LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Graffiti Writing as Urban Narrative

Evan Hennessy Carver

University of Washington

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Abstract:

Perhaps more than any other kind of writing, graffiti writing embodies what Sheila Hones called text as 'spatial event' (2008: 1307). It thrives in urban spaces that are simultaneously "under-programmed" and highly visible. It is ever-changing, and can represent a kind of "future narrative," disrupting the typical expectations of literary arc. And because graffiti is public speech and occupies space, it is inherently political. To illustrate the opportunities of graffiti as material for critical literary geographers, I focus on a heavily painted site in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin, Germany. After years of standing as emblems of Kreuzberg's leftist-anarchist identity, some of the pieces at the site were painted over by the artists, to prevent them being appropriated by developers as a marketing tool. But subjecting the site to a close reading reveals more than a simple clash over gentrification. I argue that the interplay between text and context at the site shows it emerging as what Sennett has called 'narrative space'—a 'more humane urban design' that allows spaces to 'become full of time when they permit certain properties of narratives to operate in everyday life' (1992: 190). Not only does this reading complicate the traditional categorizations of what is "literary" and what is "geographic," it shows how a multi-authored text written directly onto the surfaces of the city can adaptively articulate social identity, resist powers that would inscribe a single legibility on urban space, and allow citizens to recognize the power -- and responsibility – that comes with co-creating public space.

Keywords: graffiti; legibility; public space; literary geography.

Author contact: evanhc@uw.edu

1.

Consider three different versions of a story:

First version:

In 2007 the street artists Blu, JR, and their assistants created a mural depicting two giant, gravity-defying figures attempting to remove each other's hoods. Except for their hoods and photorealistic eyes, the figures were naked and pale white, as though depigmented from years of living underground. In 2008, Blu returned, painted goggles over the eyes, which had been made of paper and were peeling off, and also added a second image, a faceless businessman wearing two gold wristwatches chained together like shackles. The murals remained in that form for several years. Then, in late 2014, both murals were silhouetted entirely in a deep, lusterless black, transforming the walls into a Rothko-esque midnight abyss. It became clear shortly thereafter that Blu himself was behind the erasure, a rare instance of auto-iconoclasm. Within a few months, different artists added a new mural depicting a huge, extended middle finger, along with a series of vulgar messages in German and English. This new addition was itself subsequently blacked over, by unknown agents, who targeted the lines of the new mural rather than the whole wall and used a slightly different kind of black paint. Today the second layer of black has begun to flake and fade, and with some attention, in certain angles of light, the huge middle finger is easily perceived again.

Second version:

In 2007, on a wall adjacent to the former site of a famous cultural center, the street artists JR, Blu, and their assistants created a mural depicting two giant, gravity-defying figures attempting to remove each other's hoods. Except for their hoods and photorealistic eyes, the figures were naked and pale white, a marked contrast to the bright and multicolored band of graffiti along the bottom of the wall. In 2008, Blu returned, painted goggles over the eyes and also added a second image, a faceless businessman wearing two gold wristwatches chained together like shackles. The murals remained in that form for several years, during which time the band of graffiti at the bottom of the wall continued to change while the site, which became known as the Cuvry Brache (Cuvry Lot, for its location at the end of Cuvrystraße), was used for informal socializing and eventually became an encampment. In late 2014 the encampment was cleared and the site fenced off; a couple of months later both murals were silhouetted entirely in a deep, lusterless black. It became clear shortly thereafter that this was neither the work of city officials, nor of competing graffiti artists, nor of developers who wanted to build at the site, but that Blu himself was behind the erasure. Within a few months, different artists added a new mural depicting a huge, extended middle finger, along with a series of vulgar messages in German and English about gentrification, yuppies, and tourists. This new addition was itself subsequently blacked over. Today, the second layer of black has begun to flake and fade,

and with some attention, in certain angles of light, the huge middle finger is easily perceived again, although a new building is rising on the site directly in front of the wall.

