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Through the Wall: The West Bank Wall as Global Canvas

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Abstract:

The West Bank Barrier Wall in Israel has become the canvas upon which Palestinians and Israelis have begun to establish their own street art traditions, combining the visual traditions and perspectives from the Western, Jewish and Arabic Diasporas. While most artists spend years practicing and performing their craft before their work garners any attention, street art produced in Israel is noticed immediately because it is being created in a volatile political environment. It used to be that most visual culture was communicated in the art galleries or museums; the evolution of graffiti and street art culture has changed all that. The graffiti culture was started by disenfranchised and unseen youth living in the shadows of some of the wealthiest cities. The advent of the culture subverted and completely ignored the authority structure and the artistic establishment. Graffiti art and the street art movement that started in New York and Philadelphia has spread around the world. Graffiti is fundamentally, an inexpensive and egalitarian art form. Internationally, street artists have developed unique styles and visual languages that inform and influence their cultural identity. While the notorious stencil artist from London, Banksy, has garnered intense media attention for his work on the Wall, the contributions of the Israeli and Palestinians have not yet received mainstream press. Now the Palestinians and Israeli artists are creating their own language, compiled of the Arabic and Western visual traditions, by using the tools of the street artist: wheat paste, spray paint and stencils.

Through the Wall

Israel's West Bank Wall as a Global Canvas for Street and Graffiti Art

Talia Moscovitz

Introduction

The West Bank Barrier Wall in Israel has become the canvas upon which Palestinians and Israelis have begun to establish their own street art traditions, combining the visual traditions and perspectives from the Western, Jewish and Arabic Diasporas. While most artists spend years practicing and performing their craft before their work garners any attention, street art produced in Israel is noticed immediately because it is being created in a volatile political environment. It used to be that most visual culture was communicated in the art galleries or museums; the evolution of graffiti and street art culture has changed all that. The graffiti culture was started by disenfranchised and unseen youth living in the shadows of some of the wealthiest cities. The advent of the culture subverted and completely ignored the authority structure and the artistic establishment. Graffiti art and the street art movement that started in New York and Philadelphia has spread around the world. Graffiti is fundamentally, an inexpensive and

egalitarian art form. Internationally, street artists have developed unique styles and visual languages that inform and influence their cultural identity.

At the center of an Israeli political firestorm is the Israel West Bank Wall, 90% of which is composed of a network of barriers and trenches; 8-meter concrete walls makes up the remaining 10%. A monument to the years of violence and conflict has torn the region apart. Construction began in 2002 after a series of devastating attacks against Israeli citizens. Supporters say that the wall has drastically reduced terrorist attacks against Israelis since it was built. The detractors call it inhumane in that it cuts off access to water supply for over a million Arab citizens. The Wall is embroiled in so much controversy that a simple name for it has yet to be agreed upon. It has been variously called the Retention Wall, the Apartheid Wall, and the Retention Wall. Israelis most commonly refer to it as the “Separation” or “Security” Fence while most Palestinians use the term Racist Segregation Wall. The Wall has become an enormous blank canvas positioned in front of thousands of cameras. Like the Berlin Wall in the 1980s, the West Bank Wall has been attracting international and local muralists. The artwork that is appearing on the West Bank Wall can be viewed as a continuation of the game of artistic cat and mouse that started in Berlin over twenty years ago. While the notorious stencil artist from London, Banksy, has garnered intense media attention for his work on the Wall, the contributions of the Israeli and Palestinians have not yet received much mainstream press.

For decades, Palestinians have been prevented from controlling their own news media, holding gallery exhibitions, or even flying the Palestinian flag for fear that their expression of national identity would incite Israeli retribution. Now the Palestinians and

Israeli artists are creating their own language, compiled of the Arabic and Western visual traditions, by using the tools of the street artist: wheat paste, spray paint and stencils.

I. Historical Overview

The West Bank Wall is a made up of a series of razor wire fences and cement walls that encircle the Gaza strip. The majority of it consists of a concrete base, topped with a five-meter high wire and mesh structure. A four-meter ditch lined with razor wire and motion sensors runs along one side. The sections of the West Bank Wall that cut through towns and heavily populated areas are made out of eight-meter high concrete barriers complete with watchtowers. Construction began in 2002 in an effort of the part of the Israeli government to contain the Palestinian threat and ebb the tide of suicide bombings that killed 293 Israeli citizens in 2003 alone¹. The Wall is 670 kilometers long and encircles the West Bank with sections around Jerusalem and blocking off Bethlehem and Ramallah. The Wall cuts straight through the middle of the town of Abu Dis.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Bank_Wall

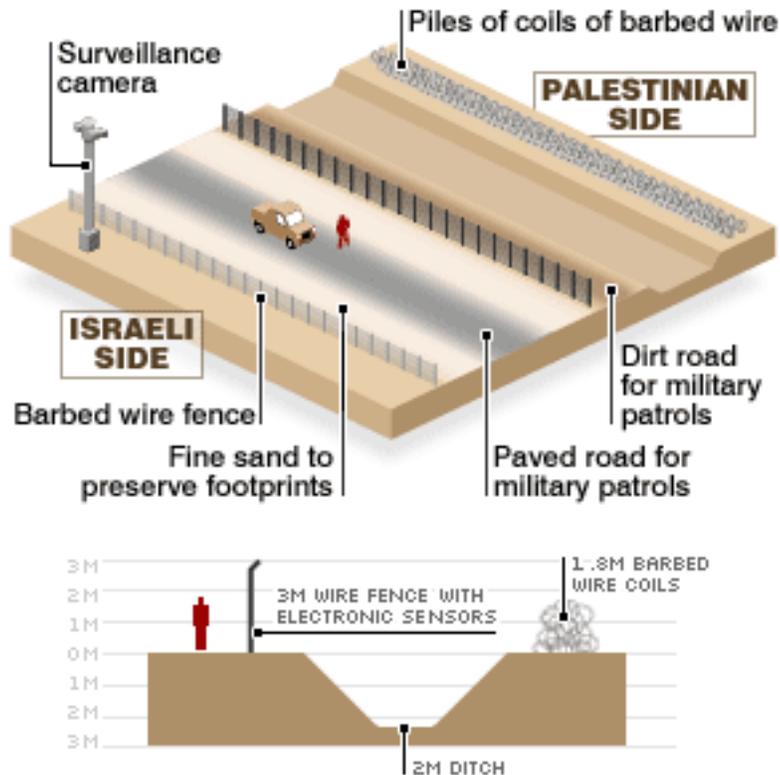


Figure 1. Over 90% of the West Bank Wall is actually alternating rows of razor wire fences, and ditches²

