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**From solitary to solidarity: The insurgent writing in the public domain**

*Draft. Please do not cite or circulate. Comments very welcome. In this draft, I briefly describe the literature foundation of my project-in-progress. I would be grateful for any comments, criticisms, or suggestions.*

**Abstract:**

In the growing body of graffiti literature, the question of the political implications of such a practice appears in almost all works. Scholars either distinguish their scope and/or subject of study as distinct from politics (Haworth et al, 2013; Ten Eyk 2014; Austin 2001) or argue that their scope and/or subject are deeply political (Tolonen, 2018; Waldner and Dobratz, 2013; Shaddar, 2016; Nicoarea, 2014). What is perplexing about these discussions is the little to no scholarship written by political theorists about graffiti's political meaning.<sup>1</sup> This paper addresses this absence, asking how graffiti transforms political theory's understanding of politics. By employing Michel de Certeau's concept-city and Georges Didi-Huberman's concept of gesture it becomes clear how graffiti is the other side of disciplining mechanisms of power. Graffiti shows how a gesture, a solitary, everyday use of space, is a tear in the concept-city's spatial makeup. Like speech acts, these tears, when engaging a solidary enterprise, can ultimately lead to a revolution, a rupture of the ideology that grounds the dominant forms of knowledge production and spatial makeup. Graffiti illuminates how everyday tactical uses of space are essential in understanding politics, as the public domain is an entanglement of the tactical and the strategic, the dominant and the insurgent, the public sphere and the public space. Graffiti answers Walter Benjamin's call to politicize art, unifying visual studies and political theory.

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<sup>1</sup> I said little to no scholarship as I have not found a political theorist yet but do not want to foreclose the possibility that there may be such work that I have yet to find.

## Introduction:

As an active viewer, the flâneur wonders the city; she takes note of the distinct aspects that make up the world around her. She notices the people, some walking with purpose and a preset destination, some shopping and eating at the various stores and restaurants, and some sitting against walls or in door wells asking for loose change. As she continues to wander around, the flâneur looks a layer deeper at the city's material makeup. The streets and buildings themselves, the walls and fences, the parks, and empty lots. Most with a marked purpose; the more obscure fading into the background. As she takes different streets, snaking her way across the city, she starts to take in the smaller aspects, the lights, the signs, the advertisements, and the various markings that dance across the top of the city's space. She focuses on the markings that seem to belong but also seem out of place. The bricolage of paint, wheatpaste, and stickers are as intriguing as they are confusing. In some places, words and messages can be made out, in other places images captivate the curiosity, and yet in other places, the marks seem to be a merging of the two. The flâneur wonders who has put this potential art up and why, what were they trying to achieve or communicate, what had they risk getting these often hidden messages into place. She allows herself and her imagination to be taken entirely by the possibilities that the graffiti offers.



Our Flâneur has noticed on the most basic level graffiti is a scratch or . scrape of some sort, this coming from the Italian word *graffito*. These markings are arguably always unauthorized; a scratch or mark on surfaces not meant as space for individual performance(though that is not to say always unsanctioned). Even though many would contest Starting with various ancient rock art such as “Cueva de las Manos” an UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Argentina,<sup>2</sup> these origins come with questions that resonate with the questions our flâneur asked<sup>3</sup>. Who is the creator? Were they trying to communicate anything specific, if so what? What is the

<sup>2</sup> “Cueva de las Manos, Patagonia Region, Santa Cruz Province, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/936/>.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Maris, “Egyptian ‘Inscriptions’ and Greek ‘Graffiti’ at El Kanais in the Egyptian Desert”

value of this work (and not just economically)? Graffiti is expansive, including different means of marking (paint, stickers, wheatpaste, yarn, pressure washing dirt),<sup>4</sup> different content in the marking (Murals, tags, boundary creating, calls to action),<sup>5</sup> and various locations (buildings, bathrooms, prisons, monuments).<sup>6</sup> Moving several millennia forward from the rock art depicted above, another example of graffiti is that in revolutionary France's iconoclasm. Insurgents tore down statues and defaced "public" buildings and objects, often with the simple tag of "la révolution."<sup>7</sup> This period in France also coined the term vandalism which various groups have used to categorize graffiti. These two examples seem to have little in common beyond the marking of a surface, yet graffiti can encompass both examples.

Our Flâneur is not alone in being bewitched by graffiti and the questions it poses. Graffiti pulls scholars from all sorts of fields, from cultural/visual studies to archaeology to sociology to criminology and more. As the diversity of these fields indicates, the themes and arguments engaged in graffiti scholarship are expansive and without cohesion. Nevertheless, one consistent theme, whether explicit or implicit, within this scholarship is that of politics. Some scholars explicitly describe their work and its subject as apolitical and rebuke scholars who would say or argue otherwise. On the other hand, some scholars have described their work and its subject as deeply political in act and content. Given this debate of political implications, it is perplexing that political theorists have written little to no scholarship. This project seeks to fill this gap in the literature, not just by asking how political theory would address this curious tension in graffiti scholarship but also by asking how graffiti transforms political theory's understanding of politics. In this endeavor, Michel de Certeau and Georges Didi-Huberman illuminate how the everyday use of space, i.e. graffiti, is solitary insurgent gestures. These gestures are tears in the dominant ideology that makes up the concept-city, reflecting hermeneutic speech-acts as tears in dominant knowledge production. When engaged with a solidary enterprise, these tears, graffiti, or speech-acts, give insight to Walter Benjamin's challenge to politicize art. In conclusion, the paper challenges political theory to expand its conception of politics from the public sphere to the public

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<sup>4</sup> Haveri, 2013; Chlafant and Prigoff, 1987; Cooper 2010

<sup>5</sup> Shaddar, 2016; Wilson, 2008; Chenoweth, 2017; Kimvall 2014; Peteet 1996

<sup>6</sup> Billy Haworth, et al., 2006; Andie Elizabeth Shabbar, 2016; Jacqueline Z. Wilson, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Clay, *Tearing up History: The Art of Revolution*, BBC 4, Director Nick Clarke Powell, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E85OP1VgB-o>.

domain. In other words, political theory must look at both the public sphere and public space, which would require being sensitive to culture's politics.

