The Graffiti-Game and the Ubiquity of Resistance: Getting Up as Oppositional Agency

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Abstract
We tend to think of resistance as an exceptional event in our lives, when something so drastic occurs that the status quo is completely disrupted and reshaped. According to this viewpoint, moments of resistance occur when one or more people actively participate in acts of political sabotage, in which some hierarchy or structure of power is knowingly challenged and subverted with the purpose of long-term change. I'd like to challenge this idea. Resistance, in effect, can function in many ways. Not only revolutions or revolts should be conceptualised as such. Everyday actions can sometimes be considered forms of resistance. De Certeau describes such activities as "sheeplike subversion." This form of rebellion, however far from being a traditional insurrection, is a common and quiet disruption of social control. Rather than efforts aimed at structural societal changes, they are micro alterations that have a major influence on transgressors' personal lives while yet evoking (traces of) social change. Graffiti, and more specifically, getting up, is a kind of resistance in this way. When painting tags, throw-ups, and pieces, authors are not concerned with long-term structural changes; their efforts may be futile on a global scale. And it does not appear that they intend to permanently change the status quo. In playing the graffiti game, spray-can calligraphers' efforts can be viewed more appropriately as enacting an oppositional agency that they would not otherwise have, allowing them to freely express themselves even when legally restricted.

Keywords
Getting up; game; political art; resistance; agency; fanzine

1. Introduction

When we think about acts of resistance, we often envision them as extraordinary deeds aimed at challenging and subverting dominant power structures. Traditionally, resistance is seen as inherently tied to large-scale, drastic events intended to dismantle the status quo and build new social arrangements. The efforts of freedom fighters opposing Nazi troops in northern Italy to establish an independent government provide a paradigmatic example of this understanding of resistance: actions that are out of the ordinary and directed toward epochal change.

However, such an understanding of resistance overlooks the oppositional acts against power structures that can take place in everyday life. In this paper, I challenge the notion that resistance occurs only in exceptional moments. On the contrary, I argue that acts of resistance are potentially ubiquitous, meaning that people can challenge dominant power structures in ordinary circumstances without seeking large-scale change. I refer to this as the *ubiquity thesis*, and my goal here is to defend this claim.

My argument in defence of the ubiquity thesis relies on example. I examine graffiti writing, specifically the practice of *getting up*—the act of frequently tagging various locations to achieve visibility and recognition—as a case study supporting the main claim of this essay. I will demonstrate that, in a particular sense, graffiti qualifies as a form of resistance, or more precisely, what de Certeau (1984, p. 200) calls "sheeplike subversion." Just as graffiti can be found across a multitude of surfaces and locations in the city, resistance can similarly permeate everyday life.

Section 2 introduces the traditional notion of resistance as an extraordinary phenomenon and summarizes the main objections to this view. Section 3 explores how certain artistic practices in the public domain—namely (official) public art, street art, and graffiti—can challenge power structures. Section 4 expands the idea of artistic resistance by demonstrating that getting up also opposes power, though as a form of sheeplike subversion. Finally, I offer a conclusion.

2. Resistance as Everyday Action

The claim that we typically consider resistance as an extraordinary moment—what we can term the "extraordinary thesis"—captures a prevalent and often intuitive view of political and social resistance (Blunt, 2023). From this perspective, resistance is seen as an attempt to profoundly disrupt social and political hierarchies. While ordinary political action operates within accepted legal or normative frameworks, resistance is positioned as a deliberate deviation from these structures, aiming to challenge or disrupt the status quo.

Lovett (2010) defines ordinary political action as legally or socially permissible action aimed at political change. In contrast, resistance is "extraordinary" because it often confronts or circumvents established norms to provoke transformative outcomes. For example, actions within the legislative process, such as voting or petitioning officials, align with ordinary political behaviour. However, actions that deliberately defy societal norms, legal prohibitions, or expectations are seen as resistance, as they aim to alter or even dismantle those normative frameworks. Events like the French Revolution or the Arab Spring, for instance, transcend ordinary political action; they are extraordinary moments of rupture that open possibilities for radical change.