Israel's Labor party first proposed the Wall as a security solution. Ariel Sharon's right wing government and supporters were, at first, reluctant to define any land in Israel as belonging to the Palestinians, and therefore cutting off any possibility for further Israeli settlement there. The first approved route for the Wall cut deeply into the Palestinian land, disregarding the 1967 boundary agreement. The construction of the Wall acted as a defacto annexation of a large portion of Palestinian Territory. In 2003, the United Nations condemned the Wall as illegal and an "unlawful act of annexation³." In 2004, the Israeli Supreme court ordered that the part of the Wall around Jerusalem needed to be rerouted because it violates the right of the Palestinians. The new route of

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/guides/456900/456944/html/nn3page1.stm>

³ "UN condemns West Bank 'wall'," http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3212430.stm

the West Bank Wall is closer to the 1967 agreement than the original plans but still confiscates acres of land and uproots Palestinian farmers.



Figure 2. The planned route for the West Bank Wall

The barriers cuts Palestinians off from jobs, healthcare facilities, irrigation and clean water, as well as from their own families and communities. For some, what was once a ten-minute walk to work, has now become a three hour drive through the security check point and back around to the destination (and that's if they can get through). In a November 18, 2006 article, *New York Times*, reporter Greg Myers wrote, “men under the age of 35 from the northern West Bank are generally not allowed to leave the area.”⁴

⁴ Greg Myre, “For West Bank, It’s a Highway To Frustration,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2006 p. A1

Opponents to the Wall say that the barrier has drastically limited the freedoms of the Palestinians effectively making them prisoners in their own land. Supporters of the Wall claim that casualties due to suicide bombings have been significantly reduced since construction of the Wall began: from seventy-three attacks that resulted in civilian casualties in 2003 to only one in 2004⁵. Suicide bombs have largely been stopped at the checkpoints or exploded prematurely.

II. History of Graffiti

Graffiti art is by no means a recent concept. People have been scribbling on walls since there have been walls to write on. Modern Graffiti, art as a unified visual culture, began when people first noticed that someone was writing “TAKI 183” in big letters on every subway stop in New York around 1970⁶. He was a delivery boy named Taki from 183 Street in Washington Heights and he became famous, without ever having to sell anything or ask for any type of approval from the established art world. Young people across New York soon began to seek their own graffiti fame. The careers of early graffiti writers, such as PAPO 184, Junior 161, CAY 161, and EVA 62, usually lasted only a few years before they retired and passed the spotlight on to younger writers. In the initial years of the Graffiti scene, writers were almost all teenagers from the poorer neighborhoods of the Bronx and Brooklyn. The scene arose out of a citywide game of one upmanship among teenagers to see who could get the most attention, by marking up every train.

⁵http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Bank_Wall

⁶ James E. Walmsley, “In the Beginning there was the Word,” Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, March 13-May 23 2004, Iconoclast and DAP publishing, p.193

The Graffiti culture quickly developed a clearly defined hierarchy, and codes of conduct. A “tag”, is a nickname that can be written swiftly and with style. A “throw up,” is a tag name written in large bubble or letters, usually just as an outline or with a complimentary fill color. Tags and throw ups are designed with simplified letterforms, to be done as fast as possible. Trumping the tag and the throw-up is the “piece.” A piece (or masterpiece), is an elaborate work of art that is designed in detail in advance to show off a writer’s individual style and skill, using many different colors and decorative elements⁷. The amount of respect an individual writer received was carefully discussed and measured with the underground community based on his or her style and how much he/ she got his/her name up (or “bombed”). The level of respect a writer had decided how long his/her work would “ride” before being painted over by another artist. As the subway scene developed, the tags, and throw ups soon covered train cars end to end.



Figure 3. A Taki 183 tag with the tags of other early writers, New York

⁷ James E. Walmesley, “In the Beginning there was the Word,” Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, March 13-May 23 2004, Iconoclast and D*A*P publishing, p.194

Graffiti culture developed as a seemingly spontaneous generation of a new form of art, Hip Hop music and dance at the same time. In the early 1980s, writers began to push the limits of style, and the first graffiti superstars emerged as fully developed artists. Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat (a.k.a. SAMO) successfully straddled the gallery art scene and the graffiti scenes. Both artists arose out of the central graffiti tradition and neither found the same level of respect and acceptance in the street scene as they did the Art World establishment. Although they may be two of the most famous street artists, Haring and Basquiat were considered outsiders by the train taggers.



Figure 4. Keith Haring making a subway chalk drawing, New York ca. 1983

DONDI was the first graffiti writer to who came out of the Hip Hop culture to be accepted by the mainstream art world. DONDI was primarily a subway artist, but his scope of vision and understanding of color and composition translated onto canvases as well. His paintings on canvases were a continuation of his graffiti aesthetic. Pictured below is one of his most famous trains, displaying his taste for dazzling color combinations and his masterful technical skill.



Figure 5. DONDI Whole car, 1982.

By the mid 1980s, movies like “Style Wars” and “Wild Styles” brought the New York scene to the rest of the country and to Europe through these films. New York writers like SEEN, KASE 2, BLADE, LADY PINK, DUSTER, ZYPHER and LEE became famous across the United States and Europe.

In 1986, the New York authorities took steps to protect their property from graffiti by putting up fences around station yards and regularly buffing trains. As it became harder and harder to paint subway trains in New York, the graffiti scene was forced to change and adapt to the new climate. Many of the pioneering graffiti writers from New York found success as graphic designers and, to a lesser extent, gallery artists. Cultures arose in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tokyo, London, Rio de Janeiro, and Berlin, each with a unique style. In the 1990s, street art, using stencils, wheat paste and installations began appearing as an offshoot to conventional graffiti “bombing”. Street art married the techniques and sensibilities of the fine art world with the harder edge of the graffiti scene. This style became associated with art school students who moved to the city, instead of

generating as an outlet of expression from the repression of the ghettos and the underprivileged.

