



2018

## What the Walls Say: Finding Meaning and Value in Tel Aviv's Street Art

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What the Walls Say:  
*Finding Meaning and Value in Tel Aviv's Street  
Art*

Rachel Rushgold Bird has completed the requirements  
for Honors in the Anthropology Department  
May 2018

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# What the Walls Say: *Finding Meaning and Value in Tel Aviv's Street Art*

Rachel Rushgold Bird

Honors Thesis  
Anthropology

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## Abstract

This thesis explores street art in Tel Aviv, Israel through anthropological concepts of value. By defining street art as an interstitial practice—one that exists between permeable, socially defined boundaries and is characterized differently by different power structures—I attempt to define some of the different regimes of value that apply to street art. Using the emerging market of “street art tours” as a fieldwork site, I look at how street art is presented and re-presented to both tourists and locals. By situating my research in a historical and geographic context, I hope to understand the ways different value schema, from economic to aesthetic to political and more, are overlaid in different ways by different actors onto the same works of art. I also address how these interstitial value schema, which can be contradictory and seemingly oppositional, interact within the systems of power that street art operates within. I argue that these power structures cause different actors in the street art world to privilege and prioritize different forms of valuation.

Keywords: street art, graffiti, public art, value, interstitiality, Israel, Tel Aviv

In memory of Hannah Bladon  
December 1, 1996-April 14, 2017  
May her memory be a blessing  
זיכרונה לברכה

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## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Professor David Strohl, for his tireless work in whipping me and this thesis into shape. I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Winifred Tate, for her comments and help with turning this piece from a draft into something resembling a thesis. Thanks to the entire Colby College Anthropology department for supporting me through my four years at Colby, and for guiding and enriching my experience as a student. Special thanks to Professors Catherine Besteman and Britt Halvorson for teaching some of my favorite classes of my college career. Congratulations to my fellow Anthropology Honors Thesis writers, Charlie Gauvin and Alyssa Lang; writing alongside you two has been an honor and a privilege. Thanks also to my roommate, Tonayo Crow, for putting up with the piles of thesis-related library books that have cluttered our room all year—your patience is much appreciated! I would also like to acknowledge the financial support I received from the Presidential Scholars Opportunity Grant Fund, and the Eitan Shalom Green Research Award. This support made my field work possible, and my thesis could not have been written without it. Finally, thanks to my parents, Jennifer Gold and Edward Bird, for giving me a lifetime's worth of opportunities—I owe it all to you both.

*Both contemporary art and anthropology have culture as [their] object... Art has increasingly become part of cultural commentary and of political discourse, involving a reflexive critique of... society (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 11).*

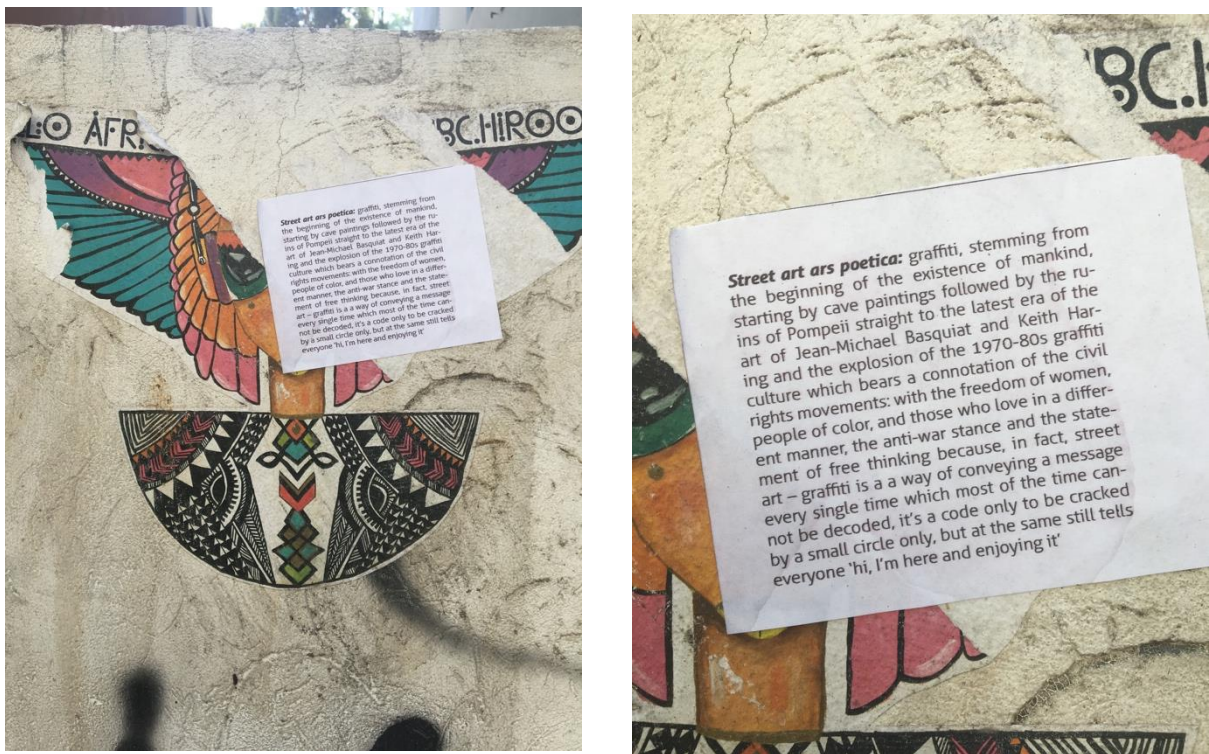


Figure 1. “Street art ars poetica,” and detail, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 2017.  
[All images are from the author’s personal photos unless otherwise noted.]



## Introduction

In this thesis, I am inspired by Andrea Mubi Brighenti's definition of "graffiti writing," a term he uses to describe graffiti in northeastern Italy. Mubi Brighenti addresses the difficulty of clearly defining the graffiti and street art (and by extension, understanding the overlapping fields of value ascribed to it) by pointing to the ways in which "It cannot always be clearly separated from a number of other practices, including art and design (as aesthetic work), criminal law (as vandalism crime), politics (as a message of resistance and liberation), and market (as merchandisable product)" (Mubi Brighenti 2010: 316). Although Mubi Brighenti does not specifically address value in his article, all of the different overlapping fields that he aligns as tangential to street art all create and express value in different ways.

Mubi Brighenti uses the blurring of boundaries between the overlapping practices he lists to argue that "[graffiti] writing appears as an interstitial practice," wherein "different social actors hold inevitably different conceptions" about the practice and what it constitutes (Mubi Brighenti 2010: 317). He claims that in the case of interstitial practices, the only common thread throughout is the physical materiality of the practice itself, in this case several cans of paint and a wall. Everything else—the meaning and legality and value of a piece—is overlaid later, in different ways by different people.

It is this interstitiality that drew me to street art in the first place. Although the process of viewing all art involves some degree of interpretation, museum didactics and art book captions and even the physical space of a museum all provide interpretive lenses that direct the viewer to a conclusion about the art. These spaces and guiding

tools also work to construct regimes of value around the piece. Carol Duncan defines the works these spaces do within the theoretical framework of ritual:

*Art museum and gallery space is viewed here as a carefully constructed stage for a specific kind of secular ritual...the visitor's individual choice to enter a liminality zone in which a state of exaltation can be reached through contemplation of, and engagement—perhaps even a sense of communion—with, works of art presented as paragons of aesthetic beauty [within] the western model of aesthetic appreciation as a transforming, spiritual process (Duncan 2005: 78).*

If a piece of art is in a museum, the viewer is primed by curators, exhibit designers, docents, and security guards to perceive it as valuable. For example, although some modern art (Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko for example) can seem simplistic and “easy” to viewers, by being housed in a space that denotes talent and value these pieces are elevated to a status of “fine art” simply by virtue of the company they keep. This priming can lead to unexpected (and often ridiculous) situations, like when a pair of glasses on the floor at San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art (Hunt 2016) or a store-bought pineapple on a table at an art exhibition (Bilefsky 2017) were both treated by museum-goers as “real art.” Aside from the parallels to Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaist movement that this brings up (Zapperi 2010), these cultural movements are tribute to the power that a museum space has to encourage visitors to give art (or pineapples and eyeglasses!) cultural value.

I want to acknowledge that art within museums, especially contemporary art, can also take on interstitial value and challenge the public’s conceptions of what constitutes

fine art. Additionally, fine art installations outside of museums and the field of public art can also bridge these gaps. The links between graffiti/street art and museums is explored by Mieke Bal in her book *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* through the concept of culture as performative and art as a dialogue conversation between a creator and a viewer (Bal 1999). In Bal's theoretical framework, "the museum (and the practice of graffiti) is to be understood as a conceptual metaphor for the functioning of cultural processes" (Bal 1999, Neef 2007: 419). Although Bal uses the connection between graffiti and museums to explore cultural processes, she also acknowledges that graffiti is simultaneously "image-writing, both linguistic and visual, both allographic writing and autographic image, a doubling that problematizes... conventional dichotom[ies]" (Bal 1999, Neef 2007: 421). Bal's description of the problematization of dichotomies inherent in graffiti (as opposed to fine art in museum spaces) relates to Mubi Brighenti's description of graffiti and street art as interstitial image making practices. Drawing from these theoretical frameworks, I believe that street art, which is typically created for free by (often) anonymous or pseudonymous artists in a public context is uniquely positioned to reveal insights about our conceptions of value and meaning that we assign to art, especially when it is outside of contexts that would prime us to define it as art.

Within a museum or gallery space, various actors from docents to curators to security guards reinforce the valuation of fine art pieces as economically, culturally, and aesthetically significant (Carol 2009). With that understanding, I began this thesis by asking the question: how does art outside of the museum's value-laden context become valued? I believe the interstitiality of graffiti and street art both gives it value and also explains how such different and often contradictory value schema are placed upon it. Interstitiality, by definition, means that different actors in approaching a work from

different positions will interpret the same work in different ways and assign different values to that same work. Each viewer creates a hierarchy of valuation that they assign to the work based on which structures of power they are operating within and what role they conceptualize street art as taking in a particular situation.

For example, a store owner assessing whether to paint over a new street art piece that was painted on the side of their shop (and thereby assessing its value versus the value of removing the piece and restoring the blankness of the wall) might prioritize the potential of the piece's aesthetic value to attract new customers. As a businessperson, the shop owner's priorities might lie in the market potential of street art to draw new customers. This creates a value hierarchy that places the economic value as the most important, while also creating value in aesthetics in terms of the economic impacts of aesthetic value to draw new customers.

Conversely, a politician who is interested in reelection might prioritize street art's political and space-making value. As gentrification efforts by municipalities shift street art away from politically contentious subjects towards aesthetically impactful and socially permissible subject matter, a politician might prioritize the ability of street art to assert local ownership over public spaces. This could come in the form of supporting public art mural projects that increase property value (which also falls under an economic valuation structure). However, it could also be expressed in that same politician opposing subversive street art that seeks to diminish the power of the municipality through communities asserting ownership over the streets they live on.

Although these are potentially contradictory desires and outcomes, both hypothetical scenarios demonstrate the politician's prioritization of value schema that relate to street art's political power within communities. The contextual importance of

the people assigning the value, the power structures they are benefiting from or competing against, and the content and location of a specific work all come together to influence which interstitial field of value an individual will prioritize in valuing a piece of street art.

One of my informants, a street art tour guide named Chana [all names have been changed to protect my informant's privacy], articulates the valuation schema that explains the difference (from her perspective) between graffiti and street art in terms of viewer relatability. For her, what makes street art special is that a viewer can project onto the piece and create stories about the (typically anonymous or pseudonymous) artist. Her explanation points to the interstitial nature of street art: because it is outside of a museum— a context populated by actors who imbue it with predetermined cultural value that is associated with museums—the audience is free to assign whatever value and meaning that they feel is appropriate to a piece.

I first started this project because, as an art student, I was baffled why anyone (especially artists living in a capitalist system that perpetuates the “starving artist” stereotype!!) would create artwork for free. Much of Tel Aviv’s street art is aesthetically beautiful and demonstrates deep technical skill and mastery of the medium that is on par with work being sold in galleries and exhibited in museums. If an artist is talented enough artistically to create work that is aesthetically valuable, why do some of Tel Aviv’s street artists ignore the possibility for economic value?

I believe that there is also some vulnerability in the act of making artwork and putting it out on the streets without the supporting infrastructure that would imbue it with the cultural/historical/aesthetic value that museums provide. However, with that

vulnerability comes freedom: if there's not pressure to make work that is economically valued, artists can explore techniques and styles that might not be commercially feasible. Furthermore, I believe that the vulnerability of literally putting one's work out there on the street makes street art more relatable and appealing (and therefore valuable).

Street art is divorced from the value-laden context art is usually found in, but it also exists in an interstitial space between multiple regimes of value (Appadurai 1986). The combination of street art's lack of "baggage" that a museum context would bring combined with the interwoven "baggage" that other intersecting fields overlay allows street art to be interpreted as anything or everything. Viewers are free to place their own conceptions of value onto a piece, and each individual's hierarchy of these overlapping and often contradictory explanations allow street art to exist in an in-between space: breaking the boundaries between vandalism and fine art, between revitalization and degradation.

## Methods

In my ethnographic analysis, I structure my writing around a “street art tour” I took in December 2017. My focus on street art tourism and the way tours and tour guides present and re-present street art and street artists evolved for a variety of reasons. Although I began my research with the intention of understanding the street artists themselves, I had difficulty finding informants and contacts within the street art community—an issue that was compounded by my fieldwork being cut short by a serious bout of the flu! Furthermore, my planned fieldwork trip to Palestinian areas of the border wall and the Banksy hotel in Bethlehem had to be cancelled due to safety and security concerns involving protests after Donald Trump’s announcement regarding recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on December 6, 2017. After doing what fieldwork I could during my limited time in Israel, I returned to the United States and began piecing through my fieldnotes.

I was particularly struck by the alternately insightful and scattered commentary and narration of one of my tour guides, Chana. I met Chana during what I initially conceived of as an introductory tour of Tel Avivian street art that I hoped would center me in the field and provide an initial perspective on street art. In reading through Chana’s commentary, I was fascinated by her multitude of different (and often contradictory) explanations and understandings of street artists and their work. Given my initial questions about value and street art—and my struggle to situate street art within an economic valuation context for my literature review—the commodification of street art through a tourist market seemed particularly relevant. In analyzing my conversations with Chana, I constructed an overarching thematic focus that centered on Chana’s seeming inability to come up with a singular, concrete answer to questions

about street artists' motivations and the role(s) street art plays in Tel Aviv. In trying to understand Chana's various and contradicting perspectives, I stumbled upon the work of Andrea Mubi Brighenti, whose definition of the interstuality of street art I discussed in my introduction to my ethnographic writing. The concept of street art as an interstitial cultural practice stuck with me and seemed to be one possible explanation for the wide range of value schema Chana seemed to assign street art (often within the same sentence!) In structuring my ethnographic analysis, I base each section on a different form of value or valuation that Chana (or other informants) defined in Tel Avivian street art.

