movement and movement becomes performance, event. The movement's future (and interests) do not concern the seizure of power, just its un/veiling. Certainly '77 is not only this; especially after March, it is political extremism, the insurrectionism of Autonomia Operaia, Marxism revisited by neoparliamentary groups on the extreme left, the radicalizing antireformist polemic against the Italian Communist Party. But aside from this, and often within the folds of political extremism, hides this first grand experiment of transcending politics.[57]

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[56] Luca Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2015), 162–63.

[57] Marco Grispigni, *1977* (Rome, Manifestolibri, 2007), 58, quoted in Giacomo Parrinello, "Il movimento "rivoluzionario" del 1977", *Storicamente*, accessed April 12, 2024, https://storicamente.org/parrinello_link18.

Those on the side of the Communist Party would argue that a focus on transcendence is an

abstract, counterrevolutionary waste of time. On the other side, it is clear that Autonomia

Operaia and similar groups feel that their expansive, decentralized approach is the real path to

societal change. This rift among the left is still felt today. A blog post from 2018 on the Italian

Workers' Communist party (PC Lavoratori) goes on an in-depth critique of Autonomia

Operaia's ideology as a whole.

> The Trontian[58] path to communism was a series of reactionary fallacies
> typical of the worst petty-bourgeois nihilism. This philosophy which
> affirms that "the end is nothing, the moment of the encounter is
> everything," was already contested by Lenin in regards to the empiricist
> criticism of Richard Avenarius and Ernst Mach, philosophical embryo of
> workerism's hyper-subjectivity. It's an extremism far beyond Leninism's
> infancy and an unacceptable political minimalism masked by
> antagonism that still wholly informs autonomist strategy per se. With
> the rhetoric of *liberated spaces* as their largest political goal, and the
> disregard for state control (even just to have more control than the
> capitalists), the workerist tradition could not be a better example of
> today's antagonistic abandonment of every connection to the world of
> labor[59].

This fierce polemic, from the Workers' Communist Party website, shows that the rift between

institutional Marxism and 77's autonomism is alive and well. Both of these critiques, one

contemporary to the movement and one from more than 40 years after, point to the same

spectacular inefficacy perceived among 1977's militants. The specific criticism of "liberated

spaces" points towards the occupations and graffiti emblematic of both 1968 and 1977, which to

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[58] Describing Mario Tronti, a founding philosopher of *operaismo*, or 'workerism'

[59] Salvo Lo Galbo, " Critica dell'operaismo," Teoria, Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori, March 29, 2018,
https://www.pclavoratori.it/files/index.php?obj=NEWS&oid=5872.

critics reads more as self-serving performance than revolution. In short, the PCLavoratori criticizes these so-called militants as just being bourgeois students playing pretend, in much the same way Pasolini critiqued the militants of May '68. The bourgeois pretention critiqued here—or at least the perception thereof—is applicable to today's politics as a whole. Even among movements unaffiliated with a communist party or workerist ideology, there is a constant wish to interrogate protestors' origins, funding, motivations. On the one hand, you have critics calling methods like graffiti and civil disobedience infantile, fantastical, ineffective. On the other, you have the demonstrators themselves refusing dialogue with 'the oppressor', advocating their goals through autonomous and self-sustaining action. This is the tension inherent to 1968 and 1977. The memory of these events has been one long debate over the background of the demonstrators and the viability of their methods, and the debate is applied to other movements today.

Whether or not inquiries into demonstrators' backgrounds are unfounded, it's a common idea—in order to affect social change, one must be genuine in their intentions and background. In other words, one must *really* be a victim. Today, this has led to a stratification in the figure of the *ally*, one who must speak up, but not too loud; not assume an understanding of the other's experience; follow the lead of those who are really suffering. Once again, we can turn to the figure of the *white savior*, or the worst kind of ally. The anonymity of graffiti removes the social rewards of feigning help in such a way. But I imagine, for many, that the motivation is the same. It is inherently impossible to say who spray-painted any given message, or put up a poster. This makes it even easier to speculate, even easier to question the 'authenticity' of the message.

FREEDOM

SAY NO TO DARMANIN'S LAW!

SAY NO TO DARMANIN'S MEASURES!

FOR A WELCOMING IMMIGRATION

POLICY

Paris

NO BORDERS

ANTIFA

(No posting)

REFUGEES WELCOME

Trento

And so, in this regard, we see another '68 every day. We could call graffiti and spectacular bourgeois aspirations the two defining features of 1968, but we can go further. Perhaps speculation, misunderstanding, and a constantly shifting memory is the only true legacy of 1968. In writing this paper, criticizing the motivations, outcome, and memory of 1968, perhaps I too am participating in it, 56 years after the fact. In criticizing modern graffiti, hoping that I could possibly know its motivations, that I know better than the graffeur, that I am *above it all*, I am replaying '68.[60]

Within and Without Authority

1968 and 1977 were temporary periods of frenzy, marked by new, liberated forms of communication. Especially in the case of 1977, modern technology was inherent to spreading messages and building community. Radio Alice was the "official" radio station of the movement. Broadcast from a repurposed military transmitter, the radio station featured philosophical debates, live updates on militant actions, and phone calls from comrades all interspersed with twangy psychedelic rock. The casual, communal format went against the authoritative, uniform style of the state-sponsored radio of the time. Everything about Radio

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[60] At least, the post-'68 '68. This is an important distinction to make. It is impossible to isolate the events of May '68 to just that month. Its memory, evolution, and ripple-effects are just as much a part of the 'events' as the militant actions in May itself.