For a long time, there had been a tangible sense of animosity on the part of graffiti writers towards street artists. Writers considered Street artists to be rich kids who dabbled in tagging for a quick thrill or to claim credibility. Working often in the “hip” artsy neighborhoods, they met with little resistance from police or torment from would be muggers. The large majority of street artists almost never paints trains and so never has to combat the dangers of the train yards: electric rails, dogs, security guards, rail tramps and locking and unlocking train cars. Graffiti writers have traditionally seen street artists as soft or “toy”, with no understanding of the complex ethical social framework that graffiti writers must bend to in order to survive. The styles of the two cultures are vastly different. While each city and region developed its own unique approach, conventional graffiti emphasizes the importance of letter forms and relies on the three primary tenets of American graffiti: tags, throw ups and pieces. Street art arose out of an understanding of fine art sensibilities and emphasizes individuality that does not fit into the set framework of street ethics and its hierarchy for respect.

Only recently have a generation of artists emerged that have been able to merge art house sensibilities with graffiti world respect. Barry McGee (aka TWIST), Stephen Powers (aka ESPO), and Brian Donnelly (aka KAWS), are all artists who have moved seamlessly from the train yards to the galleries. They each found ways to fuse graffiti aesthetics with an emotional presence and social awareness usually found in fine art. The marrying of artistic traditions endows the work with a tension and allows for multiple interpretations. These three artists are members of what is sometimes called the “Mission

School”, a group of artists working in a wide variety of media in the mid to late 1990s⁸. The artists of the Mission school are preoccupied with the modern society’s numb ambivalence in the midst of an ever-increasing sense of urgency and anxiety to fully live. The works of Barry McGee, Stephen Powers, and Brian Donnelly have in common a sense of exuberant and spontaneous expression. The two images below show how Barry McGee translates from street letterforms to character driven paintings.



Figure 6. Barry McGee street piece as TWISTO



Figure 7. Barry McGee painting on found metal

The Berlin Wall

⁸ Aaron Rose, “Least Likely to Succeed,” Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, March 13- May 23 2004, Iconoclast and D*A*P publishing, p.33

Artists began painting the Berlin Wall in the late 1970s when graffiti culture was still in its infancy. The French artist Thierry Noir was one of the first artists to paint the Berlin Wall. He lived and worked with fellow artist Christophe Bouchet in a studio in West Berlin that was directly adjacent to the Berlin Wall. Painting the Wall became a primary focus in his work and a part of his nightly routine. Noir wrote about his relationship with the Berlin Wall in a brief essay entitled “The Story of the Berlin Wall.” He describes, how when questioned by Berlin residents as to why he would strive to make the wall beautiful he would reply

‘We are not trying to make the wall beautiful because in fact it is impossible. 80 persons have been killed trying to jump over the Berlin Wall, to escape to West Berlin, so you can cover that wall with a hundred kilos of color, it will stay the same. One bloody monster, one crocodile who from time to time wakes, eats somebody up, and falls again back to sleep until the next time.’ The paintings on the Berlin wall always had an exceptional touch. It was always one extra emotion in the air, which transformed every wall painting into a strong political act.⁹

Noir and Bouchet painted vibrant, colorful murals in a style reminiscent of the German expressionists. The results were paintings of lively faces in bright primary colors and exaggerated, sweeping brush strokes. Their aim was to cover as much of the wall as quickly as possible. The murals had to be done with great speed, with one person painting and another looking out for soldiers. Noir soon found that local residents and people passing by wanted to pick up a brush and contribute to the transformation of the Wall. They wanted “to paint the Berlin Wall, to transform it, to make it ridiculous, to help destroy it”¹⁰, said Noir.

⁹ Noir, Thierry, “The Story of the Berlin Wall”, www.galerie-noir.de/ArchivesEnglish/walleng.html

¹⁰ Noir, Thierry, “The Story of the Berlin Wall”, www.galerie-noir.de/ArchivesEnglish/walleng.html

Within a few years, the murals stretched out over a mile long. According to Noir, the paintings became an “important symbol of Berlin’s charm and character¹¹.” In 1984, Noir and Bouchet began screwing household objects into the wall: urinals, sinks, a cellar door, and a pair of shoes. Noir explains that this was done to show that the wall was temporary and to detract from its myth.

The wall painters wanted to cover up the wall with colors to wrap it up with paintings, to make it luminous to show it like a mutation in the city... It created in Berlin an atmosphere of urgency, which gave the artists the feeling of trying to survive and create (through art) for themselves, and later for Berlin¹².

By the mid 1980s, many American artists flocked to Berlin to make their mark on the Wall, including Keith Haring, Alexander Borofsky, David Wojnarowicz and Kiddy Citney. The murals were done in a painterly style with bucket paint and large brushes. In a 1985 article in *Art in America* on the Berlin Wall, Cleve Gray described the paintings to be largely neo-expressionistic but also highly influenced by comic books¹³. They tended to be emotionally charged but not overtly political. The paintings overlapped genres and years. Gray explained how the “ubiquitous graffiti and sloppy images that previously abounded [were] giving way to more serious and complex and powerfully painted communications.”¹⁴ No mural on the wall was ever singled out and held up as a symbol of the conflict. The murals all intermingled in an almost comic book extravaganza of splashed on figures and aggressive graffiti. The intended audience was always the most immediate passersby.

¹¹ Noir, Thierry, “The Story of the Berlin Wall”, www.galerie-noir.de/ArchivesEnglish/walleng.html

¹² Noir, Thierry, “The Story of the Berlin Wall”, www.galerie-noir.de/ArchivesEnglish/walleng.html

¹³ Cleve Gray, “Wall Painters”, *Art in America*, v.73 (Oct. 1985) p.41

¹⁴ Cleve Gray, “Wall Painters”, *Art in America*, v.73 (Oct. 1985) p.39

With a few exceptions, the paintings on the Berlin Wall were optimistic and joyful. They symbolized the hope, vitality and creative spirit returning to the consciousness of Berlin after decades of oppressive and dominating cold, gray cement. The images below show three examples of Noir's murals on the Berlin wall and one by the American artist, Keith Haring. The expressive, almost tribal, faces shine out with vibrant colors.



Figure 8. Noir, Berlin Wall



Figure 9. Noir, Berlin Wall



Figure 10. Noir, Berlin Wall



Figure 11. Keith Haring, Berlin Wall

History of Art in the West Bank

Palestinian and Israeli art started in 1948 with the establishment of Israel as a sovereign state in the land of Palestine. In Arabic, this event is referred to as *Nakba*, which translates to “catastrophe”.¹⁵ Zionist Jews from all over Europe and the United States emigrated to help establish and build the new state. At the same time, Palestinians and Bedouins fled and were forced from the land to make way for the new Jewish settlers. The name term “Palestine” became a part of the international lexicon after World War I when the Ottoman Empire fell and the British Empire claimed control of the region. The region remained a loose conglomerate of Arab, Christian, Jewish and Bedouin communities. With the United Nations partition of 1948, two new national identities were formed: Israeli and Palestinian. An hourglass effect occurred as Jewish settlers streamed into Israel; at the same time, Palestinians scattered across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe seeking refuge from exile.

