

Contextures: Inscriptions of Urban Space in Inner-City Berlin

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Abstract

This article sets up a dialogue between photographs of urban art, artifacts, and architecture in the Prenzlauer Berg district of former East Berlin with a meditation on the ways in which urban subjects interact with their environment so as to transform both themselves and their city. The article works with notions of fluid “folded” relationships between city space and denizens, suggesting that these are not discrete entities interacting with each other according to the Euclidean paradigm of container and inhabitants, respectively. Rather, urban subjects are manifestations and products of the space that brings them forth. Any aesthetic practices on the part of urban subjects are recursive actions that modify the urban fabric continuum of which those subjects are a part, thus initiating complex environmental, political, and subjective changes, which can be understood under the rubrics of Lefebvre’s “right to the city” as well as the work of more recent theorists.

Keywords

city, Berlin, graffiti, textuality

In recent years, received notions of “civil society” have found themselves increasingly struggling to gain purchase on an urban landscape in which the allegiances of its members appear to become more and more slippery, ever more shifting. One prominent site of aporia is the changing significance of the city as a site of belonging under the influence of processes of globalization (Figure 1).

Cities possess an exemplary new role in the formation of citizenship identities capable of responding actively and indeed creatively to the novel pressures of globalization. The city may be regarded as a forum with the potential for forging new notions of citizenship—for example, the concept of the *citadin* as crafted by Lefebvre (Purcell, 2002)—able to counter the corrosive effects of globalized capital and its impact on labor and the erosion of nation-state governance, thereby raising prospects of new democratic forms (Figure 2).

This potential can be envisaged first and foremost in a negative sense. The city as a focus of globalized trends toward mobility and spatial transgression inevitably condenses in itself many of the discontents of the postindustrial age (Figure 3).

The city as a gathering point for diverse populations rendered mobile by the new flexibility of labor and its global divisions includes novel forms of immigration; new class fragmentation;

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Figure 1.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 2.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 3.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

unprecedented and rapidly spreading degrees of social inequality; the increasing “criminalization” of diverse “marginalities,” whether class-, race-, gender-, or ethnic-related (Hage, 2003); new forms of ethnic and cultural violence; varieties of personal and cultural identity, which run at odds to national identities; “border”-syndrome blurring of legal and illegal activities; and statuses (Figure 4).

Equally, however, the city also stages the emergence of new discourses of contestation and democratic dissent and the mobilization of new forms of political activity formed around local coalitions and specific nodes of issues (Figure 5).

The city thus becomes a nexus of these modes of structuration, destructuring and restructuring of social and cultural coexistence or conflict. Various indices of social interaction such as spatial organization, flow of goods, material and immaterial, access to resources and power over their distribution become the signs of new-fangled social relations in the urban fabric newly woven by the forces of globalization (Figure 6).

The city is an extreme space (Barber, 2001) of disintegration that simultaneously sketches out and renders possible new modes of social life. Citizenship itself becomes a flexible tool for participation in the unstable urban space of the new millennium. Increasingly, the city focalizes new conflicts, but by the same token enables the articulation of new discourses of rights and obligations. In the moment of implementing citizenship in the new field of urban forces, the notion of citizenship itself is subject to revision, being recast in the discourse of its urban bearers (Figure 7).

However, I wish to signal several points of dissent with these emergent theories of urban citizenship. First, these theories tend to emerge from the area of political science, urban sociology, and urban planning and thus neglect, to a large extent, the question of the semiotic regimes that traverse the politics of new modalities of urban belonging. Second, and this appears to me a weightier reservation, they do not question received notions of subjectivity. If the modern individual emerged in tandem with the modern state, the two figurative spaces being isomorphic with one another, the return of neo-civic-citizenship needs to include a rethinking of the spatial configurations of subjectivity in the wake of a recast civic status. Together, these two reservations, that of semiosis and subjecthood, need to be triangulated against the concrete spaces of the city itself. Both need to be rethought as porous, fluid, and reciprocally intertwined. The politics and



Figure 4.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 5.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 6.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

