Intervention as Act

Interventions Adaptive Reuse

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Shamsia Hassani, *Dream Graffiti*, 2015

Copyright: Shamsia Hassani
APPROPRIATING ARCHITECTURE

DIGITAL GRAFFITI AS TEMPORARY SPATIAL INTERVENTION

by DOROTHÉE KING

Introduction
In the classic first essay on the importance of graffiti in the 1970s in New York City, Norman Mailer tells us the joke about the importance of a mediated visual reality. Two Jewish grandmothers are meeting on a street. The first one is pushing a stroller: "Oh," says the other, "what a beautiful grandchild you have." "That's nothing," says the first, reaching for her pocketbook, "Wait till I show you her picture." 1

We might not fully notice what we directly and sensually perceive in reality – yet we react very strongly to a mediated visual reality. Graffiti artists use this knowledge to display messages they do not want to be unconsciously, but consciously acknowledged. Playing with size, colors, and remarkable calligraphy, graffiti artists publicly apply layers of mediated visual realities with the hope to provoke real change in society. Graffiti developed as a cultural technique, cheap and available to the suppressed, to react to political and social constraints. Until now most graffiti artists use their publically visible imagery to protest against authority, inequality, racism, supremacy, or ignorance. Graffiti is a tool of intervention. It comments on and criticizes existing cultural parameters.

The change-provoking, reality-mediating aspects are also true of digital graffiti. 2 Yet there are differences, which digital graffiti manifests in its temporality and its material. Digital graffiti is ephemeral in a way which physical graffiti is not. Messages are displayed temporarily. In traditional graffiti, information is scratched, scribbled, painted or sprayed on all kinds of mostly publicly visible surfaces, with the intention that the graffiti would be there for a long duration of time (if not forever). In digital graffiti the protest is no longer permanently applied to architecture. Graffiti in the form of digital
images of writing, calligraphy, drawing, or paintings is temporarily projected onto facades of buildings or other visible parts of constructions. While traditional graffiti might be associated with long-term vandalism and its messages might go out of fashion quickly, digital graffiti has the advantage of being removable and can be updated. Its other notable characteristic is its digital materiality in relation to the digitalization of our environment. Digital media makes us relate differently to space; Pictures, video, and sound are portable information, available at all times, embedded in carry-on every-day-gadgets and mobile phones. As the architect Anastasia Karandinou notes in her research on ephemeral qualities of architecture, “the traditional binary opposition between the sensuous and the digital is being currently reversed.”

We have come to a point where technology does not only change the way we interact virtually, but also alters the physical architecture surrounding us. This seems to be the next logical step: to picture digital imagery from carry-on gadgets, projecting them in greater size and thus making them publically visible interventions. With digital graffiti, we may mediate our visual environment digitally.

Some examples may serve to demonstrate the potential of digital graffiti as a form of intervention, and also show cultural differences in community engagement, mediation, and aesthetics within the realm of digital graffiti. First, I shall look at political initiatives that use digital graffiti professionally to formulate broader political statements. These initiatives choose distinct architecture to appropriate, linking the ‘projection screen’ with their messages, and appealing to the viewers to imagine change. Secondly, as an example for a digital graffiti community project, I will discuss ‘Calligraffiti’, which includes Berlin-based refugees from the Arabic world. This community project links to the politics and aesthetics of graffiti that showed up during the Arab spring, and at the same time relates to the Arabic cultural tool to concatenate written words or calligraphy with the facades of public buildings. Thirdly, I will show the work of the Afghani graffiti artist Shamsia Hassani, who uses digital graffiti in the form of photo-shop projects, applying colorful and peaceful elements to heal the broken architecture and communities in her war-ridden home country.

**Digital Grafitti**

In 2014 the environmentalist group Greenpeace projected the message ‘Listen to the People, Not the Polluters’ on the United Nations building in New York City, shortly
after hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated on the streets to demand climate action. The projection was later translated into different languages and was shared instantly in digital media with communities around the world, who also held marches and protests drawing attention to climate change on the same weekend. Through using the UN building as projection screen, Greenpeace literally appealed to the nations to unite, addressing global responsibility for climate control. Another example is Greenpeace’s ‘Planet Earth First’ digital graffiti campaign seen 2017 in Hamburg and the Vatican, following the US president’s travel to the G20 summit and a meeting with the Pope.