The Palestinian and Israeli artistic traditions developed around struggles with identity, feelings of homelessness and the pain of exile. The artistic histories are thematically similar. The Israeli artists deal with the struggle of combining two thousand years of European and Western cultural experiences with their renewed place in the midst of the Arab world. Many Israeli artists have done this by merging their European sensibilities with subject matter that is clearly indicative of the Israeli experience.¹⁶ The work of one of the most well known Israeli street artist, Rami Meiri, exemplifies this tension between Western style and Eastern imagery. Meiri’s works in large scale, photorealist style murals. His work is light spirited and full of joyfulness. He borrows heavily from the style of classic American advertising and is reminiscent of the work of

¹⁵ Ankori, Gannit. Palestinian Art. London: Reaktion Books Ltd. 2006 p.14

¹⁶ http://www.hittlemangallery.com/artists_lavie.html

Norman Rockwell and Rot Lichtenstein. His characters wore Western dress; his women wear bikini tops and his male figures, baggy shorts and flip-flops. He paints scenes of idealized modern Western life, days spent swimming at the pool, drinking beers with friends, skiing or shopping. He has commissioned by several large Western Beer companies to paint enormous, building size mural advertisements for them.



Figure 12. Rami Meiri, Piece celebrating the 80th anniversary of Givaatim and the first Jewish settlers, 2003

In figure 12, pictured above, Meiri takes a more somber approach to his mural work. This mural honors the early Jewish settlers, painting them as modest, hard working people taking pride in cultivating their inherited land. In this mural, Meiri is merging the particular history of the Israeli people with the idealism and simple style of Norman Rockwell.

Since the *Nakbah* of 1948, Palestinians have scattered out from their small insular communities across their new Diaspora. In their dispersal, they are unified, bound

together by shared experience of exile and the mutual resentment of Israel.

Approximately half of the Palestinian population lives outside the boundaries of Israel.¹⁷

Visual art has been a means to express a burgeoning collective, cultural identity.

Exhibitions and other community gatherings were largely illegal within the boundaries of the West Bank, until recently. The walls of Gaza became a bulletin board and canvas for Palestinians to communicate messages of solidarity and expressions of outrage. The street Graffiti of the West Bank has been difficult to document, as the Israeli government has been quick to remove it. Laila Shawa, a Palestinian artist and lecturer, explains in a 2003 interview by Venetia Porter, that

*I have been searching for the method and medium with which to record the raw dialogue appearing on the walls of Gaza, a dialogue that has been going on among Palestinians themselves, and between Palestinians and their Israeli occupiers... The only apparent difference in the streets of Gaza was the change in colors off the graffiti, which became brighter. However the misery, the trauma, and the violence remained.*¹⁸

The street murals found in the West Bank express this urgent dialogue with the community. The series of murals pictured below extend their scope to the larger Diaspora, to express solidarity with the struggles of the Iraqi people. These murals depict the strength of the Palestinian people tearing down the image of Ariel Sharon (figure 14) and bolstering the spirits of their community by standing up with the Iraqis (figure 13).

¹⁷ Sherwell, Tina. "Visiting Artists Features."
<http://www.visitingarts.org.uk/features/V43ai.html>

¹⁸ Porter, Venetia. "Collecting Now". Artenews.com. 6 August 2003 p.5



Figure 13. Gaza mural, 2004



Figure 14. Gaza mural, 2004

III West Bank Wall as a Source of Artistic Inspiration

Since construction began on the West Bank Wall in 2002, the route of the Wall, and accompanying fences and trenches, has changed several times. The wall has become like a snake meandering over the countryside, looping around settlements and blocking off roads. The original route of the West Bank Wall annexed acres of land assigned to the Palestinians in the 1967 Green Line Treaty¹⁹. The Israeli government keeps a close ownership over the Wall and the checkpoints, unlike other international borders, which have representatives from both sides on patrol. Its sections of 25-foot high concrete surfaces winding through villages and encircling cities have become an outdoor art gallery. Palestinian residents have expressed a concern that by turning the wall into a space for art, it will become a permanent part of the landscape. Palestinian artists are wary of covering up the brutal presence of the Wall with bright colors and pretty paintings. Because they are more removed from the daily struggles that the West Bank Wall imposes, Western artists express a more cerebral interest in the Wall as a metaphor and symbol of disconnection and oppressive politics.

In 2005, the Supreme Court of Israel ruled that the original route of the West Bank Wall operated as an illegal land grab according to the 1967 boundary agreement. The court ordered that the route be redrawn to follow the Green Line. In July and August of 2005, the Israeli government set about removing Jewish settlements in the West Bank that were built on the Palestinian side of the Green Line so that the Wall could be rerouted. The bulldozing of the settlements that would displace thousands of Jewish settlers was met with mass protesting and political unrest. Near chaos ensued as some

¹⁹ Mathew Kalman, "Israeli Barrier draws artists to a Cause," *The Boston Globe*, April 27, 2006 p. A18

Jewish settlers protested their removal from the region by chaining themselves in front of the bulldozers, which were in the process of knocking down their homes and caused weeks of stand offs with the Israeli government. In the midst of the unrest, nine large stencil murals appeared on the West Bank Barrier Wall. The painting of a small child climbing through a hole in the wall enveloped by the clear blue sky of freedom was discovered on the West Bank Wall next to the Ramallah checkpoint; CNN, the BBC, NBC, The New York Times and The Guardian as the new symbol of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict picked it up. Seemingly, overnight the graffiti stencilist from Bristol, England who called himself “Banksy” became an internationally acclaimed political artist.