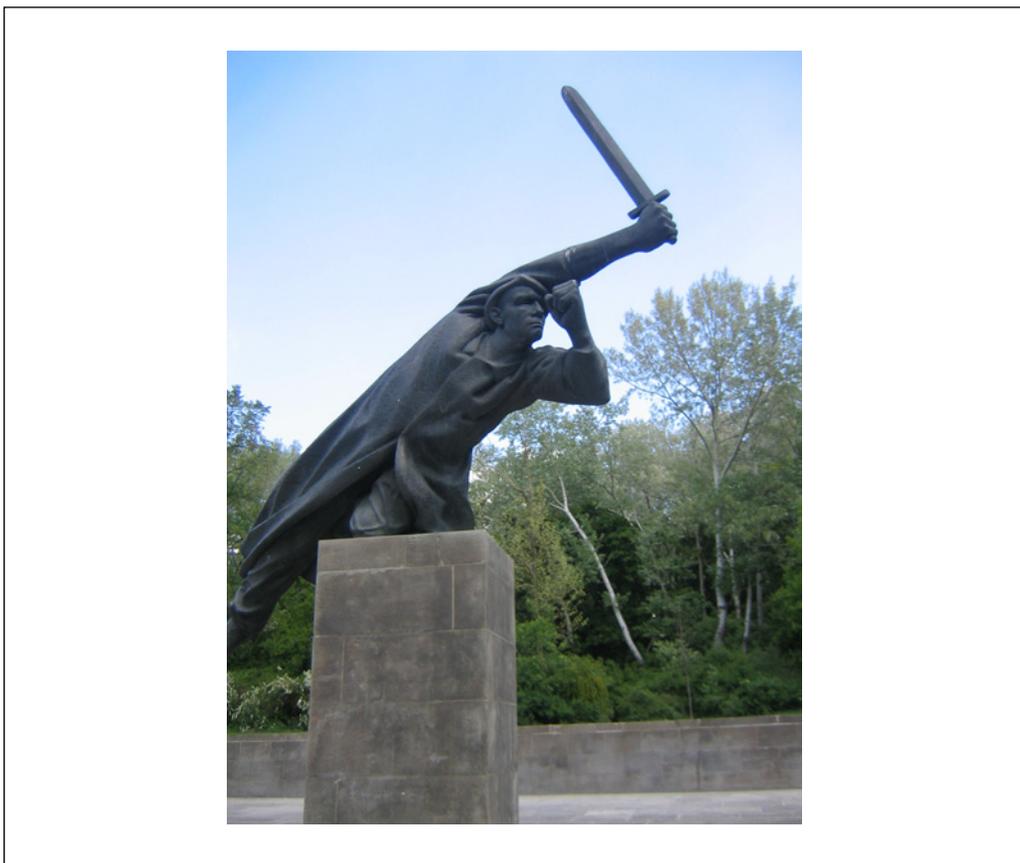


Figure 7.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 8.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

agency of writing dovetails with the politics of self-making and -remaking and with the politics of urban transformation. I make an attempt at this task, albeit in an experimental, fictive-visual mode, in this article (Figure 8).

This article aims to explore these contradictory aspects of the city by positing that the inscription of urban space, in the form of graffiti, street art, or poster art, constitutes a mode of textualization both of the urban fabric and of the civic subject and, thus, in this context, a semiotic intervention with political and subjective resonances. Street graffiti is taken here as a concrete embodiment of the contingency of urban process understood as a continuing movement of constitution, dissolution, and reconstitution that carries civic subjecthood in its wake (Figure 9).

The article thus probes the concept of “urban citizenship” via the “contextuality” of its urban inscription—a space that frames the articulation of place and voice, giving rise to a localized late-modern *vox populi*.

In an effort to understand performatively the interface of text, selfhood, and urban fabric, the article itself stages a dialogue, one which has already commenced, structured as a Benjaminesque montage, between a textual meditation and my own photos of urban inscriptions taken mainly in the inner-city areas of Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte (Figure 10).

In the process of trying to articulate a contextually based practice of vocal urban citizenship, I shall pursue a ternary theoretical trajectory.

My point of departure—and the emphasis lies here on the act of leaving behind—is the received Euclidean notion of space as a container. I thus abandon the notion of the city as a given, a preexistent space inhabited by the citizen, for a (second) more dynamic notion of reciprocal creation by the city of its citizens and by the citizen of the city (Figure 11).

My third staging-post is the Deleuzian notion of the flow of becoming or the fold (see Deleuze, 1989), a concept that envisages the city, its citizens, and their shared texts as cut from the same fabric, woven together in the same contexture and distinguished only in a provisional and temporary manner. This last, and I think the most radically disturbing notion, is one that calls into question traditional versions of the polis, of writing, of civic subjecthood and civic community itself, to the extent that it erases the lines of demarcation, which make these concepts distinctive,



Figure 9.
Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 10.
Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 11.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

and installs more fluid transitions between them: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs” (Joyce, 1939/1975, p. 3).

Agnew and Corbridge (1995) point out that

the new territorial states flourished best where the city-states were least entrenched, e.g., the coastal margins of Europe—Britain, Netherlands. . . . The nation-states came latest into existence, in Germany and Italy, where the city-states retained their power longest. (p. 14)

Conversely, the crumbling of the central significance of the nation-state appears to be announced by the resurgence of the city-state, albeit in a postmodern guise. The global moment appears also to have produced a series of new city-state-like actors across the globe, whose strength resides in the fact that they function as privileged nodes of financial exchange in the global network: Hong Kong or Singapore, Dubai. Defined as they are around virtual notions of flows of fiduciary values, they are perhaps more apt to redefine received notions of citizenship (Figure 12).

