Ephemeral Activism: Un/Making Images of Dissent

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Abstract
Along the Annexation Wall in Bethlehem, an entangled web of tags, slogans, graphic stencils, and gestures cover the surface of the concrete barrier wall and asphalt road. In Napoli, Italy, similar messages, and symbols appear on the dressed stone facade of government buildings, churches, and apartments. Messages exclaim: Not only Floyd, Iyad Hallaq Too, IAW, Palestino, and No Balls? #Build Walls. Varying in opacity, the words and symbols fight for legibility and presence, acting as a conversational message board between local and international activists. Such visual elements are, according to Ella Chmielewska, "connected with the specific history of protest, contestation, and subversion framed by the locality" (Chmielewska, 2007). Thus, graffiti may be read as an actual and symbolic act of resistance, framed by locality. Considering the saturation of solidarity-based graffiti in places like Bethlehem and Napoli, this paper examines how urban space both facilitates and complicates the durability of activist-based interventions. Through a pictorial study, I focus on the effects of graffiti-based activism and examine how these marks continue to draw attention to solidarity-based causes. Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll refer to these types of marks as "ephemeral interventions," a reference to the temporary nature of graffiti and the potential long-term impact of certain politically motivated works that produce iconic symbols/signs (Murphy and O'Driscoll, 2015). Whether along the Annexation Wall in Bethlehem or the streets of Napoli, graffitied messages are specific to local political and social causes, yet also connect to greater, global solidarity movements.

Keywords
Ephemeral interventions, graffiti, Banksy, Palestine, Napoli, Eduardo Castaldo

1. Introduction

> *SEE: The street is narrow and covered mostly by the shadows of the neighboring buildings. The grey stone façade peaks from below the layers of paint and wheat-pasted signs/decals. The vast array of colorful words and images are entangled amongst old, faded phrases in bubble typeface. Above the cacophony of colored texts, a mirrored portrait of Che Guevera stretches the length of the dressed stone façade. Draped from the windows, political banners in various states of disrepair add a soft texture against the harshness of the stone.*

While on a casual walk through the streets of Napoli, Italy, the visual cacophony of graffiti and murals overwhelms the surfaces of buildings, telephone poles, churches, cars, and monuments. Block after block, the seemingly endless array of painted images and words form a continuous corpus. Tags of various styles and forms engulf the dressed stones of old buildings; some freshly painted while others flaking from age and weather (see Figure 1). Out of the painted surface, one can discern words and phrases, some in Italian, others in English and Arabic. They read: ACAB, RESISTE, Rest in Power, Free Julien Assange, Free Palestine, and GRL

Figure 1: A mirrored portrait of Che Guevera complements various styles of graffiti and wheat-paste along the streets of Napoli, 2022. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte.

Figure 2: A mix of paint, marker, and wheat-pasted images adorn the walls of a street in Napoli. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte.

PWR (see Figure 2). Each word or statement appears in a different typeface and font, lining the streets in a diverse array of colors and forms. Outside the city of Napoli, another space speaks to the power of public-facing graffiti. Walking along the road next to the Annexation Wall in Bethlehem, Palestine, layers of text, icons, and stencils complement large-scale murals and caricatured portraits of political leaders, civil rights icons, and martyrs. The images and gestures speak the language of solidarity: ACAB, We Will Return, Stop the Occupation, The World's Largest Prison, and Cut Here. However, unlike Napoli, the graffiti covers a wall that actualizes and signifies apartheid, separation, and violence.

Napoli and Bethlehem, though geographically and socially disparate, exemplify unique graffiti cultures intent on exploring the power of 'ephemeral interventions.' Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll define ephemeral interventions in reference to the temporary nature of graffiti and the potential long-term impact of specific works that produce iconic symbols/signs (Murphy and O'Driscoll, 2015, p. 329). Drawing from Murphey and O'Driscoll's framework, I focus on the effects of graffiti-based activism and examine how these marks continue to draw attention to solidarity-based causes. Whether along the streets of Napoli or the Annexation Wall in Bethlehem, graffitied messages are specific to local political and social causes, yet connect to greater, global solidarity movements. With the aid of social media, these messages find global connections, and thus, build vast and diverse communities. Questions to be addressed: How does graffiti enhance solidarity -based movements? What are the consequences of enabling graffiti in spaces fraught with political and social strife? The presence of graffiti in places like Napoli and Bethlehem speaks to both the significance of location and the network of artist-activists working together for common causes.