While graffiti's incoherence may dissuade some scholars, others, such as Andrea Mubi Brighenti, understand graffiti's porous quality to reflect the greater spatial reality. He argues that graffiti, "cannot always be clearly separated from a number of other practices, including art and design (as aesthetic work), criminal law (as vandalism crime), politics (as a message of resistance and liberation), and market (as merchandisable product)."<sup>8</sup> More concisely, graffiti is an interstitial practice, where the porous boundaries create healthy disagreement and dialogue around what qualifies as graffiti, even among practitioners and artists themselves. Graffiti calls into the question various dichotomies and the process of dichotomizing itself. Utilizing Michel de Certeau's concept of tactic, the focus is on actions or uses of space that respond and utilize space that bounds the everyday. Individuals take from the world around them and make use of it for their own means and ends. The current analysis of graffiti centers the unauthorized and unsanctioned use of space. In other words, unauthorized and unsanctioned graffiti becomes a means of meaning, making, and emancipation from different mechanisms of domination and discipline.

Before moving on to precisely how graffiti is an insurgent gesture or tactical use of space, it is crucial to clarify what these terms mean and the context in which these acts are happening, the concept-city from Michel de Certeau. Certeau was a French scholar of social science, history, comparative literature, and more. Many of Certeau's works focus on culture and everyday practices, giving insight to the relational core of the human condition, in and outside the political. In his work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau specifically takes up the question of the politics of the network and practices of the everyday. He states that he is attempting "to make explicit the systems of operational combination which also compose a 'culture,' and to bring light to the models of action characteristics of users whose status as the dominated element in society... is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers.'"<sup>9</sup> Currently, in society, "consumer" has the notion of agency and action. Individuals have a choice over what to consume; Certeau challenges said notion, arguing that this merely hides a state of domination. He puts himself in alignment with Michel Foucault in looking at the mechanisms of power that discipline individuals. The amalgamation of

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<sup>8</sup> Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," *Journal of Space and Culture*, 13(3), 2010, 315.

<sup>9</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Everyday Practice of Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xii.

practices that discipline and dominate the individual make up culture; these practices are becoming more extensive and inescapable. Certeau takes this line of thinking further, asking if these mechanisms of discipline are in the quotidian, are there, and if so what, simple ways of resisting this domination.

To tease out these different mechanisms of power, those of discipline and those of resistance, Certeau distinguishes between strategy and tactic<sup>10</sup>. Strategy is the calculus of discipline and domination that allows for a place as proper; proper here means an isolated and contained place. The reader can think of the panoptic as a metaphor of strategy. One strategic use of space for the panoptic is material and immaterial borders. A border creates a set of antithetical relations, included and excluded, with expected and self-enforced behaviors. The rationality of the sovereign nation-state is dependent on such strategies. The tactic is a response to space's strategic use. Certeau describes the tactic as “a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ nor thus a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other.”<sup>11</sup> Tactical uses of space resist the totalizing project of strategy, creating opaqueness and obscurity in the visible field. The tactical enters when the individual interfaces with the strategic use of space and then changes it to be their own. When thinking about the wall as strategic use of space, graffiti is a tactical use of space. The artist takes the wall and changes it to their purpose, that of a canvas. Certeau finds tactical uses of space as a weapon of "the weak," or those on the margins, as it allows those excluded from active roles in spatial production to turn the forces around them to their means and ends.

Now that we have the terminology of strategy and tactic under our belts let us turn to the context in which graffiti is to be analyzed and understood, the concept-city. Certeau describes this strategic use of space as a threefold operation. First is the production of a self-contained, closed space, what Doreen Massey argues is a depoliticization of space. The second operation, along similar lines, is the production of a self-contained time, a synchronic system. Both these steps combine to form an artificially self-contained system, which is cemented in the third and final step, "the creation of a *universal* and anonymous *subject* which is the city itself..."<sup>12</sup> The concept-city has a unitary identity, that of “Los Angeles” or “Denver” or “Berlin.” Certeau finds that it reflects

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<sup>10</sup> My understanding of resistance is also leaning on James Scott's definition from *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*.

<sup>11</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

<sup>12</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 94.

the ideal political stage, a collective of diverse individuals who come together to debate and argue over the nature of politics and the human condition, ultimately coming to a rational and legitimate agreement. Certeau argues Hobbes's understanding of the concept city is built into the leviathan. He even goes as far as to call the concept-city "the dominant theme of political legends."<sup>13</sup> We can think about town halls and forums in which are self-contained systems in which all stakeholders can come together to engage each other removed from the inequality and power relations of the greater societal context. The concept-city and its defenders are dependent on an unrestricted perspective of all within its boundaries. In his work on graffiti and territoriality, Andrea Brighenti highlights the importance put on boundaries, which are "specifically conceptualized as thresholds in the field of visibility."<sup>14</sup> Boundaries can be immaterial such as processes or checkpoints, but the center of this project looks to material boundaries such as walls, buildings, doors, et cetera. Whether immaterial or material, boundaries' significance lie in their ability to demarcate the limits of space. Brighenti continues, explicitly addressing how walls as boundaries, "are governmental object par excellence. More precisely, governmentality (Foucault 1978/1991) is really what walls are all about."<sup>15</sup> Boundaries, particularly walls, help to discipline individuals by creating antithesis relations. Individuals then define themselves and their actions not only by the organization of their space but also against what they are not. Our flâneur from earlier noted how folks within certain boundaries acted in specific ways. Those on the street were to be in transition, those walls either shopping or eating.