Third version:

In 2007, on a highly visible wall in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of central Berlin, the street artists JR, Blu, and their assistants created a mural depicting two giant, gravity-defying figures attempting to remove each other's hoods. In 2008, Blu returned, adjusted the first mural, and added a second image of a faceless businessman wearing two gold wristwatches chained together like shackles. The murals remained in that form for several years, during which time they became popular icons of the neighborhood and indeed icons of the city's overall "poor but sexy" identity and its much-touted "alternative" scene; in addition to forming the backdrop for countless tourist snapshots, the murals were featured on the covers of books and were promoted on the city's tourism website. This image of edgy but ultimately benign "creative" valorization was challenged, however, when an encampment – dubbed 'Berlin's first favela' – was established on the site, known as the Cuvry Brache. In late 2014 the encampment was cleared and fenced off, and plans to build a mixed-use condo building on the site were unveiled. Shortly thereafter both murals were silhouetted entirely in a deep, lusterless black. It became clear shortly thereafter that this was neither the work of city officials, nor of competing graffiti artists, nor of developers who wanted to build at the site, but that Blu himself was behind the erasure. Within a few months, different artists added a new mural depicting a huge, extended middle finger, along with a series of vulgar messages in German and English about gentrification, yuppies, and tourists. This new addition was itself subsequently blacked over, and although the erstwhile murals are all but invisible anyway, on account of a new building rising on the site directly in front of the wall, tour guides still stop at the Cuvry Brache, sometimes using photographs of the recent past to recount the story of Berlin's most famous vanished works of graffiti and street art.

What shall we make of each of these versions of a narrative? This is not a quite Rashomon situation, where different sets of facts lead to different conclusions; rather, in the three versions there is a shifting emphasis on "text" -- the images and words painted on the walls -- versus the "context" -- the site, the neighborhood, and the city. Even in just these three short versions, it is possible to recognize the range of interpretive potential based on which features of text and context are included or excluded. A dominant reading might emerge, for example, that the initial erasure of the murals was a rejection of touristification and valorization, the artists refusing to have their work reductively aestheticized into a marketing tool. And indeed, that is among the justifications given by an associate of Blu's in subsequent statements (Henke 2015). But this is itself a reduced reading. What I propose is that by expanding our considerations of text and context we might recognize far more complex, and richer, processes unfolding here, processes that have potentially important implications for literary geography and spatial hermeneutics.

    In this paper, I treat the site as a multi-authored text and subject it to a close reading that pays particular attention to the interplay between text and context. First, I find that

the site emerges as an example of what Richard Sennett called 'narrative space.' Sennett conceives narrative space as an alternative to the dominant regimes of urbanism and governance, which seek to control the way time unfolds in space. Narrative space, in contrast to controlled and controlling, overdetermined spaces, offers a 'more humane urban design' that allows spaces to 'become full of time when they permit certain properties of narratives to operate in everyday life' (1992: 190). Sennett is vague about what this means or might actually look like, but certain properties of narrative, as we will see, are particularly relevant to a consideration of a graffiti site: an 'arrangement of incidents' (to use Aristotle's definition of narrative) such that it is possible to draw causal or temporal relationships between the incidents (i.e., plot); a sense of authority and perspective, as in authorship, with its accompanying sense of readership (i.e., point of view); conscious manipulation of expression for rhetorical impact (i.e., style); and of course willful use of location and spatial relationships (i.e., setting). While a full elaboration of each of these properties is beyond the scope of this paper, in subsequent sections I explore how plot, point of view, setting, and style contribute to a realization of space 'full of time' in the Cuvry Brache case.

Second, and somewhat related, I argue that such narrative spaces involve what Cornelius Castoriadis called 'public time.' Public time is 'a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as a domain for its activities' (1997: 281). To put it differently, public time is the dimension where people recognize the power of democracy. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to fully articulate a definition of democracy or what exactly it might look like in the context of designing public space. But at the very least, reading the Cuvry Brache as a narrative space will provide an example of a collectivity confronted with the possibility of its own actions.