Alice was new, modern, completely in the present—new music, minute-by-minute directives on where police where planning attacks, new ideas, a new form of communication. Though Radio Alice was not the first "free radio" station (*radio libera*) in Italy, its open use for political means has solidified its legacy long after the police raid that shut it down in 1977.[61]

We can define Radio Alice's allure as a type of communication free of authority. With its laid-back tone and counter cultural subject matter, Radio Alice did away with the paternalistic voice of Mussolini, the post-fascist government, church, school, even the communist party. Graffiti is intriguing for many of the same reasons. In its accessibility and approachability, it creates a liberated environment. If one didn't agree with what was being broadcast on Radio Alice, all it took was a phone call to send a different message through the airwaves. With graffiti, all it takes is some paint to cover up someone else's idea and promote your own. This liberated form of communication eventually organizes itself. Certain factions find certain streets to take over, confirming each other's positions and doing away with the threat of disagreement. During times of protest, this uniformity becomes almost total. In 1968, for instance, a protestor could assume that any graffiti on any wall was written by a comrade. Certain messages gained traction and were repeated throughout the city. A dedicated time to go against authority leads to an exponential growth of graffiti and extra-authoritarian communication. 1968 and 1977 were opportunities for voices which were usually suppressed to come to the forefront and communicate in a world completely opposite from the usual.

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[61] Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia,* 103.

I will venture to define both Radio Alice and graffiti as a whole as examples of what Idil Basural calls 'carnivalistic mediation' in "*Médiation carnavaleaque* de l'écriture rebelle: le graffiti des événements Occupy Gezi et Nuit Debout." Building off ancient Greek and Roman carnivals, where social order and acceptable behavior are ignored for a given period of time, Basural defines *médiation carnavalesque* as "all non-institutional media that permit collective, individual, harmonious, or cacophonous participation, in short the whole network of communication that authorizes a public form of speech (*parole*) with no manifest identity…"[62] Carnivalistic mediation takes place outside of the restraints of authority. Modern political movements use the cover of nighttime as a natural opportunity to avoid the authorities. Basural cites France's Nuit Debout and global variations of Occupy Wall Street, specifically Istanbul's Occupy Gezi, as taking place primarily during the night time. She argues that nighttime is worth more than the logistical advantages of darkness—nighttime is conducive to a collective psychology and the release of societal inhibitions[63]. The natural rhythms of day and night lead to a sort of carnival that occurs every 24 hours, which, when properly exploited, can provide momentum for collective celebration, demonstration, occupation, and liberation.

For a more definitive definition of the carnival, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin. His text *Rabelais and His World* is a criticism and social interpretation of the works of Renaissance writer François Rabelais. Though the specific scope of this book is unrelated to my project, his succinct definition of the carnival influenced 1977 philosophy and has implications today, especially in

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[62] Idil Basural, "*Médiation carnavalesque* de l'écriture rebelle : le graffiti des événemens Occupy Gezi et Nuit Debout," in *Communication et Langages* no. 197 (March 2018): 55, https://doi.org/10.3917/comla1.197.0053.
[63] Ibid, 58.

regards to Basural's work. The medieval carnival evolved out of the Roman Saturnalia and keeps its definitive features. During the Saturnalia, which coincided with the winter solstice, social norms were reversed—gambling was allowed, masters served food to slaves, etc. It was a time of social *liberation*[64]. Modern carnivals work in a similar, albeit more subtle fashion—during a given time of year, the state promotes carnival activities, allowing the people to flood the city and all live liberally. The countercultural behavior that Basural defines as carnivalesque functions in a similar way, with one fundamental distinction— the lack of approval from the state. Times of protest, such as 1968 and 1977, function as spontaneous carnivals, completely untouched by the state.

Bakhtin's ideas influenced academics at the University of Bologna leading up to 1977, namely Piero Camporesi and Marco Belpoliti. In *Settanta*, a collection describing multiple social phenomena that occurred throughout the 70's, Belpoliti describes the linguistic effect that carnivals have on their participants. For him, this was exemplified by the graffiti, pamphlets, and performances among 1977's demonstrators.

> In the days of the University of Bologna's occupation, in February 1977,
> the walls were covered in murals and slogans, dozens of very informal
> publications appeared, but above all the piazza opposite from the
> University became the birthplace of spontaneous initiatives: theatrical
> improvisations, dramatizations, mime and clown shows (*spettacoli*) all put
> on by DAMS[65] students… That which most struck observers during this
> "carnival in Bologna" … were the slogans quickly transcribed by linguists
> and sociologists, the wordplay, the improvized poems with no order or
> rhythm or respect for dimension and form, which covered the walls
> inside the university, the walls of the surrounding streets, until they

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[64] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1968), 7.
[65] *Discipline delle arti, della musica, e dello spettacolo* — division of arts, music, and theater

completely covered, for quite some time, all the zones frequented by
students and other youth.[66]

Belpoliti, who studied in Bologna while Camporesi taught, describes how the idea of the

carnival had completely captured the imagination of demonstrators from all disciplines.