From this perspective, the extraordinary nature of resistance is, of course, contextually dependent. A society's norms and values heavily influence the boundaries between ordinary and extraordinary action. In liberal democracies, actions like protesting or advocating for change are integral parts of political discourse and are usually permitted within legal limits. In an authoritarian regime, however, the same actions may constitute resistance because they disrupt the expected obedience to authority, thereby challenging the political and social order. As Raz (2009) observes, organizing an independent labour union or participating in an anti-government demonstration might be ordinary political behaviour in democratic contexts, but in authoritarian settings, these become radical acts of defiance, positioning them as resistance.

Supporters of the extraordinary thesis have also long debated whether law-breaking is essential to resistance. Delmas (2018) questions whether legal transgression is a necessary component of resistance. While many forms of resistance do involve legal violations, historical examples show that actions may still qualify as resistance even if they operate within legal limits. The suffrage movement illustrates this: women advocating for voting rights engaged in legally permissible actions that profoundly challenged societal values. This suggests that resistance can also involve actions that comply legally yet morally or culturally defy the dominant worldview. In this sense, resistance, whether lawful or unlawful, emerges as an extraordinary act when it questions fundamental beliefs or norms.

In sum, the extraordinary thesis holds that resistance is, by nature, an exceptional and transformative act. It extends beyond what society typically allows or expects, aiming to redefine the boundaries of political and social possibilities. This perspective underscores resistance as an expression of agency that disrupts established norms or laws, not merely to operate within but to reshape the system.

I contend that this view, while highlighting important aspects of radical moments of revolutionary change, overlooks significant ways individuals enact resistance in their everyday lives. In particular, the extraordinary thesis makes it difficult to appreciate the political significance of mundane activities that, although they do not aim to cause a significant or long-term shift in the status quo, still embody a form of oppositional agency that should not be ignored. A comprehensive understanding of resistance practices necessitates broadening our theoretical framework to recognize ordinary actions as potential loci of resistance.

One of the earliest thinkers to conceptualize the broader notion behind the ubiquity thesis was de Certeau (1984). As anticipated, he introduced the concept of "sheeplike subversion" to describe mundane actions that, rather than aiming at significant moments of systemic change, serve as quiet and pervasive challenges to social control (de Certeau 1984, p. 200). Although these small-scale acts may not seek far-reaching or enduring societal reforms, they nonetheless hold meaningful impact for those who engage in them, bearing subtle traces of social change.

Sheeplike subversion is how the weak and the subordinate can revolt against its dominators. It is indeed true that these acupunctural acts of subversion do not depend on explicit political intentions and are not guided by a long-term collective agenda. But these aspects seem not enough to deny their effectiveness as acts of resistance. Quite the contrary, abstaining from conceptualizing or labelling these largely individualistic acts is a key element non only of their effectiveness, but of their very own possibilities of existence. Sheeplike subversion, in an important sense, thrives at the margins of conventional ordinary and extraordinary political action and discourse.

IIn many contexts, it may indeed be impossible for large segments of the population to openly oppose hierarchies of power. Revolt is often dangerous and risky, requiring a near-absolute commitment—including acceptance of potential negative consequences—that many individuals may find too demanding. In contrast, sheeplike subversion does not necessitate such a commitment, allowing its perpetrators to easily interrupt or deny their involvement in any form of opposition. Yet it still provides individuals in subordinate positions with a means to resist their marginalization while achieving some momentary personal benefit.

De Certeau's (1984) theory emphasizes that "marginalized people *do have agency*" (Ballard, 2022, p. 304). In a similar vein, Scott (1985), who is often credited with introducing the concept of everyday resistance to describe phenomena akin to acts of sheeplike subversion, observed that Malaysian peasants, while never engaging in open rebellion, asserted their interests through various tactics, including "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott 1985, p. xvi). This closely parallels one of de Certeau's classic examples: *la perruque* (the wig), which refers to using work time for personal gain (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 24–28).

In a later work, Scott (1989, p. 34) introduces a valuable distinction that helps clarify the differences between sheeplike subversion, or everyday resistance, and traditional forms of resistance as outlined by the extraordinary thesis. Revolts and revolutions aim for what can be termed *de jure* gains—structural transformations that create new possibilities for all individuals. In contrast, acts of sheeplike subversion or everyday resistance focus on *de facto* gains. For example, an exploited cabinetmaker may gain something positive for himself by using his work time to craft a coffee table for his home instead of working for his employer. However, this benefit does not have long-term implications, neither for him nor for his colleagues, who remain subject to ongoing exploitation.