This approach might be valuable for literary geographers or literarily minded geographers for a few reasons, not least because it builds on a relatively long tradition. For decades, scholarship in geography has deployed techniques from literary criticism in order to provide better readings of landscapes or to show how landscapes function like texts or even literature (e.g. Cosgrove and Jackson 1987). Landscape's metaphoric properties have been used to explain things like place-attachment and fear (e.g. Tuan 1974, 1979), its instructive properties have been put forward as forms of environmental education (e.g. Stables 1997), while Duncan and Duncan (1988) have explored how textuality, intertextuality, and reader reception of landscape can inform and naturalize ideologies. The exuberance with which certain scholars pursued this line of inquiry – for example, considering a whole range of cultural phenomena as texts (e.g. Duncan 1990) – led to accusations of overreach (e.g. Peet 1996). Central to this debate is the question of whether landscapes can be treated literally as texts or whether geographers can, at best, treat them *as* texts for metaphoric purposes (Peet 1996). For Peet, all "textual" analysis of landscape is merely metaphoric (or ideational, in his words), because landscape only becomes text in the scholar's translation.

My approach in this paper comports with some of Peet's critique – I maintain that social and cultural phenomena are strictly *contextual* – but likewise I maintain that the graffiti "text" can indeed be read as text qua text. (There is some risk here of being

misunderstood by semioticians. In this paper, 'text' does not refer to a Derridian, disembodied set of signs, but rather a very specific instance of textual or text-like expression.) In other words, I will be reading an actual text (in the case, markings on a wall) as it unfolds within a physical-social context (the site and city). It is this methodological approach that I hope will be of particular interest to literary geographers, while the conclusions of my reading should be of interest to scholars and activists interested in participation, urban power structures, environmental psychology.

Some critics, including notably the very same Richard Sennett whose concept of 'narrative space' inspires this paper, have been skeptical of graffiti as productive political expression. Sennett was troubled by graffiti because he thought it representative of the pathology of individualism and egocentrism in modern society. Graffiti tags were mere 'smears of self' (1992: 187). But I believe that he was reading too narrowly—seeing only tags and not the full range of wall writing—and also more or less ignorant of the role that context plays in creating the narrative space of the graffiti wall. As Halsey and Pederick put it, 'the graffiti writer is a self-publishing author, and the page is always negotiable' (2010: 94).

As a final clarification, or justification, for my use of the term 'reading' and my considering a graffitied wall as 'text,' and as a segue into my discussion of context, Chmielewska explains the importance of reading expansively when it comes to 'graphic signs':

> Reading in context entails paying attention to the individual marks as well as the entire environs in which they are immersed: surrounding spatial and temporal patterns, groupings, types, and their temporal organization evident in simultaneities and sequences of visual events. The close reading of context of the graphic sign, then, demands setting within the same platform the visual and the textual argument. Accordingly, text and image need to be considered together, and they must be allowed analogous epistemological status. (2007: 150)

But while Chmielewska uses her method in part to elucidate the linguistically charged nature of preserved "heritage" graffiti, my discussion looks at an instance of graffiti that is much more typical: it is no longer there at all.

2.

The relationship between text and context with graffiti and street art is vital. Cresswell (1992) proposed that subway graffiti in New York was seen as transgressive not because of anything inherent in its content but merely because it was writing 'out of place'; when the same kinds of paintings began to appear on canvases in galleries, they were understood as fine art and sold accordingly. Furthermore, there is a live debate between two schools of thought about what the presence of graffiti means for a neighborhood. Still dominant among urban policy makers is the conception of graffiti as a 'broken windows' infraction, a sign of disorder that must be quashed because such disorder is an invitation for more

serious crime (e.g. Austin 2001; McAuliffe and Iverson 2011). In this conception, graffiti happens in poor or neglected places in a city and is associated with deviance.