Boundaries are essential to the concept-city for demarcating limits and fostering recognition and order within these limits. Certeau argues that the concept-city is where "administration is combined with a process of elimination in this place organized by 'speculative' and classificatory operations." Classification is crucial in distinguishing that which the concept-city recognizes and accepts from that which it does not. In an interview, New York detective Bernie Jacobs states, "Graffiti is the application of a medium to a surface... Is that an art form? I don't know, I'm not an art critic. But I can sure as hell tell you that's a crime."<sup>16</sup> Within the strategic logic, which the detective represents, there is no means of recognition for graffiti. Detective Jacobs

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<sup>13</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Brighenti, "At the Wall," 315.

<sup>15</sup> Brighenti, "At the Wall," 316.

<sup>16</sup> "Crime," *Style Wars*, directed by Tony Silver (1983, New York City: Public Art Films): [https://tubity.com/movies/189483/style\\_wars?start=true](https://tubity.com/movies/189483/style_wars?start=true).

explicitly describes his inability to understand graffiti, it is illegible to him.<sup>17</sup> Detective Jacobs employs a legible classification to the concept-city, that of graffiti as a crime, as deviant, as unauthorized. Once something is classified as external to the city's totalizing project (unauthorized, deviant, insurgent), classified as being waste, it is either absorbed or removed. In other words, the concept-city demands a "rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this way."<sup>18</sup> Various cities around the world spend millions of dollars on the removal of graffiti, painting over, or power-washing away the work.<sup>19</sup> Recognition becomes an essential mechanism of power, and the spatial makeup helps to distinguish what is and is not recognized.

### **Insurgent Gesture - The Solitary Decision:**

Failing to be recognized can have profoundly negative implications for an individual. It withholds a sense of belonging and the ability to participate in collective activities, such as politics. Enacting exclusions often safe-guard a particular standard or boundary. Various disciplining mechanisms perpetuate and cement these standards and boundaries. People who exist outside of these spaces are "the other." Other is distinguished from the internal or included, those who are other than that in the alignment of strategic rationality. While Certeau uses the language of "weak" to describe the other, I argue a more accurate description of the other would be precarious, from Judith Butler. Precarity is a state an individual is put in by the various operations of the concept-city and its economy. This does not denote that these individuals personally lack, as weakness does. If anything, Butler would argue that those who are in positions of precarity are often incredibly strong out of necessity to survive. As the rationality of the government and economy creates this position, it may seem that the other lacks a means of political participation. The tactical use of space so far discussed seem to address cultural and social exclusion or marginalization but not political exclusion.

Here graffiti is investigated as a response to exclusion from the cultural and political. In other words, graffiti is to be considered an expression of the affect of exclusion, leading to a tear

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<sup>17</sup> I would also like to note that the group he believes to have more insight into graffiti's artistic/aesthetic value, art critics, also often find graffiti illegible. Graffiti's overlapping of the qualifications of art is part of it being an interstitial practice. With artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, the difficulty in labeling graffiti is particularly true in high art/low art debates.

<sup>18</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

<sup>19</sup> Katie Honan and Coulter Jones, "New York City Businesses Fret as Graffiti-Removal Program is Axed," *Wall Street Journal*, July 19, 2020.

in the strategic boundaries. Butler in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* asks “whether the destitute are outside of politics and power or are in fact living out a specific form of political destitution along with specific forms of political agency and resistance that expose the policing of the boundaries of the sphere of appearance itself.”<sup>20</sup> What is important to note here, and will be returned to in the conclusion, is that Butler is not arguing for an expansion of the current political system to include those marginalized but an expansion of what is considered the political system. The first step in understanding this is to understand the individual desire to use space tactically. I will explicate this through an analysis of graffiti as an insurgent gesture. Graffiti comes from a solitary decision to express the pain, anger, and frustration from marginalization or exclusion. These decisions lead to gestures or uses of space that tear the spatial and temporal boundaries, as Butler states exposing these boundaries' policing. In the next section, I will then turn to how this use of space is reflective of hermeneutical speech-acts and that the tears, graffiti, or speech-acts, can ultimately lead to ruptures in the spatial makeup of the concept-city, pulling its authority and stability further into question.

Georges Didi-Huberman opens his piece "By The Desires: Fragment on What Makes us Rise Up" with a tale of two young girls who have just lost their mother; in his lecture “HOW TRY TELL? A short journey in the papers of Warsaw Ghetto" he opens with stories of the lost and deep grief that came to define the Jewish communities of Europe during the Holocaust. Through these examples and many more, Huberman asks his audience and reader how do we speak of an experience of pain that transforms the nature of relation and reality.<sup>21</sup> While such a transformative pain can take many forms and be of different scales, as seen in the difference between the loss of a loved one and the mass extermination of one's community, Huberman often focuses on the pain that comes from exclusion. He continues in his works to challenge the reader and audience to understand that certain people have no way of existing within society.<sup>22</sup> This is reflective of the rationale behind the concept-city that is contingent on the exclusion of people and behaviors. Huberman emphasizes the importance of recognition in this process, "as the central concept of

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2018), 78.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman. “HOW TRY TELL? A short journey in the papers of Warsaw Ghetto.” Wellek Lecture, the University of California at Irvine, Irvine, May 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Didi-Huberman. “HOW TRY TELL?” 2019.



social, moral and political sciences.”<sup>23</sup> Recognition is only capable of building a collective with the categorization of those that it does not recognize. The collective requires the other is denied recognition. While acknowledging the importance of recognition, Huberman asks, “what is recognition when unilateral positions of domination persist?”<sup>24</sup> What are the possibilities for the marginalized and excluded with the expanding and deepening mechanisms of discipline that aim for their complete erasure? Certeau asks, what are the means that individuals can resist these everyday practices of domination?