It is significant that urban citizenship is an emergent category that springs not from the relatively abstract notion of the nation but rather from the more concrete and tangible space of the city. To that extent it represents a reversion to an earlier, prenatal scale of collective identification, one that was based on the sense of graspable space, a space that may have even been able to be encompassed by the human eye if the citizen stood on some outcrop that looked out over the polis. Paradoxically, the reemergence of the city-state-like notion of urban citizenship comes at a moment when the nation itself is being partially overhauled by an even more abstract entity, that of the global diaspora. But perhaps this is not a paradox at all—perhaps, as the global allegiances of many migrant citizens becomes more and more strung out across multiple places on the globe, the sense of rootedness in an urban community is merely an equal and opposite counterreaction (Figure 13).

If the resurgent city state of urban citizenship is to be relocated in the concrete and tangible bounds of the city—indeed, of the federal state of Berlin, an avatar of the earlier city states such as Venice, Bremen, Lübeck—then I would suggest that the mode of expression of this

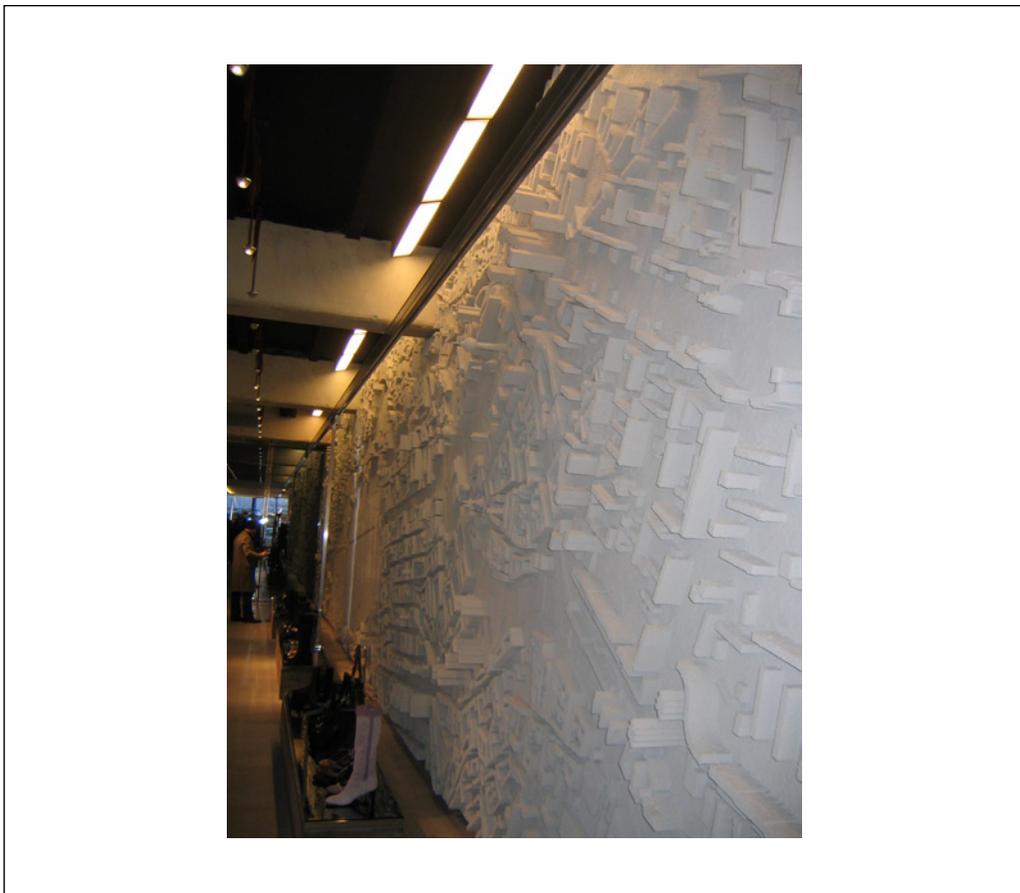


Figure 12.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 13.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 14.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 15.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

citizenship—or perhaps the practice that founds and constitutes it—is likewise a concrete one. Rather than the passport, the number plate, or the tax form, which is the code by which we attach ourselves to the nation-state, I submit that other codes, more material and more earthy, mediate the identity of the urban citizen within the less distant fabric of the city itself. As an icon of this grounded citizenship, I propose the figure of the graffiti artist as the locus, which epitomizes the practices of local identification constituting urban citizenship (Figure 14).