On the other hand, as graffiti has gained acceptance in mainstream culture, a growing body of scholarship has proposed that presence of graffiti (or street art) foreshadows *increasing* property values and gentrification (Halsey and Pederic 2010; McAuliffe 2012). This development may not be surprising, given that artistic subcultures have long been seen as 'harbingers' of gentrification (Smith 1996; Dovey, Wollan and Woodcock 2012). Some graffiti writers speak explicitly about beautifying the city (even as others embrace that identity of "vandal" [e.g. Banksy 2005]), and graffiti has tended to thrive in disused urban sites, like former industrial districts, that are often ripe for redevelopment and appreciation (Ferrell and Weide 2010). What is more surprising, and more relevant for the story of the Cuvry Brache, is that even 'transgressive or overtly critical public art, such as graffiti and street art … [can] attract rather than repel investors' (Zukin and Braslow 2011: 138).

While I agree with writers like Ferrell and Weide (2010), who argue that it is impossible to understand graffiti outside its context, I want to take this discussion a step further, beyond a consideration of texts whose interpretation is context-dependent, or topo-sensitive, to use Umberto Eco's term (Eco 1976: 186). I propose a more fundamental and even material process by which any text and context are co-constituted. To illustrate, I offer an example from Timothy Morton (2010). About two thirds of the way through the poet Charles Bernstein's collection *With Strings* (2001), the reader comes to a page bearing only the words 'This poem intentionally left blank'. This pun will register with readers familiar with bank statements or other bureaucratic documentation that include the paradoxical statement 'This page intentionally left blank.' Here we have 'This poem intentionally left blank.' But the poem hasn't been left blank -- the words are right there. The *blank* part is the rest of the page. The meaning of the text would be entirely different—entirely lost—without the rest of that blank page. It might go without saying that the blank page would in turn be meaningless without the text, but the text brings the page's erstwhile total blankness to attention. The text inhabits the context and could not exist without it, yet in turn changes the context; it is an ecological relationship (Morton 2010).

As I have already demonstrated in the brief versions of the story above, something like this ecological relationship is at work in potential readings of the Cuvry site, not just at a physical level but at a social one as well. In the case of Cuvry, the context is not merely substrate – as the page is in a book or bank statement -- rather it is an urban space that is produced through social forces operating at multiple scales. Not only that, the narrated locale and location of the reading and writing are essentially identical. The text on the wall does not point to some other place somewhere else; it relates a series of events that happen right here.

With the exception of those who read Braille and have a direct haptic experience of the text, space is part of the reading experience. There is physical distance required between the text and one's eyes in order to read. If the object in question is a book or magazine, one needs to hold it a certain distance from one's eyes; without that space, one cannot read. This distance has implications. Even holding a book at arm's length becomes a gesture with social implications when done in public space, especially in a setting like a

crowded subway car or busy cafe. The physical space required for reading in public is incredibly important—it has a social value. When a text becomes publicly visible, when it is actually or potentially legible to multiple people at the same time in public space, everywhere that it is visible becomes a space charged with social meaning. Reading becomes a collective event, and the space both required for and taken by that reading is involved in a social event, even granting the inherent multiplicity of the readings.

The argument here could be threatened by the invocation of "context collapse" in at least two ways. First, globalization, with increased mobility of individuals and capital— in this case, graffiti writers, graffiti tourists, and foreign real estate investment—may seem to undermine efforts to describe the local context as being central to making meaning from what happened at the Cuvry Brache. And second, the Internet era, which allows not only the instantaneous broadcast of images but also their infinite duplication, may seem to make the unique materiality of space irrelevant.