On Women’s Day March 8, 2017, the feminist activist group Team Vulvarella projected two huge images of a naked woman with a face mask on the façade of the US Embassy in Berlin. Deliberately choosing time and place, the activists protested against sexual harassment and the US travel ban against citizens of several countries in the Middle East.

In both cases the projection screens are chosen upon the basis of a calculation. The message to be spread is linked to the place which represents its cause. Digital graffiti is addressing the pedestrians walking by, and additionally the larger institutions, whose facades are used for the projections. Also, the graffiti acts digitally in two ways: Firstly, through the technique of digital projection, and secondly, through the massive viral impact on digital media that follows the actual projection event.

Digital Calligraffiti

During the Arab spring graffiti was an often-used tool to formulate visible protest against political oppression. Graffiti was seen in such diverse forms as fast scribbling, slogans, and scenic murals. Voices that were silenced or whitewashed become louder through recurring graffiti. One special form of this graffiti is Calligraffiti. Looking back to a 1400-year-old Muslim aniconic culture of emphasizing the depiction of words over the representation of animated beings, it appears to be a logical step to combine traditional calligraphy with graffiti. Another twist is applied by projecting calligraphy as digital graffiti.

In the Summer of 2017, the Berlin based Public Art Lab, a platform for urban art projects, organized a project with migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Senegal, and other countries. The main idea was to transform the urban environment into projection screens and communication platforms. Subway stations and public building interiors and exteriors served as boards for calligraphic messages. The projection tool was a simple live projector named ‘Infl3ctor’, developed by the artists Michael Ang and Hamza Abu Ayyash. The messages spread were written primarily in Arabic and German. Calls were made for love, art, and peace. Yet also more concrete political messages were spread, such as “It’s
amazing to take pictures in the street without being stopped by police.”

In this case of digital graffiti, the messages and the aesthetics of the digital graffiti are an important factor in the acknowledgment of the cultural heritage of the new Berliners. Calligraffiti serves as a community builder. Through appropriating public space, one belongs to a community. This is true for digital graffiti in 2017, as it was true for graffiti in 1972, when Hugo Martinez, who organized the first graffiti association, stated that “graffiti writing is a way of gaining status in a society where to own property is a way to have an identity.”

Digital Dreaming Graffiti
Shamsia Hassani is a famous graffiti artist in Kabul. Being a professor of Sculpture at Kabul University, she has brought street art to the center of her home town. She uses colorful graffiti to cover up the negative reminders of the war on real architecture and also in the minds of the people. She claims that “image has more effect than words, and it’s a friendly way to fight.” Shamsia Hassani also presents her ideas digitally. Her project ‘Dreaming Graffiti’ is a series of photo-shopped images. She paints and decorates war-ruins from Kabul and shares these images online. She imagines a different environment through interacting virtually with the physical architecture surrounding her. Though this sub-category of digital graffiti may not be tangible in the physical space, it has the power to change the way in which the community sees the potential of its environment.

Conclusion
Is digital graffiti the new tool for the generation of digital natives to resist, protest, and engage? With the examples above we see that going digital allows a “displacement and assemblage of space,” and leads to a re-organizing of the aesthetics of architecture with all its symbols and power structures. Digital graffiti is a powerful tool for protest and intervention. And the practical advantages of digital graffiti over traditional graffiti are obvious. One does not have to get close to the architecture onto which one intends to project. Even fenced-in buildings can be turned into a projection screen. One may even choose the building in relation to the message of the graffiti. Also, digital graffiti does not cause damage to property and is therefore not a criminal act.