Following the topos of “theory as fiction” evoked by Maud Mannoni (1979) or Malcolm Bowie (1987), I wish in this article to construct something that one might term, chiasmatically, fiction as theory. I employ the fictive figure of the urban graffiti artist as urban citizen in an attempt at exploring the ways in which this new mode of citizenship invests in the concrete fabric of the urban context not merely to give itself expression but, more profoundly, to constitute itself in the very gesture of constituting its environment (Figure 15).



Figure 16.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

The photos taken during my own peregrinations across the city should suggest that the city itself in its manifest textuality, in its contextuality, proffers a form of theory equally worthy of attention as that which is promulgated within the walls of the university (Figure 16).

My gaze is that of the *flâneur*—the wanderer through the city possessed of a distanced gaze, which captures the photographic moment. However, in contradistinction to the 19-century *flâneur*, distanced, loosed from the bonds of community, and thus an avatar of the artist as outsider, as *poète maudit*, this *flâneur* is one whose wanderings, more often than not, are part of a quotidian urban fabric. Those of the father pushing his son in the orange pusher, slowed down to walking pace by the exigencies of toddlerdom. Those of the daily trek from the apartment to the S-Bahn station or the winding progress of the tram through the narrow streets of the Scheunenviertel. This, then, is the modern urban *flâneur*, whose stance is that of nondisjunctive liminality. The route through the articulated streets is one that mediates an espacement in the Derridean sense of the term—a spacing that enables the urban elements to be articulated on one another and thus provides the very condition of meaning itself (Figures 17 and 18).

This article proposes the graffiti artist as a heuristic *cas limite*, an extreme figure that exemplifies more quotidian traits of urban citizenship. Highly visible and invisible at the same time, her or his practice makes manifest the meaning of urban citizenship.

The urban fabric is the material basis on which the practice of graffiti is inscribed; but at the same time, it depends on inscription, of which I take graffiti to be an extreme case, an exemplar, for its own contours to become clear. It is the spray can slogan Berlin that allows Berlin, in this particular manifestation, to come to be. Berlin as a flow of high-intensity becoming is reactivated, configured, marked at sites of intensity by the work of graffiti (Figure 19).

The urban fabric endows the urban citizen with a specific identity, but that identity works to give Berlin its identity—that identity of the creative city. Urban creativity is to be understood here as a tautological construction. The city is a process of creativity, a ceaseless of reconfigured assemblage of flows bringing forth nodes of creative urban citizenship. It obeys thus the vector of analysis of Sansot's (1971, p. 13) "poetics of the city"—"from places to people" (Figure 20).

Kristeva (1974), in her work on the chora, suggests that semiotic and symbolic are inseparable. Without the semiotic as its "geno-text," its foundation and genesis, the symbolic could not



Figure 17.
Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 18.
Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 19.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

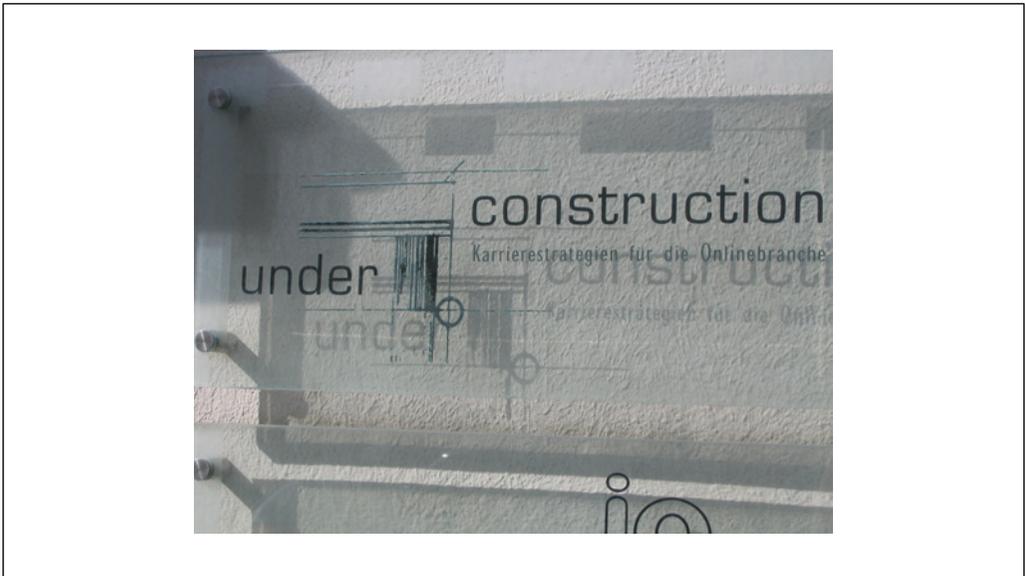


Figure 20.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

be formed; at the same time, the semiotic only becomes visible as it surges up within the fabric of the symbolic that has repressed it. Likewise, for Saussure and the early archaeological Foucault, langue and the rules of discourse make possible parole and statements but at the same time, cannot be identified separately from the paroles and statements they generate. Lipietz (1997) points out, similarly, that structuralism, which has imagined the language as speaking the subject, has forgotten that the language itself is dependent on subjects for its own existence—were it not to be spoken by them it would dissolve as surely as the classical languages, and many others, have done (Figure 21).