Drawing upon Camporesi's teachings on the history of Italian carnivals, student demonstrators

put his academic ideas into action. In addition to performances, puppets, mimes, and music, the

carnivalistic mood manifested itself through a fundamental change in language. Camporesi

describes this as a "a polemic break with the organized fabric of logical thinking and rational

expression, with the traditional order of things."; students became " 'separated bodies'

insensitive to the correspondence between words and things, swallowed up by the magical

attraction of phonetic association and a regression towards infantile language."[67] Before 1977,

Bakhtin had already described the carnivals power to inspire "special forms of marketplace

speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact

with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times."

Graffiti is inherent to this new form of communication and keeps this nature even today,

outside of times of protest. More than just methods, though, we must investigate the

psychological state of people participating in carnival, or spray-painting on their own time. The

carnivalistic joy of living outside of authority, of doing without social rules, is sometimes the

most important part of the graffeur's experience, taking precedence over the "message" of a

piece of graffiti.

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[66] Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta*, Nuova edizione (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), 320–21.

[67] Belpoliti, *Settanta*, 321.

"AAAAHHH!!! THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL!!!"
DOES ANY ACCEPTABLE PLEASURE (*JOUISSANCE*) COMPARE TO THAT OF UNITING
SEX APPEAL WITH THE IMMEASURABLE APPEAL OF BREAKING SOCIAL CHAINS AND
THE REVERSAL OF ALL LAWS?
Detournement of an ad near the Sorbonne, from 1968[68]

[68] *Enragés et situationnistes dans le movement des occupations*, 76.

Kristin Ross cites a first-hand account of May '68 that shows how collective action can lead to individual pleasure and joy:

> But as testimonies like that of Martine Storti make clear, individuality can be completed and not submerged by collectivity, and an experience can be both serious and happy at the same time (in fact, it is most likely in the nature of revolutionary collective experiences to be both serious and happy, or to be remembered as such)... "Was I aware of what has been called the 'Festival of May'? Yes, if it's a festival to demonstrate every day or almost every day, or to believe it at last possible to change the world, to share with others that hope, and from day to day to live in that kind of lightness of being I described earlier."[69]

The enjoyment that comes out of rioting together is the *jouissance* cited by the anonymous graffeur from the Situationist anthology of '68. In French, *jouir de* means *to enjoy,* while just *jouir* means *to orgasm, climax*. The sexual ambiguity of this word speaks to the aspirations and motivations of the '68 militants. It is relevant to both '77 and the modern day as well. A focus on *autonomy* and *ecstasy* reveal that the movements I have discussed were more about the activity than the outcome. It's not like the protestors in 1968 and 1977 had a list of demands that, if satisfied, would end the protest. In the case of Nuit Debout, which Basural investigates as a carnival, the goal was simply to open an arena for conversation, to turn public spaces into spaces of debate and learning. All of these differ from the anti-41bis and retirement age protests, which did have clearly defined goals. The emblematic movements of France and Italy were more so protest for protest's sake, for the collective ecstasy felt when reclaiming one's

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[69] Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives,* 100.

surroundings. So, in this sense, comparisons between last year's movements and those from 50 years ago are not entirely accurate.

Still, however, the *jouissance* is an inherent part of the practice of graffiti. It's the same rush that the graffeurs in Jules Hardi's documentary cited. Zen, who I cited in the first section, states, "I don't have a specific goal, I do it because I like it, because it gives me enough adrenaline to feel good."[70] Writing on walls, whether alone or with others, is worth more than just spreading a message. Writing is an *action*, not a product. Nighttime, periods of unrest, autonomous zones free of police—all of these are spontaneous carnivals. When the people agree to riot or celebrate, social rules go out the window. In the moment, destruction and creation evoke ecstasy. Yet during the frenzy, certain themes and slogans lose meaning due to their constant repetition. Most of the graffiti from '68 is repetitive, spreading the same message—for instance, 1968's "sous les pavés la plage" and "la beauté est dans la rue" have had such lasting legacies in part due to their wide dissemination and repetition during 1968[71]. In time, the carnival becomes ritualized and conformity takes precedence over dissent. This ritualization, inevitably, leads to stagnation.

But before things go awry, before the movement stagnates into a sort of repetitive spectacle, what is the driving force? Like traditional carnivals, it comes down to time. Religious festivals often have origins in the celebration a harvest season, or a solstice, or a certain phase of the moon. May '68 and the movement of 1977, too, involve the natural rhythms that guide our world. I believe that both movements were catalyzed by feelings of change and renewal

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[70] Hardi, "Documentary - VANDAL GRAFFITI, INVISIBLE APPROACHES," 21:20.
[71] "Under the paving stones, the beach" and "Beauty is in the street".

inspired by the springtime. I am certain that these protests' respective seasons are not a

coincidence.[72] Spring is a time of renewal, rebirth, and gives an optimistic outlook on the future.

In fact, Bakhtin clearly identified the link between carnivals and natural cycles.

> The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of
> an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historical
> timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development
> feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle
> of nature or in the life of society or man. Moments of death and revival,
> of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world.
> These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar
> character of the feasts.[73]

Springtime's religious and folkloric significance is reflected even by seemingly unrelated

cultural celebrations. Warmth, blooming flowers, a new harvest—all are reasons to celebrate, as

well as shake off the feelings of stagnation and isolation that winter evokes. With the turning of

the seasons, celebrations of regrowth and rebirth touch every level of society. When there are

compounding factors, such as the anti-Vietnam War and pro-worker aspects of 1968 and 1977,

the celebration turns into demonstration. Spring was the catalyst for these movements just like

it is for official carnivals. The one difference is that in official, state-sanctioned festivities, an

end-date is always set. During the carnival, social upheaval is allowed only until a certain date.