Many contemporary American graffiti artists are examples of individuals who are illegible to the concept-city and put as inferior and in need of removal. This practice starts in railroad yards, specifically with railroad workers in the early 1900s<sup>25</sup>. These railroad workers were often put into positions of precarity through two different mechanisms. The first was their label as an immigrant. Most had emigrated to the United States with hopes of a new start, quickly finding they would always be considered other. While taking on dangerous and demanding work, they were withheld recognition by the collective. The second aspect was the unstable nature of railroad yard employment. Many railroad workers were forced to continuously move and make do with what was available in their everyday environment. Moving forward from the French Revolution into the later part of the century, graffiti is taken up and transformed by other precarious communities in urban environments such as Pittsburg and New York City. As such graffiti quickly became wedded to hip-hop culture. With its continued growth, precarious communities around the world took it from Berlin to Palestine, to China, to Chile.<sup>26</sup> While graffiti has become a larger phenomenon, it is essential to keep in mind the solitary decision it takes to participate in such a practice.

Returning to Huberman, he calls the reader’s attention to the insurgent potential of these positions of exclusion, of the precarious. Resistance, and ultimately revolution, is not enacted by those who already exist in positions of accumulated power, those using space strategically. Resistance is impossible among constituted relations and practices. For Huberman, “to refuse is not accomplished by us, nor in our name”<sup>27</sup>. Us is pointing to individuals in the dominant culture,

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<sup>23</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “By the Desires: Fragments on What makes us Rise up” in *Uprisings*, transl. Shane B. Lillis, (Editions Gallimard, 2016), 335.

<sup>24</sup> Didi-Huberman, “By the Desires,” 336.

<sup>25</sup> John F. Lennon, “Trains, Railroad Workers and Illegal Riders: The Subcultural World of Hobo graffiti,” in *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, ed. Jeffrey Ian Ross, (New York, NY: Routledge), 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Valijakka, 2011; Palmer, 2008;

<sup>27</sup> Didi-Huberman, “By the Desires,” 350.

from the academy to media to politics. He turns vehemently, claiming that refusal is accomplished, “rather by a very poor beginning that belongs first of all to those who cannot speak.”<sup>28</sup> So while the communities that have turned to graffiti seem to use graffiti as a means of recognition, there is a more robust and transformative core. Those who cannot speak are the most important to refusal that leads to resistance and insurgency. Refusal here is synonymous with the tactic, the use of space in unauthorized ways. Now, this must start with the individual. Several scholars have attempted to represent the experiences at the margins, but this usually results in further violence and domination. Huberman explains this is part of the reason that those in dominating positions (conscious or unconscious) are incapable of such insurgent gestures as accurate representation comes from the inside.<sup>29</sup> When asked about the purpose of graffiti, one of the interviewees of "Style Wars" responded, "It's for us!"<sup>30</sup> This insurgent message, while simple, gets to the heart of the politics of graffiti. Graffiti helps artists and viewers alike navigate and reshape various power relations that make up the cityscape, as seen in the growing literature on graffiti as a political act. The sheer act of graffiti allows for a solitary gesture of refusal to abide by the rules or law of the space of everyday life. Each gesture of resistance, each tactical practice, creates tears in the everyday spatial makeup, challenging the different modes of domination.

### **Forest of Gestures: The Solidary Enterprise:**

While these gestures and uses of space must start with the desire of the individual, they must be communicated to the rest of the public. Huberman describes this as "refusal should be founded on a *solitary decision* capable of nonetheless of engaging a *solidary* ‘enterprise’.”<sup>31</sup> While individual actions are the refusal, to become a larger movement, part of a revolution, graffiti must lean into a collective. In her work on the performance of place, Adelina Ong argues that this is a natural trait of graffiti. Where ever, whatever, and by whomever, graffiti was (and continues to be), "an inscription that performs, and this performance may turn a site into a place for those who discover the inscription and are affected by it."<sup>32</sup> While graffitiing is often a solitary one, an

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<sup>28</sup> Didi-Huberman, “By the Desires, 350.

<sup>29</sup> Didi-Huberman. “HOW TRY TELL?” 2019.

<sup>30</sup> “It’s for us” *Style Wars*, directed by Tony Silver (1983, New York City: Public Art Films): [https://tubitv.com/movies/189483/style\\_wars?start=true](https://tubitv.com/movies/189483/style_wars?start=true).

<sup>31</sup> Didi-Huberman, “By the Desires,” 350.

<sup>32</sup> Adelina Ong, "The path is place: Skateboarding, Graffiti, and performances of place," *The Journal of Applied Theater and Performance*, 21(2), 229-241, 2016, 230.

individual performance, the inscription itself is also a performance that engages the collective. Graffiti becomes a metaphorical tract, what Huberman describes as the spark to revolution:

Tract. On the one hand, it is a "short treatise," a literary genre that gave first to those numerous pamphlets and brochures that have addressed political, moral, or religious questions since the fifteenth century. On the other hand, and according to a more recent meaning, it is a simple little piece of paper handed out for political propaganda. In both cases...a word that means the act of dealing with a subject, of deliberating, carrying on a discussion, or delivering a sermon...<sup>33</sup>

What is significant and unique to the tract is its ability to circulate on its own. Huberman describes how the tract flies from one hand (sometimes the author) to land in another. It is like a butterfly that flickers through various fields or like a spark that jumps to fresh fuel. The tract is a complex entanglement of time and space as it always has remnants of its former viewers and creators but is made anew with each passing moment. The gesture is free, able to fly until it loses energy to lie somewhere. As graffiti performs anew for each viewer, each flâneur also can spark insurgency in them.

These gestures' ability to fly about easily allows them to "bring to the surface, at the heart



of its *call to action*, something like a condensed *pathos: a lyricism of gesture* we might say, inherent to the political decision to rise up."<sup>34</sup> This pathos is a different form of recognition. One in which the actor is being recognized by finding anonymous support. The author of the gesture is demoted to a creator without a face, giving more room for new uses and creations to come. The tracts while created by an individual decision become a critical means

<sup>33</sup> Didi-Huberman, "By the Desires," 372.

<sup>34</sup> Didi-Huberman, "By the Desires," 374.

"to circulate this very gesture. To give it, in this way, a political meaning."<sup>35</sup> Our spark can ignite a fire when it finds the right fuel. Think back to the rapid growth of graffiti around the world. The public space and the culture within it suddenly take on insurgent political meaning, not only challenging the typical public sphere, but creating an alternative means of dialogue and deliberation. This alternative use of space comes from the collective of precarious bodies. They have voice here and it helps to shape the world around them.