2. Graffiti, Graffiti, Everywhere

Graffiti may be read as both a symbolic and material act of resistance, framed by the politics of 'locality.' Ella Chmielewska contextualizes graffiti as it is 'connected with the specific history of protest, contestation, and subversion framed by the locality' (Chmielewska, 2007, p. 163). Location is fundamental to the success (or failure) of graffiti. Depending on the intent of the artist, the message/mark may appear grand in scale and involve a vast, organized composition. On the other hand, it may include quick, rudimentary gestures with the sole intent of proclaiming one's agency or identity. Often, the location will dictate the style, message, and intention of the artist.

These clandestine acts of defiance, resistance, and place-making date back centuries, with graffiti marks found in villas around ancient Pompeii and Rome (Guichard, 2016). Names, icons, symbols, and gestures affirm the presence of long-deceased persons. Often, these marks were carved or incised onto the surface of stone or marble, extending the durability of the message. In the modern context, graffiti marks are often created using aerosol paint or wheat paste. In "Engaged Ephemeral Art: Street Art and the Egyptian Arab Spring," Saphinaz Naguib contextualizes the multi-valent nature of modern graffiti:

> …street art, and thus graffiti, is a multi-sited, interactive, and ephemeral kind of art. Walls in the urban space are its favoured surfaces. Common methods and techniques of street art today are stencil and spray-can art, writings, stencils, wheat pasted posters or sticker art, murals, mosaic, street installations, paint lighting, and knitting…Intentionality and performance are central characteristics of street art. Artists appropriate the public space to convey their messages and the streets become their exhibition space. (Naguib, 2017, p. 60)

This assertion of the street as an 'exhibition space' varies, based on locality and the desire for longevity. How does ephemerality impact Naguib's notion of the street as 'exhibition space?' Each small act of resistance has the potential to facilitate a collaborative movement. In "The Art/History of Resistance: Visual Ephemera in Public Space," Murphey and O'Driscoll critically contextualize the community impact of graffiti: "…ephemeral intervention is an event that involves print (itself possessing textual and visual elements), sound, movement, and interaction between actors and spectators, all enacted within a particular public space that is mobilized for political

purposes. These multimedia interventions are important civically and cannot be understood except as a totality (Murphey and O'Driscoll, 2015, p.329)."

Ephemeral interventions are thus performances, graffiti, murals, sound-based works, and/or projections that are meant to last a short period of time, yet communicate a social, political, and/or culture injustice or issue. However, I want to look beyond the impact of a single piece, word, or phrase within these spaces and to think critically about the collective role(s) of solidarity-based graffiti. Murphy and O'Driscoll frame graffiti as a "mode of resistance, played out in public space, against state power" (Murphy and O'Driscoll, 2015). In cities like Napoli and Bethlehem, the works in question critique state/colonial/authoritative powers that aggressively marginalize, erase, and/or dehumanize vulnerable and/or minority populations. Paint, paper stencils, and posters serve as forms of material resistance, covering the façade of oppressive structures like border walls, government buildings, or religious institutions.