Although Mubi Brighenti's concept of interstitiality provides a lens through which to understand how different valuation schema interact and are overlaid onto street art, I give the caveat that these interacting values aren't always equally (for lack of a better word!) *valued*. Although more than one of the valuation schema I discuss later in this thesis are typically relevant in understanding a single piece of street art, not every valuation schema is relevant to every piece of art or every actor who interacts with the work.

As an art student, I initially approached street art from a perspective of aesthetic value. However, I was also drawn to Chana's apparent lack of artistic background. Given the ways in which my artistic focus on formal beauty and aesthetics sometimes blinded me to the larger societal implications of a work, Chana's "layman" status [in the artistic sense], and her focus on tourism and education, provided a welcome counterpart to my own positioning. In situating my own role as a tourist, and also an anthropologist, I tried to use my ethnographic writing to privilege the voices of Tel Avivians in conjunction with anthropological theorists and my own analysis. Although my inability



to speak at length with any local street artists leaves me unable to represent their perspectives, my ethnographic focus on the ways in which other actors speak for or about street artists provides another avenue through which to approach the often-anonymous or pseudonymous field of street art.

## Literature review

## Value: approaching street art through economic anthropology

David Graeber (2016: 1-2) begins his book *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* by discussing three different understandings of the word "value": 1. value in a sociological sense, defined as "conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life;" 2. value in an economic sense, defined as the "degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them, and 3. value in a linguistic sense, defined as "meaningful difference." When I first posed my research question about value in Israeli street art, I was generally talking about a mixture of the first two types of value: sociological and economic. However, street art seems to defy easy categorization, existing in an interstitial space between a flexible hierarchy of overlapping categories. To begin with, street art's association with vandalism (especially by municipal authorities) gives it a negative tinge under a sociological definition of value. However, its beauty and links to fine art have historically been equated with visual and aesthetic pleasure, which pushes back on a solely negative cultural association. This is especially true in Israeli/Jewish cultures, which draw heavily on ornamentation and visual in religious ritual (Steinberg 1999).

Under an economic theory of value, street art is equally paradoxical; as Graeber says, "economic models claim that people are always trying to maximize something, whether that's money, power, status, etc" (Graeber 2016: 5). However, street artists don't clearly gain any benefit from their works. In street art, especially anonymous or pseudonymous street art that does not have an explicit political or social goal, what is the artist trying to maximize?

Karl Marx provides a different theory that seems especially relevant to understanding the relationship between economics and the art world and how “regimes of value” function throughout them (Appadurai 1986). As Graeber says, “for a Marxist, labor is, or should be, a matter of self-expression: the ideal is that of a fine craftsman, or even more, an artist, whose world is both an expression of her inner being, and a contribution to society as a whole” (Graeber 2016: 41). By focusing on self-expression through labor, instead of maximization through the results of that labor, Marx is able to explain why a street artist would make art in the absence of any direct benefit. Although this complements the seemingly selfless nature of street art, it still doesn't explain the relationship of value to the labor associated with it. If street art is “an expression of inner being” and “a contribution to society as a whole,” does it derive its value from that inner reflexivity? Or from the society's reaction to that self-expression? Graeber, in his analysis of Turner’s 1984 analysis of Kayapo societies, says that value is only derived from society’s reaction to self-expression if self-expression is one of “the pinnacles of social value” within that society (Graeber 2016: 74). One of the goals my fieldwork and research on Israeli street art was to determine whether that is the case in Tel Aviv.

In contrast to analysis that depends on the creator, in his seminal 1986 essay “The Social Life of Things,” Arjun Appadurai diverges from the Marxist belief that value arises from human labor, and instead draws from Georg Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* (1907), arguing that value does not derive from human labor, nor does it depend on the existence of a larger social or economic system involving supply and demand. Rather, value for Simmel and Appadurai arises from exchange.

Here, it is the relationships between the producers and consumers within a framework of exchange that creates value. Specifically within the art market, the editors of *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader* write that “Exchange is one of the ways in which value is created, and material objects are both expressions of value and objects which in themselves gain in value through processes of exchange” (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 10). The importance of exchange in valuation can be seen in the dual nature of art objects as expressions of value and also valued objects which gain that value through exchange. A work of art can take on many interstitial, layered value schema simultaneously.

For example, one of Degas’ sculptures of a ballet dancer is an expression of the value of feminine youth and beauty during the time it was created, because the choice of subject expresses what is valued by the artist and the culture within which they create that art. Once that sculpture is sold, the monetary value placed on the piece reinforces the cultural value on the concepts expressed in the piece—works of art that are not culturally relevant do not tend to sell as well (Shiner 2001). As the piece is sold and appraised and economically valued, it gains cultural capital as a work of fine art; the provenance and sales history of a work of art is often as important (if not more important) than the visual or aesthetic qualities of the work itself (Shiner 2001). However, this multi-layered valuation seems to depend on the work of art participating in an economic exchange market, where the various actors, from the artist to art dealers and collectors, ascribe economic value and cultural capital to the work as it moves through different “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986).

In his analysis of “regimes of value,” Appadurai does not limit himself to just studying “commodities” as the only objects to be sold in a commercial market. Rather, he looks “at the commodity potential of all things... breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on the total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption” (1986: 13). Following this expansive view of exchange, Appadurai suggests that it is possible to look at the “life history” of a single object as is it transferred between different “regimes of value” (1986: 5, 14). Of particular interest is his exploration of what he labels as “ethnic or tourist arts,” which he argues “constitutes a special commodity traffic, in which the group identities of producers are tokens for the status politics of consumers” (Appadurai 1986: 47).

This is readily apparent in the Tel Aviv *Shuk Ha'Carmel*, an immense open-air market where things ranging from fresh strawberries by the kilo and an Arabic pudding called Malabi to knock-off Kylie Jenner lipsticks and Hanes boxers are sold. Most relevant to the concept of “tourist arts,” though, are depictions of local Tel Aviv street art, found on posters and coasters and t-shirts and phone covers (figures 2-5). These representations are (to my knowledge) never sold by the creators of the original street art, but rather by enterprising individuals with a camera who aim to package the essence of Tel Aviv street life for the benefit of the tourists who flock to the market every day.



Figures 2-5. Stalls in the *Shuk Ha'Carmel*, Tel Aviv, Israel, December 2017.

In this context, the products sold by vendors are easy to understand within a capitalist economic lens; their value comes from how much tourists are willing to pay for them. The vendors attempt to maximize their profit and minimize their expenses. By extension, the images and art pieces that the vendors choose to reproduce are the ones that will sell the best. To the vendors, the most valuable street art pieces are the ones the tourists want the most.

The role of the tourists is important in this system of exchange because it is almost exclusively tourists who are buying these works. Native Israelis do frequent the market, but they buy fresh produce, cheese, and spices. For Israelis, the street art is already there, in person, on walls outside their homes or on their commute to work. They have no reason to participate in this “special commodity traffic” that Appadurai describes, because if what is for sale is “the group identity of producers,” then the Israelis can get that for free (Appadurai 1986: 47). Israelis possess that identity already, and the allure of foreign and exotic art pieces that lures in international tourists does not pertain to them. The street art that vendors market to tourists as part of the authentic Israeli landscape is already available, at no cost, to locals; serving as a

democratic sort of art gallery that they do not need to pay to possess, because they already have it.

This free “gift” of street art to the streets of Israel illustrates another paradox in the economic theory of value that Graeber, and other anthropologists including Marcel Mauss focus on: gifts. Mauss explains the seeming impossibility of gifts from an economic value perspective by proposing that gifts act as a way of creating social relationships and creating alliances and obligations between individuals and groups (Mauss 2016). This fits into functionalist and structuralist theories of anthropology as well: exchange is primarily a way of achieving social solidarity. Following Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu rejected the pretense of paradoxically selfless generosity, claiming that in traditionalist societies, which do not “recognize an explicit field of economic activity,” gift giving is similar to bartering, but with a time delay in between transactions (Bourdieu 2015). However, this analysis of the gift is predicated on exchange between parties. Although Mauss and Bourdieu differ on their opinions of generosity, both of their analyses rely on the exchange itself as defining the gift.

In his 1982 analysis of the Baruya people of New Guinea, Maurice Godelier also analyzes the anthropological relevance of gifts through the commodification of salt and its role within the Baruya society as both a form of currency and also a gift. Although salt “served as an exchange currency and circulated from one group to another as a good,” salt was never exchanged within groups, and was only redistributed as a gift. However, salt transformed from a gift object into a commodity that “detached itself from the person of its owner and became totally alienated when it entered the goods circuit at the regional economic level” (Godelier 1982” 5).



Similarly, Israeli street art is typically not commodified in the hands of its creators. There are some exceptions that I discovered through my fieldwork which I discuss in my ethnographic writing, including the Broken Fingaz Crew's sales of posters, and Michal Rubin, a tattoo artist who uses her street art as an extension of her tattoo business. However, as permanent installations, most street art pieces in Israel are inextricably linked to their locations and are more akin to a "gift" to the local communities than a product to be commodified. However, like the Baruya salt gifts, these pieces of art are commodified through the process of detaching them both from their creators and from their locations. By photographing works of street art and printing these images on posters and t-shirts and mugs, local vendors simultaneously detach the images from their initial context and alienate them from their creators. As these products enter the economic scene as commodities, they lose their affiliation with the artists that created them *and* with their physical contexts.

This divorcing of an art object from its creator is less common in the fine arts world and is typically more characteristic of the realm of handicrafts. In his discussion on Maori heirlooms, Graeber (2001) notes that the heirloom objects, often axes or other weapons, derived their value specifically from the "actions they facilitated in the past" (Graeber 2016: 185). He continues, saying that although "many heirlooms are now considered works of art," their creators, "the artists or craftspeople who made them" are not important; their names are forgotten and what gives the piece value in this context is "the names of subsequent holders" of the heirloom. This is in direct contrast to today's fine art world, where the creator of a piece is integral to its value. A Monet or Matisse or Mondrian is valuable because it is a Monet or Matisse or Mondrian.

Building on the concept of a creator/artwork link in the fine art world, in her essay “Beautiful Money (Art as Money, Art as Experience),” artist and theorist Sal Randolph relays a story about a woman who had bought a Dan Flavin from a gallery back in the sixties:

*She had never turned it on, and it was in perfect condition. She wanted to sell it, and she had the original receipt from the gallery, but had misplaced the certificate of authenticity. The auction house turned her away — without the certificate it could not be sold. Most of the Dan Flavins in circulation today are completely rebuilt — the original bulbs only lasted three or four years. They were made, deliberately, of ordinary materials available at any hardware store. A piece recreated with entirely new materials, and many on display are, is an original Dan Flavin if the owner has a certificate. The woman’s piece was a Dan Flavin when she bought it, but now, without the certificate, it is not.*

In this sense, the piece is only valuable because of its creator, and the certificate of authenticity is what has value. Without it, the artwork is just a collection of materials. The piece in this anecdote owes its worth (or lack thereof) to the verifiability of its status as a Dan Flavin original. Even though by some definitions it is more original (i.e. not reconstructed or made of new parts) than most Dan Flavin pieces on the market today, without a certificate of authenticity its only value can be derived from the market value of its parts: a few lightbulbs and pieces of wiring. Although those are the same parts put in by the artist, because that cannot be authenticated the provenance is lost, and with it, the value of the piece. In street art, the authentication process is less formal, and happens more often through an artist’s signature or stylistic tag—a concept which one of

my informants, Chana, discusses in my ethnographic section on *Technical Skill, Time, and Aesthetics*. Despite the presence of these signatures and stylistic tags, street art is often a pseudonymous art-making practice, where the artist creates a persona that inextricably links the *persona* of the maker to the work, while divorcing the “real world” identity of the artist from their creations. The importance to street artists of cultivating a known persona that is linked to their work is similar to the fine art world’s linking of artist and art in generating economic value. However, street art also derives value—like Graeber’s Maori heirlooms—from actions it facilitates and the impact it has on the public space. As an interstitial art-making practice, street art draws on valuation processes from both the fine art world and the area of handicraft/heirlooms.

Godelier, in his studies of the Baruya people, also analyzes anthropological value by differentiating between objects that are sold, given, and kept, attaching each of these categories to the relative alienability of the object from its original owner. If a sold object, or commodity, is completely separated from the person who first owned it then it is both alienable and alienated. Conversely, a kept object, or sacred object, must be kept by the original owner because “in this union resides the affirmation of a historical identity that must be passed on,” making it both inalienable and unalienated (Godelier 19). In the middle are gift objects, which are inalienable and maintain something of their original owner even after they change hands, but still change hands, making them alienated.

Israeli street art holds elements of all these categories. As physical pieces that are often inextricably tied to their location by virtue of the materiality of the process, they are physically completely separated from their creators, likening them to sold objects.

Street art is not street art if it is removed from the street and placed in the artist's kitchen, then it is kitchen art or something else. However, the complex elements of personal style and the signed pseudonyms attached to most pieces prevent them from ever being fully divorced from their original owners/creators, drawing parallels to gift objects. Conversely, the power of street art to create identities for artists and the power of “affirmation of [that] historical identity” via reproducing and creating art in a signature style lends sacred qualities to street art in the way it builds a persona for each artist; without their art, the artist is not an artist. This is especially true in a community like Israel, where most street artists are only connected to their work through a pseudonym, allowing the persona of the anonymous artist to grow and flourish only so long as the art is being made.

## Public(s): The role of the public in making art “street”

In his 2011 essay on anthropological conceptions of the public, Francis Cody builds on Benedict Anderson’s (1983) *Imagined Communities*, which “argues that printed books, newspapers, and other mass-mediating technologies allowed for a new sense of contemporaneity to arise as the condition of horizontal solidarities among fellow members of a nation” (39). In relation to Israeli national identity, the role of national newspapers and heavily politicized print publications (ex: *Ha’aretz*, *Israel Hayom* and the *Jerusalem Post* (formerly the Palestine Post)) falls under the category of what Anderson calls “print capitalism” (39). Via the “standardization of language” that results from this print capitalism, there is an accompanying “homogenization of the very means by which national publics are imagined” (39). In Israel, a small country roughly the size of New Jersey, there is a diversity of “publics” and public opinions and accompanying attempts by nationalist groups to unify the country. This tension helps to create a space for public artists to weigh in on topics of national identity and policy in their own communities, both through the “mass-mediating technologies” such as newspapers and blogs and radio shows that Anderson talks about, but also with imagery on the streets of those communities.

However, rather than creating a vacuum that is filled with controversial and political activist art, in Tel Aviv, the tension between competing nationalist identities often manifests in a surprising *lack* of expressly political art. Rather, the street art in Tel Aviv tends to be either relatively apolitical, either addressing issues that are not state-related (ex: the role of technology in our lives (figures 6 and 7) or promoting feminist ideology (figure 8)) or pro-statehood and filled with nationalist symbolism (figure 9).



Figure 6. “One way or another technology screws us...” Street art mural by Murielle Street art, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 2016.



Figure 7. “Living in the Cyber world”, Tel Aviv, Israel, December



Figure 8. Clitoris poster, Tel Aviv, Israel, April 2017.