Figure 21.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

These thoughts bring us to the conclusion that the city is a work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which the urban actors as the writers of their own city create not only their surrounds but themselves to boot (Figure 22).

The city is not a container where differences encounter each other; the city generates differences and assembles identities. The city is a difference machine insofar as it is understood as that space which is constituted by the dialogical encounter of groups formed and generated immanently in the process of taking up positions, orienting themselves for and against each other, inventing and assembling strategies and technologies, mobilizing various forms of capital, and making claims to that space that is objectified as "the city." (Isin, 2002, p. 283)

However, I wish to go further in my thinking. A more radical version of these various attempts to blur the boundaries between surface and depth, between subject and object, is Deleuze and Guattari's notion of intensities in a continuum of flows of energy, or alternatively, Deleuze's concept of the fold (Deleuze, 1989). These ideas suggest that the subject is not an entity set off against the background of the world, nor even that the subject is less than autonomous, determined by the world. More radically, the subject is a residue of the world as becoming; the subject is a thickening, or intensification, or coagulation, or alternatively an in-folding, in the fabric of the world. The subject-object distinction on which all of Western thought is based is collapsed or better folded back into a continuum of flows of becoming and desire, marked by stops, couplings, blockages, re-routings, within which subjects, spaces, concepts, are crystallized or coagulated, but only ever temporarily, soon to be dissolved and recast in novel forms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, 1980; Figure 23).

The graffiti artist is an ephemeral subject. He or she inscribes and flees. In the fleeting interval between two clicks of the digital camera, itself held by a precariously balanced tram passenger, these images capture the presence and absence of the graffiti artists, figured by the frozen velocity of the helmeted vesper-rider. In the moment of passing by, the motorcyclist erases the central linchpin of the graffiti slogan, setting truly under erasure, but only for an instant, an article itself already under erasure. The inscription reads: Graffiti is *ein/kein Verbrechen: Graffiti is/is not a crime (Figures 24 and 25).

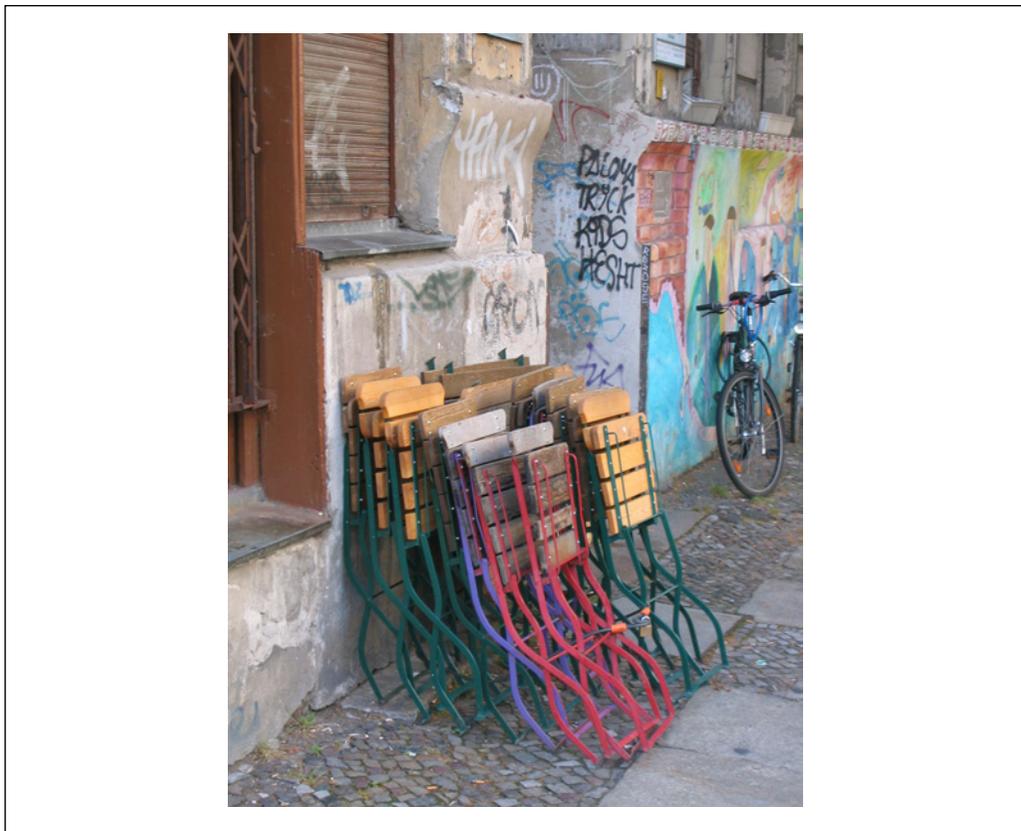


Figure 22.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 23.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 24.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 25.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

The asterisk, which is added to the article as a typographical supplement, as a perverted K, also expands the article into a negation and thus by the same token, shrinks its import to zero. Curiously, the unmarked version is coded negatively, while the marked version is coded positively, thus imitating a re-coding of graffiti itself from a negatively coded marking of urban space to the positive reworking of the naked masonry (Figure 26).