But on May 1st 1968, nobody had it in mind that they would stop the 'festivities' by the month's

end. Nowadays, it is easy to look back at May '68 and define it as a single month. But in the

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[72] We can also look to the Arab Spring, as well as the movements that Basural investigates.

[73] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 9.

IT'S SPRINGTIME – REVOLT, HARVEST

Paris

moment, the wish was for the protest to never end, for it to usher in a permanent and wholly new social structure. The carnival metaphor offers a helpful paradigm, but it can only go so far.

One consequence of this unclear end date is that the psychology of participants may never go back to "normal." What I mean by this is that ideas, images, and certainly graffiti may bleed out past the time when the authorities shut a movement down. This has a ripple effect, meaning that slogans "from" 1968 still have life after its "conclusion." Along with this repetition comes the constant evolution and repurposing of ideas. Take the institutional nature of the following sticker posted by a union organization, Union Syndicale Solidaires. The slogan follows the formula of "sous les pavés la plage," advocating for LGBT rights while evoking the spontaneous militant action of 1968. Here once again, there is a tension between *spontaneous* and *official* ideology. Though 1968 did initially involve pre-existing unions, the Situationists saw them as bureaucrats who did not represent the workers, being just a "mechanism of integration into capitalist society."[74]

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[74] "Pour le pouvoir des conseils ouvriers", in *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Paris : Gallimard, 1968), 280.

UNDER THE GLITTER, THERE IS RAGE! EQUAL RIGHTS!

Paris

In lieu of unions, the SI promoted worker's councils (*conseils ouvriers)*, groups of laborers who would have more direct control over strikes and factory occupations[75]. As I have demonstrated in regards to 1977, the most ardent militants of the time were against any form of hierarchy, any pretense of control or authority. So while at first glance this sticker may seem in line with 1968's ideals, its existence signals a contest over the right to an event's memory. The design probably passed through several offices before being finalized and sent off for mass-printing. The emblematic slogan of 1968 has entered the marketplace of speech and, the SI would argue, has been coopted by a bureaucracy that does not represent the working class. For a militant leftist who wants to 'stay true' to the origins of the phrase, it must be replaced. Thus, the *act* of graffiti, or producing stickers on a smaller scale, bypassing a hierarchy of approval, once again takes precedence over the so-called message. Wall-writing, in and of itself, becomes the stage for carnivalistic mediation.

Even outside of these carnivalistic periods, though, graffiti maintains the market-like nature described by Bakhtin—honest, liberated, and promoting communication with no distance between participants. Remember that Basural pointed towards night-time as an unavoidable, clockwork condition that inspires carnivalistic mediation. Even during "normal" periods in society, nighttime provides cover and inspiration for graffiti. Everyday graffiti exists in the realm of the carnivalesque, a seemingly-natural chaos, and shows a constantly open expression and repudiation of ideas even outside times of protest.

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[75] "Pour le pouvoir des conseils ouvriers", in *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*, 281.

Genoa

No words here, yet substantial conversation. We see an X, a Palestinian flag, and a fascist Celtic cross all intersecting. Presumably they were painted by three different people. With the layering, it is hard to tell which came first. Perhaps someone crossed out the Palestinian flag, and the original graffeur painted back over. The Celtic cross could have come in at any stage. Three interweaving and opposed ideologies fight it out in a narrow alley, and anyone walking by sees this public, collective palimpsest created in real time.

I want to be clear that May '68 is not the origin of politics and graffiti, nor is it only event that is evoked by modern graffiti. The symbol of the guillotine and the barricade, which draw upon the first French revolution and touch upon subsequent ones, show up again and again. All of these seem to say the same thing—I, the graffeur, am the ideological successor to these movements.

The following stylized piece of writing shows the contradictory sense of proletarian hope offered by the image of the guillotine[76]. Like the *barricade* I discussed in the first section, it has taken on a life of its own—the barricade and guillotine *are* the French Revolution[77], just like the paving stone *is* May '68. The image of a blooming guillotine evokes the paradoxical union of creation and destruction, tells the reader that violence is the way forward to a reborn society. This idea is in line with my previous point on springtime, renewal, rebirth, and revolution.

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[76] It is hard to ignore the Proustian sound of this graffiti, too. *Clan* evokes the exclusive *Verdurin clan* of the saga, and *en fleur* echoes the French title of the second volume, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs.* While I shan't go on a tangent about Proust, I will just note the subtle ways this graffiti plays on canonical French literature and cultural memory.