Given that actual locals painted at the site, used it for activities, and even lived in the encampment, there is a clear sense in which the social meaning of the place cannot be swept away by invocations of rootless international artists or even entirely disembodied capital. The threat to context posed by mass virtualization, duplication, and dissemination facilitated by the Internet is perhaps more difficult to dismiss. While the research for this paper was conducted in part on-site in 2014 and 2016 and included interviews with people who had used the Cuvry Brache, almost all the historical and background research was enabled by web searches, digital photo archives, and social media. All media can be understood to be replacing what Plato called *anamnesis* -- "the lived convergence of history and experience" -- with *hypomnesis* -- the exteriorized off-shoring of information and knowledge (see Marvin and Hong 2016). The implications of such an out-sourcing of knowledge could be profound for identity formation and political participation. However, it is my belief that this close reading of the Cuvry site, with a full articulation of the co-creation of text and context, demonstrates the importance of the material, lived specificity of narrative space. Even for the tourists who came to take photos of the murals in order to immediately post them on social media, there is still something of the Benjaminian aura of the original that drew them to the site. I will now return to that site for a fuller explanation of how in the case of the Cuvry Brache, and perhaps all graffiti and street art, the "authentic" work of art is inseparable from its context.

3.

The wall in the image is adjacent to an unbuilt lot. During World War II, there was a bunker here, then several warehouses, which were cleared in the early 1990s to make way for redevelopment. After the purchaser went bankrupt, for a few years the site was used by an Afro-Caribbean cultural organization called YAAM (Schmidl 2014). In 1998, new owners forced YAAM out, and proposed building a shopping center. Kreuzberg has for decades been a neighborhood of immigrants and students, and known for fringe culture and well-organized leftist politics (e.g. Braun 2015). So it may come as little surprise to learn that the proposal for a shopping mall met resistance from locals and was blocked by the neighborhood planning authority (Rollmann 2017). In response to the bold behavior

of the neighborhood, the city senate (Berlin is one of three city-states in the Federal Republic of Germany) took over land use decision-making from the neighborhood (Schönball and Voss 2017). Nevertheless, the site remained unbuilt and continued to be used for impromptu art events and concerts, picnicking, and similar temporary and informal activities (Morawski 2014; Rollmann 2017).

One of the first things to notice about the text that emerged from that context is that it has multiple voices, and probably also multiple authors. All of these authors are anonymous, even if in some cases we have their pen names. Out of this heteroglossia, in 2007, a dominant voice emerged, and the story it tells is an allegory for the condition of modern Berlin (Figure 1). Two figures seem to float; as if astronauts, they wear hooded suits, they are essentially anonymous. With one hand, each makes a gesture, a kind of gang sign, one W-shaped, one E-shaped, while with their other hands they try to unmask each other. The two figures represent the two halves of Berlin, the former East and the former West. They may be technically, politically reunited, but they do not stand on the same ground; they still do not know one another. They hold up their gang signs in an attempt to assert distinction, but of course the two signs are effectively the same. (Turn a W on its side and it becomes an E.) The message is that the two halves of Berlin are at once indistinct and yet themselves unable to see their commonality.

There is an implied reader here -- one that knows something of American gang culture, in order to interpret the signs, as well as something of the recent history of Berlin.

Figure 1. (Courtesy of www.urbanpresents.net/)

This reader does not have to be local, but that recent history will have special valence for locals, especially at this site near the path of the former Wall. For readers with only passing knowledge of the highlights of history, this image brings to light the subtle nature of the incompleteness of German reunification. That these images were created by Blu, an Italian, and JR, a Frenchman, shows how in Europe today street art may be just as likely to express translocal imaginaries as the hyperlocalism of other regions and eras (see Brighenti 2010; Dovey, Wollan and Woodcock 2012; Irvine 2011; Young 2013). While we know the artists' *noms de pinceau*, they, like the rest of the writers here, retain an essential anonymity.