Graffiti exemplifies the tract and all its political insurgence showing how culture is deeply political. It is not separate from the world around it, nor is it entirely a part of its world. Graffiti pulls into question the boundaries between culture and politics by calling into question the strategic logic that defines the concept-city.<sup>36</sup> This happens by fostering politics in locations in which the strategic tries to isolate it from: everyday life. When an actor expresses herself from the margins, when she pulls the political into the everyday life, the commutes to work, the walks on the weekends, she forces those around her to notice. The actor has found her voice that was withheld from the strategic uses of space. Huberman recognizes that this is a process, that the actor must work out a way in which to express herself. She must come to "know how to *work [her] shout*, to give it shape, and to labor over it, long and patiently... *fusing together* new images, new thoughts, or new possibilities of action in the public consciousness, which receives it in this form"<sup>37</sup> This is a how tactical uses of space are configured. Graffiti, tracts, and other everyday practices come to be this shout for many precarious bodies as it pulls an unsuspecting public into conversation, even if only to have to reject it explicitly. A single gesture is but one of a multiplicity, a single tree in a forest of gestures that can lead to a rupture.

Graffiti transforms the everyday space and its use, but it also transforms everyday forms of communication. It fathered a way of, "...speaking a postlinguistic language in... hyperstylized ways of writing than defied all sociologies of youth, subculture, or deviance."<sup>38</sup> That is to say graffiti not only challenged public space by where it was placed but also by the content it included. Graffiti merges art with deviance, sometimes in a contentious overlap. The interstitial quality of graffiti make it hard to draw clean lines of what is and is not art, what is and is not political, what

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<sup>35</sup> Didi-Huberman, "By the Desires," 370.

<sup>36</sup> Carlo McCormick, Ethel Eno, Marc Schiller, Sara Schiller, Banksy, Anne Pasternak, and J. Tony Serra, *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*(Köln: Taschen, 2010): 50.

<sup>37</sup> Didi-Huberman, "By the Desires," 345.

<sup>38</sup> McCormick, et al., *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, 22.

is and is not mere vandalism. Graffiti creates tears in the spatial makeup that helps organize and categorize the concept-city, often across the boundaries themselves. As graffiti is a tactical use of space it is also a tactical use of language and art. Carlo McCormick argues that graffiti, "invent, unwind and reshape words themselves, or their meaning."<sup>39</sup> The content of graffiti often perplexes the viewer by making them reconsider the everyday uses of words by playing with the established rules. The content of graffiti acts analogous to a speech-act.

Jacques Derrida opens his analysis of speech acts and the way they represent the world with saying that very basically these acts can create meaning, that shifts and destabilizes; they "communicate a movement or than a tremor [*ébranlement*], a shock."<sup>40</sup> One importance of these speech acts is the way they represent that which occurs, an event. Representation is important in the process of recognition, which as discussed above, is vital for an event, a use of space, or a person to engage a solidary enterprise. This representation can then perform on its own, as a signature of an author does. Derrida clarifies that while an event and/or a speech-act must be recognizable that does not mean that it has to play by the linguistic rules (such as J.L. Austin puts forth. Instead they can be deconstructive of said rules. He explains that deconstruction is "the reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated."<sup>41</sup> Again graffiti is analogous to this in its post-linguistic language. The content of the markings are often not readily distinguishable between pictorial and linguistic. It is a volatile form of communication that those who can see graffiti and understand it could always change tomorrow. If we take Certeau's metaphor of speech as walking a city, graffiti may be more aptly describe as swimming where one is always in the same water, but the water is always moving and shifting around, even in the calmest of times.

J.G.A. Pocock's explicit discussion of the politics of speech may help to ground the discussion a bit more. He differentiates, "Verbalization *of* a political act and verbalization itself *as* a political act"<sup>42</sup>. Thinking back to graffiti, this is equivalent to asking if the practice of graffiti is political or if the content of graffiti is political. Pocock is tying together these items as separate but constitutive of each other. Communication is not just a means to an end but also an end itself. If

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<sup>39</sup> Magda Danysz, and Mary-Noëlle Dana, *From Style Writing to Art: A Street Art Anthology* (Rome, Italy: Drago, 2010): 48.

<sup>40</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," 21.

<sup>42</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act: Toward a Politics of Speech," *Political Theory* v, no. 1(February 1973), 27.

communication takes on additional importance, that of creating something. In keeping in mind the necessity for recognition and speech and graffiti as representational, communication is not just a creation of something for the speaker alone, or just put into a space to be but is dependent on an audience. Importantly, Pocock (and visual studies broadly) does not find the role of spectator as a passive one for, “[receiving] information ... is bound, as it is intended, to modify his perceptions of the world”<sup>43</sup>. The flâneur is not one who is passive in their wondering around the city, in their viewing of graffiti and other objects. They take, while random, deliberate paths. The flâneur makes choices and what they see continually shifts and remakes their reality.

Pocock pushes this even further as he also looks back at the speech acts that have come before that define the moment in which one speaks, causing the speaker to question who is speaking, "When we speak, we are not sure who is talking or what is being said, and our acts of power in communication are not wholly our own"<sup>44</sup>. There are those who have come before and those to come after, and the speaker when speaking also is speaking to those in the moment. In his excavation of underground London graffiti Theo Kindynis describes how his “encounters ‘bring to light the heterogeneity of temporalities in modern city life’ (Pile, 2005: 136), and reveal the simultaneous co-existence of ‘innumerable pasts’ (Pile, 2005: 143).”<sup>45</sup> The speech-act and graffiti (whether the original performance or the performance of the piece itself) cannot be easily be given authority as the author of the utterance's communication. The spatial and temporal complexity destabilizes the ownership of a speech act and destabilizes the author or artist's authority. If no one person can claim power in acts of communication, current dominant ideologies and structures of meaning making become less rooted..