Figure 15, Banksy "Art Attack", 2005

Banksy’s murals instantly communicated across all language barriers what hundreds of breathless reporters, with microphones and flak vests, could not. The murals

focused international attention away from the street protests and towards the Palestinian cause of the immediate conflict, the West Bank Wall. The protests showed that the presence of the wall now disturbed the settlement movement for the Israeli citizens as well as inhibiting the freedoms of the Palestinians. Banksy spoke about his experience painting the West Bank Wall in a recent interview with Shepard Fairey. When asked how he was able to get away with painting murals that favored the Palestinian perspective on the Israeli controlled Barrier Wall, he responded,

*I have sympathy for both sides in that conflict, and I did receive a lot of support from regular Israelis, but if the Israeli government had known we were going over there to do a sustained painting attack on their wall, there's no way that we'd have been tolerated. They are very paranoid. They do not want the wall to be an issue in the West. On the Israeli side of the wall they bank it up with soil and plant flowers so you do not even know its there. On the Palestinian side it is just an f**king huge mass of concrete.²⁰*

The murals appeared in the media consciousness like ghosts, without warning or explanation. They needed no commentary or context. The images were clear and simple yet poignant in their precision. Fairey explains the power of Banksy's work: "The images are brilliant and funny, yet so simple and accessible that even children can find the meaning in them²¹." Banksy is a new breed of graffiti artist who effortlessly enfold the danger and competition of traditional graffiti with the aesthetics and social awareness of the pop art world. Banksy understands that the power of graffiti is in the action, the surprise and the disrespect for social conformity. He declares himself to be a graffiti writer instead of a street artist, explaining, "Graffiti equals amazing to me. Every other

²⁰Banksy. "BANKSY; the Man, the Myth, the Miscreant." Swindle, no 8, p.91

²¹Fairey, Shepard. "BANKSY; the Man, the Myth, the Miscreant." Swindle, no 8, p.83

type of art compared to graffiti is a step down ... if you operate outside of graffiti; you operate at a lower level. Other art has less to offer people. It means less, and is weaker²².” His images are taken from popular culture, advertisements and symbols of authority, and stencils are reminiscent of Warhol’s screen prints in that he repeats iconographic images altering them slightly each time. Turning the familiar into the absurd, Banksy takes Warhol’s commentary on pop culture and updates it to relate to the current state of complete media saturation. He says, “Warhol got it wrong: in the future, so many people are going to be famous that one day everybody will end up being anonymous for fifteen minutes²³.”

Through stenciling, Banksy creates work that is satirical and humorous. Banksy employs a sense of the wit and playful rebelliousness in his work. His murals playfully poke fun at the somberness and gravity of the situation, and in doing so usurps the power in the symbol of the West Bank Wall and uses it against itself. When painting the murals Banksy met with some of the same questions from local residents that Thierry Noir did twenty years earlier.

²²Banksy. ”BANKSY; the Man, the Myth, the Miscreant.” Swindle, no 8, p.84

²³ Banksy. ”BANKSY; the Man, the Myth, the Miscreant.” Swindle, no 8, p.84



(Right) Figure 16. Living room, Berlin Wall, unknown artist

(Left) Figure 17. "Window on to the West Bank," Banksy, West Bank Wall, 2005



(Right) Figure 12. Berlin Wall Mural, unknown artist

(Left) Figure 13. "Unwelcome Interruption", Banksy, West Bank Wall, 2005

Through stenciling, Banksy creates work that is satirical and humorous. It is not the people that he is rejecting, but the power structure. His art is filled with a joy and candidness, but at the same time rebelliousness and illegality. The viewer is left

wondering how he can get away with doing the work that he does. Like most Graffiti writers, he brags about escaping from the cops and about the times he has been caught. However, he has built such a strong bond with the public, that the police seem almost happy not to chase him too fast.

Banksy represents the dichotomy of the graffiti writer as famous and anonymous at the same time. In the article “In the Beginning there was the Word,” published in Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, James E Walmesley discusses this peculiar situation in which graffiti writers find them selves,

Due to its very nature, graffiti is a primarily anonymous act. Those who participate in this world are operating in the strange situation of demanding to be noticed and, at the same time, hiding behind an alias. The focus of the movement is not on the people involved, but on their work. [They are] as anonymous in their art as they are in society²⁴.

In this age of overwhelming celebrity, a public figure that actively side steps the limelight is refreshing. He never attends his art openings, which have become star studded media events, as a culture, we have become so accustomed to people angling for fame and attention that we have engrained skepticism about anyone in the media’s focus. Banksy’s rejection of celebrity gives his work credibility and makes him more than a self-opinionated artist; it makes him a revolutionary and an activist. Of his status as a famous unknown he has said, “I have no interest in ever coming out. ... It is a pretty safe bet that the reality of me would be a crushing disappointment to a couple of fifteen year

²⁴ James E. Walmesley, “In the Beginning there was the Word,” Beautiful Losers: Contemporary art and Street Culture, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, March 13 – May 23, p. 197

old kids out there²⁵.” Banksy has put the spotlight squarely on his work, which appears mysteriously. He is able to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time and he understands that the only matter of any importance is the powerful, evocative and startling images he produces. As long as his identity is unknown, no one will be able to criticize his work on the basis of his personal background. His anonymity gives his work strength and, as he put it, “Nobody ever listened to me until they didn’t know who I was²⁶.”

Banksy takes his images from the lowest bastions of western culture: images that are so prevalent that they are invisible, tacky, overproduced, over commercialized. He scrapes the underbelly of western popular culture and represents it to the viewer as a social commentary on mundane modern life. Banksy operates within the realm of Western culture and the domination of western ideals is his primary subject matter. He rarely deals with personal circumstances and intimate emotion or even class struggles. His battle is with the intrusion and control of the capitalist system.

The figures painted in Banksy’s murals on the West Bank Wall are not Arabic or Israeli; they are very clearly European in the dress and features. The mural entitled “Unwelcome Intervention” depicts two blond haired European children playing innocently at a tropical beach. The painting looks like a post card from a trip to Florida. The children are done in black and white stencil. The children appear to be trapped in the concrete of the wall. Banksy uses a combination of wheat paste and stencil work to show the contrast between the solid, cold two dimensionality of the wall and the cheesy, photo

²⁵ Banksy. ”BANKSY; the Man, the Myth, the Miscreant.” Swindle Magazine, Summer 2006, no 8, p.84

²⁶ Banksy, Wall and Piece, Century, Random House Group Limited, United Kingdom 2005, p. 13

realism of the tropical scene. The scenes of Paradise that he shows peeking through the cracks in the wall are not the Paradise of an autonomous Palestinian state but scenes of vacation destinations of wealthy Westerners. While the tropical scene is shown as peeking through the cracks in the cement, the contrast between the kitschy image and the reality of the location give the image an eerie quality. The title “Unwelcome Intervention” has pointed multiple connotations, implying either the unwelcome interruption of adults, or children, as well as the intervention of the Israelis into Palestine. The wall itself is a very literal unwelcome intervention into the lives of the Palestinians.