There are a variety of ways to react to anonymous authorship. Foucault, who himself used a pen name periodically, famously said that knowing the author's name 'makes reading too easy.' He suggested that a book without an author might 'land in unexpected places and form shapes that [he] had never thought of' (1988/2013: 324). I argue that this effect is at play in the reading of a graffitied wall. In contrast to much advertising, which people can instinctively turn away from the instant they recognize a brand, the anonymity of wall writing can allow contact between writer and reader that is "unrippled" be preexpectation. But what is different about a graffitied wall is that the anonymity of the writer does not confer the same level of plausible deniability that authorial distance sometimes does. Authorial distance breaks down when we know that the writers were actually physically present at the site.

The addition in 2008 of the second figure added an overt critique of capitalism and the rat-race culture to the story – the figure shackled by his wristwatches described earlier (Figure 2). But is here that the interplay with context begins to become more active. In the spring of that year, a citizens' movement passed a referendum to halt the continued development and privatization of the banks of the Spree River (Novy and Colomb 2013). The war and the Cold War had left many lots like this one vacant in what was now, in the

Figure 2. (Courtesy of www.flickr.com/photos/urbanhearts/)

reunited city, prime waterfront property, and the city had been selling off the land for a variety of high-end developments, including luxury condos, an arena, a luxury hotel, and a Daimler-Benz office building. The plan was to develop the entire waterfront, numerous other parts of which had also been open to the public and served as de facto parks in the manner of the Cuvry. When the referendum paused the continued sale of the waterfront, it represented another victory for an anti-corporate citizen's movement. When Blu returned in the fall to touch-up the first piece, he added the second figure (Jakob 2017). The second piece by Blu was now visible from a bridge crossing the river and even the other side of the river, a visual and symbolic unification of the two sides of the river, two neighborhoods formerly on different sides of the Wall, now working together to resist the advances of a global capital and the privatization and commodification of the waterfront.

Over the years, the site became a common stop on graffiti tours of the neighborhood, and the murals became famous. An online image search for 'Kreuzberg graffiti' still shows that many of the top hits are of the Cuvry site. The murals became the icon of an 'alternative' but rapidly gentrifying neighborhood (von Törne, Waleczek and Felber 2014). They were a slice of 'edgy' culture easily snapped up by your smartphone. In this way they were in a sense a microcosm of the entire city. In 2014, the New York Times named street art in Berlin one of '12 Treasures of Europe,' alongside chocolate in Brussels and umbrellas in Paris (The New York Times 2014). And this merely reflected an ongoing and largely successful effort to market Berlin's alternative scene; as mentioned above, the city's official tourism site has pages devoted to 'street art' in Berlin and even outlines a self-guided walking tour of Kreuzberg. This phenomenon has been met with no small amount of ambivalence by residents of Kreuzberg, and that ambivalence was expressed in ways that altered the context of the Cuvry site significantly.

In 2012, plans were announced for a so-called BMW Guggenheim Lab to occupy the site for several weeks. Even though this would have been a temporary usage, and even though there was an explicit community-building theme, locals balked at the corporate presence in a de facto public space, and several protesters occupied the site, living in tents. Even after they were successful in shunting the BMW-Guggenheim project to a different neighborhood, more and more tents arrived, and the first more permanent structures began to appear (Lackmann 2014). Within a short while, the site had become a squat of around 200 people, a diverse group that included not just the original protesters, but artists, homeless, Roma, and others seeking an alternative, autonomous living arrangement (Rollmann 2017). When the latest owner released plans for development in 2013, this time a mixed-used structure made up primarily of condos, the reaction was not just against a loss of public space but of occupied living space. Locals became more vocal about what the site *meant* (Figure 3). A poster displayed at the edge of the camp, viewable to all in the street and those who came to look at the murals, reads, 'This open space stands for: Exchange, Collectivity, Self-organization, City Planning…' Below, you can just make out, in a mix of English and German, the call to 'Fight for our right to the city! Occupy everything!' What we see here is a Lefebvrian right to the city being used as a response to neoliberal property regimes (Purcell 2003). To explore the nature of the attempt at self-management made by these people is beyond the scope of this paper, but I introduce it here to point out that their redefinition of the meaning of site had significant implications

Figure 3. (Photo by Franklin, courtesy reclaimyourcity.net)

for the context for the painted wall. As I will argue below, when that context changes again, the text is compelled to change in response.