Calling into question the dominant ideology and rationale or resisting the disciplining mechanisms is not to say that none exist or that they will go away. It is also not to say that the those who use the everyday space and language in radical ways to resist are not in positions of precarity and oppression. Knowledge is inextricably tied to power and the strategic meaning-making and spatial makeup is still generally strong and stable. Pocock recognizes the disparity in language power relations which he describes as the relationship between the slave learning the master's tongue. The master's language defines both the slave and master; and as the slave learns

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<sup>43</sup> Pocock, “Verbalizing a Political Act,” 30.

<sup>44</sup>Pocock, “Verbalizing a Political Act,” 31.

<sup>45</sup> Theo Kindynis, "Excavating ghosts: Urban exploration as graffiti archaeology," *Crime Media Culture* v. 15, 1, 2017 p. 32.

more and finds the extremes of the language, he gains agency and challenges the relationship. The slave looks to rupture the master/slave relations. The only thing is that the slave is always working with the master's language and must outmaneuver the master to unravel the structure that holds them both. Pocock also uses the metaphor of a chess game, where one player must think so many moves ahead of the other player, always working on the edge of the field<sup>46</sup>. This is as true for graffiti as it is for language. Graffiti seeks to tear at the space around it, to alter the current landscape completely. The insurgent speech act, the tactical use of space changes the one speaking while also shaking up those in dominating positions and the whole system of which strategic rationale has built up.<sup>47</sup> The result is a complete redefinition of all subjects involved but this is not the end. While these occasions of cataclysmic displacement are rare and often followed by relative peace, "There is not a last word"<sup>48</sup>.

The tactical uses of space and insurgent speech-act make apparent that while, "Language gives [the dominating] power... [they] cannot fully control or prevent others from sharing..."<sup>49</sup> The rationale of the strategic is to hope that once it achieves domination and strategic actions organize space, a synchronic, monolithic identity is cemented. The strategic hopes to create the perfect-planned, readily legible and controllable collective. However, the reality of power relations is that for every disciplining mechanism there is a counter-mechanism, that all power is shared. The strategic exists alongside the tactical. When the strategic "[perform] a verbalized act of power, [they] enter upon a polity of shared power"<sup>50</sup>. This dynamic communication and meaning creation is seldom a civil discourse. It is never a quiet, peaceful process, but one of tension, confrontation, instability. This can be seen in the violent attempt to absorb, exclude or erase that which is outside the strategic, totalizing project. Ong explains how "For local authorities and property owners who express zero-tolerance for graffiti the presence of graffiti exposes the presence of security vulnerabilities that have been exploited by the graffiti writer. For other graffiti writers, graffiti demonstrates the possibility of *la perruque*."<sup>51</sup> Strategic rationality is a disguise, a fable, and the concept-city's decay slowly begins to tear at the city's universal, unitary identity. At moments, as

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<sup>46</sup> Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act," 35.

<sup>47</sup> Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act," 42.

<sup>48</sup> Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act," 43.

<sup>49</sup> Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act," 33.

<sup>50</sup> Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act," 33.

<sup>51</sup> Ong, "The path is place," 231.

the Black Lives Matter marches of 2020 shows, these tears rupture, altering the face of the city forever, shouting with the unseen plurality that has always existed.

### **Public domain – the politics of graffiti and tactical use of space**

In the concluding section of this tale of graffiti, I investigate the relationship between realm of culture and politics more explicitly. The first section started with a look at one specific example of how power relations play out in the everyday, the concept-city. A space which is defined by strategic rationality to create a place proper. A place that is a self-contained space, time, and with a unitary identity. This rationality is contingent on exclusion and erasure, mainly to help solidify the order within it. Those who are excluded and erased, the precarious, are left illegible and vulnerable. This violence while it enacts pain also is the fertile ground for insurgency. Individuals make the solitary decision to use the space to respond to the strategic with a tactic. These gestures when communicated in a public space act as sparks, spreading the insurgent desire. These performances, what they communicate, and their reception can lead to ruptures of the dominant narrative, the dominant ideology, and the strategic rationale. This tale is still of two distinct sides in constant antagonism when the story is much more complicated. To truly understand how the cultural and political is bound together demands a complex understanding of space. It demands the merging of the public space and the public sphere to create a public domain, to which political theory can turn to analyze. In this last section I will quickly turn to Doreen Massey who challenges the social sciences on their conceptualization of space and offers a more dynamic and fruitful conception to move forward. I will then show how this helps to further traditional understandings of politics, which allows for a more productive understanding of the politics of culture, such as graffiti.

Hopefully, the reader sees that the concept-city and its rational, which has defined much of political theory's understanding of politics, is deeply flawed. Various fields and scholars have offered fruitful interdisciplinary work to move past this. One such scholar is Doreen Massey, who was a prolific Marxist, feminist, cultural geographer. She aimed to challenge how people conceptualized space as a non-political entity. In her work she provides a productive counter-logic to the concept-city. Massey offers a dynamic and political notion of space contra to the unitary and stagnant, what she describes as dead and depoliticized. It concerns her that this depoliticized notion of space permeates the dominant social sciences, including critical theory and post-structural theory. While post-modern critical theorists aim towards emancipatory knowledge production,



Massey argues that they contribute to the death of space, as they assume, "time is the dimension of change, and of dynamism, and of life we live, and all the rest of it."<sup>52</sup> The concept-city logic holds space and time as frozen, and critical theorists have sought to free time, ignoring the just as crucial spatial component. The concept-city defends this on the ground of its panoptic needs of a totalizing perspective; spaces that change and warp under various spatial practices become unintelligible. Ironically critical theorists seem to struggle with the same problem. Graffiti is a practice that highlights how these groups fail to see the importance of the spatial, notably the everyday. Kindynis explicitly argues that "the enduring traces of pain and ink reveal a counter-history to what are typically thought as 'non-places' (Auge., 1995)."<sup>53</sup>

He is saying that graffiti pulls to the surface the history of places that have historically been ignored or erased, those who have been excluded by the concept-city. These non-places become depoliticized, removed from the public space and the counter-history they offer is also removed. Instead, various other histories, such as neoliberalism or historical materialism, dwarf them. These non-places, the use of space that constructs them, and their history are unthinkable<sup>54</sup>. Instead of accepting the idea of non-place or a depoliticization of space, Massey demands a reconceptualization of space. In this reconceptualization Massey is not attempting to erase the presence of the strategic use of space. Instead, she wants to allow for overlapping and entangled uses of space, where everyday practices and uses manifest larger political conflicts.