Figure 18. Banksy "Unwelcome Intervention", 2005

Banksy's "Wall" murals are imbued with a quirky, whimsical quality that is decidedly British. It is a European framework placed on a starkly non-European culture. The

wistful look at a childhood ideal long gone by juxtaposed against the reality of the war torn landscape gives the piece a universal resonance.



Figure 19. Banksy, “Escapism” 2005

Banksy is painting what he knows as a European. It would have come across as condescending if he had attempted to paint in the style of the Palestinians. The murals would not have the same universal resonance. The lightness and sentimentality of the work is especially poignant when contrasted with the local graffiti that already decorated the wall when he painted it. The wall is speckled in red and black spray painted letters, invoking the “Intifada” against Israel. The local graffiti is aimed at uniting the locals in their struggle against Israel, speaks to the direct community, and acts like a message board for the culture.

The Palestinians have a long history of political graffiti. They use it to help unite their community into one voice, to remember the dead and martyred, and to rejoice in the hope of peace. The local work is very specific and direct. The murals by Banksy are from a decidedly outsider perspective. The Palestinians with whom Banksy talked were not positive about his murals. This sentiment is reflected in a conversation that he had with a local man while painting one of the murals. He transcribed the following exchange for his website and it has been repeated in several articles.

*An old Palestinian man said his painting made the wall look beautiful. Banksy thanked him, only to be told: 'We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall. Go home.'*²⁷

This dialogue shows the indifference and mild hostility many of the Palestinian have towards the work. The paintings do not speak to them. The murals glorify the wall by showing it as a symbol of the struggle and of oppression. On April 27, 2006, Mathew Kalman of the *Boston Globe* published a reaction from a local souvenir salesperson living near one of the Banksy murals on the edge of Bethlehem. The Banksy mural depicts two over-sized flat black and white stenciled armchairs. Behind them, a window opens to a scene of the Swiss Alps with spring flowers peeking out through the snow. The local man, Mohammed Fathi, said

*When I see these two chairs, I understand there is no one sitting there to talk about our situation, on both sides. There is a very beautiful place through the window, but we cannot see it because of the wall. We do not have many visitors these days, but they all come here to see the wall. Its' become like a place of pilgrimage.*²⁸

²⁷ Mathew Kalman, "Israel Barrier Wall Draws artists to a Cause." The Boston Globe. Thursday, April 27, 2006 p. A18

²⁸ Mathew Kalman, "Israel Barrier Wall Draws artists to a Cause." The Boston Globe. Thursday, April 27, 2006 p. A18

The Wall is changing the economic and social structure of the West Bank, by blocking off access to Holy sites of pilgrimage and replacing them with views of the fractionalization, fear and insecurity of modern global politics.



Figure 20. Banksy "A Window on the West Bank", 2005

In July of 2004, muralists Eric Drooker and Susan Greene from San Francisco traveled to the region to create a mural on the West Bank Wall in the Salfit District. Drooker and Greene are members of San Francisco based organization “Break the Silence Mural Project” and “Anarchists Against the Wall”, which is a group made up primarily of Israelis, and American Jews, but also works with members of the Palestinian community to educate the public about the West Bank Wall. The muralists chose a

section of the West Bank Wall that encircles the home of the Aamer family on four sides. The family of Hani Aamer lives in the West Bank village of Mas'ha. Their family's home is situated in between the two main gates that allow access to the village. After the Aamers' refused money to vacate, a twenty-four foot high wall of concrete was erected in front of their home, cutting off their access to the village²⁹. The muralist arrived at the home with paint and design plans. Local children and friends from the village helped them complete the colorful mural that spans the length of the eighty-foot wall in front of the Aamers' home³⁰.

The mural (figure 19) was painted in vibrant colors and consisted of a field of bright green along the bottom of the Wall interspersed with red, yellow and blue creatures and flowers. The green clearly represents the dream of an uninterrupted fertile landscape and waves across the bottom of the wall with fluid motion. The mural is done in the innocent style of children's' drawings. The dominant figures are a fish and a yellow bird, outlined in red soaring from the green landscape to the top of the wall. The tone of the mural is one of unbridled hope and joy. There are no traces of the anger and pain of victim-hood, only the jubilant expression of an undying hope. The mural contains no spots of shadow or other efforts at realistic representation. The muralists chose paint with almost day-glow vibrancy. The mural's political message is in the juxtaposition of the purity and dreaminess of the painting against the brutal concrete reality of the West Bank Wall. Susan Greene explains that, "Where dark concrete loomed, a yellow bird now

²⁹ Susan Greene, Three Cities Against the Wall, New York, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv, November 9, 2005. Catalog published by Voxpop, Brooklyn NY, p.52- 53

³⁰ Susan Greene, Three Cities Against the Wall, New York, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv, November 9, 2005. Catalog published by Voxpop, Brooklyn NY, p.52- 53

soars from a lush green valley dotted with red flowers³¹.” The painting conveys a feeling of the universal spirit of youth, without reference to religion or nationality. The feeling of freedom it represents is one without political delegations and cultural divisions. The mural looks completely out of place against the barbed wire and iron rods of the West Bank Wall.



Figure 21. Eric Drooker and Susan Greene, Mas'ha mural and view of the mural on the Wall from the interior of the Aamers' home, 2005

A common thread in the Israeli Graffiti made by Western artists on the West Bank Wall is the desire to cross the cultural divisions in Israel by relating to universal human emotions. An installation piece by R. Cohen Gat, an artist from Tel Aviv, and M. Gerstel, a filmmaker from New York, for the “Three Cities Against the Wall” exhibition entitled “Next Year in Jerusalem” (figure 20); more distinctly unifies the cultural history of the Jewish people with that of the Palestinians. The work connects the two cultures that are usually placed at odds with each other, bringing together two histories of exile and

³¹ Susan Greene, Three Cities Against the Wall, New York, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv, November 9, 2005. Catalog published by Voxpop, Brooklyn NY, p.52

displacement. The installation consisted of a long white couch positioned at the foot of the West Bank Wall. The artists chose a particularly barren and desolate section of the wall with no other markings or signs of human contact near by. The presence of the white couch is swallowed up by the enormity of the endless, cold, blank, cement.



Figure 22. "Next Year in Jerusalem", R. Cohen Gat and M. Gerstel, 2005

“Next year in Jerusalem” is the prayer recited by Jews throughout the world in the traditional Passover Seder. The repetition of this little prayer connects the Passover table of the present with all of those that have come before in the long line since the Jews were expelled from Israel. By titling the installation with this phrase, the artists are bringing to mind the feeling of longing for a lost home, and sense of belonging. The artists are

recalling the pain of exile and displacement that is understood by all Jews as a part of their cultural history. By reciting the prayer “Next year in Jerusalem” every year, Jerusalem has become symbol of Paradise regained. It represents an intangible ideal, the end of suffering and dispersal, the return to the safety and security of community. The recitation of the prayer every year renews the connection of the individual to the larger tribe. The phrase is inextricably tied to a feeling of family, and the comfort of domesticity and shared tradition.