[77] I hesitate to specify *which* revolution here. The guillotine could be localized to the 1789 revolution and the barricade to that of 1830, though throughout the years the memories of several revolutions have bled together, inspired new revolts, and become national myths more than objective truths. By *the French Revolution* I mean something more akin to *the French* way *of Revolution.*
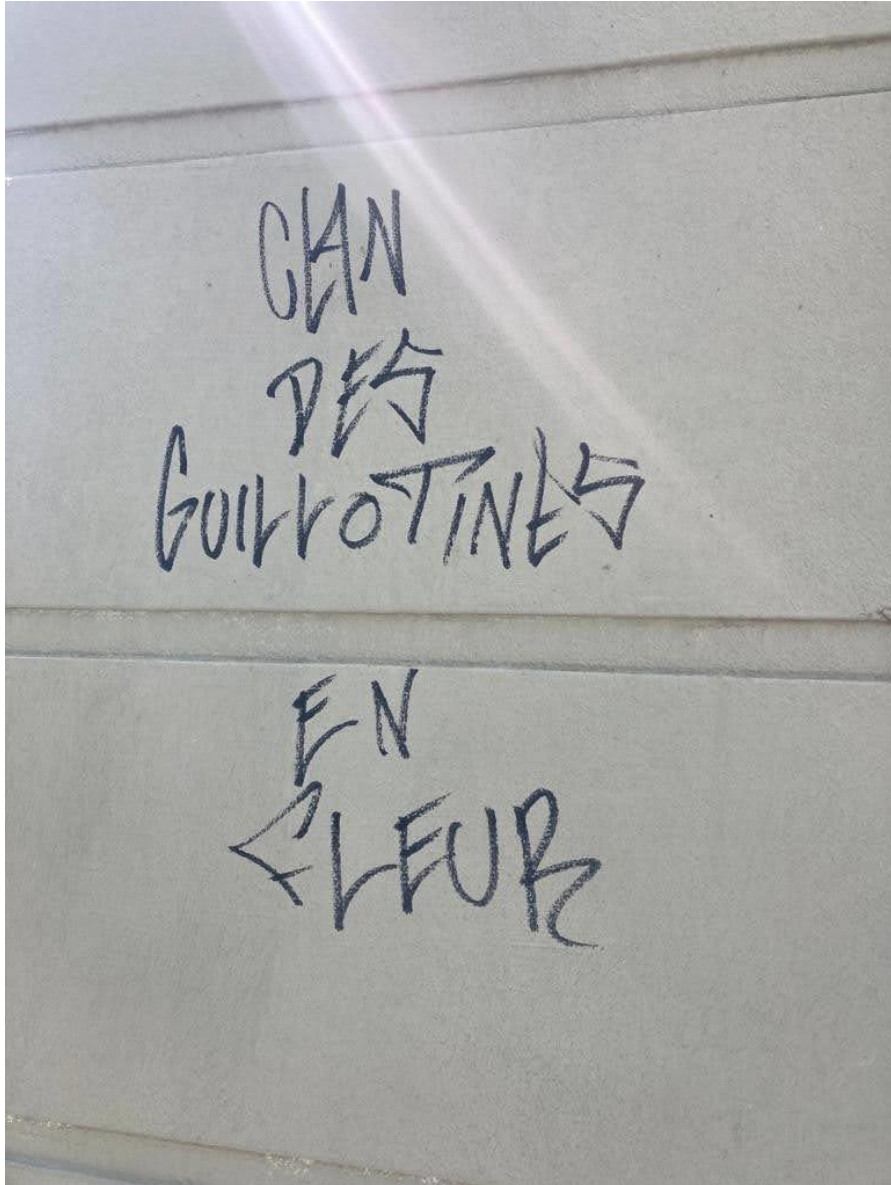
BLOOMING GUILLOTINE GANG
Paris
(Photo taken by Claire Bartholomew '24)

While the image of the guillotine directly links violence to social progress, other graffiti only point to violence indirectly[78]. Such are the variations of "No 41bis" that adorned Italy throughout my stay. The 41bis protests did not address the violence for which Alfredo Cospito was incarcerated, and instead condemned the violence imposed by solitary confinement. Similar in scope is the case of Dax, or Davide Cesare. Dax was an anti-fascist militant from Milan who was killed by fascists in 2003[79]. Also a symbol for antifascists, graffiti commemorating him highlight a similar focus on the violence of the *other*. His murder, as well as the riots and trial that followed, have stayed in the memory of the Italian left. Graffiti that commemorate him do not focus on militant activity, the violence that caused his death, or the rioting that followed—they focus instead on the existence of hate and the persistence of memory. Graffiti reading "Dax lives" and "Dax still hates" have spread far beyond Milan, becoming more of a symbol for generic pro-left sympathy than anything else. This is especially clear looking at other cases that became models for similar graffiti. Matteo, Lorenzo and more *live on*. Even with no historical context, one gets the idea that all of these people were killed by the same type of person, for the same type of reasons. Through evoking the memory of Dax and repurposing the formula used to commemorate him, graffeurs lay claim to a certain ideological heritage and victimhood. By explicitly evoking past revolutions or political events, a graffeur implies a straight line between past and present.

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[78] Perhaps the guillotine, as a mythologized tool whose most recognizable use is a few centuries behind us, is a more 'digestible' form of violence than anything pertinent to the modern day.

[79] "Militants assaulted in Milan by fascists, 1 killed", Indymedia Italia, March 17, 2003, https://web.archive.org/web/20110609184116/http://www.italy.indymedia.org/features/multilanguage/#bottom.

DAX LIVES

Trento

20 YEARS LATER, DAX STILL HATES

Trento

PROJECTILES DON'T RICOCHET

MATTEO LIVES

Trento

LORENZO LIVES

Trento

To a pessimist, this parental affiliation may just be a bastardization of an event's memory. However, each instance comes from the same root—to clearly define the memory of event before someone else gets to it. These examples are small, personal in tone, and honor those killed by right-wing violence. But the left is not the only political group active in graffiti. Even during the fascist period in Italy, when there was no shortage of governmental advertising and propaganda, fascist civilians touted the ideology through clandestine forms of wall-writing. In the case of fascism, the misconstruction of memory and decontextualization of graffiti allow for its violence and hatred to seep into the modern day.