Figure 9. “Please goodness protect the children” Street art mural by Murielle Street art, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 2016.

One instance that stands out against this trend is the expressly political and anti-governmental photography collective *Activestills*. The collective, which was started by four photojournalists, began their work by photographing protests at the border wall

that separates the West Bank. The photojournalists conceptualized their early work as a push back against both traditional fine arts photography and also photojournalism. They were not striving to have their works shown in museums, but they also didn't want to have to rely on newspapers for funding. Rather than displaying their work in galleries or on the pages of newspapers, the collective "configur[ed] their work as interventionist," and "they soon decided to create street exhibitions to be posted in dozens of different locations on the walls of abandoned buildings and empty billboards" (Maimon 2016: 30). Their stated justification for this public exhibition technique is "to reach different sections of the Israeli public" (30).

Activestills exhibitions typically consist of a grid of loosely related works, accompanied by a general artist statement and dates/locations where each photo was taken. The photos are not signed, however, and the artist statements do not include the photographer's names. This lack of specific attribution may be related to street painters' pseudonymic signatures, in that the work is technically illegal to post without a permit. However, unlike much of the street painting (in Tel Aviv, at least), these photographic grids also serve as an "aesthetic and formal embodiment of [Activestill's] political and ethical positions," which are strongly anti-establishment and anti-border wall. The controversial nature of the photographs in many ways necessitates the anonymity of the artists, in that their other professional work would likely be tarnished by association with the collective's more radical goals.

In a compendium of their work, titled *Activestills: Photography as Protest in Palestine/Israel* the group declares "the street [to be] a relatively unregulated space for communication" (74). This lack of regulation is essential, given that "the mainstream

news media" and many Israeli galleries both shy away from such expressly anti-governmental work (74). The group also touts their street installations "as a way to address the public directly, as opposed to through institutions" (74).

However, official institutional regulation is not the only form of censorship present in Israeli society. As the *Activestills* book notes, "The [collective's first] exhibition lasted for only one week but had to be repeatedly repaired because of vandalism inflicted upon the displays in different locations" (76). In this case, the censorship did not come from a newspaper editor or a museum advisory board, but from municipal authorities and citizens, who serve as a policing force in moderating and mediating the kind of imagery they want to see on their streets. The "public," which consists of the citizens and the municipal authorities who regulate them, creates itself in opposition to the *Activestills* collective's message. In this instance, although the art is "public" in that it is initially visible to anyone who passes by, the publicity and accessibility of the work (it is not protected behind museum glass, for instance) allows the members of that public to editorialize and contribute to what is allowed in the public sphere.

Some of the censorship seems wide sweeping and intentional, including the painting over of one exhibition in Tel Aviv, which was likely done by municipal authorities (given that the color of the paint used was identical to the paint that initially covered the wall), and the complete removal of another exhibition in Beit Shemesh, a suburb of Tel Aviv. The *Activestills* book interprets this removal as a form of political protest to their work, saying "these acts [of removing the works] appear to have been generated by opposition to what the images showed and to the political objectives of the



collective. Both seem to have been perceived as offensive and unacceptable” (81). In the cases where installations were censored by what was likely municipal workers or official governing bodies, the visual expression of dissent may have been seen as a threat, both to the authority of the government and also to the tenuous sense of distance Tel Aviv manages to maintain from the visceral effects of the border wall.

In other cases, the censorship of the Activestills installations was more obviously carried out by individual citizens in a non-governmental capacity. These include instances of written Hebrew commentary on top of the photographs, and scratching or scribbling over the images or artist statements. As the book reflects, "the writing of graffiti over the displays was intended to verbally reframe the images... For example, in response to an image that depicted a concrete section of the Israeli separation wall... one spectator wrote: 'how lovely! Here a suicide bomber will not pass'" (81) (figure 10).



Figure 10. “40 to 67 exhibition [Jerusalem detail], Tel Aviv, 9.6.2007” (Activestills)

One final category of censorship that I would like to remark on in the case of the Activestills installations is potential censorship by other street artists. Although I am speculating about this point, there are also instances of Activestills installations being covered up by colored spray paint, which could indicate censorship by other street

artists. In these instances, rather than painting other imagery on top of the photographs, however, the example shown in the *Activestills* book depicts hurried gray spray paint obscuring the majority of each photograph, forming a grid-work of gray swirls and spray (Figure 11).



Figure 11. "Activestills Street Exhibition, Haifa, Israel 10.5." Activestills Photography Collective, Haifa, May 10, 2007. (Activestills Collective).

As the introduction to the book notes, these "responses can also be understood as attempts by ordinary citizens to police aberrations within the Israeli field of vision and, at the same time, to secure the boundaries of Jewish-Israeli identity" (81).

Francis Cody's piece on publics argues that "the mass circulation of texts... created the very conditions under which... an assembly of strangers could understand themselves to be acting collectively" (39). I would like to take this one step further and argue that imagery can also be associated with nationalist identity and, particularly in Tel Aviv, plays an important role in the creation of a public that understands itself within a national identity. Within the framework established by Benedict Anderson's

(1983) *Imagined Communities*, “horizontal solidarities” can be formed between and among members of a nation via print media, but I believe that visual imagery on the streets can also form these solidarities.

The prevalence of apolitical or pro-establishment art in Tel Aviv, and the concurrent censorship of controversial art by civilians and municipal authorities alike literally illustrates and simultaneously creates the definition of what being an Israeli looks like. On the streets of Tel Aviv, a “public” is created that is beautiful and aesthetic, nationalistic and anti-conflict, a public that supports the city, and, by extension, the state.

However, as Francis Cody says, “...representing a mass of people to itself as a public favors the dominant classes, who can be content with individual strategies of expression because they benefit from the status quo” (44). In this context, by generalizing the Tel Avivian public as pro-Israel, pro-statehood, and strongly against visual or explicit representations of the Palestinian conflict, the art on the walls of the Tel Aviv street upholds the status quo and “favors the dominant classes” at the expense of anti-establishment activist art like that of the Activestills collective.

## Colonial/Postcolonial: Understanding Art in an Israeli Context

As a relatively new state, Israel exists in a space between the postcolonial remnants of the British Mandate and the current colonial implications of the Palestinian partition. In her essay on applying “postcolonial methodologies to architectural history research in Israel/Palestine,” Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler points out that “historians who have dealt with the concepts of nation and nationality have underscored the importance of art as a tool for representing these concepts locally and internationally” (100). In Gitler’s understanding, art can be used by artists to understand their nation(ality) and also by scholars to represent these same concepts.

One example of an overlap between art as a way for artists to understand their nation(ality) and scholars to represent concepts of nation and nationality comes in Stephen Shore’s photographic exploration of Israel, *From Galilee to the Negev*. Shore, as an American photographer, approaches the subject of Israel through an analytical lens. However, his monograph of his Israeli photography also includes numerous photographs of street art, a method through which local artists express themselves. Interspersed between sweeping landscapes and candid portraits are images of Israeli street art: a stenciled portrait of a man tipping his hat on a Jerusalem electrical box, a painted silhouette of a soldier and his automatic rifle on a crumbling concrete wall in Hebron. Through Shore’s lens, these brief moments of art help characterize the visual complexity of Israel; from the ragged, dry deserts of Ma’ale Adummin to the bustle of a downtown street scene in Tel Aviv, and all the photos in between, street art populates all of his book’s sections.

As a scholar and a local, Merav Yerushalmy also analyzes the colonial implications of the ways art is presented within Israel/Palestine. In her article on the Umm el-Fahem Gallery (UEF Gallery), Yerushalmy discusses the complex relationship between the gallery and a comprehensive photographic archive it houses. This archive focuses primarily on the town of Umm el-Fahem, “its history,” and “its environs,” and makes up, she argues, the most exhaustive archive of “Palestinian memory culture” in the world (Yerushalmy 152). However, the archive and its gallery are situated “within Israel’s borders,” and many of the photographs were taken by “Jewish Zionist or other colonial photographers,” adding to the “complexities and power relations” that the archive both explores and documents (152).

This question of power relations in terms of art is complicated by the UEF Gallery’s close relationship with the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which “is known for exhibiting mostly mainstream, or up and coming artists from Israel and elsewhere, limiting potentially controversial political exhibitions to well established artists or those likely to be so in the near future” (155). In Umm el-Fahem, an almost exclusively Arab neighborhood south of Haifa, a photographic archive of “Palestinian memory culture” is potentially less provocative than they would be in Tel Aviv, and thus the gallery can house and display these images without censure.

However, as Yerushalmy notes, UEF Gallery’s relationship with the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and the archive’s relationship with the gallery, are double edged swords. Although the archive’s association with a reputable gallery provides it with “a greater sense of legitimacy within Israel,” the gallery’s ties with a relatively apolitical (and certainly not expressly pro-Palestinian) museum such as the Tel Aviv Museum of Art

have “perhaps compromised its reception within Palestinian politics” (164). The political balancing act that is required, even within the art world, is apparent in these contradictory relationships.

Yerushalmy ends her essay with the question “can art and its discourses still provide a viable and critical framework for those who wish... to construct national narrative in Israel/Palestine today?” (166). I believe it can. Art, and especially public art, which is freed of some of the constraints of institutional allegiances that are alluded to in the relationship between UEF Gallery and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, simultaneously constructs, and is constructed by, the contexts in which it exists. Photographic archives, as another form of “public” and accessible art, can help to illuminate these national narratives.

The role of a visual archive in Israeli political contexts also comes in in Ariella Azoulay’s (2016) essay “Photographic Archives and Archival Entities.” The essay appears in a collection titled *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict*, where Azoulay describes her difficulty accessing and reproducing images from a Red Cross archive. The images in question depict the aftermath of the “United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine,” which, in November 1947, created the state of Israel as a modern sovereign entity. Azoulay’s difficulties come from her refusal to reproduce the images with the accompanying captions, and instead desiring to use her own captions, which the Red Cross claims would undermine their organization’s desire for neutrality. Aside from how this situation comments on the link between text and image, the entire essay also remarks on the political power images have, specifically in tumultuous areas such as the Middle East.

In her section on “The Unshowable Photograph,” Azoulay specifically discusses the perceived censorship of the Red Cross’s photographic archive. Azoulay argues that this censorship is enacted because she wishes to show the photos in a light that would look unfavorably upon both the state of Israel (which she sees as perpetrating political violence against Palestinians) and the Red Cross (which she sees as complicit in this violence).

This act of censorship is, in the context of my research, potentially more important than the content of the photos. It reveals the importance of images and visual representations in Middle Eastern culture, and it also demonstrates the power of the Israeli government to dictate how the national visual narrative is shaped. By limiting the ability of individuals to reproduce certain images, the Red Cross archive, and by extension, the Israeli government, is declaring what is and is not acceptable imagery in Israel. Through restriction they are also endowing these images with power that they might not initially have, similar to the ways the censorship of the Activestills photography exhibitions encouraged the photographers, rather than dissuading them.

This importance of images and visual culture in mediating and understanding conflict also comes up in the introduction to the book Azoulay’s essay originates in. Although many of the image contexts Jen’s Eder and Charlotte Kline reference (i.e. Isis propaganda footage, Wikileaks drone material) are more explicitly political than the street art I am studying in Tel Aviv, the common thread throughout this collection is the intrinsic relationship between politics and visual culture(s). As Eder and Kline argue--and the essays in the book illustrate--art and imagery exist in a political context, and

oftentimes have the power to “reduce, intensify or transform existing clashes and even generate new types of conflict” (Eder 2017: 4).

The idea of images and conflict co-creating one another is explored specifically in relation to Israel in Stephanie Hankey and Marek Tuszynski’s piece in *Image Operations*, “Exploding the Invisible: Visual Investigation and Conflict.” The article begins with the assertion that “visual cultures of conflict have slowly expanded and become the domain of those directly involved in a conflict,” an assertion that strongly rings true in the case of Israeli street art (Hankey 2016: 169). With a few notable exceptions, most street art in Israel and Palestine is made by locals. The expressly political street art, most common in highly contested areas like Hebron and East Jerusalem, is one clear example of the ways Israelis and Palestinians involved in this conflict participate in and create their own visual cultures of conflict. An interstitial reading of the valuation of street art in this situation would prioritize the positive value of street art to mobilize social change and express visually the lived experience of conflict.

Conversely, Tel Avivian street artist’s tendency to shy away from political statements in favor of visually and aesthetically pleasing imagery is, in a way, its own visual culture of conflict. By avoiding controversial political statements (or modifying controversial artworks to appear more mainstream, a la the handwritten commentary over the Activestills photography installation) Tel Aviv’s visual culture of conflict is one of omission. A comparatively safe distance away from any fighting and steeped in international cosmopolitanism, Tel Aviv street artists rarely are not as “deeply involved” in the conflict that much of Israel/Palestine is steeped in, and thus, do not utilize visual



culture to illustrate it. One could argue that the omission of political sentiment by Tel Aviv street artists is a statement in and of itself; that by metaphorically sticking their heads in the sand, the street artists of Tel Aviv are aligning themselves with the status quo.

Harkening back to Ariella Azoulay's struggle from earlier in this collection with censorship in the Red Cross photographic archives, Hankey and Tuszynski also discuss the state of Israel's role in mediating and moderating visual culture. In their interview with Hagit Keysar, an Israeli civic organizer, Keysar mentions that "the control by the state of visual representations is wide-ranging," spans "education, mass media, and the manipulation of publicly available data" (Hankey 2017: 176). As a militarized state with compulsory military service, much of this censorship falls under the authority of the Israeli Defense Force (the IDF). Although official imagery is often censored and manipulated, street art falls outside the purview of governmental regulation. As a technically illegal activity, there is no street art regulatory committee that approves pieces before they are put onto the walls. However, censorship still exists.

That censorship can take place through citizen intervention, as seen in the Activestills exhibition with handwritten graffiti over it, or through municipal involvement, as in graffiti from a tunnel I came across during my fieldwork in Tel Aviv, where the street art was completely painted over and only a few spray paint marks remained. In both cases, the "free-range" street art is being curtailed and constrained, typically to support the agenda of the ruling body. Here, I would disagree with Israel Scheffler, who writes in his book *Symbolic Worlds: Art, Science, Language, Ritual*, that while knowledge-making practices in "both science and religion... involve authority; the

mode in art does not” (Scheffler 2010: 121). Although the involvement of authority, particularly political authority, in the art world may be less transparent than it is in the fields of science and religion, authority still very much plays a role in the field of art. The authority of the state of Israel influences art, but that same authority is also created by art. Through the censoring of some images and not others, municipal authorities and citizens alike create a cohesive street art narrative in Tel Aviv that omits mention of the political conflict. Any visual mention of political narrative is couched in pro-statehood imagery which reinforces the authority and power of the government.

## Ethnography

## Economic Value

When I first proposed this thesis topic, I was particularly interested in understanding *why* street artists would create work for free. I understood the economic exchange in commissioning a mural and the illicit pleasure in scrawling one's name on a street sign, but I was baffled by Israeli street artists' immense, time-consuming, and technically skilled pieces that were being produced (apparently) outside of a network of financial exchange. In asking these questions, I was creating a hierarchy of valuation for myself that prioritized economic value within the interstitial regimes of value that can be applied to street art. However, it seemed to me that street artists' potential valuation hierarchies differed from mine, given their apparent lack of regard for economic value.