By placing the white couch in front of the West Bank Wall, the artists are contrasting an image of safety and comfort with the Orwellian concrete, effigy of insecurity and fear: the West Bank Wall. The sculpture implies that the dream of the Jewish people of finding safety and home in Jerusalem is now shared with the Palestinians. For both cultures, Jerusalem now represents a return to the whole community after being scattered and dispersed. For both sides the dream of a peaceful and united homeland is increasingly unattainable. The reality of life in Israel only makes the symbol more powerful. The West Bank Wall blocks off communication and serves as a constant reminder of the dangers that go along with life in the Holy land.

The installation creates an interior world of domesticity against an external, impersonal, industrial scene. In this way, the sculpture relates to Thierry Noir’s installations on the Berlin Wall. Noir screwed in mundane items from everyday life, such as a kitchen sink and pairs of shoes, into the Berlin Wall³². The work of Noir, Gan and Gerstel combines items that are so harmless and ordinary that they are practically unseen

³² Thierry Noir,” The Story of the Berlin Wall”, www.galerie-noir.de/ArchivesEnglish/walleng.html, retrieved 10/25/2006

in normal life, with a structure of the military industrial machine. In doing so, they disarm the weapon of fear through humor and irreverence.

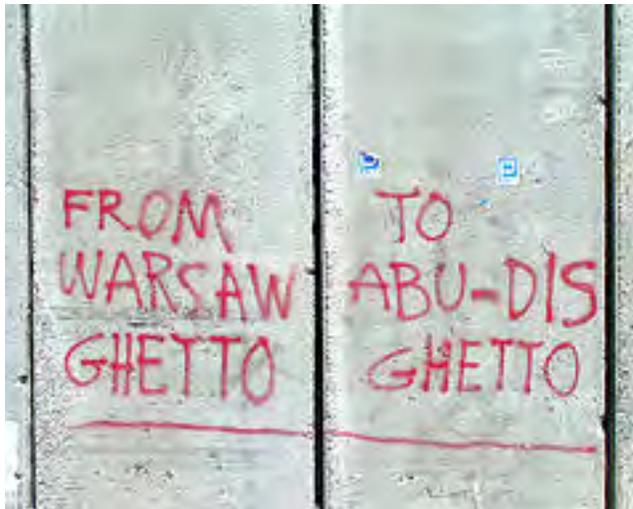


Figure 23. West Bank Wall, unknown artist

Sometimes the most powerful statement is the most direct. In the image above, an unknown artist has made a simple and direct connection between the history of the Jewish people and the current situation of the Palestinians. Both groups were stripped of the land and livelihood and forced to live in slums, both groups now have their own type of “Wailing Walls.” This writing clearly points out the irony of the Israeli citizens forcing their own history of injustice and victim-hood on to another group.

Palestinian and Arabic Graffiti on the wall focuses its attention on the Palestinian community. The art acts as a rallying cry among neighbors. It shows solidarity within a distinctive minority group and builds upon the budding Palestinian national identity. The artwork acts as a call to arms, instead of a cry for help. Palestinian artists tend to use a darkened palette, primarily relying on the black, red, white and green of the Palestinian flag. Their new autonomy as an independent state has given them the freedom to openly

display their flag. The Palestinian flag remains a powerful decisive emblem of rebellion and national identity.



Figure 24. Groups of Palestinians gather to paint large replicas of the Palestinian flag on a section of the West Bank Wall, artist unknown

A group of artists from New York had the idea of conducting an art exhibition in three cities simultaneously. The exhibition was entitled “Three Cities against the Wall” and was held in New York, Tel Aviv and Ramallah in November 2005. It displayed work of American, Israeli and Palestinian artists that was dedicated to the goal of bringing international attention to the moral and humanitarian crisis created by the West Bank Barrier Wall. The artwork collected in all these exhibitions show distinct differences in the Western and Arabic interpretations of the West Bank Wall.

The work of Fawzia Reda on the West Bank Wall exemplifies the insular quality of the Arabic work vs. the universalist art from the western perspective. Reda is an Egyptian artist and activist who has lived and worked in Israel, Palestine and the United

States to promote Arabic arts and culture.³³ Reda painted the popular newspaper comic character “Henthala” on the Wall surrounded by the tricolors of the Palestinian flag and layers of other Arabic graffiti. Reda submitted a photograph of wall art; entitled “Writings on the Wall, 2005,” for the “Three Cities Against the Wall” exhibition. Henthala is an important symbol for the Palestinian people. The character was created by Naji al-Ali, who was exiled from Palestine with his family at age 10. In the 1960s, he spent time in a Lebanese jail as a political prisoner. It was while he was in prison that he developed the Henthala character. Henthala is a ten-year-old Palestinian refugee, who will only continue to age when he is allowed to return to Palestine. The character was published as a part of a political comic strip in Arabic newspapers for decades. According to Reda:

Henthala, which means bitterness, stood as a quiet witness to the suffering and dignity of the Palestinian people. ‘Henthala is not a fat, spoiled, comfortable child. He is bare-footed like the barefoot children in the refugee camps... Notwithstanding his ugly looks, he has a pure heart ... His hands are clasped behind his back as a sign of rejection during a phase that this region is undergoing ‘solutions’ offered by the United States and the system’ ... On the Separation Wall, Henthala’s presence reflects the persistence of a political conscience and a remarkable vision. It gives the Wall and the figure, both, binding value and consequence, marking a fusion of realities, more that thirty years apart –from the prison walls of Lebanon to the Separation Wall in Palestine.³⁴

³³Biographies, Three Cities Against the Wall: Ramallah/ Tel Aviv/ New York, November 9, 2005, Voxpop publishing, p.107

³⁴Fawzia Reda, Three Cities Against the Wall: Ramallah/ Tel Aviv/ New York, November 9, 2005, Voxpop publishing, p.75



Figure 25. "Writings on the Wall", Fawzia Reda, 2005

Henthala symbolizes an innocent sufferer of Western greed and Israeli occupation. The character is pitiful and embodies the victimization of the Palestinian people. The Henthala character is an insular reference to Palestinian popular culture that would not be widely understood outside the Arabic culture. Reda paints him “In the midst of poetry lines, patriotic slogans and Qur’an verses that speak of patience and peace all overlapping in a passionate malange of graffiti³⁵.” The Henthala graffiti unites the history of the Palestinian People with the current political situation, turning their chronicle of suffering at the hands of the west into a source of dignity and pride that has become an

³⁵ Fawzia Reda, Three Cities Against the Wall: Ramallah/ Tel Aviv/ New York, November 9, 2005, Voxpop publishing, p.75

important aspect of their national identity. The struggle to remain a connected and united ethnic group throughout the Diaspora is an ongoing motif in the work of Palestinian artists. Reda's work is building upon an open and shared past using a colloquial visual language.