3. Mark-Making as Activism

> *TOUCH: I stand in front of the hotel. Above the door, the sign reads Walled Off Hotel. I step back into the avenue in front of the hotel. I hear muffled traffic noises from Caritas Street. I notice a group of tourists sitting in the hotel's café. Their view is of the Annexation Wall, only a few feet from their table. An abundance of stencils, ads, wheat-pasted signs, graffiti, and murals overwhelm the corner portion of the wall. Standing on the corner, I look to my left and see the ebb and flow of the concrete structure. Shrubs grow from the crumbled portions of the façade. As I approach the wall and rub my hand on the surface, a few paint flakes fall to the ground. I notice many pieces with names and/or graffiti handles. Others choose to remain anonymous and let the works speak for themselves through acerbic icons and phrases.*

The segment of the Annexation Wall along Caritas Street is perhaps one of the most popular destinations for graffiti tourists to visit in Palestine (see Figures 3,4). Although murals and graffiti pieces appear all throughout the country, this portion of the Annexation Wall became infamous due to celebrity graffiti artist Banksy and other artist-activists and provocateurs (see Figure 5). Coupled with the location of the Walled Off Hotel and adjacent Wall Mart sundry shop, tourists flock to the region to capture selfies and photos of the wall and hotel. The hotel also houses a museum on the history of occupation in Palestine. Built in 2017, the boutique hotel was the vision of Banksy (Walled Off Hotel). A tongue-and-cheek play off the Waldorf, the hotel is situated in direct proximity to the Annexation Wall. In fact, the slogan, "The Worst View in the World," speaks volumes about the location of the hotel (Walled Off Hotel). Many of the windows facing the Annexation Wall have a telescope that gazes directly at the concrete façade (see Figure 6).

Banksy and other famous street artists like Ron English, LushSux, and JR have all contributed works/interventions throughout Palestine. However, the focus of their ephemeral interventions is more complex. Like other conflict-influenced artists, their goal is to bring attention to the various social and/or geo-political crises impacting Palestinians. The "Banksy Effect," a term coined by Max Foster in 2006, contextualizes the impact of celebrity street artists and how their work has popularized graffiti for the mainstream (DeTurk, 2018). DeTurk makes the following assessment concerning the proliferation of Banksy, and other celebrity street/graffiti artists: "To speak of the Banksy effect, whether seen as a positive or negative development, in a context of war, political upheaval and loss of life may seem to trivialize the important role that street art has played in liberating the voices of the people of this region during times of revolution and change (DeTurk, 2018)."

These types of ephemeral interventions are polarized, receiving conflicting attention from visitors/tourists and the local population. Though the graffiti and wheat-pasted works are inherently ephemeral by design, the question of how these types of works actively critique and intervene deserves attention. To reference Naguib's framework concerning the role of "the streets as exhibition space," the graffiti on the Annexation Wall raises critical concerns about how the fetishization of conflict zones are used as a creative muse for artists (Naguib, 2017, p. 60)

Figure 3: Graffiti on the Annexation Wall, Bethlehem, Palestine. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte

Figure 4: A mix of infographs, stencils, and graffiti cover the Annexation Wall, Bethlehem, Palestine. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte

Figure 5: To the left, the outdoor café of the Walled Off Hotel. The café faces the Annexation Wall, affording patrons the "worst view in the world." Bethlehem, Palestine. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte

Figure 6: View from Caritas Street next to the Annexation Wall outside the Walled Off Hotel, 2019. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte.

Though these images, phrases, stencils, and murals serve as a means of educating the public about social and political injustices, the images and text have the potential to obfuscate the locations they seek to critique. Where are we supposed to look? What are we to see beyond the colorful images? Are these messages didactic or distracting? In an interview with Mohammad Alazza, the Director of the Lajee Center in Aida Camp, Bethlehem, he comments on the function of ephemeral messages on the Annexation/ Wall, stating:

> If we paint it--- that means we accept it and we are going to live with it. The wall is ugly---Because if go from the other side of the wall, they make it beautiful. Nice stones. Nice graffiti. So that when they have visitors, they never feel like there is an Apartheid Wall. And that is why we are against the graffiti on the wall, even if it Is related to Palestine. It's better not to paint it – I remember the first time I saw the graffiti it was really beautiful, and I start to forget about the wall. We can't forget (Alazza, 2022).