In the introduction to their book, *The Anthropology of Art: a reader*, editors Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins write that “art is associated almost equally with the two senses of the word “culture” – culture as a way of life or body of ideas and knowledge, and culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of society are judged” (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 1). It is this second articulation of art's relationship to culture that is most relevant to an analysis of economic value in street art. As Morphy and Perkins write:

*Art in the second sense has been seen as the product of a particular stage of Euro-American history. In this sense, art is seen as disconnected from society as a whole and overdetermined by its role in the class structure of Western capitalist society (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). In this view art objects have become tokens or repositories of symbolic capital in which the ruling class invests its*

*money to create value, and by which it reinforces its elite status* (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 2).

However, street art and graffiti art exist (at least in their initial, “on the wall” form) outside of this system of symbolic capital. Although—as I discuss later—street art is commodified in a variety of ways after its initial inception, the act of painting or installing a piece in public on a wall seems to run counter to Morphy and Perkins’ understanding of art relative to culture.

The seeming contradiction of this (street art) form of art-making is articulated in Rafael Schacter’s 2016 book, *Ornament and Order: Graffiti, Street Art and the Parergon*:

*Rather than flowing directly toward the relationship between capital and culture (a relationship which I would suggest the inalienable products of [street art] are inherently disconnected from), it is the continued need to produce this form of work irrelevant of base financial gain (and often at considerable cost and danger to the actor themselves) that I am more interested in here exploring, a desire, an addiction, which cannot be explained by the force of the market alone* (Schacter 2016: xxvi).

Although in my literature review I attempted to understand street art through economic anthropology in terms of gift economies and objects that are kept/given/sold, Schacter’s description of the “continued need” to make street art “irrelevant of base financial gain” and even “at considerable cost and danger” to the artist is what interests me most. Although some street artists, especially the ones who don’t have a solely pseudonymous presence, are commissioned by businesses to paint murals, street art in

Tel Aviv typically avoids that form of direct involvement with capitalistic and monetary structures. Rather, the commodification and involvement with economics is secondhand, and frequently out of the artists' control. In later sections I will explore artist's reasons for making art outside of economic structures, but this section focuses on the ways in which street art, despite its disconnect from the "relationship between capital and culture," is commodified and appropriated by economic and capitalistic structures. Although this valuation hierarchy does not appear to apply to many street artists, the ways street art is commodified by other actors indicates that, for many people, street art's potential for economic value is its primary source of value from among the many interstitial value schemas that street art relates to.

### Touristic Capital and Economic value in Street Art tours

In his article "Modernist Anthropology and Tourism of the Authentic," Michael Harkin draws parallels between anthropological fieldwork and tourism. He argues that although the tourism and anthropological fieldwork, especially tourism to "exotic destinations" share common experiences, they differ in the ways they are interpreted. For Harkin, what is important in differentiating a tourist from an anthropologist is the "xenology" of the traveler; xenology being "the conventional ideological structure placed as a frame on all experience of the other" (Harkin 1995). In this context, the ideological framework within which a traveler encounters the other defines the experience as either anthropological or touristic.

On a guided tour, especially one exploring cultural expressions such as art, those lines blur. Many of the tours I went on felt, to me, alternatively (and often simultaneously) touristic and anthropological. As I conducted fieldwork and took notes

about my fellow tour-goers, I was also conducting fieldwork with them; all of us discussing the significance of street art together: a group of accidental anthropologists.

In his analysis of tourism, Harkin also addresses the interplay between social class and tourism. He claims that “one important aspect of the tourism experience is the temporary raising of social class. This undoubtedly accounts in part for the popularity of “exotic” destinations and much ethnic tourism: armed further with a highly favorable exchange rate and a squalid local standard of living, the tourist is in a relative position she could never achieve at home” (Hardin 1995). In addition to being remarkably dismissive of indigenous communities and their perceived “standard of living,” this analysis is also untrue in terms of tourism in urban areas of Israel. Tel Aviv is a cosmopolitan city described by National Geographic traveler as a combination of Miami and Manhattan, a characterization that serves to simultaneously familiarize Tel Aviv and establish its status as a modern metropolis (Barrell 2011).

However, although Harkin’s linkages of tourism to social class and superiority do not ring true in term of Tel Aviv, his analysis of tourism as a remnant of colonialism—and the interplay between social class and colonial status—can be seen in a critical reading of Tel Avivian tourism. Harkin asserts that “much ‘third world’ tourism expresses a nostalgia for colonialism” (Harkin 1995). In an earlier section, *Colonial/Postcolonial: Understanding Art in an Israeli Context*, I addressed Israel’s colonial history and the ways this plays out in the Israeli art world. However, colonialism also plays out in Israeli tours and tourism, specifically in the sense of typically white, wealthy tourists using guided tours to “experience the Middle East”

while minimizing—or actively participating in—the oppressive power structures at play in the region (Keller 2012).

In an odd pseudo-colonial exercise, wealthy foreigners pay to enter the complex and confusing space of the Tel Avivian streets under the expertise of the guide. Although walking the streets of Tel Aviv is a free activity, to be able to understand (and therefore appreciate) the street art, tourists seem to need a translator who has access to local knowledge about street art. In addition to furthering the gap between tourist and locals (Keller 2012), this also begins the process of commodifying street art, a supposedly free medium. However, what participants are paying for is not the experience of seeing the art, as in the case of a museum entrance fee, but the ability to *understand* the art.

### Locality from an economic perspective

Although street art is technically a free art form, on the walls for anyone to look at and appreciate, it is also constantly being commodified through different capitalist processes. One of the processes that assigns monetary value to street art is the guided tour, a ritual experience that commodifies the experience of looking at street art for tourists. The online description of the Abraham Hostel tour I took during my first few days of fieldwork uses language that exemplifies this process.

The description claims that, by participating on this tour, the consumer will supposedly “see firsthand the many different forms of graffiti and street art, as well as learn how to identify pieces of the most well-known Israeli streets artists.” Although a tourist allegedly needs the assistance of the tour to “unlock” the secret to street art, the tour is also characterized as a learning experience, and by the end participants will



become knowledgeable about the subject themselves, having passed through the ritual experience of a guided tour.

The description continues, labeling Florentin, the neighborhood the tour takes place in, as

*Tel Aviv's hippest and trendiest neighbourhood [sic], [the location of] some of Tel Aviv's most colourful [sic] streets... home to many popular Israeli, international, and up-and-coming graffiti and street artists, [Florentin] is the centre [sic] to one of the most thriving street art scenes in the world.*

In this section, the description centers Florentin—and by extension Tel Aviv and Israel—as a cosmopolitan art center. Language like “hippest,” “trendiest,” and “up-and-coming” positions Tel Aviv as a desirable tourist location, drawing on the tourist’s wish for increased social status via visiting unique destinations (Harkin 1995). It also serves a complex dual role of explaining, and perhaps apologizing for, the nature of Florentine (a neighborhood that is only starting to undergo gentrification and is still home to a lower-income segment of the Tel Aviv population) while simultaneously reminding visitors of Florentin’s upward trajectory as a neighborhood. In his book, Schacter mentions that “Gentrification is an issue which is becoming more present within the [Street] Art world, muralism often being utilized by local government or other such organizations to boost the perceived allure of an area” (Schacter 2016: xxvi). The complex relationship between graffiti as a sign of gangs or lower-income communities versus street art and muralism being seen as “boost[ing] the perceived allure of an area” is evident in Florentin.

Later on, the description invites visitors to “explore the rundown mazes of warehouses scrawling with graffiti,” a contradiction that reveals the balancing act

graffiti tours must undergo: between appealing to tourist's desires to visit authentic sights while also attending to the touristic need for elevated social status via tourism (Harkin 1995).

This contradiction is echoed in an article by Elijah Shifrin of theculturetrip.com:

*In spirit, Florentin is Tel-Aviv's Greenwich Village: people from all walks of life, from around the world, live in this liberal and open-minded community. Located in the south of Tel Aviv, the neighborhood has been the subject of urban renovation plans for over a decade. Many of the buildings were marked for demolition, creating an opportunity for the burgeoning artists (Shifrin 2016).*

Just as in the National Geographic Traveler article, Tel Aviv is familiarized by drawing connections between it and a trendy American neighborhood. The article continues, describing Florentin's attraction as:

*Tel Aviv's multicultural and bohemian neighborhood, Florentin offers the casual stroller a repertoire of vintage boutiques, artisanal workshops and cozy cafeterias. Yet one crucial ingredient of the area's charm blooms not within the walls but on their very surface. Exploring Florentin's street art uncovers a unique and carefully guarded realm—few rules and an abundance of unbounded, edgy creativity (Shifrin 2016).*

Here, it is the liminality of Florentin as a neighborhood that allows for street art to flourish. The very “grunginess” that might scare off tourists is what facilitates the street art that draws them in. The interstitiality of Florentin as a neighborhood enables and contributes to the interstitiality of street art as a medium.

In *Tourist Israel*'s online self-guided tour, Florentin is described in a similar way:

*Florentin is an old neighborhood of Tel Aviv which hasn't yet seen the same large-scale gentrification as the likes of its neighbor Neve-Tzedek. Florentin has a very mixed population, traditionally characterized by poverty and transience yet now is increasingly youthful, and yuppie. It is a neighborhood undergoing change, moving away from the margins in wealth terms, along the margins creating a center for arty and alternative culture. It is a symbol of south Tel Aviv, and is a fascinating area to walk through, contrasting to the modern Tel Aviv which dominates the rest of this city, and increasingly popular for its influence on the Tel Aviv nightlife (Stein 2017).*

Florentin is also portrayed as a neighborhood in transition, the liminality of the space allowing for creative and artistic expression in ways that are not possible in the more stably gentrified areas of Tel Aviv. The linkage of economic instability and change with street art (Zukin 1993) also points to the tenuous relationship many cities have with graffiti and street art: on the one hand, street art can be a draw for tourists, as seen in the numerous street art tours that populate Tel Aviv. On the other hand, graffiti and street art are often seen as signs of criminality or gang activity, especially for American tourists—one of Israel's biggest tourist groups (Beirman 2002). These complex and contradictory ways of valuing and devaluing street art point to the interstitiality of street art that Mubi Brighenti writes about in his 2010 paper on graffiti in Italy. Street art exists on multiple registers, and as a result, these tours have to define and describe themselves in ways that account for different participants pre-existing conceptions of what street art is and what it signifies. Through this process of self-definition, street art

tours create a hierarchy of valuation within the interstitiality of street art that prioritizes value schema that would appeal to tourists. By localizing street art and the tours to Florentin, a Tel Aviv neighborhood that is also a transitional space, the transience and interstitiality of street art is prevented from “contaminating” or negatively impacting tourists’ perceptions of the rest of Tel Aviv. This allows the tours to show visitors the “grungier” parts of Tel Aviv—and all of the beautiful street art that is associated with those areas—without risking tourists generalizing those experiences to the rest of the city and potentially negatively impacting the tourist market (Beirman 2002).

Both of these descriptions work in a number of ways to assert the value of street art, often drawing upon contradictory metaphorical language involving secrecy and keys. For the creators of the Abraham Hostel street art tour, street art is an elusive phenomenon yet it is omnipresent in Florentin—a neighborhood that is grungy yet hip, unique yet with art that is generalizable to all of “Israeli culture.” The tour’s description ascribes value to street art in that it is a metaphorical “key” to the “lock” of Tel Aviv and Israel as a whole. In this understanding, street art is significant culturally (as the reason for Florentin’s trendiness) and nationalistically (as the “key” to understanding Israel). There is an interesting contrast to the ways that the tours localize street art in specific areas that are already liminal spaces. The balancing act that is done between characterizing street art as omnipresent and generalizable to all of Israel, but also localized and confined to only the transitional neighborhoods in Tel Aviv, points to the interstitiality of street art and the tours that explore it. By locating street art as a phenomenon that exists in multiple realms, ranging from expressly local to nationally generalizable, this description of the street art tour positions street art in contradictory ways, illustrating its interstitiality.

Furthermore, the Abraham Hostel tour description is imbued with nationalistic language that positions Tel Aviv as a cosmopolitan destination, creating additional value in the nationalistic sense. The tour also promises to teach visitors the secret code of street art. The emphasis on mystery and discovery also created value and authority for the tour, positioning it as the exclusive way to enter into the complex realm of street art.

This commodification process is found in other tour descriptions as well, not just in those of the Abraham Hostel. Even the free “do it yourself” self-guided tours online involve themselves in the monetary process. One free online tour, listed on the *Tourist Israel* website, includes in the first paragraph a recommendation that participants also go on their longer, guided, *paid* tour:

*If you are looking for a more in-depth understanding of the street art culture in Tel Aviv, we recommend our guided Street Art tour which is available every week for those who prefer to be guided through the works in a more structured way* (Stein 2017).

Here, the paid tour is advertised as being more appealing because of the depth of understanding it can give visitors. Even though the free tour can “help you navigate through the high amount of street art that can be found in city, for a “do-it-yourself” street art tour of Tel Aviv,” the paid version is portrayed as better and more complete. The exchange of monetary capital allows the tourist access to a more complete version of the street art experience, furthering the connection between tourism, economic wealth, and social status that Harkin (1995) discusses. The pressure of a capitalist market, combined with tourists’ potential preconceptions about Israel and the Middle East, create systems of power that force street art tours to create hierarchies of value that

promote street art's local value in order to fulfill their own prioritization of market capital and economic value.

### Economic value outside of tours: commodification of street art

The involvement of economic value in the world of street art can also be seen in contexts where the imagery of street art itself is commodified. In addition to the commodification of street art through the guided tour process, Tel Avivian street art is also commodified directly, sometimes by street artists, but often by other individuals who see the potential for economic capital in the imagery on the walls. Unlike in the fine arts world, where works are typically copyrighted and illegal reproductions are punishable by fines or jail time (Bamberger 2011), once a street artist paints a piece and leaves the area, the work is (both literally and figuratively) out of their hands. As I mentioned in my discussion of the constantly changing world of Tel Avivian street art, one consequence of this lack of artist control is regular painting over and adding on, both by other artists and also by the owners of the properties that are painted on. One other consequence of the lack of artist control is the inability to truly “control” an image once it has been created.

Some artists, like the Broken Fingaz crew, an Israeli street art crew that originated in Haifa, combatted the illicit commodification of their work by commodifying it themselves. In the *Tourist Israel* self-guided tour, the Broken Fingaz crew are described as creating posters and murals that “were very popular and consequently abducted from billboards” (Stein 2017). In response to the theft of their work, and “following the high demand, they also began to design album covers, logos as well as a series of T-shirts” (Stein 2017). The Broken Fingaz crew is one example of a

street artist group stepping in to fill a market niche and profiting off of it themselves. Rather than allowing their work to be taken and resold by others, they expanded their focus from solely providing free street art to the community to also creating opportunities for individuals to possess their work, thereby participating in the commodification of street art.