In late summer of 2014, there was a large fire at the encampment. Many of the structures were destroyed, and the incident was used as an occasion by the authorities to clear the entire site and install and more permanent fence with guards, seemingly making development finally an imminent likelihood (Schurmann, Dassler and Loy 2014). For some locals, and especially the former residents, this felt like the end of an era (e.g. Rollmann 2017). The wall, which had symbolized edgy Kreuzberg, then "tourist graffiti," now seemed like a monument to an alternative scene irrevocably lost. There was even a petition started to preserve the wall, though which part of the wall's legacy was being preserved was up for debate (Schucker 2014). Then, in December 2014, in the dark of night, the Blu pieces were painted over completely, leaving an almost entirely black wall six stories high. A photo taken during the process shows that for a few moments the painters left an extended middle finger before finally painting it black too.

As mentioned, Blu released a statement, reiterated by an associate, Lutz Henke, explaining that he erased his pieces because he did not want them to continue to be used as marketing tools (Henke 2015). The indicated, if not directly stated, message to potential investors is: you can have the space, but you cannot have the urban life that made the space what it is. However, if Blu had not wanted the wall to draw the attention of cameras, he might have blacked out the entire thing. Instead, the other pieces on the wall, primarily along the bottom, were left untouched, and the 'Reclaim Your City' slogan, which had been on the wall before Blu's pieces, was shortened to leave just the words 'Your City'. 'Your City'—who is being addressed here now? It is not exactly the same implied reader as before, the one with an appreciation for street culture and recent Berlin history. It is a

local, a denizen, a participant in the urban life of Berlin, who, by calling Berlin home, is being asked to take partial responsibility for what has happened here: the leveling of 150 people's homes, the loss of a work of art, the continued gentrification of a neighborhood. It might seem unfair to implicate all locals, all who would call Berlin their city, in an act of police violence and the destruction of art. But the fact that locals are not in control and yet nevertheless partly responsible is perhaps the point. And grappling with this fact is what Castoriadis thought a community required "public time" in order to do. As he puts it, public time is necessary for democracy because it is 'a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as a domain for its activities' (1997: 281). In a democracy, Castoriadis seems to argue, the people need to be aware that they lack total control while simultaneously bearing responsibility for the acts of violence and injustice, large and small, that take place within their society.

Some months later, in mid-2015, other group of artists known as the Berlin Kidz restored the middle finger, magnifying it several times, and amplified the message, adding slogans in English and German like 'Fuck ghetto tourists,' 'Fuck investors and yuppies,' and other forceful statements against a perceived socio-economic transformation of the neighborhood. It represented a dramatic transformation from just a few months prior: from a vibrant open space with an evocative wall art culture to a vacant, fenced-off lot with stark slogans written white-on-black. And then even these slogans, which while harsh channeled a real sense of disenfranchisement among locals, disappeared. Today, the wall is black and the site is almost completely filled with a new building, tentatively leased as office space for the online retailer Zalando.

It is not hard to read this as a tragic story, characterized primarily by loss, as many local observers have (Schönball and Voss 2014; Rollmann 2017). But the sense of sorrow over the loss of the Blu murals and the Berlin Kidz slogans, I argue, is engendered by the loss of social life in the space of the Cuvry Brache. In other words, the loss understood from the text of the murals is signaled by the loss that occurred in the context of the public space. After all, graffiti and mural art are by their nature ephemeral. Perhaps Blu and Henke's intentional intervention, removing the pieces before they could experience a "natural death" through weathering or buffing by authorities – the typical fate of outdoor aerosol art – renders the erasure a political act. But part of the inherent charge of graffiti, especially in this discussion of its potential to unfold as text through a narrative space, is that it never lasts forever. Blu himself has toyed with how easy it is to destroy his pieces, having generated stop-motion animations from iterative destructions of his pieces. (Subsequent to the Cuvry Brache affair, he also removed several decades worth of work in his hometown of Bologna, also because he thought it was contributing to gentrification [Vimercati, 2016].)