Throughout the *ventennio*, the period in which Italy was under fascist rule, wall-writing was an instrumental tool of propaganda for Mussolini's regime. Much of this writing fell in a gray area between graffiti and advertising, between popular and official. The writings were especially common in rural areas, and were written on both public and private walls. Often, they were sanctioned by the local municipality—but you could never really tell. They repeated common fascist slogans. The style was simplistic, either plain text from a stencil, or handwriting with minimal artistic flair.[80] Even after the fall of fascism and the people's theatrical public execution of Mussolini, much of this graffiti was spared. In Trento some of these graffiti remain, especially outside of the left-leaning city center. Regardless of the condition they are in, the fact that were simply left to decay says enough on its own.

[80] "Scritte murali durante il fascismo," Le pietre raccontano / "C'era una volta…", Comune di Cinisello Balsamo, accessed April 28, 2024, https://www.comune.cinisello-balsamo.mi.it/pietre/spip.php?article426.

LONG LIVE THE -

Cles, Trento[81]

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[81] Stefano Vannozzi, *W IL DUCE*, January 2010, photograph, Ventennio Oggi, https://www.ventenniooggi.it/trento-scritte--motti-del-ventennio?lightbox=i4rd4.

DUCE

Val di Sole, Trento[82]

[82] *DUCE*, August 2008, photograph, Ventennio Oggi, https://www.ventenniooggi.it/trento-scritte--motti-del-ventennio?lightbox=image_q9j
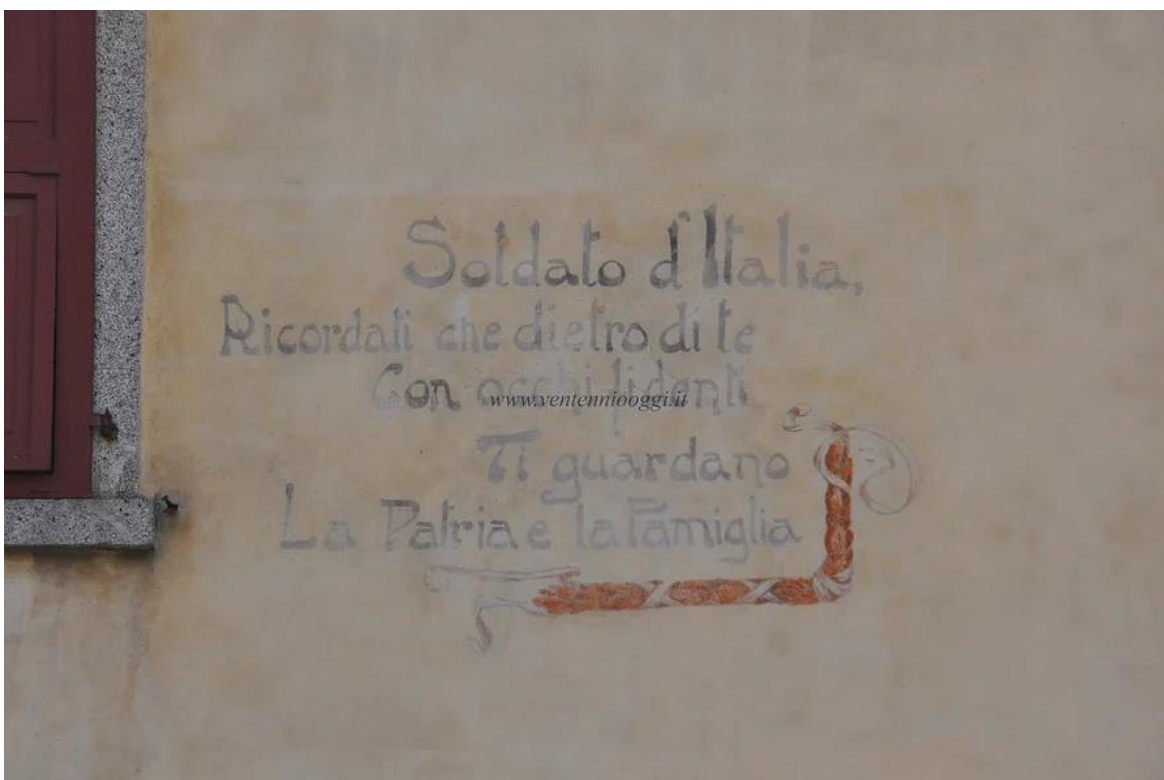
SOLDIER OF ITALY, REMEMBER THAT YOUR FATHERLAND AND FAMILY ARE BEHIND

YOU, WATCHING WITH TRUSTING EYES

Locca, Trento[83]

[83] Gianni Valerio, *SOLDATO D'ITALIA*, January 2015, photograph, Ventennio Oggi, https://www.ventenniooggi.it/trento-scritte--motti-del-ventennio?lightbox=dataItem-kls3eim01.

The decision to leave fascist writing as is, neither removing or contextualizing it, speaks to a larger phenomenon in Italy. As I have said, these writings fell somewhere in between graffiti and official doctrine[84]. Yet even for monuments that were clearly erected by the state, there is seldom any attempt at removal or reconciliation.