The involvement of economics in the street art world can also be seen in the work of Tel Aviv street artist and tattooist, Michal Rubin. Her street art (figures 12, 13), which uses wide block of color that visually allude to stained glass windows, resembles her tattoo work (figure 14), which follows a similar style.

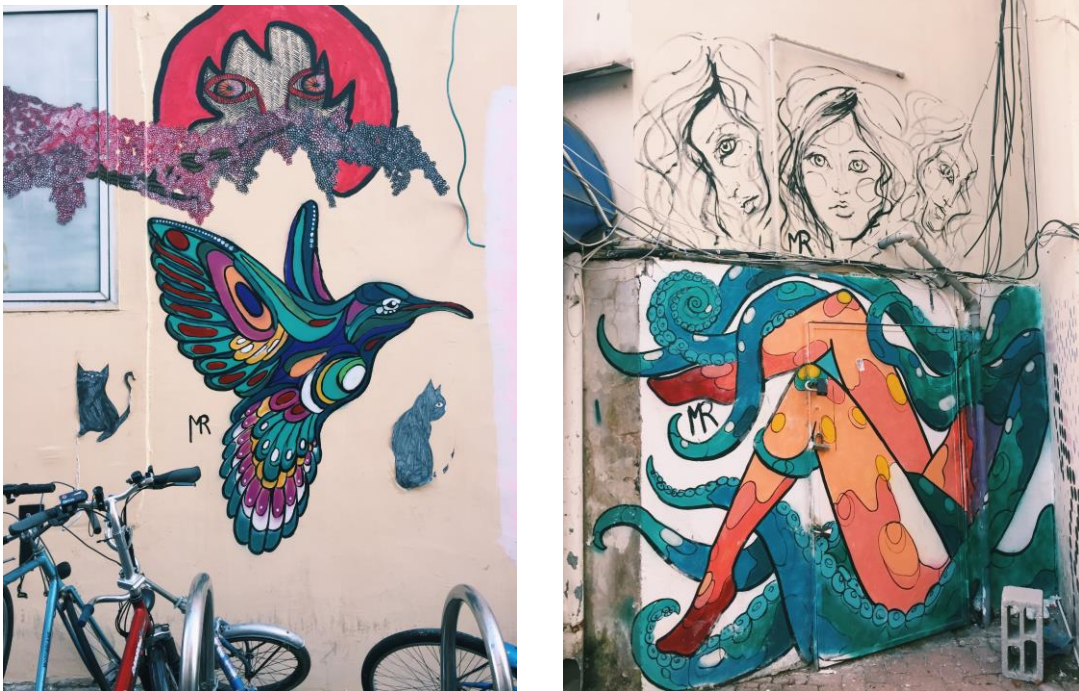


Figure 12, 13. MR street art, Tel Aviv, January 2018.



Figure 14. Michal Rubin - Tattoo & Art Facebook page cover photo featuring examples of Rubin's tattoo work.

In addition to demonstrating the concept of an artist's stylistic "tag," which my informant Chana discusses in the "Visual Aesthetics" section, this stylistic cohesion also allows Rubin's street art to serve as a sort of advertisement for her tattoo business. However, although Rubin signs her street art pieces with her initials: MR, the works aren't directly linked to her tattoo business. Even Googling "MR" and various combinations of other descriptions, including "street art", "graffiti", "tel aviv", and "Israel" don't link to anything that would connect her street art work to her tattoo business. This contradiction could be explained by the "in-group" knowledge of MR's identity that seems relatively widespread in Tel Aviv. Although none of the tourists on my tour with Chana had ever heard of MR or knew she ran a tattoo business, when I sent an image of MR's work in a WhatsApp message to two of my Israeli friends, they had both heard of Rubin's tattoo work and knew about its links to her street art. This privileging of knowledge, which I also discuss in the next section, shows the importance of locality in understanding the economic implications of street art in Tel Aviv. MR's



work on the streets might serve as an advertisement for her tattoo business, but only to those who possess the local knowledge about her tattoo business.

Interestingly, the involvement of economic exchange in the street art process shifts and potentially perverts the act of “subversive possession” I discuss in later sections about street art in a Florentinian community garden and street art’s role in “reclaiming the streets.” Here, the involvement of economic capital allows an individual to possess a work of art, thereby removing it from the context of the neighborhood and undoing the act of subversive possession of the community vis a vis outside forces. The individual is possessing the work in opposition to the community, removing it from the free and democratic context of a billboard of public wall it originated in, and confining it to their own personal context.

The Broken Fingaz crew is one example of Israeli street artists commodifying their own art in an economic context. However, another form of commodification of street art takes place when outsiders who are not street artists use images of street art and resell them as tourist souvenirs, as I discussed in my literature review in terms of the *Shuk Ha’Carmel*. In his piece on “authentic tourism,” Michael Harkin also ties social class and tourism together through the lens of souvenirs. He argues that “upon returning, the benefits of elevated social class persist... Such claims are buttressed with mementoes constituting proof of the trip: photographs, tourism art, ‘souvenirs,’ or even a good tan” (Harkin 1995).

Although the commodification of street art via various processes involves in it a capitalistic and economic value regime, Boris Groys (2010) argues:

*There is no doubt that in the context of a contemporary civilization more or less completely dominated by the market, everything can be interpreted as an effect of market forces in one way or another. For this reason, the value of such an interpretation is null, for an explanation of everything remains unable to explain anything in particular [...] Art was made before the emergence of capitalism and the art market, and will be made after they disappear (Groys 2010: 17–18).*

Art's position in relation to economic markets can also be seen in the writing of Morphy and Perkins (2009), who say that “art consists of a set of objects set aside for aesthetic contemplation, with no other overt purpose” (2), and Tooby and Cosmides (2001): “involvement in the imaginative arts appears to be an intrinsically rewarding activity, without apparent utilitarian payoff” (8). Israeli visual culture, which draws heavily on Jewish visual culture, holds similarly lofty ideas about art (Steinberg 1999). As Richard Cohen writes in his 1998 book *One Hundred Years of Israeli Art* “centrality of the visual image within modern... Jewish history” is deeply linked to Jewish Israeli notions of art and value (Steinberg 1999: 497).

Perhaps street art is commodified economically and thus can be understood through economic anthropology's value schema, but I believe that the interstitiality of street art gives it value outside of an economic framework. To paraphrase Groys (and my informant Chana, in her later discussion of the history of graffiti and street art), art is eternal for reasons other than money.

## Street art and respect, privileged knowledge

### Creation of authority and knowledge production on tours

The Abraham Hostel Street Art tour, as advertised on the hostel website, bills itself as “the key to unlocking Tel Aviv’s fascinating urban art scene.” From the very first sentence, the tour is marketed as the “key” to “unlocking” the Tel Avivian art scene, a metaphor that creates an allure of secrecy around the inner working of the street art world. Far from being a democratic art form, here street art is a complex phenomenon that requires a “key,” in the form of an expert-guided tour, to “unlock” or understand. In this tour, the creation of authority begins even before I meet my tour guide; from the very beginning the guide is positioned as a privileged holder of knowledge—knowledge that I have to pay 25USD for a two-hour tour—to “unlock.”

Chana, our tour guide and one of my primary informants, is a Russian Jew who speaks English with a Hebrew accent and Hebrew with a Russian accent. She tells our small group that she made Aliyah [the Hebrew word for immigration to Israel, literally meaning “rising up”] and now works as a tour guide. Interestingly, she does not share any additional credentials, and I am left wondering where she learned what she knows about art. In my analysis of authority and knowledge production on these tours, I draw heavily on Fredrik Barth’s essay “An Anthropology of Knowledge” (Barth 2001). Barth would describe my curiosity regarding Chana’s potential lack of art/art history training as a privileging of academic knowledge, which he defines as:

*Our academic prototype of knowledge probably refers to the things that are contained in a textbook, an encyclopedia, a dictionary...It simulates a knowledge without knowers (Barth 2001).*

Given that the content of the tour relies on facts and information about street art and street artists, my desire for Chana to assert a “pedigree” of her knowledge derives from my notion of the knowledge on this tour as needing to come from someone in a position of academic and intellectual authority. Although Chana is the tour guide, and therefore in a position of authority, her introduction (which did not mention any academic or artistic credentials) presumes that this authority is inherent in her position as guide and does not need to be substantiated.

After a round of introductions and background on street art, we head off into the Florentin neighborhood for our tour. The first major stop is a local community garden. Chana directs us to the wall of a building that borders the garden and is covered in a variety of paintings in multiple styles. She gives us a run-down of the different artists in this section of the garden, starting with Sened, the artist who stencils small “boxinette” people like the Adam and Eve piece in the garden (Figure 15). According to Chana, when he was in university, he had an art assignment to think of people in geometric forms which led to the small people he now stencils. When I ask how she knows this background story she is evasive and moves on quickly to the next piece on the wall.



Figure 15. Adam and Eve Boxinette stencils, Florentin, Tel Aviv, December 2017,

The construction of authority on these tours is an interesting dance between academic fact (Barth 2001), supposition and lore, and “indigenous knowledge” (Harkin 1995). Chana does not say how she knows the story of Sened’s boxinette figures (or even how she knows the gender of the artist), and, as a tour participant, I am reluctant to press her. From the very beginning of the tour, when I read the description that promised to “unlock the secrets” of Tel Aviv graffiti, the tour guide is positioned in a place of privileged knowledge—an insider in the world of street art. Perhaps Chana is correct, and truly does have this insight into Sened’s process, perhaps she is passing on tour guide lore that has taken on a life of its own, or perhaps she’s completely making up the information. Within the context of the tour, the veracity of the stories is not all that important. What’s being marketed and passed on is the aura of authenticity (Harkin 1995) and the feeling of being welcomed into a privileged and secretive space.

Sened’s work is also mentioned in the *Tourist Israel* online self-guided tour, where the boxinette figures are described as secretive and difficult to find: “by contrast to most graffiti work, SENED’S work can often be discovered only by incredibly perceptive viewers” (Stein 2017). In this description, by discovering the boxinettes, we are being invited into a secret society of “incredibly perceptive viewers” (Stein 2017). Chana, as our guide, is the most perceptive, and because she shared the information about how to find Sened’s pieces, she has given us the ability to find more boxinette figures for ourselves. Here, the *Tourist Israel* description creates a sense of mystery surrounding street art, privileging access to it and also creating a sense of accomplishment in the tourist when they do track down one of Sened’s boxinette pieces. In conjunction with the Abraham Hostel guided tour, this sense of street art being

mysterious and privileged also creates authority within the tour guide as the giver of this complex and illusive knowledge.

Later on in the Abraham Hostel tour we pass a large gray building that, compared to the colorful walls surrounding it, looks drab and depressing. Chana explains that the building is a synagogue, and there used to be a large piece by DIOZ (the same artist who painted the cactus in the community garden) that features pink splotches and polka dots. A tiny corner of the piece is still visible under the synagogue's sign.



Figure 15. Florentin Synagogue, Florentin, Tel Aviv, December 2017. Red circle added later to indicate the remainder of DIOZ's piece.

Chana says that “This is the life of street art: today you see it, tomorrow you don’t.” I ask her how the constantly changing streets impact her job: how hard is it to give a tour of something that changes day to day? She just says that “it keeps being

interesting.” Unlike other tours of Israel that focus on (relatively static) biblical history or the archeology of the region, Chana’s subject is always in flux: here one day and gone the next. Her supposed ability to stay on top of all the changes in the dynamic world of Tel Aviv’s street art positions her as an authority figure. It also speaks to the value of the tour as a commodity: just because I went on the tour once does not mean my knowledge is sufficient to be a complete expert—in order to maintain an understanding of the constantly shifting world of street art I should repeat my tour experience regularly. As Chana says: “every tour is different.”

### Creation of authority and respect between street artists

One interesting facet of street art is that, unlike in a museum, where it would be unheard of for an artist to paint on top of another artist’s canvas (although transgressive works like this have occurred, see Robert Rauschenber’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (Roberts 2013) and Ai Weiwei’s *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (Merewether 2003)), street artists share the same canvas: the walls, and over time, works start to overlap. Furthermore, because street art is on the *public* streets, there is no regulatory body that prevents other artists (or municipal workers, or building owners, or citizens walking by) from writing on/painting over/interacting with the work. Sometimes this overlapping and interaction comes in the form of censorship, as in the form of the censorship I saw in my research into the Activestills collective’s photography installations.

This interaction between artists can also occur in a more collaborative (and less censoring) way, particularly when there is a degree of mutual respect between two established artists. In the community garden, Chana pointed out Sened’s boxinette figures. Above those figures is a larger piece by artist Damien Taub, featuring his



signature humanoid figures with distended bellies and football-shaped heads (figure 16). Both Sened's Adam and Eve piece and Taub's figure incorporate apples, and the interplay between the two pieces shows a sort of inside joke between the two artists. The mutual respect between the two is clear in the lack of covering up/over-painting, and also in the shared subject matter. Their works on the wall form a sort of joint mural, each exploring the same apple motif in their own style.



Figure 16. Community Garden wall, Florentin, Tel Aviv, December 2017.



## Street art as Statement

### Censorship in political street art

This mutual respect is not always present, however, especially when contentious topics such as politics are explored on the walls. In the community garden, Chana points out other stencil artists above Sened's stenciled boxinette figures. The faces of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Zionist Leader Theodor Herzl cover a section of the wall above Sened's Adam and Eve (Figure 16).

Chana mentions that stencils are popular in political graffiti because they're easy to replicate a lifelike form that would be easily recognizable. The caption under the Herzl portrait reads "לא רוצים לא צריך," which loosely translates as "if you don't want it [i.e. Israel as a Jewish state]; then there is no necessity." This is a reference to the famous Zionist quote "if you will it; it is no dream" (Herzl 2016), but in this reversal the message is that for those who do not want a Zionist state, then there is no need for Israel to exist in its current form. The reversal of Herzl's words is a piece of political commentary that is unusual in graffiti in more central parts of Tel Aviv. The confinement of anti-statehood sentiment to the far corners of a community garden speaks both to the subversive powers of graffiti but also to the powers of the state to limit that subversion. Chana mentioned when our group first entered the garden that graffiti and street art are a way for citizens to reclaim the streets and their communities. However, this reclamation has its limits. As I saw in my research into the Activestills collective, whose political photography installations were censored by municipal workers and citizen alike, the regulation of the street is still very present in Tel Aviv.

This self-regulation is also present in the stenciled portraits of Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel. The red, green, and yellow portraits include captions reading “מחרבן לך בפה,” which loosely translates into “shit mouth” or “you shit into your mouth.” This vulgar expression of dissent is censored by the piece of Damien Taub (figure 16), whose work was in conversation with the Sened Adam and Eve Boxinette’s. Taub painted his large figure over top of the Netanyahu stencils. When I ask about the social acceptability of artists painting over each other’s pieces, Chana says that “it’s a communication between artists.” Here, the message that is clearly being communicated is that vulgarity and anti-statehood messages have no place in Tel Aviv’s visual culture—even in an area as private and isolated as the small community garden.