The oscillation between crime and no-crime, between legality and illegality, is already provoked by the typographical uncertainty of the asterisk as an asemantic element, which provokes a (re)semanticized reading. The briefly passing profile of the motorcyclist completes this work,



Figure 26.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).



Figure 27.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

continuing the oscillation at the meta-level of complete erasure, the occlusion of the offending article. Indeed, the urban space itself is revealed as an unstable space by the passage of the motorcyclist. The cemetery wall is not the background on which script and passerby are imposed; rather, it is one surface of a folded urban fabric, whose own contours are altered by the interventions of script and subject, just as they in turn are inflected by its own imbrication in the common urban textility.

What does this oscillation between negation and affirmation, between degree-zero neutrality and marking, between article and nonarticle, between absence and presence, tell us about the

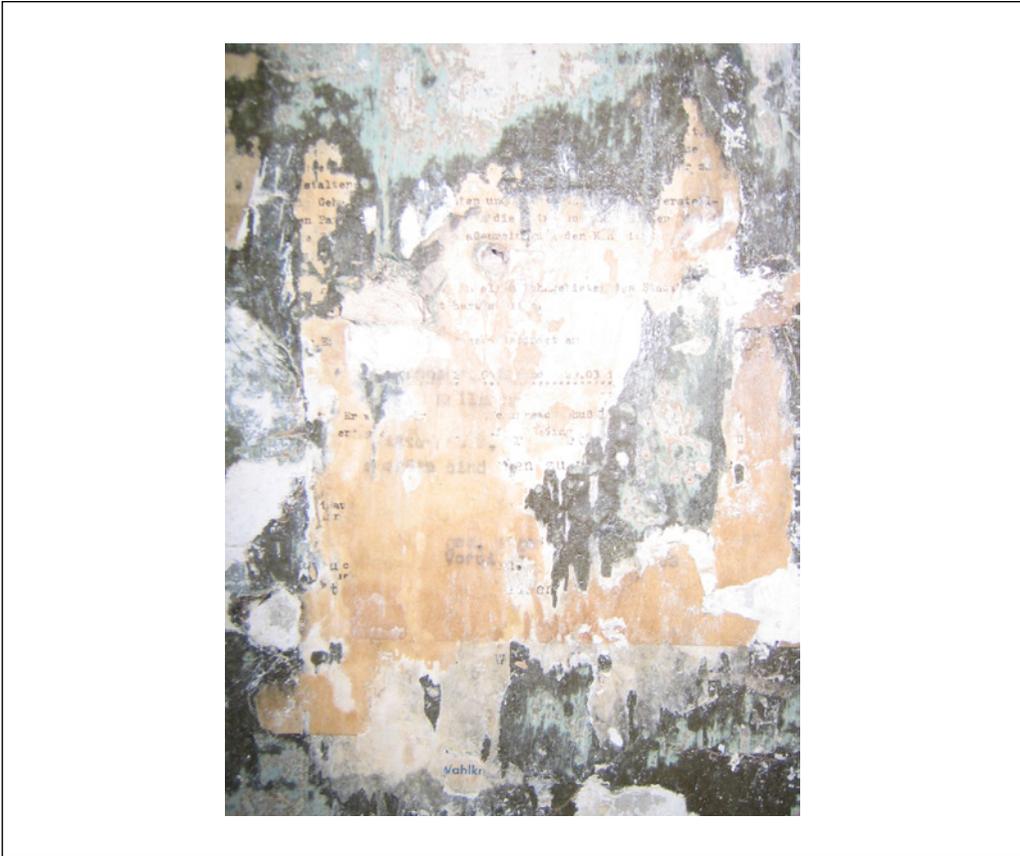


Figure 28.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

work of the graffiti artist? What do the ripples of passage and trace, of erasure and highlighting, the folds and waves in this urban warp and woof, reveal about the political agency within contemporary city spaces? (Figure 27).

It points up the constantly fluid nature of the work of graffiti, its shimmering quality, the constant effects that it generates even after the artist is long gone, so that one may say that the graffiti outlives its author, indeed, calling forth the death of the author, but perhaps, in a retroactive temporality, her or his birth.