The wall is not symbolic; it is tangible, actual, present. The function is to control and contain. Thus, Alazza's statement affirms the concerns felt by many throughout Bethlehem and greater Palestine concerning the fetishization of the wall as an exhibition space. Travel bloggers, influencers, and Instagrammers flock to these spaces to capture selfies and upload content to their digital platforms, often without fully understanding or realizing what the wall signifies. However, some do support the influx of graffiti artists to the region. While attending the 2022 Youth Art Competition at the Walled Off Hotel Art Gallery, I engaged in a casual conversation with a member of the gallery staff. He recognized the issues concerning graffiti art and tourism, but he also discussed how the hotel has provided visitors with a space to celebrate Palestinian artists outside the context of the wall. As he explained, the gallery displays and supports Palestinians and includes exhibitions of both established and up-and-coming artists. The gallery highlights the work by Mansour and others; a stark juxtaposition to the graffitied works outside the walls of the hotel. Per the Walled Off Hotel:

> …[the] space enjoys complete autonomy from the rest of the hotel. It is the largest permanent platform for Palestinian artists to showcase their work in Palestine. Local curators are invited to organise the regularly changing roster of exhibitions. Many of the most notable Palestinian artist work is on display here, including Suliman Mansour and Nail Anani. An adjoining space is dedicated to temporary shows by emerging artists. The gallery sells original work, prints and postcards (Walled Off Hotel).

4. Solidarity Speaks around Napoli

> *SEE: I can only see fragments of stone under the paint. A mess of black, white, red, blue, and green, complemented by a black and white stencil of a scuba diver that reads resiste. Further down the street in downtown Napoli, numerous murals depict politicians, activists, and/or political prisoners. Their portraits adorn the walls of buildings, some as caricature, others as homage. I face the façade of the Laboratorio Occupato S.K.A., one of many self-managed social centers (aka LOSKA). The multi-storied building is adorned with various murals, graffiti pieces, banners, and wheat-pasted posters. Cartoonish figures play and interlock along the façade of the second and third stories, juxtaposed to the LOSKA painted sign on the first level. A yellow hammer and sickle and a black star frame the Laboratorio Occupato S.K.A. text. Wedged between the entry ways, two painted figures in white face each other. One wears a helmet, the other a Balaklava.*

The LOSKA collective, like many across Napoli and Greater Italy, use the visual arts as a communicative device; going beyond graffiti and wheat-pasting and instead using highly visible façades of their collective spaces to broadcast their messages. LOSKA works to fight oppression and systemic marginalization:

> …we are engaged in a decisive dispute against the state of social crisis in our region which means stabilizing salaries, fighting the closure

> of businesses essential to citizenship, providing unemployment benefits for hundreds of workers… there is no certainty for their future work, as a result of government cuts in social spending and the absolute indifference of the Region and local authorities in intervening with their own resources and with responsible planning (LOSKA).

Thus, these centers are visibly marked by a vast array of political and socially motivated signs, stencils, text, and graffiti/muraled pieces. Throughout the city, similar messages found on the Annexation Wall also appear in multi-colored phrases: ACAB, liberation, and Free Palestine (see Figure 7). The amalgam of phrases, however, is often lost in the vast graffiti-scape of the city. Even Banksy's Madonna disappears amongst the chatter of paint and stencils. Though many graffiti and mural artists choose to remain anonymous, a few famous tags/handles have become visible among the cacophony of colors, symbols, icons, and text.

In a form of cross-solidarity practice, Neapolitan artist Eduardo Castaldo created several Palestine-focused murals/projects around the city of Napoli (see Figure 8).[1] His work may be viewed as a form of visual solidarity-building. In 2021, Castaldo unveiled Welcome to Bethlehem, a black and white tableau placed along a curved wall in downtown Napoli. The inspiration of the piece originates from Castaldo's work as a photojournalist in the West Bank from 2007-2011. The mural is based on a series of photos he captured of individuals moving through checkpoints (Rubeo and Baroud, 2021). In an interview with the Middle East Monitor, he reflects on how the images were originally captured and how the mural expressed his concerns about exploitation:

> I was standing outside the checkpoint cage, taking pictures of Palestinian workers aged between 30 and 60, even 70, piled on top of one another for hours to pass through the checkpoint and get to work in Jerusalem. These people repeated this same routine every day, from as early as 4 am to 8 am. And every day, they were forced by circumstances to suffer that same dehumanizing experience, simply to earn meager amounts of money [to feed their families] … These people were already deprived of their dignity and I didn't feel I had the right to take photos of them as if they were animals in a zoo. This feeling was so unpleasant that I decided not to show or sell those pictures to newspapers. (Castaldo in Rubeo and Baroud, 2021)

The mural depicts workers in a checkpoint moving into Jerusalem. From a visual perspective, the effect produced from the photo-transfer individualizes each subject in the mural. Rather than use black bars, Castaldo negates the images, opting for white bars. In a second piece, Castaldo's mural blends both Neapolitan and Palestinian elements. The mural depicts a woman throwing water on two Israeli Occupation Force (IOF) soldiers. The action is inherently Neapolitan:

> The throwing water is quite common in Naples, especially by women who want to scare away kids when they are too loud in the street. By associating this typical reaction with Israeli soldiers I tried to epitomise Naples' solidarity with the Palestinian people. In my mind, that gesture became a symbol of 'anti-Zionist' Naples (Castaldo in Rubeo and Baroud, 2021).

This piece furthers the cross-solidarity commitment by the artist in Napoli. He places the murals/street interventions in locations where they can be viewed, processed, and engaged by the public. Rather, then create small-scale or obfuscated works, Castaldo's public-facing works speak to the importance of locality, complemented by the digital cycling/posting of the pieces via social media platforms.

1 - Historically, the city of Napoli shares a connection to Palestine through programming, economic support, and peacekeeping. According to the Comune di Napoli's Decentralized Cooperation Interventions and Projects initiative, the city "has played an active role in promoting peace in the Middle East and, therefore, in the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (Comune di Napoi). The city allegedly contributes funds, resources, and a network of solidarity-workers to assist in education initiatives, medical procedures, and creative projects.

Figure 7: Street graffiti around Napoli, Italy. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte

Figure 8: The Palestinian flag hangs between buildings in downtown Napoli. Photo credit Jenna Altomonte

5. Digital Longevity

Though materials like paint and wheat-paste are subject to the elements (weather, censorship, and overpainting by other artists), they are often captured using screenic platforms and distributed via social media, the internet, and/or documentary film projects. Jeff Ferrell argues that "the ephemerality of street art and graffiti is…neutralised by new channels that…'elongate' in time and space the experience of creating street art and graffiti offer new kinds of aesthetic durability" (Ferrell cited in Naguib, 2017, p. 63). This durability is made possible by the popularity of graffiti and mural-based Instagram accounts, documentary films, and material branding:

> When ephemeral productions appear in public space, there is no possibility that they are neutral. When a poster is wheat-pasted on a public wall, or a slogan is carried on a banner at a demonstration; when protesters chant and sing or bang saucepans as they block a street; when graffiti are spray-painted on a billboard—all of these manifestations elicit a range of intense responses (Murphey and O'Driscoll, 2015, p. 332).

These intense reactions create content far removed from the surfaces in which they were originally painted, wheat-pasted, and/or bombed. In "Super-ephemerality: Street Art in Digital Space," Sarah Hwang warns against the "flattening" of street art within digital space:

> Street art's ephemerality—it is often buffed (chemically removed) or painted over—is hyperinflated when viewed on the internet because its photographic replica is no longer rooted in physical time and place, yet, it exists on multiple screens and is immortalized on infinite cloud drives… This multiplicity ascribes digital street art as super-ephemeral because it straddles the line between form and formless, real and not real, possible and impossible… This new way of seeing has prompted street artists to create art that is both made to be seen online and to be a semiotic of itself as street art in digital space—or that is super-ephemeral (Hwang, 2010).