However, Taub’s piece on top of the stencils does draw attention to them, and he doesn’t fully obliterate them, just covers them partially, which complicates Chana’s censorship reading. The multilayered, interstitial reading of the interaction between these two pieces is indicative of the multitude of ways street art can be interpreted. Depending on which power structures a viewer sees as important, they would interpret the overlap of the works as either highlighting the politically contentious message or censoring it—demonstrating the importance of value hierarchies in understanding the way individuals experience the interstitiality of value schema in street art.

Earlier I mentioned a synagogue that painted over a piece by the artist DIOZ. However, the graffiti and street art is starting to encroach again. To the left of the building someone has sprayed סרטן = המסתננים, (the infiltrators = cancer). This is a reference to conservative right-wing Israeli rhetoric of Palestinians as infiltrators into the state of Israel. Although, as seen in the censoring of the *Activestills* collective’s work,

anti-statehood sentiments are often met with opposition, as I discuss in the next section, pro-statehood street art is more commonplace. Although this racist slur is far more radical than some of the nationalistic graffiti that remains long-term on the streets, it does demonstrate the political slant of some street artist. This anti-Arab graffiti will undoubtedly bring about a slew of other artists, either responding to the sprayed message or covering it up or in some way interacting with the new blank canvas of the synagogue wall.

### Pro-Israeli statehood graffiti

Although much of the controversial street art in Tel Aviv is censored for reasons ranging from institutional protocol to citizens' conceptions of acceptable topics in the public sphere, which I discussed earlier in my literature review, pro-statehood and nationalistic graffiti does occur with some regularity. One example of this is a mural by Murielle Street Art, which depicts Israeli flags and a collage of other nationalistically coded images, including the iconic David Rubinger photograph of three paratroopers at the Western Wall, which is heavily coded in Israeli society as referencing the successes of the Six Day War (Kanuik).



Figure 17. “Please goodness protect the children” Street art mural by Murielle Street art, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 2016.

(Red circle is my addition to indicate the location of the Rubinger photograph in the mural.)



Figure 18. “Israeli paratroopers Zion Karasanti, left, Yitzhak Yifat, center, and Haim Oshri, right, stand next to the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, in Jerusalem's Old City after it was captured on June 7 1967” David Rubinger/AP (Kanuik).

Another example can be found in the 035 graffiti that appears all over Tel Aviv (Figure 19): “Former IDF [Israeli Defense Force—Israel’s national army] soldiers sprayed the number 035 on walls and garage doors. The number 035 is the number of their units in the IDF and can be seen all over the city” (Stein 2017).

Although to an international tourist, this number may not have significance, for Israelis, who all have to do compulsory military service, 035 is a symbol of the bonds formed in the army for all unit numbers, not just the graffitiers of the 035. Interestingly, this form of street art is the most similar to the graffiti tagging that is so

familiar to me from my childhood in Washington, DC. In DC, graffiti artists spray gang tags to delineate territory and claim ownership, a phenomenon that I discuss in my next section. In this case, perhaps the 035 artists are



Figure 17. 035 graffiti, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 2016.

laying claim to Tel Aviv as their home. Additionally, because of

Israel's compulsory military service and the emotional significance of unit number as a symbol for the bonds formed in the army, this graffiti could be seen as a larger political message about the importance of the IDF in Israeli society.

## Owning the streets: Street art, locality, and subversive possession

### Who Paints Where? Locality and “Fit” in Global Street Art Communities

On the Abraham Hostel street art tour, one of my co-participants was Nico [name has been changed], a Brazilian graffiti artist. Nico had bartered a stay in the hostel on the condition that he paint a mural in one of the stairwells. In between navigating the sidewalks and trailing Chana and the other participants, he tells me a bit about his work. He is nearly done with his stairwell mural, a commissioned job he got through a friend of a friend who knew about the hostel and recommended he get in touch. He bought all his supplies here, given that flying with spray-cans is both illegal and logistically difficult, and he remarks on the easy accessibility of materials. Apparently in Brazil spray-paint is much more expensive.

Chana overhears us chatting and drops back to ask a question, “you have left your mark on the streets?”

After a few beats of mental translation into and out of our respective native languages Nico explains, with an unexpected tinge of embarrassment, that he has not sprayed anything on the streets, at least not yet.

I ask him whether he plans to or not, and he pauses for a moment, when it comes, his answer is measured and thoughtful.

“I will not yet paint here because I do not know this place. I have been here only two weeks, so if I paint, it may not fit. Perhaps at the end of my stay I will leave behind a piece.”

Nico’s response fits well into some of the readings I had been doing about street art’s cultures of respect. Although it is common practice for street artists to travel the world and leave their mark on foreign cities, there is a concept of respecting the area and its style (Bal 1999). Especially in Israel, a country with hours-long customs interviews and frustratingly difficult air-travel regulations, entering and leaving the country is a project that is both expensive and time-consuming. Perhaps because it is difficult to just pass through Israel for the weekend (in the way one can take trains across Europe and hop off in different cities along the way), Nico feels extra pressure to make his contribution to the Israeli streets “fit.”

In Nico’s answer, street art becomes a way to celebrate what makes a city unique. The value of street art comes in its particularity, its locality. In her essay on graffiti and place, Ella Chmielewska writes that graffiti is “intended to be read as place specific” (Chmielewska 2007: 146), and argues that “[graffiti] writing was inseparable from its surface, from its materiality, and from its local discourse” (147). In her analysis, and in Nico’s understanding of street art, the relationship of a piece of street art to its location is just as important as the piece itself, and transplanting a piece from its home would strip it of its value.

This deep linking of a piece of street art to its location is also found in Rafael Schacter’s piece on graffiti and ornamentation. Schacter describes graffiti as “Independent Public Art,” a term he takes from the theorist Javier Abarca which is

defined as “an umbrella label which incorporates all forms of autonomously produced aesthetic production in the public sphere” (Abarca 2011).

*[Independent Public Art] thus naturally encompasses practices which have been called graffiti or street-art yet also includes actions which may exceed these traditional designations, building an assemblage out of variance through its intentionally broad nature. What is crucial, and quite clear by the term itself however, is that it does not include works produced in the interior domain, works outside of what could be considered as public space (Schacter 2016: ix).*

In addition to covering a broader (and perhaps more interstitial) set of art-making practices than the term (street art) that I focus on, Independent Public Art directly links the art to its *public* location. As Schacter says, street artists have an “obsession and fervor for [working in] the public sphere... a commitment to concrete action in the street, to physical performance in public space” (Schacter 2016: xxv). Although I am choosing to define the work on Tel Aviv’s streets as “street art” because it is the term my informants use, I am working in a similar vein as Abarca and Schacter in that the works I am interested in are deeply and intrinsically linked to their surroundings.

Unlike his reticence to paint on the streets of Tel Aviv, Nico had no compunctions about painting a mural within the confines of the hostel. Following the logic of his earlier answer about “know[ing] this place”, either Nico feels he already knows the hostel and has the familiarity necessary to create a mural that fits, or he does not see the hostel as a high-stakes location that requires as much forethought. The reality is



probably a combination. Fully understanding and knowing a hotel (even one as large as Abraham Hostel!) would take far less time than understanding and knowing a city (particularly one as varied as Tel Aviv). Furthermore, the open-ended commissioned nature of Nico's project in the hostel likely absolves him from some of the pressure of having to create a piece that "fits"—the hostel asked for his work and should therefore expect a piece in his typical style featuring a subject matter of his choosing. The streets of Tel Aviv did not ask for anything from Nico, so for him to impose a piece upon the streets would require it to be perfect. Furthermore, his lack of connection to the "language and national identity" in Israel would necessitate his encroaching on the territory of native Israeli and Palestinian street artists (Chmielewska 2007: 148).

At the beginning of the tour, Chana gives our group an introduction to Israeli street art. She briefly touches on artists' motivation, making an analogy to a dog peeing and marking its territory. As crude as this may be, her reference to territory and ownership highlights an important element of street art: the feeling of ownership an artist may have to an area they painted. This may also help explain Nico's reticence to paint in a city he does not know yet: if painting signifies ownership, it would be presumptuous to paint, and thereby claim ownership, after a mere two weeks in a new place.

### (Not so) subversive possession

The first stop on our tour is a community garden, where Chana expands on the concept of ownership and street art, saying "one of the aims is regaining the streets... That it belongs to the citizens and not to the mayor's office or to advertisements."

In this explanation, Chana touches on another form of value street art can provide: that of subversive possession. One side effect of the gradual gentrification in Florentin is the disenfranchisement of its long-term residents (Hatuke 2010). As forces both governmental (“the mayor’s office”) and commercial (“advertisements”) infringe on the Florentin streets, street art can provide a way for artists to resist that intrusion, often by quite literally covering up the municipal or commercial presence.

The concept of street art and graffiti as a method of possession is talked about in terms of Philadelphia street gangs in David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky’s article “Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers,” which claims that gangs distribute tags through their territory as a way to demarcate boundaries and assert ownership of gang-controlled spaces (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974). The relationship of graffiti to gang activity in the United States is well studied, but in the case of street art in Tel Aviv—and particularly in this community garden—the possession that is being illustrated and enacted by street art is that of possession of the space by *locals* vis a vis larger municipal or economic forces. As seen in Oren Yiftachel’s article “Israeli Society and Jewish-Palestinian Reconciliation: ‘Ethnocracy’ and its Territorial Contradictions,” one consequence of “Israel’s settlement and socio-economic policies [is that] internal ethnic and class divisions” have led to a “separation of [citizens from] local government” (Yiftachel 1997: 510-511). The oppositional relationship between disenfranchised communities in Tel Aviv’s outskirts and the municipalities that control them can be seen in the high prevalence of graffiti and street art on Florentin’s walls. Although the municipality builds and regulates the infrastructure, the community quite literally (re)covers the space with paint and imagery.

The community garden is a bit of a subversive project itself; created by a Florentine neighborhood that has historically been fragmented by high crime rates and high housing turnover (“Israel 2017”), the garden provides a source of fresh food and community. Chana says the garden centers on communication, just like street art. She explains that the gardeners are bringing life into the city and getting to know their neighbors. Similarly, she says street artists are brightening up the streets and communicating with people who see their works. That might explain the numerous street art pieces that cover the walls and fences around the garden.

Although street art is subversive in that it is technically illegal, the laws regarding street art are rarely enforced. The dance between illicit and permissible is one that tours and articles about street art must also undergo. In appealing to tourists, they have to balance tourist’s desire for the authentic (Harkin 1995) and therefore potentially illegal, with the need to appeal to a wide range of audiences (most of which probably do not want to commit—or witness—a crime abroad!) That balancing act points to the interstitiality of street art in Israel: is it illegal but also permissible, subversive but still safe.

This interstitiality can be seen in the *Tourist Israel* online tour description:

*While graffiti is illegal in Israel, the municipality of Tel Aviv turns a blind eye to works of graffiti work in certain areas, with the Florentin neighborhood being notable among them* (Stein 2017).

It can also be seen in an article by the website *theculturetrip.com*, a site whose tag line “explore *your* world” [emphasis mine] points to the interesting ways in which

tourism is also an act of possession. In discussing street art in Tel Aviv, theculturetrip.com blogger Elijah Shifrin writes:

*Drawing on walls is still illegal, but municipal authorities turn a blind eye – entire streets have become a no-man's land, swiftly conquered by spray paint and rich visual ideas* (Shifrin 2016).

Both websites emphasize the technical illegality of the act of spray-painting street art while simultaneously reassuring readers that the authorities will not punish the artists for painting *or* the tourists for enjoying the results of that painting. The interstitiality of street art allows it to be both appealing in its illicitness, but also permissibly safe.

Christina Goulding, Avi Shankar, Richard Elliott, and Robin Canniford explore the anthropology of pseudo-illegal pleasure in their research on clubbing, saying:

*the club, as well as the pleasurable practices and experiences that it supports, has become a site of contained illegality. Here, the illicit, subversive practices of rave have now become shepherded and channeled into more predictable, manageable, and regulated environments facilitated by the “knowing wink” of club promoters, police, and state authorities* (Goulding et al. 2009: 759).

Like Goulding et al.'s understanding of clubbing as a regulated and marginally acceptable space of illegal behavior, street art's interstitial positioning between illegal and permissible allows for the “channel[ing]” and “regulat[ing]” of illicit impulses into socially acceptable outcomes. Although street art's technical illegality gives it a

dangerous appeal, the “‘knowing wink’ of...authorities” who silently condone the work allows that danger to be pleasurable as opposed to entirely forbidden.

## Community Control and Ownership

In addition to the over-painting and collaboration that can be seen between Sened, Taub, and the painter of the political Netanyahu stencils, another subtler form of collaboration is in the small eye stickers that can be seen in the close-up image of the far right Hertzl stencil (figure 20).

These added-on eyeballs show up later on in the tour as well, as we walk past a barrier wall by a construction site: nearly all of the faces that appear in various artists works have the same little eyeball stickers covering up the painted eyes. Chana says these were added on by one of her fellow tour guides who is “contributing” to the work that they are employed to share with the tourists. She says that the little stickers are the easiest and fastest way to be “part of the creation.” She claims that add-ons are another artist saying “I think I need to complete your argument”—that one last element is needed to “finish” the work. Perhaps this is true, or perhaps the sticker-er just wanted to see a part of themselves on the walls as they gave their tours. Part of the beauty and confusion of



Figure 20. Close up of Netanyahu stencil with sticker eyes. Community Garden, Florentin, Tel Aviv, Israel, December 2017.

street art comes from this ambiguity. Once an artist put their piece out into the world and onto the walls, they have no control over it. It could be painted over by another artist or removed by a municipal worker or the building it's on could be torn down or someone could come by with eyeball stickers and add just one more element to the work. Once the artist leaves the piece to dry, it is out of their control: it belongs to the streets and the community.

In Tel Aviv, there is a tightly entangled relationship between local business owners and street artists; as *Tourist Israel's* online guide says:

*A big part of the graffiti in this area is painted on the doors and gates of various businesses thus we recommend to walk around and explore during the afternoon, when most businesses are closed and the artwork is more easily spotted (Stein 2017).*

This can backfire for the street artists, as seen with the case of the synagogue painting over the piece by DIOZ. However, especially in Florentin, the community does not always reject this ownership. *Tourist Israel's* guide also describes “a piece painted by a known street artist named Dioz. The painting took him 3 days to complete and he received help for business owners next door” (Stein 2017) (figure 21). In this instance, the business owners welcomed the presence of the street art, perhaps, as *Tourist Israel* says “in an attempt to add



Figure 21. DIOZ mural, Florentin, Tel Aviv, Israel, December 2017.

some color to Florentin neighborhood,” or perhaps because the business owners recognized the tourist draw of large street art pieces.

The support of street art by local businesses can also be seen in the case of the 1000 gallery and the art store underneath it. On the Abraham Hostel tour, we passed the gallery and Chana informed our group that “it helps their image” and “covering up street art always depends on whether the owners like it.” In this case, the presence of street art helps the gallery attract customers and cultivates “their image,” forming a symbiotic relationship between the street artists and the gallery owners.