We return to the joke about the picture in the pocketbook. Now is the time to get our pocketbooks – aka phones and tablets – to show our environment the real truth. This time we are not only showing our mediated reality to our friends. This time our messages are projected, are publically visible, and go viral. All one needs is some courage, maybe a good projector – but usually a flash light does the job.
ENDNOTES:
2 There are non-protest versions of digital graffiti, such as street festivals and commercial advertisement. For this article, I want to focus on digital graffiti as interventions and political acts.
5 Pascal Zoghbi and Don Kari aka Stone, Arabic Graffiti (Berlin: From Here to Fame, 2011), 57.
12 Karandinou, 201.
WE ARE NEVER NOT INSIDE
Image Credits, fig. 01, Daniel Koehler, AD Research Cluster B; fig. 02, 03 courtesy by the author; fig. 04, Mark Foster Gage Architects; fig. 05, Daniel Koehler, AD Research Cluster B.

KLÁN KOSOVA
Name of project, Klán KOSOVA Television; Location, Pristina, Kosovo; Name of design firm, ANARCH; Name(s) of key architects/designers, Astrit NixHAJ and Asistr NIXHA; Name of contractor, ASHALA; Name of designer, Emilian REXHAJ and Asistr NIXHA; Year completed, February 2015; Website address of design firm, www.anarch.biz; Image Credits, Valdrin REXHAJ and Astrit NIXHA.

THE PAST EMBODIED IN ACTION
Name of project, Cattedrale di Pozzuoli; Location, Pozzuoli, Napoli, Italy; Name(s) of key architects/designers, Marco Dezzi Bardeschi (Capogruppo), Gnosis Architettura (Francesco Buonfantino, Antonio De Martino e Rossella Traversari), Alessandro Castagnaro, Renato De Fusco e Laura Gioeni; Name of owner, Regione Campania; Name of structural engineer, Giampaolo Martuscelli; Electrical, Domenico Trisciuoglio; HVAC, Fulvio Capuano; Consultants, Alessandra Angeli (geologist), Mario Bencivenni (restoration history and theory), Giovanni Coppola (art historian and archaeologist), Sabino Giovanni (conservationist), Ugo Grazioso (liturgist), Giorgio Piccinato (town planning), Furio Sacchi (archaeologist), Ferdinando Zaccheo (restoration specialist); Name of contractor, Rione Terra Pozzuoli Consortium; Year completed, 2014; Image Credits, courtesy by Marco Dezzi Bardeschi

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FREE SPEECH COMES HOME
Name of project, La Casa del Hijo Ahuizote; Location, Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico; Name(s) of key architects/designers, Giacomo Castagnola (industrial designer); Name of owner, Centro Documental Flores Magón, A.C.; Name of photographer, fig. 01, Roberto Arellano; all other images courtesy by the author; Website address of design firm, http://giacomocastagnola.com/

EMPOWERING ACTIONS
Image Credits, fig. 01, 02, 04 courtesy by Lilithphoto ©; fig. 03 by Sara Cerato.

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Roland Barthes_ https://www.flickr.com/photos/alyletteri/5352054723; Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**


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**THE ELEPHANT REFUGE**

Name of project_ The Elephant Refuge in Rejmyre; Location_ Rejmyre, Sweden; Name of design firm_ atelier Kristoffer Tejlgaard; Name of key architects/designers_ Kristoffer Tejlgaard; Name of owner_ Daniel Pelz and Kristoffer Tejlgaard; Name of photographer_ Kristoffer Tejlgaard; Year completed_ 2018 (Design Proposal); Website address of design firm_ https://www.instagram.com/ktejlgaard/; Image credit_ Kristoffer Tejlgaard.

**UNDER THE RADAR**

Interview conducted by Elizabeth Debs and Liliane Wong; Interviewee_ Joe Garlick; Image Credits_ fig. 01, 02, 04, 06 by Elizabeth Debs; fig. 03, 05 by Liliane Wong.