Massey's conceptualization of space has four discrete but interwoven parts. First, scholars must transition from a 2-D/3-D notion of reality to a 4-D/n-D notion of reality.<sup>55</sup> Scholars rarely make this notion explicit in their work, but it underlies all scholarship. An <sup>n</sup><sup>th</sup> dimension framework would allow scholars to recognize the temporality of space and the spatiality of time. One can think about Kurt Vonnegut's aliens in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the tralfamadorians. As beings that experience and understand life as four dimensions, they see humans not as two-legged but more as millipedes.<sup>56</sup> Any place an individual is in is an entanglement of past, present, and future; any moment an individual is in is an entanglement of multiple uses of space. Massey's second

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<sup>52</sup> Doreen Massey, "Doreen Massey on Space," Social Science Bites, interviewed by Nigel Warburton.

<sup>53</sup> Kindynis, "Excavating Ghosts," 27.

<sup>54</sup> I pull "unthinkable" from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work *Silencing The Past*. (p. 82), where he pulls it from Pierre Bourdieu. I recognize that I am already taking on a lot in this paper, but I wonder if it would help to flesh out the unthinkable.

<sup>55</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 264.

<sup>56</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I do not have this book on hand now, so I cannot look up the explicit reference but will do so in the future.

requirement is to understand that "space [is] constructed out of interrelations, as simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global."<sup>57</sup> In other words, "place" or "space" do not have one identity, a nation-state does not have one identity, a city does not have one identity, nor does a local neighborhood have one identity. Individuals socially constitute space on various scales, but their social relations are also spatially constituted. One does not have to look far for an example. In the year 2020 (and 2021), COVID-19 highlights the constitutive relation between the social and space. At first, these two qualifications may imply that all experience is chaotic, a depthless void of processes and relations. However, Massey finds this line of argument just as depoliticizing as artificially drawn boundaries.

The third requirement of Massey's notion of space is both elements of order and chaos exist in all spaces, and even using this duality/dichotomy is reductive.<sup>58</sup> The order enters because the spatial location of phenomena is caused and therefore explainable, as is the set of spatial phenomena that constitute a system (moving train cars from one depot to the next or the UC system or even international trade networks). Elements of chaos enter when the location of two phenomena (or set of) by happenchance are next to each other. Chaos and order can be seen in Kindynis's description of architectural glitches in the urban landscape, "where, as the city is continually retrofitted, renovated and reconfigured, the stacked superimposition of successive (infra)structural elements traps the intervening space... between the rigidly rectilinear places of late capitalism."<sup>59</sup> As the concept-city continually reconstitutes and reappropriates itself in the name of order, it folds in elements of chaos. Even the most perfect-plan community cannot escape this reality, nor can the most chaotic space. The last requirement is for social science and humanities scholars to take seriously the notion that physicists have stumbled upon "space-time." This is particularly important to research as Massey states, "spatial form can alter the future course of the very histories which have produced it."<sup>60</sup> Space nor time are separate, self-contained systems; any argument that they can be understood as such is ignorant to the world's complexity. The "ministers of knowledge" that perpetuate this make it to where the politics of the everyday practice is unthinkable.

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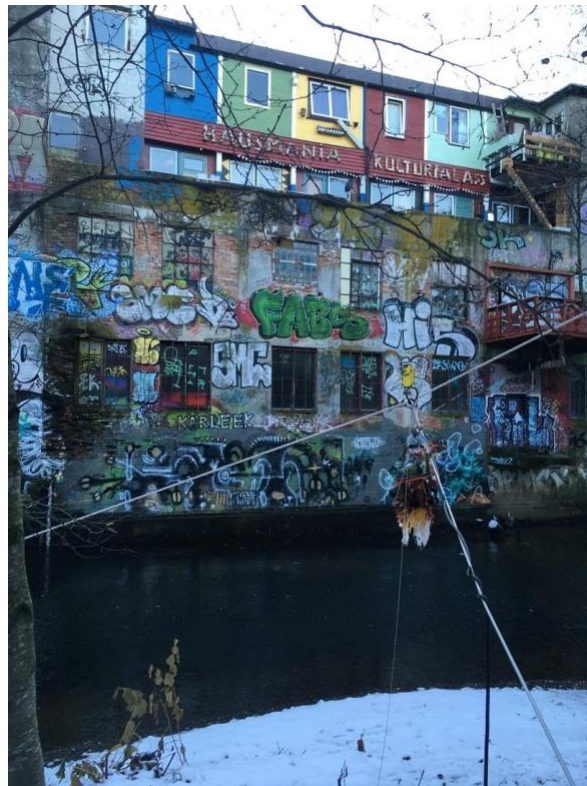
<sup>57</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 264.

<sup>58</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 265.

<sup>59</sup> Kindynis, "Excavating Ghosts," 27.

<sup>60</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 268.

Massey's reconceptualization of space is more productive in thinking about space as a dynamic multiplicity where multiple uses of space knit together in a way that truly represents the collective. The concept-city is incapable of understanding the banal, the greater makeup of reality. It misses the fact that the city is a multiplicity of overlapping everyday spatial practices, where larger political conflicts manifest. With this understanding graffiti suddenly takes on more meaning. Considering the way graffiti moves across a wall, Brighenti describes how "from both strategic and tactical perspectives, the wall is an object that constitutively calls into play the interweaving of space and social relations."<sup>61</sup> What



is important to note is that graffiti is not merely a tactical use of space but an awkward amalgamation of strategic and tactical uses of space. It becomes a place where power relations play out; an almost playful game of tag, or maybe chess, occurs between the tactical and strategic. If political theory embraces this notion of space, it would be able to access more points of political action, particularly insurgent political action. For example, it would allow Hannah Arendt to expand her public sphere to a public domain.