Figure 26. unknown artist, West Bank Wall

The character of Henthala reappears in another mural on the West Bank Wall by an unknown artist. This time his back is turned to the viewer and he is peeing a blue streak on to the wall. The character is rendered more formally as a cartoon, with black outlining and a solid white fill. In this painting, the patches on his clothing, bare feet and shabby appearance are clearly emphasized. In the rear window of pick-up trucks across the United States the image of Calvin from the popular American cartoon strip “Calvin and Hobbes” appears, peeing on car logos and assorted pop culture slogans. When

viewed as a Palestinian version of Calvin, the image of Henthala is a decisive critique of the disparity in wealth and life style between the Americanized Western world and the impoverished Palestinian community.



Figure 27. "A view to 'Peace'", artist unknown, West Bank Wall

The stenciled mural on the West Bank Wall, entitled "A view to 'Peace' in figure 25," bears a strong resemblance to Banksy's stencils but from a darker, less western perspective. The mural, by an unknown artist, depicts two female figures, dressed in Islamic headscarves, standing on either side of a large window. The window is barred, like a prison, separating the viewer from the lush landscape with black bars and a perspective of thick concrete. This places the viewer and the female figures on the inside

of a jail cell looking out. The scenery is of neatly cultivated farmland in the fore ground and an olive orchard in the background. On the right side of the background, the landscape darkens into black. Over the crest of a hill, a sun shines.



Figure 28. Unknown Mexican muralist, West Bank Wall 2004

In October and November of 2004, a group of artists from Mexico traveled to Palestine to paint on the West Bank Wall³⁶. They chose a section of the Wall near Bethlehem that was still under construction. They relied on help from international activist groups and local children to complete the murals. One of the murals shows a tan lion devouring a large white bird. It is a gruesome scene, with the lion's sharp teeth scoring the bird's back with rows of blood. The bird appears to be screaming in pain with

³⁶ www.RCNV.org/gaza/pictures/htm

its head surrounded by a cloud of white feathers. The lion is marked with a picture of an oil well and the money symbol. Underneath the lion, the word “Hypocrisy” is painted in white with a Star of David dotting the “I”. Making a loud statement about Israel’s role as the villain.

The murals convey a feeling of solidarity with the Palestinian people. One of the Mexican artists was known to be working with the Zapatista revolutionary movement in the Chiapas region of Mexico³⁷. The Chiapas region is one of the poorest and most financially depressed in Mexico, yet it contains the majority of the country’s supplies of fresh water and other raw resources. The Zapatistas, operate in the same fashion as the PLO or Hamas in Palestine, they fight for greater autonomy over the region while also operating as the primary local governing body. The artists are working as outsiders from half a world away, yet they can directly relate to the plight of the Palestinians and their feelings of pain and frustration. Their mural is more aggressive and direct, with a darker and bloodier tone, than a lot of work from other Western artists.

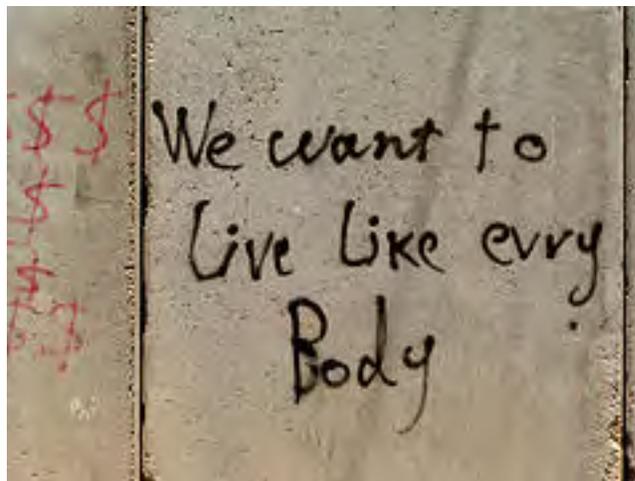


Figure 29. West Bank Wall, artist unknown

³⁷ www.RCNV.org/gaza/pictures/htm

It does not always take buckets of paint and teams of artists to get a message across. In figure 29, a simple statement resonates from the cold concrete barrier. “We want to live like every Body,” is an earnest declaration, written in the shaky handwriting and with misspelling of someone, not entirely comfortable with English. It is an effort to clarify that, like everyone, Palestinians want freedom and respect, to be treated as equal human beings, instead of terrorists and prisoners.

Conclusion

The Land of Israel is unlike any other in the world in that it contains locations central to the histories of three of the world’s largest religions; Christianity, Islam and Judaism. These traditions began in Israel and spread throughout the world. The Graffiti Art on the West Bank Wall reflects this diversity in diasporic influences and the distinct visual traditions of European Fine Art, American Graffiti and traditional Arabic cultures at work. The graffiti medium adds an inherent rebellious spirit and subversive outlook to the dominating concrete surfaces of the West Bank Wall. The work on the West Bank Wall is a continuation in the story begun with the color-filled murals of the Berlin Wall. The wide range of styles and themes visible in the artwork on the West Bank Wall display the influence of global politics on cultural identity and visual language.

The graffiti and murals on the West Bank Wall are more directly political than the work on the Berlin wall, which was often spattered with references to music and American pop culture. The work on the West Bank Wall is more aggressive and drenched in the pain and sorrow as the conflict claims more victims every day. This is due to the fact that the West Bank Wall is not merely a symbol of the struggle but is a major

component of the daily fight. It is not a slumbering monster, but is an active weapon of the confrontation.

Themes and images from the Berlin Wall are echoed on the West Bank Wall twenty years later. The comparison of the images shows how the tools and techniques of graffiti art have developed and artists have become more sophisticated in the visual language they employ. Yet, the desire for freedom, the need to share in a communal well of hope and rebellion remains the same.

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