**SECOND ACT**

Name of project_ Mercado de Xabregas; Location_ Lisbon, Portugal; Construction Area_ 2837.18m2; Date_ 2016/2017; Owner_ AR.CO - CENTRO DE ARTE E COMUNICAÇÃO VISUAL; Designer_ SANTA-RITA ARQUITECTOS, João Santa-Rita; Collaborators_ Pedro Guedes Lebre; Artur Simões Dias; Carolina Portugal; João Vital Sousa; Structures_ Teixeira Trigo, Lda; Eng. João Leite Garcia; Other Engineering and Systems_ GRAUCELCIUS, CONSULTORES DE ENGENHARIA, GESTÃO E PLANEAMENTO, Lda; Eng. Carlos Oliveira; Construction Supervisor_ TEIXEIRA TRIGO, Lda; Eng. João Cordeiro; Contractor_ GUALDIM NUNES DA SILVA, Lda; Eng. Bruno Ribeiro; Photographer_ Inês Guedes Lebre; Image Credits_ fig. 01, fig. 06, fig. 8, fig.10 by Inês Navarro Soeiro Guedes Lebre; fig. 02 ,05, fig.07, fig.09 by ar.co, Centro de Arte & Comunicação Cisual, copyright_ Nuno Martinho.
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Fabia Mendoza is a Film and Art Director from Berlin Germany. Her first movie ‘The White House Documentary’, 75min, 2017 won at the 18th Beverly Hills Filmfestival 2018. Over the past 6 years she collaborated on a variety of projects including ‘Another Pussy for Putin’- an act of solidarity art performance for the Russian punk band The Pussy Riots, 2012, and ‘Amerikkka’, a photo project in collaboration with Erica Garner, the daughter of the late Eric Garner. Fabia’s photographic and cinematographic work have been featured by Vogue Italia, Interview Magazine, ID magazine, CNN Style, Vanity Fair among others. Her video and documentary material has been featured by BBC World, Arte, ZDF, CNN, etc.
Ryan Mendoza is an American artist who lives and works in Sicily and Berlin. He is the artist behind The White House (2015), the Invitation (2016), and the Rosa Parks House Project (2017). Primarily a painter, Ryan’s artistic projects move between expressionism and realism, engaging American and historical reference. Ryan’s work often depicts obsessive scenes, illustrating questions of hypocrisy and repression. Ryan has shown with a range of European galleries and museums including White Cube, London, Galerie Lelong, Paris and Museo Madre, Naples. He is the author of Tutto e mio, published in Italian (Everything is Mine) 2015, Bompiani.

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João José Santos holds a B. Arch and M. Arch from Escola Superior Artística do Porto and he is currently living and working from Berlin. He is specialized in not being specialized as he is moved by arbitrary challenges and mundane curiosity over science and art realms. He independently expresses this himself by exercising, on various mediums, over artifacts about space and the human condition. Collectively wise he continuously looks for opportunities to rationally and physically assist on consequential projects and interventions.

Enrique Aureng Silva received his Bachelor of Architecture from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), a Master in Critical Conservation at Harvard GSD and has practiced architecture in Mexico and the US. His research focuses on the intervention, transformation and reuse of historic buildings in Latin America, especially in post-disaster scenarios. He is editor of Oblique, Open Letters and Platform XI. When not thinking architecture or editing texts, he writes fiction in the form of short stories.

Barbara Stehle is an art and architecture historian, educator, writer, art advisor and curator. She holds a PHD from the Sorbonne and has worked for several museums including the Pompidou Center and The Zurich Kunsthau. She has written extensively on modern and contemporary arts and architecture. In 2014 she gave a Ted x talk “Architecture as a tool for Human Investigation in the case of the Cambodian Genocide”. Stehle has taught at Columbia University, RISD and NYU before founding “Art Intelligentsia”, her own heterotopia.

Diogo Vale is deeply interested in breaking the boundaries of the architecture profession, with an intense curiosity in the meaning of preservation in the XXI century, and the studying of architecture as a tool for social intervention. Diogo attained a Bachelor and Master in Architecture at the ESAP (Escola Superior de Arquitectura do Porto) in Porto, Portugal and has worked as a Carpenter/Performer/Artist/Architect. He is currently living in Berlin Germany where he works as an Artist Assistant and Architecture consultant in Studio Mendoza as one of the architects/coordinators of the Rosa Parks House Project.