This framework enables a more nuanced understanding of the ubiquity thesis. If everyday actions can possess subversive potential in a significant political sense, then resistance can indeed manifest in various contexts. In the following sections, I will support this claim by exploring graffiti—specifically the act of getting up—as a form of sheeplike subversion. I will argue that graffiti, far from being a narcissistic form of esoteric communication, has the capacity to challenge authoritarian power by granting a new sense of agency to its practitioners.

2 Public Art, Street Art, and Graffiti as Artistic Resistance

When examining art forms that are inherently political, both (official) public art and street art emerge as significant examples. Each has the potential to convey political messages, yet they employ distinct strategies and utilize various tools and resources (Baldini, 2023). Both can effectively protest against dominant hierarchies and power structures. However, their relationship with and potential for rebellion differ considerably. By briefly discussing each of these art forms in turn, we can also gain insight into the heterogeneous nature of resistance.

In principle, official public art is fully authorized and often commissioned by authorities, meaning that most examples are part of ordinary political discourse. While much public art may not be revolutionary, some of its more radical instances contain seeds of resistance. Importantly, as I have emphasized, the legal status of public art does not automatically render it celebratory or uncritical. Just as women's protests against their lack of voting rights have been significant, sanctioned works of public art can also express deep dissent that challenges existing hierarchies of power. Thus, illegality is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for resistance, which public art can sometimes enact.

When considering examples of official public art that qualify as forms of resistance, a particularly instructive case comes to mind: Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall*. The Memorial, conceived by Jon Scruggs and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), was authorized by Congress, which designated an area next to the Lincoln Memorial for its construction. Completed in 1982, Lin's minimalist design not only critiqued traditional practices of memorialization but also created space for reflection on a controversial war, the significance of loss, and the need for reparations (Blair et al., 1991). Her work challenged core societal values and, much like a revolution, profoundly transformed American society.

Street art, on its part, has emerged as a powerful and widespread tool of resistance. Indeed, Bacharach (2015) identifies its activist nature as a necessary condition for defining an artwork as street art. She further elaborates that activists have co-opted street art to address epistemic injustices—those injustices stemming from negative identity prejudices that unfairly silence certain groups (Bacharach, 2018). Many scholars have highlighted the radical possibilities of dissent inherent in street art, demonstrating its impact in various contexts, from Gezi Park (Tunali, 2018) to Egypt (Hamdy & Karl, 2014), among others.

Street art has become almost synonymous with creative activism, and several prominent figures have gained fame through their socially engaged works. The most notable example is Banksy, whose politically charged interventions, including those in conflict zones like Bethlehem and the West Bank Barrier, are among the most iconic pieces in the genre, inspiring many to pick up a spray can and bring resistance to urban spaces (Blanché, 2016; DeTurk, 2015). Other well-known street artists, such as Blu and JR, have also produced art that is politically charged (Tomassini, 2020)Tratta ad Alta Velocità.

In discussions about art forms and their potential for resistance, graffiti often receives little attention. The practice of stylized urban signatures is frequently dismissed as a narcissistic form of esoteric communication. For instance, Bacharach (2015) argues that graffiti should be excluded from the broader category of street art, as she contends that writers are primarily focused on gaining fame among their peers rather than pursuing an activist agenda. In effect, she asserts that their main objective is "establishing notoriety rather than raising awareness of some socio-political issue," framing the graffiti game as one centred on personal recognition rather than collective political engagement (Bacharach, 2015, p. 483).

This dismissal of graffiti's political nature is an exaggeration and oversimplification that fails to acknowledge the complexity of the movement. While many—if not most—graffiti writers may lack an explicit political agenda, some do seek to engage with critical social and political issues. For example, the legendary duo Utah & Ether has stated in various interviews that their art aims to provoke fundamental questions in viewers' minds regarding the nature of private property and the distinction between public and private spaces (Zio, 2015). Similarly, another iconic duo, Taps & Moses, envisioned their project "Top Sprayer" as a means to advocate for changes in the laws surrounding the prosecution of graffiti (Boris, 2015).

But even granting that some graffiti may qualify as resistance, what can we say about that subset of the practice—which is likely its majority—that does not involve explicit political action? The artistic trends we have discussed so far would fall under the traditional category of resistance as exceptional action, driven by specific ideals and directed at *de jure* gains. However, the bulk of graffiti

practice, particularly (mere) getting up, does not clearly align with this notion of resistance as an exceptional deed. Should we simply bite the bullet and accept that most graffiti lack political significance?