This following mural is found in one of the main piazzas in Trento. At first glance, to someone unfamiliar with the history of fascism, the quote seems like any other expression of national pride. Not much worse than "The Star-Spangled Banner." Yet when you know that the bricks at the bottom right used to be hidden under the name Mussolini, it takes on a new meaning. Immediately after the fall of fascism, the masses took it upon themselves to destroy monuments to Mussolini or his movement. The carnivalesque nature echoed the collective execution and desecration of Mussolini's body. But the state never required the removal or contextualization of fascist monuments. There was never a widespread persecution of fascists and their ideology in Italy like denazification in Germany. This is partially due to the US's fear of instability in the country if they were to promote such an effort. It also speaks to the national *buona gente* myth, or the idea that the Italians were a truly good people led astray by Hitler and Mussolini. While it is true that antifascist partisans were instrumental in ending the war, this sweeping generalization is a dangerous attitude that does not address the crimes of Italian fascism. The lack of reconciliation over fascism meant also that these buildings and

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[84] These pieces were photographed and compiled on the website "Ventennio Oggi" ("the Ventennio Today"). This website claims to solely be a historical archive with no political agenda. But its title, like "Barricade Partout," leaves a lot of room for interpretation. There is no condemnation of fascism displayed on the website. It is hard to imagine that those who run the website have anything against the ideology. I have made the decision to use the photos in any case, because the truth is the website hosts the most in-depth archive of fascist monuments I have found online. Hopefully, in my explicit naming and condemnation of fascism, I can do more justice to the memory of its victims than this website.

THE ITALIAN PEOPLE CREATED THE EMPIRE WITH THEIR BLOOD, WILL FERTILIZE IT WITH THEIR WORK, AND WILL DEFEND IT FROM ALL WITH THEIR WEAPONS

Trento

The Italian text uses a V in place of every U, using Roman spelling conventions to evoke the 'greatness' of the Roman Empire that fascism hoped to reclaim and recreate.

monuments often remained untouched, perpetuating either willful ignorance or full-fledged admiration of Italy's fascist history. Nowadays, there is more of a debate over what to do with fascist monuments in Italy. Some are inspired by the conflict over statues of enslavers and colonists in the United States[85].

In any case, the Italian state seems to decide more often than not to either leave fascist monuments as they are, or alter them only slightly to minimize conflict. This one seems to say that Mussolini's name is controversial and shameful, but his messages are not inherently so. The message from on high, with the angel-like figure who once held a fasces, speaks down upon the people. It is unreachable, untouchable. Both in its original and current forms, the very presence of the mural confirms that the state's narrative of the past is non-negotiable. There is no chance of dialogue or dissent from simple street folk. This is quite an extreme example, but it points towards the more innocuous ways in which the state can dictate or reflect memory.

Official, institutional memory is often prescribed through plaques and monuments. The following memorial plaque to those lost during World War I—"La Grande Guerre"— seems to stretch for miles. The list of names is harrowing, sprawling. It is right at eye level, on the sidewalk, outside of the iconic Père Lachaise cemetery. The plaque is unavoidable, begs to be considered, begs reconciliation. The words themselves speak to the values of France post-WWI. The notion of the "sacred" earth implies that the war was shameful and went against values of the European land. It seems the war was a surprise, incomprehensible, something which could

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[85] Sylvia Poggioli, "Italy Has Kept Its Fascist Monuments and Buildings. The Reasons Are Complex," *NPR*, February 25, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/02/25/1154783024/italy-monuments-fascist-architecture#:~:text=The%20victorious%20Allies%20chose%20not,too%20poor%20to%20rebuild%20them.

TO THOSE WHO DIED IN THE GREAT WAR
PARIS TO HER CHILDREN
"WHO WILL EVER KNOW HOW MANY TIMES I CRIED, MY GENERATION, OVER YOUR
SACRED DEATH" – GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE 17 DECEMBER 1915

Paris

not or should not happen again. The vastness of the plaque touches upon this as well; sprawling into the distance, it hints at something larger than the observer, larger than the plaque. Though it only explicitly speaks to Paris, its sprawling nature is outside the limits of human vision and comprehension. Its "message", for lack of a better word, can be applied to the whole world, to anyone who suffered or was killed in war.

The final plaque, which commemorates WWII, shows a much more humble and somber form of memory. Hung at the site of the tragedy, the wall of the raided school itself, it does not aim to speak for the whole world. The small plaque, again at eye level, forces the reader to reconcile with *here* and *only here*. Similar plaques can be found at other schools subjected to pogroms throughout Paris. The cut-and-paste nature of the plaques may suggest that the reader make connections with other times and places. Yet, face to face with one of them, it is hard to think of much more than the wall it is fixed upon and what happened behind it.

I do not mean to claim that these two plaques are offensive, insidious, or mishandlings of the memory of tragic events[86]. All I want to point out is the conscious choices that went into their inception, the simple truth that there was someone who designed each plaque, decided where to put it, and how those on the street should interact with it.

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[86] Although I do think it is important to reflect upon the choice of "complicity" rather than "responsibility" in the final example. Are we to believe the Vichy government also a good people led astray, as Italy says of its fascist past?

IN MEMORY OF THE STUDENTS OF THIS SCHOOL, DEPORTED BETWEEN 1942 AND 1944
BECAUSE THEY WERE BORN JEWISH, INNOCENT VICTIMS OF NAZI BARBARISM WITH
THE ACTIVE COMPLICITY OF THE VICHY GOVERNMENT. THEY WERE EXTERMINATED
IN DEATH CAMPS. (APRIL 10 1999)

Paris

Section Conclusion

Graffiti is but one manifestation of wall-writing. Like all other forms—plaques, street signs, advertisements—it is a reflection of culture at large. What makes graffiti unique is its spontaneous and collaborative nature.