In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes the public sphere, rooted in Athenian democracy, as a space where citizens experience freedom and express themselves as individuals, helping to create a shared collective. She delineates two aspects of the public. The first is that actions can "be seen and heard by everybody and [have] the widest possible publicity."<sup>62</sup> There is a strong current of recognition already in the basic understanding of the public. If one fails to be recognized, then they fail to be within the public. This recognition includes an acknowledgment of one's existence and the fact that one contributes to politics. The second part of the public Arendt outlines is the fact that it "signifies the world itself, in so far as it is

<sup>61</sup> Brighenti, "At the Wall," 323.

<sup>62</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50.

common to all of us... related to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands... relates and separates man at the same time."<sup>63</sup> She is pulling on the shared quality, the importance of the formation of a solidary group. Her emphasis on the solidary can be taken as the importance of having a clear understanding of the public will, but Arendt speaks to something more profound. To the fact that we are only free in ourselves as we are in relation to others. Arendt holds up the public sphere as the ultimate form of the human condition, which allows us to claim our position as human.

The two things that lie at the heart of the public for Arendt is the collective and action. These two concepts are interdependent and constitutive. The collective is based on the ability to recognize each other's actions and, "action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others."<sup>64</sup> It is quite clear that Arendt's emphasis on the largest part of understanding democracy and the shared government is political action, which requires recognizing people's desire and translating this into a collective. "Every action performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy."<sup>65</sup> Quintessential actions achieve are those taken up in public. The public delegitimizes actions by recognizing them or taking them up, pushing the actors of said action out of the public sphere. Almost all the theorists within this paper would agree, recall the discussion of the importance of recognition above. Recognition legitimizes and more basically allows for an understanding of the solitary individuals and the solidary collective. It builds collectives and, for Huberman, it allows space for potency to rise to insurgency. As seen above and within Massey's argument, recognition can result in the exclusion and depoliticization of various people, actions, and spaces. Huberman earlier asked what recognition amounts to in a system with unequal power relations and relations of domination.<sup>66</sup>

Arendt does address this by arguing there must be a plurality. She posits that the public sphere "relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself."<sup>67</sup> If the public sphere lacks a plurality then it is not truly representative, and the collective loses part of its humanity. However, she differentiates the public from the social, limiting what is included as political relations and communication. Arendt finds

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<sup>63</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 23.

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 48.

<sup>66</sup> Didi-Huberman, "By the Desires," 336.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

this necessary as the social can be the birthing ground for fascism, leading to totalitarian governments. Benjamin would respond that is exactly why it is crucial to politicize art instead of depoliticizing all of the social. An unintended consequence of demarcating the social from the public sphere is the complete foreclosing of the social from politics. Arendt has depoliticized space, at least some space. What is legible to politics and political analysis becomes greatly limited. Brightenti, in his work, speaks to how graffiti is often categorized as a deviant social practice. Rigid boundaries between the social and public enforce the categorization discussed above and, Brightenti argues, “As a result, context—or what we might call here the dynamics of space and place—carries its own specific set of social, political, and economic associations which shape how inscriptions are defined and evaluated.”<sup>68</sup> Further, the logic that builds up the public sphere has the unintended (though I must say sometimes intended) consequences of exclusion. This exclusion, as discussed above, is a significant part of what puts folks in positions of precarity. At first, it seems to be fostering multiplicity and individualization, and freedom ends up being a sphere that is restraining and in need of morphing.

Applying Massey’s conceptualization of space to Arendt’s understanding of the public sphere results in a new and more representative conception of politics, one in which graffiti is not only an insurgent political act with destabilizing content but is part of political deliberation. Graffiti exists as genuinely political in the public domain. Arendt creates a space of radical and inclusive deliberation but excludes other important spaces, cultural and social. She is not wrong that these spaces can foster fascism, but they can also foster radical and emancipatory political participation. It becomes a space in which the everyday person can resist the mechanisms of discipline and domination at work around them. Massey would argue that it is impossible to draw clean lines from one space to another because no one space is a single identity but multiple, overlapping, and often contentious identities. The public sphere is not of one identity, nor is the public space of one identity. They are entangled. Brightenti, when looking at how graffiti is a tactical practice on a strategic space, sees this fact shine brilliantly, “At the point of convergence and tension, the point of juncture of the material and the immaterial—public space and the public sphere—a public domain appears.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ursula K. Frederick, “Out of Time and Place: Graffiti and Rock Art Research” *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Rock Art* Edited by Bruno David and Ian J. McNiven, 2019, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Brightenti, “At the Wall,” p. 326.

**Conclusion**<sup>70</sup>

When thinking about politics, many things come to mind. Starting large, one can think about the international system and the various state and non-state actors that make it up and their relationships. One can think about the individuals and institutions that make up these nation-states, the different governments, and governance forms. One can think about the citizens and how they share their voices to help shape this government through voting, debate, marches, protest, and riots. What about moments in every day, moments where individuals resist domination, where they keep pushing and defining the world around them. The desire for resistance and uprising bubbles up inside, and an individual decides to shout at the top of their lungs in whatever way they can. While this is a solitary decision... I am not sure how to conclude this... I just simply want to say, see! Look! Graffiti (and visual studies more broadly) is where resistance can occur, where one can challenge the capitalist and liberal system that dominates the youngest to the oldest! It is where folks can resist the mechanisms of discipline precisely because of the marginalization of the everyday use of space. As Benjamin says, "Communism replies [to fascism] by politicizing art."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> I am still working on writing the conclusion up... I have seemingly failed to find the correct words to sum up this work and do not want to just put my abstract or something like it.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility,"

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