The power imbalance between street artists and business owners in these instances is also interesting. The business owners have power and authority in the legal sense, in that they own the building and have the right to paint it whatever color they want. If someone paints something on their walls that they owners do not like, they can just whitewash over it. In this sense, the street artists are beholden to the owners of the walls they paint on.

However, the street artists also have power in this situation. Although the business owners can paint over whatever gets sprayed onto their walls, that will not stop the next artist from coming along and painting on the fresh, new, whitewashed canvas of the wall. Although an individual artist may

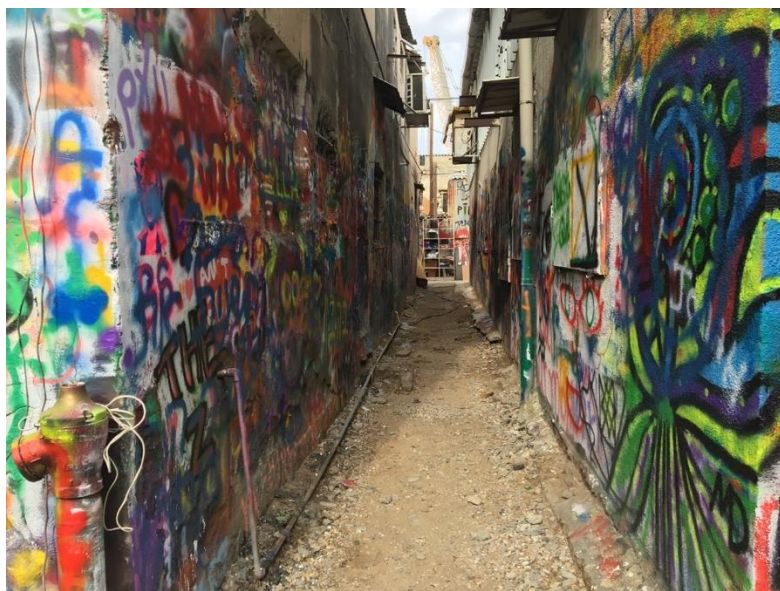


Figure 22. Florentin alley, Florentin, Tel Aviv, Israel. December 2017

have less power than a business owner, in that one piece can easily be painted over with no legal recourse for the artist, street artists as a whole have an ongoing power struggle with business owners where there does not appear to be a clear winner. In some areas, like the alleys of Florentin (figure 22), layers and layers of street artists have taken over the walls.

In these contexts: the small alleys and areas far from the main thoroughfare, the street artists seem to come out on top. Towards the main roads, in situations like that of the synagogue and DIOZ, the property owners seem to have bested the street artists. However, the encroachment of new spraying on the freshly painted synagogue points to the lack of a clear resolution of the conflict. The murkiness of this relationship, and the ways that business owners can view street art either as a colorful way to decorate their properties for free without having to commission a mural or professional painter, or as a nuisance that needs to be painted over, points to the interstitiality of street art as a medium and the competing hierarchies of interstitial value street art inspires. Different property owners can (and do) define street art as either decoration or vandalism depending on their goals. Even the work of the same artist, as in the case of DIOZ, whose works were alternately covered up the synagogue and celebrated by the local businesses, can be characterized in different ways and by different actors. This interstitiality—the difficulty of defining—is what defines street art.



## Locality within *Israeli* street art and the complications of tourism in the Middle East

Another complication that graffiti tours in Israel specifically must manage is the positioning of Israel in the Middle East and the impact that regional instability has on the tourism industry (Beirman 2002). It is within this context that the description of my tour with Chana claims that Florentin is “centre to one of the most thriving street art scenes in the world.” By aligning Israeli street art with other “street art scenes [around] the world,” the tour metaphorically brings Tel Aviv out of the tumultuous Middle East and into a global street art context that includes cities such as Sydney, Philadelphia, and Sao Paolo—all tourist destinations that have flourished because of their vibrant street art.

In addition to bringing Israeli street art into a global context, the Abraham Hostel tour’s description also brings the tour out of the realm of solely street art to make a greater argument about street art’s relevance to Israeli and global culture(s):

*This experience will help you learn to decipher the current happenings in contemporary Israeli culture by gaining a unique insight into Tel Aviv lifestyle, through exploring this bohemian corner of the world.*

Here, the description makes claims (once again) for the power of the tour as a learning experience, but also pushes further to assert its power to “decipher” Israeli culture through street art. In this metaphorical understanding, the key/lock metaphor is flipped, and rather than the tour being a key to understanding street art, street art is a key to understanding Israel.

This complex duality of locating Israel within the Middle East and also pulling it into a global context can also be seen in *Tourist Israel's* free online self-guided tour:

*Tel Aviv, being the most liberal city in the Middle- East, where nightclubs are always open and everything is possible, attracts many young, talented artists. Walking around the streets of Tel Aviv you can find various artworks on building garbage cans and doors [sic]. The most important thing to remember is to look around and open your eyes to beautiful pieces waiting to be discovered by people passing by (Stein 2017).*

In this phrasing, Tel Aviv is simultaneously positioned within the Middle East—perhaps to draw on the concepts of exotic and “authentic” tourism locations that appeal to tourists (Harkin 1995)—while also characterized as “the most liberal city” in the region, a designation that is, later in the same sentence, associated with youth and talent. The balancing act that tours in this region must undergo also points to the balancing act that Tel Aviv’s street art is put through: as a simultaneous symbol of the locality of the Middle East but also a way to connect Israel and Tel Aviv to a wider context of the world. Here, street art is both intensely personal and local but also wide in scope and generalizable. The interstitiality of street art and the variation within the medium allow it to serve as a semiotic symbol (Turner 1974) in both cases: both as a marker of what is uniquely Tel Avivian, but also as a link between Israel and a broader context.

## Who's Who: Notoriety, Anonymity, and Relatability in Street Art

### The Artist Never Dies: Street art as a form of immortality for the artist

Before taking us into the streets of Florentin to see the street art ourselves, Chana gave a brief introduction into the history of street art:

“We are now all here,” she says, gesturing around the circle, “and I will start with the history.”

She pulls a binder out of her large purse and poses a seemingly rhetorical question: “when is the first graffiti?”

There’s a moment of fidgety silence, like in a classroom where everyone wants to avoid being called on. One of the tour participants, a man wearing socks and sandals nudges his wife, who sports a color-coordinated fanny pack. He then half-raises his hand and answers, his voice lilting up like a question, “in the 60s? In New York?”

“Earlier!” Chana nearly cackles at having stumped him. “It is the cavemen! They graffitied in their cave! With their hand!”

Here, Chana reinforces her position as the authority within the context of the tour; she has the answers to her own questions.

Chana flips open her binder to an image of handprints on cave walls, and starts to track a history of graffiti, beginning in Neolithic times. She shows pictures from the Middle Ages, and of a scrawled name in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher: a man named Piero leaving his mark. She tells us that “everyone wants to be remembered” and

“everyone wants to know people speak of him.” The invocation of historical sites draws from a western cultural prioritization of historical facts (Bloch 1989) which asserts both graffiti’s traditional legitimacy and also Chana’s authority as the holder of information and historical truth (Cheater 2003).

For Chana, graffiti is a way of leaving a bit of yourself behind; creating a small notoriety for yourself in the eyes of those who come after you. She says that “graffiti shows the way society moves;” by following graffiti across the world, historians can see where human went. It seems that people have been scratching their initials into walls for millennia.

In this explanation, graffiti art derives its value in a historical sense, as a tool for looking back at human cultures and tracking their spread. Graffiti also seems to be an innate human impulse, perhaps, as Chana characterizes it, springing from a desire to be recognized and remembered. Therefore, the value is also psychological for the “graffitier”—in leaving their name in a public place, the graffitier can derive pleasure in the idea that someone in the future will see their name and know they existed. Here, Chana provides one answer to my initial curiosity that sparked this project: why paint on the walls for free? In her explanation of the history of graffiti, Chana alludes to the potential future notoriety graffiti can bring.

Author David Eagleman writes that “There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time” (Eagleman 2010). In that case, Piero, the man from the Middle Ages whose name is still getting spoken on graffiti tours today, is still alive—his graffiti allowing his name

to be spoken again and again, centuries later. Perhaps graffiti is an effort to achieve some sort of immortality.

## Making a Name: Notoriety in conjunction with anonymity and pseudonymity

In the community garden, our group walks around the corner of DIOZ's cactus piece, and Chana remarks on another appeal of street art: the anonymity.

"Who is he? Who is she?" She talks about how viewers can project onto the artists and make guesses about their lives. Although she earlier mentioned street art as a way to be remembered and to create a name for yourself, the paradox of that comes when many street artists work under pseudonyms, so their day-to-day identities are not at all connected to their works.

Sammy muses that if we do not know who DIOZ is, it could be any of us.

Nico winks, "maybe I have done my painting here already!"

Chana laughs and shakes her head, "no, DIOZ has been here for many time and you all are new to Israel. Only I could be DIOZ!"

"But are you?" Benny, another tour participant, counters.

"Perhaps" Chana laughs, shaking her head. None of us think she actually is DIOZ, but the possibility is there; the pseudonymity of the street artists leaving just the smallest bit of uncertainty.

Chana takes us through the rest of the artists who have painted on the garden wall. She says that some street artists have an education in arts and design, and graffiti

is usually just a small part of what they're doing in the art world. One example of this is the artist "Adid A Fallen Angel," who she says is a musician and designer who travels all over the world but is based in Tel Aviv. His piece, which incorporates large swirling green lines and the repeating word "love" written in English, covers the far side of the garden wall (figure 23). I recognize his style from another piece done in red in downtown Tel Aviv in a side street near Carmel Market (figure 24).



Figure 23. Adid A Fallen Angel mural, Community Garden, Florentin, Tel Aviv, Israel. December 2017.



Figure 23. Adid A Fallen Angel mural, by *Shuk Ha'Carmel*, Tel Aviv, Israel. June 2016.

My connection of these two works, and my feeling of familiarity with the artist (even after only seeing two of his works) speaks to what Chana was saying earlier as a possible motivation for making street art: artists want to be remembered, to make a name for themselves in the local consciousness.

The stylistic uniqueness of the main artists in the Tel Aviv graffiti scene is also mentioned in the *Tourist Israel* online guide:

*While most graffiti artists remain anonymous, you can very often recognize their work by their signature or by the theme of the artwork... known artists such as “Sened”, “Dede”, “know hope” and more, each have an artistic style that is unique to them (Stein 2017).*

This description points to both the pseudonymous status of many graffiti artists, but also to their notoriety in spite of the lack of “real” identity attached to the works.

Towards the end of the Abraham Hostel tour I directly asked Chana whether she knew any of the artists in person. She responded “Some, but some you meet accidentally. You don’t know they’re street artists. You find out... also [you can meet them on] the internet.” Her answer, in its obliqueness, points to the mystery of street art; like her joking with Nico earlier about the true identity of DIOZ, Chana perpetuates the idea that street artists are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere—moving among us and through society, leaving their mark and then slipping away into the night.

### Finding value in relatability and projection

Throughout our tour, Chana also differentiates between graffiti and street art. Interestingly, the line she draws between the two hinges on how the public understands and perceives the work, not on the actual content. In her explanation, graffiti is “not really understood” and is analogous to vandalism. However, street art “some people understand,” and “you can project your own thoughts and feelings onto the work.” In her view, the universality of a piece is what transitions it from graffiti to street art. She

elaborates that street art is “more accepted by people [and] easily understood by peoples and society.”

Earlier, Chana asserted the psychological selfishness of graffiti, in that it exists to satisfy the graffitier’s desire for recognition and notoriety. When she differentiates street art from graffiti, it is the lack of selfishness that elevates the former. When a piece can be understood by the general public and serve as a vessel for the public’s thoughts and feelings, that lifts it above graffiti into a new artistic realm. The value in street art (as opposed to graffiti) comes in its relatability and appeal to the masses. Although a street artist may also be creating notoriety for themselves, it is the absence of graffiti’s psychological selfishness regarding that notoriety that gives street art its value.



## Aesthetic Value

Another value schema that street art draws from is the value human beings place in art: that of visual and aesthetic beauty. The pleasure of seeing beauty where it is least expected is addressed by Elijah Shifrin in his article on Florentin graffiti for [theculturetrip.com](http://theculturetrip.com): “The smaller the alley, the wilder the artwork. While you can’t really get lost here, you can fully enjoy the titillating sensation of getting lost, generously bestowed upon the adventurous traveler by the city’s graces” (Shifrin 2016). Here, street art is a gift from the city to the traveler, a “titillating” sensory experience that is valuable in its sheer physical and aesthetic pleasure.

In my research, I initially approached the aesthetic qualities of street art through what I saw as analogous anthropological research into ornamentation and decorative and material cultures. As Rafael Schacter writes, street art can be seen as “a practice of urban ornamentation” (Schacter 2016: xxv). The concept of ornamentation as an expression of culture and psychology was famously defined by Ernst Gombrich, who argues in *The Sense of Order* (1984) that:

*ornament could be seen as a manifestation of a deeply embedded psychological urge to classify and regulate, an urge to order one’s surroundings, a compulsion which he believed to be ‘deeply rooted in man’s biological heritage’ (Gombrich 1979: 60) ... therefore, humankind’s innate need to create harmony fashioned both a material, architectonic order, as well as an immaterial, social one. It generated a state through which visual forms could serve as both signs of, and actually engender, a particular type of societal structure, through which the ‘close interaction between social and aesthetic*

*hierarchies' could become visibly manifest* (Gombrich 1979: 33). (Schacter 2016: 5)

Although contemporary anthropologists would likely question Gombrich's generalization of "humankind's innate need," the importance of visual culture in Jewish and Israeli history (Steinberg 1999) makes his larger point about the ordering potential of ornamentation serving a cultural purpose relevant to my analysis. I wrote in my introduction that museum architects and curators create a spatial relationship that involves "the western model of aesthetic appreciation as a transforming, spiritual process" (Duncan 2005: 78). The transformative nature of art speaks to its structuring potential. This sense of aesthetic appreciation as a transformative process can be carried outside the museum space as well to extend to art on the streets. In this understanding, "the act of viewing" street art is a process which involves both "aesthetic contemplation" and "intellectual engagement" (Neef 2007: 420). The interaction between intellectual engagement and aesthetic contemplation forms the aesthetic experience of looking at art.

Other theorists, including Jean Baudrillard in his seminal 1975 essay on graffiti, "KOOL KILLER, or The Insurrection of Signs," privileges aesthetic contemplation over intellectual engagement as mode of interpreting art's value. Relying on a structuralist semiotic model, Baudrillard argued that "signs do not operate on the basis of force, but on the basis of difference." Graffiti, then, contrary to the city's 'official' semiotics, functions against this symbolic order: "Graffiti has no content and no message: this emptiness gives it its strength" (Neef 2007, Baudrillard 1975). In his visual analysis, Baudrillard points to graffiti's "superimposition amounting to the abolishing of the support as a framework, (just as it is abolished as frame when its limits are not

respected). Its graphics resemble the child's poly-morphous perversity, ignoring the boundaries between the sexes and the delimitation of erogenous zones" (Baudrillard 1975). In addition to contradicting Gombrich's perspective on art and ornamentation as a creator of frameworks, Baillard also points to the interstitiality of street art and graffiti, emphasizing its tendency to "ignore the boundaries." While I do not fully agree with either Gombrich or Baillard in terms of street art's aesthetics, these competing frameworks through which to approach artistic aesthetics illustrate the difficulty of categorizing an interstitial art form like street art.