To expand on Hwang's assessment, the notion of the super-ephemeral, with regards to street art, removes the sense of locality from the original piece. Photographed, cropped, color-corrected, and decontextualized from its original state, the graffiti piece loses its intensity. For example, the plethora of pieces that cover the surface of the Annexation Wall often serve in conversation with one another. The layering of images and text speaks to the expansive, palimpsestuous nature of the graffiti. Once they are removed and processed within an online platform, the pieces become part of a different contextual conversation.

One of the most iconic examples centers on Banksy's Flower Thrower, created in 2003 in East Bethlehem. Numerous iterations of the piece appear on tee-shirts, posters, mugs, NFTs, and memes. The piece is now part of the super-ephemeral state with many viewers unfamiliar with Banksy's political motivation or the original intention. The dangers of such image recycling warrants further examination. The visitors become more familiar with images and not the context; thus, they lose the potential to educate. In a travel blog titled, High Heels & a Backpack, travel blogger Melissa Douglas writes about 'must-see' graffiti spots around the West Bank. With regards to Banksy pieces, she states, "…the painting of a young girl frisking a soldier, a masked thug throwing flowers, and an armored white dove. (If you are interested in Banksy or other graffiti artists, you have probably seen photos of this graffiti before and perhaps hadn't realized that these pieces were in Palestine?) (Douglas, 2022).

The comment is both glaring and indicative of the concerns regarding the digital recycling of these site-specific works. Even walking through the lobby of the Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem, the jovial and somewhat displaced attitude of visitors centered more on capturing the perfect Instagram pose, rather than actively engaging with the spaces of oppression manufactured by the Israeli colonial state. The effect produced by locality and the experience of interaction within the actual space is weakened through the digital copy.

> The meaning of any ephemeral intervention is not simply to create a spectacle for others but also to transform participants politically through the complex workings of affect. Images, sounds, activities—all are part of the environment that produces the feeling of political engagement. It is the bodily experience of the ephemeral intervention, rather than its digital transmission, that concerns us here. (Murphey and O'Driscoll, 2015, p.333)

To further complicate this form of consumption, DeTurk references how the Banksy Effect has impacted the commercial dimensions of graffiti art, going from the street to the gallery to the online shop (DeTurk, 2018). With the push to display graffiti in galleries and to sell them at auction houses, the consumption of these types of work subverts the original function of street art. In fact, the rise in graffiti tourism has elevated these pieces to celebrity status. Some tourists even cut or remove the works from the walls in order to sell or keep (Cascone, 2021). In spaces fraught with war, instability, and geopolitical violence, these graffiti messages have the potential to inform viewers about the plight of the local, indigenous, and/or marginalized populations.

6. Conclusion

According to Chmielewska, the public-facing dimension of street art is informed by both the personal/lived experiences of the artist and speaks to the community in which the images/text are situated. These tags, marks, icons, and symbols both contribute to identity-building, affirm locality, and reinforce solidarity movements:

> An inscription—whether a slogan, stylized signature or an icon—is connected with the specific history of protest, contestation, and subversion framed by the locality. Nothing that takes place in the public sphere remains a private gesture with no political or cultural meanings. Writing carries in its graphic trace iconic significance, and no image is innocent of linguistic resonance (Chmielewska, 2007, p. 163).

The act of creating a piece of graffiti asserts the public-facing message, while also connecting artists through shared symbolism via common solidarity movements or ideals. The old adage of graffiti as fleeting still remains true in some capacity. Works get painted over, crumble, fade, and warp. However, technology and the marketability of graffiti art has changed the way these types of ephemeral interventions function and serve their communities. What are the consequences of enabling graffiti in spaces fraught with political and social strife? In support of both Alazza and Castaldo, these ephemeral interventions must be carefully read, consumed, and understood within their respected contexts and used to further educate and expose various crises. However, Castaldo provides context from the position of an artist-activist: "[I am aware that] art will not change such a dramatic political situation on its own, or have a key role…But I also think that it can contribute because art is freedom. And, to me, it is important to point out that this freedom is not neutral, it has to stand on one side, on the right side (Castaldo, 2021)."

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