De Certeau's notion of sheeplike subversion, within the framework of everyday resistance, offers us the conceptual tools to counter this scepticism and to illustrate why and how even acts of getting up carry an oppositional political undertone. I will elaborate on this point in the following section.

3. Getting Up as Sheeplike Subversion

To show that even getting up is a form of sheeplike subversion or everyday resistance, and not simply a hedonistic pursuit, I need to prove that, while done as part of one's regular life, such an activity challenges hierarchies of power. In order to do so, we must definitely return to the discussion of agency, power, and social change to explain how writers can do that.

Let me begin by examining the practice of graffiti through a lens that has largely been neglected in academic scholarship: the fanzine. Here, I want to emphasize a fundamental methodological point. Research on graffiti and street art has relied on various forms of evidence, with the produced objects (e.g., tags, stencils) taking centre stage. Interviews have also played a significant role, with some books heavily based on them (Bonadio, 2023), alongside photographs, which serve as the primary documentary evidence in academic discourse. Surprisingly, fanzines (and even magazines) have been cursorily addressed—if at all.

This oversight is striking, as fanzines are not mere records of what has been painted; they represent a genre in their own right, significantly contributing to the development and popularization of the practice, as acknowledged by Ferrell (1996, p. 10). Often self-published by the writers themselves, fanzines are integral to the graffiti and street art community, offering deeper insights into the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of writers and street artists than interviews typically provide, which can suffer from the inherent issues of interviewer interaction. In essence, fanzines are the most authentic form of linguistic expression within the graffiti movement and deserve much more scholarly attention.

SBAM's recently self-published fanzine *When No One Is Watching* perfectly exemplifies the potential of this genre (Figure 1). Alongside drawings, typographic work, and photographs, the fanzine includes diaristic writings that provide insight into the writer's perspective. In one passage, SBAM describes the conditions faced by the working class in the city: "There are so many of these hellish jobs around the city, and it sucks. I belong to this category, so forgive me for being empathic. We are modern servants; we own nothing except our clothes and a smartphone" (SBAM, 2021, p. 35). Against this backdrop, SBAM articulates the significance of his work as a graffiti writer: "Graffiti is a way to say: 'Fuck the system!' The system is so powerful that it often crushes all your dreams…. You need to be relentless and fight everybody and everything to escape what they had planned for you" (SBAM, 2021, p. 35).

SBAM's statement aligns with findings from ethnographic research on graffiti (Brighenti, 2010; Campos, 2013; Ferrell, 1995; Halsey & Young, 2006). His actions are not political in the conventional sense, nor does his writing represent exceptional resistance. There is no clearly defined political objective, no pursuit of *de jure* structural change, and no formal organization supporting his actions. Viewed through the exceptional theory of resistance, SBAM's act of getting up may appear, at best, as a form of escapism—a diversion from his unpleasant reality akin to other potentially addictive coping strategies, such as alcohol, drugs, sex, and shoplifting: "Graffiti helps me to coexist with the system," he writes (SBAM, 2021, p. 29) (Figure 2).

However, we can still identify an opposition to authority in SBAM's actions. The complex network of forces he refers to as the "system" becomes the target of his sheeplike subversion. By painting graffiti, he escapes the constraints of social control and the oppressive market tendencies that seek to exploit labour and promote consumerist consumption. While his resistance may be ineffective on a global scale and neither aims for nor achieves *de jure* gains, it provides him with a *de facto* achievement: an oppositional agency that he would not possess otherwise.

Figure 1. Cover of *When No One is Watching*. All images of the fanzine have been shared by SBAM.

Figure 2. A page from SBAM's fanzine.

Thus, painting a tag, throw-up, or piece becomes a political act, revealing "a dynamic of power and authority" (Ferrell, 1996, p. 170) that significantly shapes the meaning of a writer's rogue actions.

This might come across as romanticizing vandalism, but it's important to contextualize it within a broader discussion of games and agency that sheds light on this perspective. Nguyen (2020) offers a philosophical analysis of games as a unique art form, positing that a game is more than just a designed environment; it instructs players on specific moves to make and the goals to pursue. By assigning temporary aims and strategies, games "can thus provide us with something very special: they can expose us to alternate agencies" (Nguyen 2020, p. 76). For instance, "Monopoly offers me the experience of submersion in an agency that is entirely self-oriented, where I am narcissistically bent toward the destruction of others for my own good" (Nguyen 2020, p. 90). This framework allows us to see graffiti not merely as vandalism but as a form of engagement with alternative modes of agency in the face of societal constraints.