Interstitiality and boundary breaking can also be seen in Rafael Schacter's characterization of street art as "an aesthetic working through an equally adjunctive and decorative essence, one which can only exist amidst the dirt and noise of the street itself" (Schacter 2016: xxv). The disjunctive and decorative work in conflict and conjunction to create the aesthetic of street art. In this section I draw on Elijah Shifrin's article "The Street Art of Tel Aviv's Florentin Neighborhood," written on theculturetrip.com blog, as a site for doing fieldwork in that it is an analysis of street art from an aesthetic perspective, written by a local. Morphy and Perkins argue that "an anthropological approach to art is one that places it in the context of its producing society," and in analyzing Florentinian street art's aesthetics I rely on Shifrin, as a member of that "producing society" (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 15).

In discussing the alternately "adjunctive and decorative essence" (Schacter 2016: xxv) of street art, Shifrin writes that:

*Still, it's the individual and original touches—enveloped and nourished by the ad hoc 'exhibition space'—that lend the images their unique character...*

*Within the confines of the city, even such monumental scale appears natural and almost understated. When the only lighting available emanates from the sun, the viewing distills into a humbling experience, and such cliché terms as ‘the fabric of the city’ suddenly assume real meaning. This is street art at its most inspiring and thought-provoking (Shifrin 2016).*

Shifrin’s emphasis on the power of art’s aesthetics to inspire and provoke thought is also expressed in Morphy and Perkins’ definition of art making as “a particular kind of human activity that involves both the creativity of the producer and the capacity of others to respond to and use art” (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 12). The role of the viewer’s response in creating the art experience is based on the unique aesthetic qualities of that art; “an aesthetic response involves a physical, emotional and/or cognitive response to qualitative attributes of the form of an object” (13). Although this emotional response is often found in beautiful art objects—ones that include the elements of ornament and order that Gombrich discusses, “the aesthetic dimension must also encompass their opposites—feelings of discomfort, the idea of ugliness and the potential for pain” (13). In these understandings, the individualistic nature of the art and the artist, and the connection that is formed between viewers and the unique visual moment found in a work of art, form the culmination of aesthetic experience. Shifrin argues that “The city itself and its rituals and iconography comprise an underlying theme that binds everything into a loosely collaborative project,” highlighting both the collaborative nature of street art that I discussed earlier, as well as the power of locality in creating visual culture and aesthetic value (Shifrin 2016).

The painful and uncomfortable aesthetic qualities are also articulated by Elijah Shifrin, who writes that “the most consistent quality in Florentin Street Art is that of absence. For some, it will be an absence of optimism, for others of hope—but the effect is persistent and inescapable. Not all artists explore despair, but the touch of ennui—and sometimes of pure urban blues—doesn’t elude even the most vibrant of compositions” (Shifrin 2016). This despair can be seen in various visual motifs, ranging from “bizarre explorations of alien anatomy” to “the human figure, often disassembled, distorted, and violated.” Shifrin also references artistic modes used in established Western fine art to describe this perceived “absence of optimism,” writing about “solitary blue elks grazing on smog—morosely poetic flights of fancy...reminiscent of [Albrecht] Durer’s illustration” (Shifrin 2016). In addition to elaborating on the emotional connotations of the aesthetic modes found in Florentin street art, this reference to Dürer’s work points to the interstitial ways street art breaks boundaries between vandalism and fine art, and also could be an evocation of more conventionally valued art forms as a way of valuing street art by association.

Wilfried Van Damme writes, in *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics*, “that empirically observable cultural differences in aesthetic preference may be accounted for by pointing to a cross-cultural regularity that relates this preference to its sociocultural context” (Van Damme 1996: xiv). Using the flip-side of this assertion, similarities in aesthetic preference could point to similarities in sociocultural context—in this case between Tel Avivian art viewers and European fine art movements. However, Shifrin draws connections between a variety of art movements and Tel Avivian graffiti—not just to Dürer’s work. He invokes stylistic and aesthetic trends in various fine and commercial/pop art movements when he classes

Florentin street art as having “influences includ[ing] expressionism, surrealism, cubism, steam-punk, animation (including anime), fantasy and horror, caricature, and more. For example, such elaborate works by Dede and Fish Air... can be immediately placed within the school of Picasso’s and Braque’s avant-garde experimentation with the visual plane” (Shifrin 2016). The wide breadth of movements that Shifrin mentions (and their associated range of cultural contexts that afford them different aesthetic sensibilities) illustrate the range of styles and accompanying aesthetic influences in Tel Aviv’s street art. If art and aesthetics draw from specifically socioculturally motivated contexts, then this array of styles could be seen to illustrate the array of perspectives and lived experiences of Florentin’s diverse inhabitants.

Van Damme builds on the way lived perspectives influence aesthetics in asking the question: “...if the notion of beauty is to a significant extent influenced by culture, then which elements of the cultural environment are actually involved in shaping aesthetic preference?” (Van Damme 1996: xiii). Shifrin’s answer to this question can be seen in his characterization of Florentinian street art as united by a central mood of loneliness and absence. He defines the loneliness and its accompanying aesthetic as stemming directly from the cultural environment, saying:

*It [Florentin’s street art] is the swan song of and to the neighborhood, a farewell to its past. The seriousness of the mood, often suffused with disarming naiveté, can bring visitors to contemplate the fate of the district, as well as some of its darker sides. Many of Florentin’s residents are not strangers to economic hardship, and the walls serve them as a creative outlet (Shifrin 2016).*

Shifrin's direct link of Florentinian artists' economic hardship (as an influencing element of the cultural environment) to the aesthetics that are privileged and valued in Florentin street art (the sense of absence and ennui) provides one answer to Van Damme's question from a Tel Avivian perspective.

Another explanation, written by Franz Boas in 1927, draws on emotion as a source of aesthetic value, specifically in the sense of memory and association. As Boas writes, "the emotions may not be stimulated by the form alone but by the close associations that exist between form and ideas held by the people. When forms convey meaning, because they recall past experiences or because they act as symbols, a new element is added to enjoyment. The form and its meaning combine to elevate the mind above the indifferent emotional state of everyday life" (Boas 1927: 12). In Boas' theoretical framework, the emotional absence and loneliness in Florentinian street art stems not from similarities to other art movements, nor from the cultural environmental causes of economic hardship, but from the emotions themselves. The aesthetic pleasure and value people take from art is derived from the ways "forms convey meaning" by "recall[ing] past experiences" or act[ing] as symbols"—a reference to the aesthetic theories of symbolic ornamentation as well. The layering of emotional memory onto a symbolic representation creates pleasure, and thus sparks aesthetic enjoyment. Shifrin classes this emotional referencing as "self-expression [that] leaves a trail of a parting innocence, inexorably mixed with nostalgia... Florentin street art will make you contemplate sooner than it will make you laugh, if at all" (Shifrin 2016). Shifrin's emphasis on the viewer's contemplation fits nicely into Boas's emphasis on the power of art to "elevate the mind above the indifferent emotional state of life," and that power's influence on aesthetics.

The variety of theories about art and aesthetics point to an important overarching element of street art: its wide-ranging interpretability. The interstitiality of art is articulated by Morphy and Perkins, who “recognize that the category of art is fuzzy, involving a series of overlapping polythetic sets, which contain objects that differ widely in their form and effects” (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 12). They acknowledge that “we do not think that there is any single anthropological theory of art. Since art is an encompassing category, it includes objects of very many different types that are incorporated in contexts in different ways” (Morphy and Perkins 2009: 15). Street art in particular, with its lack of any of the curatorial mediation that is found in museum and gallery spaces, serves as a form of outsider art with aesthetics that can be interpreted via a variety of (often contradictory) frameworks. As Shifrin says, “it may seem pointless to identify ‘art styles’ in graffiti,” and to me, much of the beauty and pleasure in street art comes from that multiplicity (Shifrin 2016). Because street art can be interpreted through so many different lenses, and contains so many different aesthetic and stylistic moves, visitors to Florentin are confronted with an immense range of works that depict and equally immense range of experiences and emotions. The variety in theoretical interpretive frameworks also means that viewers are welcome to reach their own aesthetic conclusions about the work and can find different meaning (or lack thereof) in every piece.



## Technical Skill, Time, and Aesthetics

On the Abraham Hostel tour within the community garden, most easily visible from the street is a piece by DIOZ that depicts a caricature of a man with a 5 o'clock shadow holding a cactus with a flame-like aura around it (figure 25). In the background, the entire wall of the building is painted lime green.

Chana describes DIOZ's style as depicting "people that live their young lives... doing all the hipster things." It occurs to me that in a garden, a painting of a cactus is particularly appropriate.

Chana mentions, almost in passing, that "on the one hand you think it's vandalism, on the other you think how much work it is to make it real." DIOZ's piece, which stretches across the entire face of a two-story building, clearly took a lot of work "to make it real." In this understanding, the value in a work of street art comes from the amount of time and effort put into a piece; the line between graffiti and street art is just time and effort.

Chana also mentions tags as being the signature of an artist. For her, the tag is "the basis of what a graffiti artist has." Unlike in the typical American graffiti vernacular



Figure 25. DIOZ cactus man mural, Community Garden, Florentin, Tel Aviv, Israel. December 2017.

(Read 1997), where a tag is an artful signature that includes the artists name or moniker, to Chana, a tag can also be an artistic motif. As an example, she offers the Israeli artist Dede: “everybody knows a bandaid and everybody knows it’s Dede.”

The *Tourist Israel* online self-guided tour also discusses Dede’s aesthetic and stylistic choices:

*...DEDE, a Telavivian artist whose work is easily recognized by the signature of his name on the bottom of the artwork. His early work was mostly made with stencils. Over the years, his work changed his style and has more free work, done on paper pasted on the walls of buildings. a prominent theme in his work are Band-Aids, A symbol of wounds, hurt and healing, you can find pieces with Band-Aids all around Tel Aviv. Another common theme of DEDE ‘s work is wildlife, you can easily find cats, birds and fish on city walls and fences (Stein 2017).*

Here, Sapphire Stein, the author of the *Tourist Israel* guide, emphasizes not only the signature as a way to identify Dede’s work, but also the content. Band-Aids and wildlife, the content of the work, can also serve as a signature—identifying the work as uniquely Dede. In addition to illustrating the elements of notoriety and “leaving one’s mark” that I discussed earlier, Dede’s ability to create a cohesive style across multiple media (from stencils to “free work”) and different content (from Band-Aids to wildlife) points to the artist’s aesthetics and technical painting abilities.

Stein also mentions these technical abilities in discussing a piece by Jonathan Kis-Lev, saying:

*Jonathan Kis-Lev, a young Tel Avivian artist and a peace activist...is mostly known for his street art in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, which have granted him recognition in Israel, and have become part of major art collections (Stein 2017).*

Kis-Lev is unusual in that he attaches his actual name to his work and uses the notoriety that he has cultivated through street art to transition into the fine arts world as well. However, he is not unusual in that his mastery of technical stylistic elements afford him this opportunity. Many (if not all) of the well-known Tel Avivian street artists have mastered their own personal style in a way that demonstrates technical artistic ability and allows them to create a stylistic niche on the walls. Each artist's own stylistic "tag" both identifies their work as uniquely their own, and also displays awareness of what other artists are doing, as well as general trends in art and aesthetics.

Perhaps this phrasing can also explain Chana's differentiation between graffiti and street art. Although street artists such as Dede can achieve that same recognition, notoriety, and even potential immortality that graffiti artists can, they achieve this through their "tags," or artistic motifs, as opposed to simply scrawling their names. The addition of a signature style allows for the cultivation of a known persona, but the presence of artistic relatability elevates the artist above a graffitier.

Chana's designation between graffiti and street art might also stem from stylistic differences between Israeli and American street art. In Israel, the things on the walls generally fall into one of two categories: either monochromatic initials, signatures, or characters that are identically repeated across the city without regard for locational specificity and can be created in mere seconds (figure 26), or they are complex site-

specific paintings or multimedia pieces that include multiple colors and design elements and would require hours to install (figure 27). Even the pieces that blur those categories (TRA's primitivist faces (figure 28), karate kid's stenciled silhouette, or Amgosha's biblical calligraphy stencils) include artistic elements beyond just the artist's name or pseudonym.



Figure 26. Stick figure with teeth, Tel Aviv, Israel. December 2017.



Figure 27. Multicolored faces mural, Tel Aviv, Israel. December 2017.



Figure 28. TRA piece, Florentin, Tel Aviv, Israel. December 2017.

In global street art, the line between what Chana would define as graffiti and what she would call street art is much more confusing. Some styles of American “tags” include multiple colors and unique fonts that are often so complex that the artist’s pseudonym is barely legible. Other category-blurring styles from outside of Israel include the emerging “calligraffiti” style, which combines calligraphy and graffiti to create tags that are not site-specific and are usually monochromatic, but still incorporate design elements like careful use of fonts and show an artist’s aesthetic awareness.





Figure 29. “Bi-Gak-IUA tag,” Brooklyn, New York. October 2017.



Figure 30. “Calligraffiti,” Munich, Germany. August 2017.

## Conclusion

Throughout the process of writing this thesis I have been focusing on concepts of interstitiality in street art. Something that drew me to street art initially was its seeming paradox—beautiful artwork in dirty streets, illegal paintings that are vaguely permissible, technically skilled artists working for free. As I learned more about street art and tried to define it, specifically within a Tel Avivian context, I ended up with more questions than answers. Even on tours with supposed street art experts, my guides gave multiple different explanations of street art, often conflicting with themselves in the same tour.

Although concepts of Interstitiality can be used to understand these contradictions, as I noted in my introduction, viewers of street art do not always hold these competing regimes of value as equal. Rather, different people who are coming from different positions within the networks of valuation that surround street art prioritize different forms of valuation based on which value structures they see as holding the most power. Anthropologically, that contradiction and inexplicability is what defines street art's interstitiality, but to me that interstitiality is also the source of much of its beauty. The mystery and myriad explications behind and for street art allow viewers to overlay their own expectations and interpretations on the work. As an art student, walking through streets that vibrated with art and color was incredibly inspiring. As an anthropology student, I also drew from street art in its ability to influence and intersect with the public space.

Studying street art, as opposed to more formalized methods of art-making, allowed me access to a more inclusive art-making space—unlike museums or galleries or

other privileged spaces, the streets are open for anyone to paint or see or participate.

Although I was unable to succinctly answer my research question, the lack of a single explanation of street art's valuation reveals its interstitiality—a guiding concept for my fieldwork. I hope that the concept of interstitiality, especially within studies of the art world and aesthetics, will open routes for more nuanced exploration of visual culture.

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