Whence the validity of the inscription. The inscription practice, beyond the pale according to a certain juridical formulation, is also what gives the city its identity, making visible a coagulation in which the citizen and civic habitat are crystallized out of flows of becoming-space, in which the transformation of the one goes hand in hand with the transformation of the other.

The palimpsestic, oscillating moment of erasure and highlighting located in the asterisk itself marks a knot of intensity, a site of desire, to which the gaze is drawn, a place where meaning flows between apparently opposed poles of positive-negative valency. Likewise, if the citizen-scriptor herself or himself is a knot of intensity called forth by that moment of inscription, coagulated around it out of the ceaseless flow of urban becoming, then this citizen is not infringing on the urban order, disfiguring the urban landscape, but enhancing it by the very act of participating in its dynamics. As Harvey observes, commenting on Lefèbvre's (1968) notion of the "right to

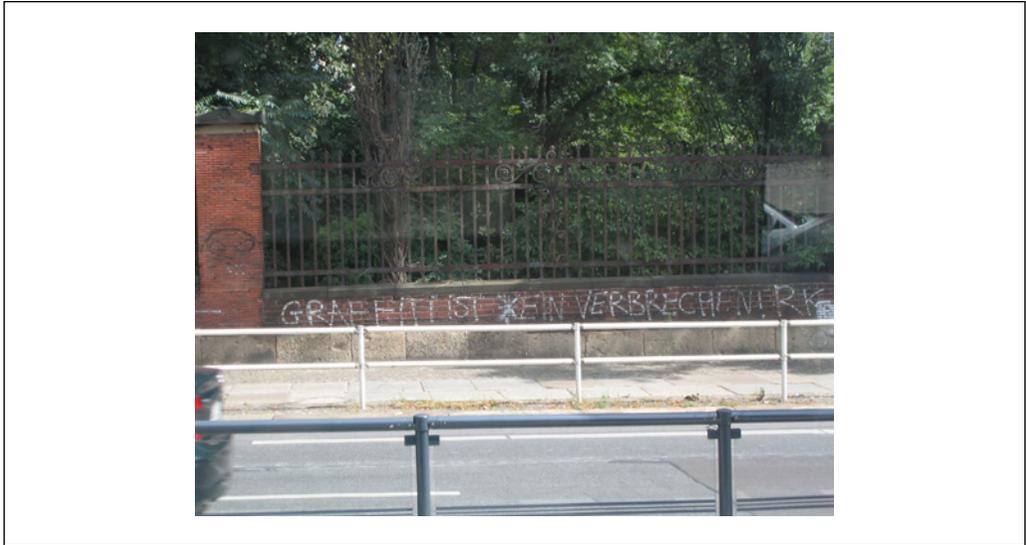


Figure 29.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

the city,” “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey, 2008, p. 23; see Figure 28)

The *k*, reinscribed so as to be at once erased and highlighted, points up the liminal character of graffiti, its capacity to blur the boundaries between the legal and the illegal, the included and the excluded—and so doing to make out the spaces of lawfulness and delinquency, thereby casting into question their apparently clear relationship to citizenship. The good citizen is one who obeys the law of the land—yet perhaps the polis, the urbs, possesses its own deviant laws, which are not necessarily those of the abstract entity of the nation but rather are anchored in the concrete exigencies of the urban space and its processes of identity formation (Figure 29).

By extension, the boundaries of national belonging and nonbelonging are unsettled by the turbulences generated around the foreign loan word, itself an exemplification of a foreign, minoritized script. The form of citizenship alluded to in this manner may thus be understood as casting into question the rigid boundaries of nation-state defined citizenship.

Refuting received notions of Euclidian space, Hiram Stanley has suggested that space is not so much a receptacle full of things, so much as that things themselves are inherently spaceful (cited in Kern, 1983, pp. 153-154). Similarly, one might suggest that the city is not a space full of citizens but rather that citizens are city-full. To that extent they are not defined by being dutiful, but by other attributes, habitus, practices, which flow out of a fluid environment that they entertain an infolding nondisjunctive relationship (Figure 30).

Why the importance of these theories of civic flow? First, because they refuse to privilege one of the terms, to make it the ground or background on which the other terms are founded. Rather, they assume that these terms themselves are the starting points for politics, that they do not need to be justified by some superior instance. To that extent, this theory responds to the implicit assumptions of a concretely placed urban citizenship, one defined by the contingencies of the here and the now rather than by abstracted notions such as the nation. In keeping with this refusal of a hierarchy of terms with its head in the clouds, it proposes disparate but connected terms, all of them with their feet firmly on the ground, in a contrary sense, and communicating with each other across the folds of their shared fabric (Figure 31).