Wall-writing does not exist solely in the time it was written. It communicates with the past, building upon collective memory to state one's existence either in relation or opposition to history. In Western Europe today, May 1968 is the main paradigm through which graffiti is written and read. As our political landscape continues to evolve, so does the way we write. Perhaps one day we will see a revolution whose memory supersedes that of 1968. Perhaps it will fundamentally change the way that nation-states represent and memorialize the past. Until then, the words written on walls will remain. Even as the paint fades, photographs, testimonies, and unspoken memories will shape the way we understand the walls that surround us.

Conclusion

Graffiti comes from an urge—one that I think is inherent—to control one's surroundings. Like seasonal carnivals, it is a sort of semi-legal, feverish celebration in response to periods of cold, dark, and hunger. Of course, graffiti is not limited to periods of social unrest. There is always a baseline presence of graffiti, a sort of buzzing under the surface of every city. Yet when worse comes to worst, graffiti becomes the main expression of a group's wish to fight back, to affirm themselves.

I mentioned in my introduction that this project initially focused more on *walls* than on *graffiti*. But I would like, if I may, to turn back to the idea of walls as I wrap up this paper. Those things that shape and define our entire lives; structures that separate private from public, worker from boss, incarcerated from free, domestic from foreign.

For more on this, I turn to Safaa Fathy's essay *From Wall to Wall*. This essay investigates the role of police-built walls during the occupation of Tahrir Square and the graffiti that followed. Fathy links the walls built by Egyptian police to walls of past regimes around the world.

> The Reichstag in Berlin was covered in graffiti by the Russian troops;
> and during revolutions, under occupation, during the Algerian War, in
> May 1968, on the Berlin Wall, and in regions with problems of
> autonomy, urban graffiti surges and overpowers space with the
> possibility of what's to come, a contestation or a legitimacy in the process
> of construction. [87]

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[87] Safaa Fathy, "De mur en mur," *Rue Descartes No. 92* (Collège international de Philosophie, Paris, 2017), 10-11, https://www.cairn.info/revue-rue-descartes-2017-2-page-6.htm

Fathy shows here that no event, no wall, no piece of writing is isolated. Just as the walls that contained and separated Egyptian protestors are linked to every other divisive wall in history, so too is the graffiti that covered them. She shows that graffiti is not just an urge or a representation of the past. It is a promise of what is to come. Graffiti, in the face of violent repression, is a sign of perseverance, dedication, and further resistance.

The Arab Spring, like May 1968 or Spring 1977 is easy to label as a failed revolution. In all three of these cases, the demonstrators made very few material gains. In some cases, the pendulum swung back leading to even harsher repression of those who initially tried to liberate themselves. But maybe "succeeding" or failing" mean more than just "winning" or "losing".

> Until then, Egypt did not know graffiti or street art. This art is truly revolutionary : naturally, it showed up during the occupation of Tahrir Square, but it really took off in the context of confrontations between the living forces of the revolution and those of the counterrevolution. This unprecedented pictorial work was like the phoenix, rising from the ashes of so many young men and women who perished during the uprisings.[88]

The Arab Spring, like 1968 and 1977, stopped time for a bit. All three of these movements opened, for the protestors, an arena outside of authority, outside of the constant progression of capitalist time. Perhaps the hope that these events offer is more important to a nation's collective memory than taking control of the government. Perhaps this memory can only reach its greatest utility later. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, or spring flowers blooming from winter soil, revolutions are a constant cycle of death and rebirth.

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[88] Fathy, "De mur en mur", 11.

Fathy goes further than just motivation and psyche, though. She draws a straight line between painting and the body that paints. In other words, graffiti is an extension of the self. Spilled paint *is* spilled blood. Graffiti moves among walls in the same way bodies do, though in its lasting nature becomes archive and history as well as body and blood.

> Mural art is an art of concrete spaces and virtual networks at the same time. Thus, walls themselves are virtually displaced through the opening of future spaces even if they are destined to disappear. It is thus spirit and body, dying and almost eternal. It comes from a certain worldly sacredness, since, in this context, the artform substitutes and displaces red liquid, that is to say blood. The colors are a sign, representing and displacing human sacrifice … [89]

Graffiti as an individual act thus reaches a collective status only through its sacrificial nature. In risking arrest or other forms of repression, a graffeur places the importance of graffiti above the importance of the wall or the self. The idea of graffiti becomes larger than each instance of writing. The distinction here is between individual instances of graffiti, and graffiti as a lifestyle. The act of writing could not exist without a surface upon which to write. "Upon sites of power walls emerge, and upon those walls appear drawings." [90] In a similar way, on a larger scale, the words and "message" of graffiti cannot exist without reason. Graffiti as a *phenomenon* is this reaction to abstract structures, while graffiti as an *act* is a reaction to physical structures.

Graffiti, thus, is a reaction to walls (both physical and abstract). But as Fathy showed with the image of the phoenix, graffiti does not follow a linear life cycle. Graffiti is not a one-and-done event. It is not simply a collection of lines and colors. Due to the ephemeral nature of

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[89] Fathy, "De mur en mur," 11.
[90] Ibid, 10.

walls, the artform and political practice of graffiti cannot dependent on any one physical surface. Graffiti has a life outside and beyond the physical walls upon which it emerges.

Paris '68, Berlin, the Roman Ghetto, the West Bank…

The walls are temporary, but the graffiti is eternal.

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