If ephemerality readily reads as loss, and loss, in the context of the destruction that occurred at the Cuvry Brache, reads as tragedy, the tragic does not necessarily equate to failure. Tragedy is not the same as nothingness. In fact, tragedy turns out to be the mode for realizing public time. Castoriadis saw public time most clearly in the performance of Athenian tragedy:

> Only in the city where the democratic process, the process of self-institution reached its climax, only there could tragedy (as opposed to simple 'theatre') be created. … Tragedy shows not only that we are not masters of the consequences of our actions, but that we are not even masters of their *meaning*. … In his *Trojan Women* (415 BCE) Euripides presents the Greeks as the cruellest and most monstrous beasts -- as if he were saying to Athenians: this is what you are. (1997: 284)

Tragedy can say to the people: this is what you are. This is your city. If the narrative that has unfolded at the Cuvry site is less a whodunit—starting with the "dead body" that was that blacked over wall—than it is a tragedy, that does not need to lead a reader or a resident to despair or to think that somehow the site represents failure. For the period that the site did function as narrative space, the artists and locals there created for themselves significant public time. By opening ourselves up to the narrative capacity of this kind of public space, it is possible to see that what transpires is more than simply street art and more than simply protest, but a complex and continually changing story. Even if that story is painful, perhaps especially if it is painful, it is a story about what it means to live together in the city, a story that needs to be told. This is, I contend, a reading only available if one considers graffiti as text within a rich and changing socio-physical context.

Coda

At the opening of this paper, I drew the reader's attention to the elements of plot, setting, style, and point-of-view that are complicated by the interaction of text and context in three different versions of a story about the murals at the Cuvry Brache. Narrative spaces like the Cuvry Brache, even if they become caught up in the interests of global investment and even if they can seem to be consumable in virtual form via myriad Instagram posts, can in fact stem the tide of context collapse. The narrative properties that allow them to "become full of time" are the same that restore the lived specificity of such places. In my reading, the central topics of the narrative at the Cuvry Brache – reunification, capitalism, gentrification, and the right to the city – are allowed to take on a fuller range of meaning than they might when encountered outside the diachronic, text-context interaction related here. Specifically, the relationship between graffiti, street art, and gentrification becomes far more complex than often assumed. Graffiti and street art do not invite, resist, or indicate gentrification; rather, they are dynamically involved in multidirectional flows of people, values, and ideas that characterize urban life in a particular place. In emphasizing this narrative's mimetic, tragic bent, my reading shows how narrative spaces can afford the kind of public time that can be crucial for a community coming to know itself.

This approach could be extended in numerous ways, most obviously via ethnographic investigation of locals' reactions – readings – of the events that unfolded at the Cuvry Brache. Similarly, while in the preceding I have drawn on the secondary and grey literature about the Cuvry Brache, gentrification in Berlin, and graffiti in Berlin, a full exploration of the discourse around the site and the pieces might unveil the extent to which a fully situated construction of meaning takes place in readings other than my own. Literary geographers might in turn apply a similar technique to other sites in order to assess

how well it reveals hidden meanings in other cases in other places, perhaps especially in less well-known, more "everyday" geographies. There is no doubt that the Cuvry Brache and the series of graffiti and murals that appeared on it over the years represent a particularly vivid instance of text and context interacting, but it is my modest hope that this approach would be validated in other less dramatic, potentially less tragic, cases.

Acknowledgements

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