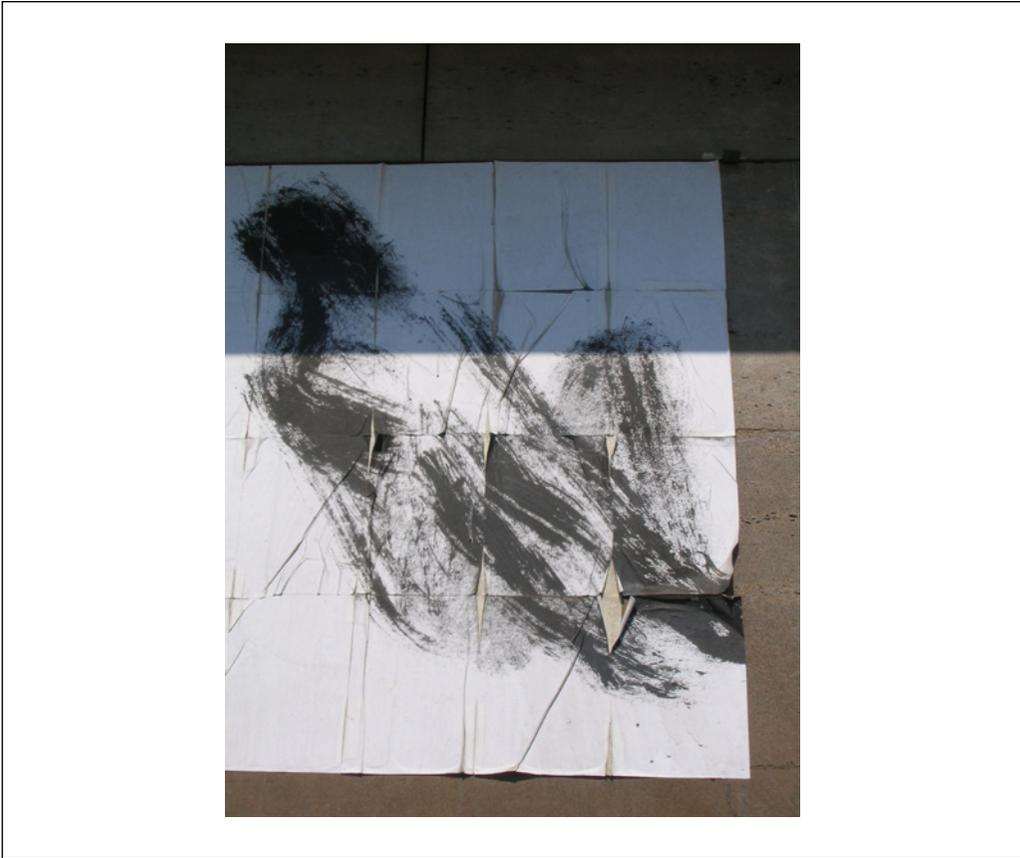


Figure 30.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

Second, to posit some hierarchy based in an originary or superior term is to assume that the term is itself fixed, which predicates the possibility of change on an unchanging framework, whereas the framework itself may be quite contingent, indeed, equally in need of radical change. To posit the city as the fixed ground of urban citizenship is, paradoxically, to fix the very structures that the citizenship aims to transform, thereby foreclosing the processes of transformation that are evoked by that selfsame theoretical imagination.

These ideas of the contextures of civic subjecthood, urban space, and political inscription are all conceived as grounded practices that originate in the material here of Berlin, but simultaneously highlight the transmutability of all that we take for granted.

Such notions of subject, writing, and urban space as aspects of a continuum of becoming-space offer a means of thinking identities, political action, and the spatial parameters of such action in ways not available before. Moreover, these notions enable fluid transitions between a number of normally discrete and indeed often methodologically incompatible modes of critique.

In his monumental *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin includes a chapter on universal exhibitions and posters. He recounts an anecdote about 19th-century revolutionary Paris, in which the walls of



Figure 31.

Source: Photo by the author (2005).

the city were bedecked with an ever-increasing number of political posters. The author he quotes, Alfred Delvau, refers to the walls of Paris at this time as “*murailles revolutionaries*,” revolutionary walls (Benjamin, 1982, Vol. 1, p. 240). The walls of the city had become a surface of inscription for the insurgent citizens, the palimpsest on which the *vox populi* expressed itself. In May 1968, spray cans would replace posters, and the venerable walls of the Sorbonne would be adorned with proverbs such as “*Défense d’interdire*”—it’s forbidden to forbid, in a self-contradictory parody of the standard administrative interdiction (Bourg, 2007, p. xi). The revolutionary walls seem today less a site of political change as the site of a political, place-based identity. They are the place where rights are not so much claimed, and created, thereby bringing their creators into being as citizens of the city—as *citadins*—at the moment they inscribe its folded contextures and in turn are inscribed by them.

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