Graffiti can indeed be conceptualized as a game in Nguyen's sense. Ethnographic research shows that writers often perceive graffiti as a regulated, goal-oriented activity (Austin, 2001; Brighenti, 2010; Ferrell, 1996; Jacobson, 2020; Snyder, 2009) (Ferrell 1996, p. 170; Brighenti 2010; Jacobson 2020; Austin 2001; Snyder 2009). Miss17 (2018) elucidates this framework by identifying players, rules, and achievements: "Graffiti is a game that anyone can play. Take a name, see what you can do with it" (pp. xi—xii). Norms surrounding access to and use of public space act as obstacles, primarily manifesting as law enforcement, which becomes part of this "oppositional game" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 152), where players actively contend with each other. In engaging in this game, writers immerse themselves in an alternative agency, akin to a superhero fantasy, with tangible implications. The "created alter ego provides the promise of never-ending adventure hidden in the night, via the anonymity of a mask," enabling them to get up their name while "escaping the disciplinary control of social norms and worldly habits" (Campos, 2013, pp. 155, 160). This perspective highlights the complexity of graffiti as a form of resistance, not merely as vandalism, but as a creative assertion of agency.

Graffiti writing, in all its forms—including getting up—functions as an oppositional game, allowing participants to engage with an agency beyond the constraints of their social position. This agency enables writers to contest the power structures that label them as dominated subjects, illustrating a form of resistance. Through graffiti, they can temporarily evade the social hierarchy that seeks to discipline them. Consequently, writing becomes not only a form of resistance but also an everyday practice, woven into the routines of its practitioners. This interplay of creativity and defiance highlights the nuanced ways in which graffiti contributes to a broader understanding of resistance in contemporary society.

One might object at this point that if graffiti is considered everyday resistance, insofar as it is a game that grants its players oppositional agency, then it is, in theory, no different from various forms of "[y]outhful adventures in crime [such as] vandalism, theft, and especially shoplifting" (Ferrell, 1996, p. 170). Every "broken window, every leather-jacketed street fighter spitting teeth and blood, every scooped-out liquor store cash register, every Krylon-tagged alley wall" (Ferrell, 1996, p. 172) appears to qualify as a game providing oppositional agency. If, in other words, everyday resistance encompasses all non-conventional forms of agency, then the concept seems so broad that it becomes inapplicable to a meaningful analysis of oppositional practices.

Atypical behaviours like shoplifting (Thompson & Sholette, 2004) and vandalism (Lai, 2020) have occasionally been described in the literature as forms of everyday resistance. However, this does not necessarily mean that such abnormal behaviours always fall into that category. Everyday resistance is contextually sensitive; a given action may or may not be regarded as such depending on the situation.

Consider this example: during an alcohol-fuelled night on a class trip, a group of students from an elite high school goes around their hotel removing all fire hydrant signs.

This is a clear instance of mere vandalism. However, given the contextual conditions, it does not qualify as everyday resistance. First, it is not "everyday" in that it represents an extraordinary moment in the lives of these individuals. Second, and more importantly, it is not resistance because these individuals are not subaltern, and their bravado does not challenge established power structures. These are bullies seeking excitement while exercising their privilege.

However, it is not hard to imagine scenarios where stealing those signs might be viewed as a form of resistance. For instance, instead of privileged students, we could have immigrants, and the signs could bear the logo of a business whose CEO is well-known for being a white supremacist. In demonstrating that getting up is a form of sheeplike subversion, I have provided evidence for the ubiquity thesis, showing that resistance can manifest everywhere.

4. Conclusion

Just as not every hero has a monument, not all acts of resistance have their revolution. The possibilities of dissent extend far beyond extraordinary moments of collective revolt. Power can be questioned and hierarchies subverted in the small cracks of everyday life. There is no need for organized movements or an explicit political agenda to challenge dominant social norms. Moments of rebellious rapture can be carved out at virtually every step of our ordinary lives. It is enough, for instance, to pick up a spray can and write one's tag, regaining—even if just for a moment—an agency that allows us to express ourselves in public spaces without limitations or constraints. A spark of the fire of revolt can also be sometimes found in a fat cap.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author(s) also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects' anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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