What does Caravaggio have to do with “muzz” influx into Europe?
Controversial street murals in Brussels and the question of political street art

Deniz Berfin Ayaydin

ABSTRACT
Brussels has been the scene for a number of murals depicting sexually explicit and violent acts since 2016. Both online and offline discussions surrounding the murals reveal the complexities between visibility regimes and public spaces. While street art literature has grown in various academic areas, street art remains undertheorised, especially when it comes to public reactions. How street art becomes politicised in relation to socio-political realities also remains to be examined. By analysing online discussions about murals in Brussels depicting violence and sexually explicit imagery, this article aims to contribute to the scholarship on the relationship between street art and politics. I try to categorize what is seen as political in street art by scholars as political praxis and political impact. I argue that when political praxis’s invitation to engage with the object and reflect on its particular socio-political context is taken up by spectators, the street art generates political meanings that can tie Caravaggio to ISIS. This formulation of the political does not rest in the art object, the artist’s intention or the public’s reception, but in the potential for the realisation of human relations around the artwork.

KEYWORDS
Street art; visual culture; political street art; political art

Introduction
In September 2016, a six-foot tall penis mural greeted residents of the Saint-Gilles neighbourhood in Brussels. This mural was soon joined by other explicit and violent murals throughout the city. A female touching herself overlooked La Place Stéphanie. A close-up depiction of coitus graced a wall on the Rue des Poissonniers. Murals of a birth scene and an anus (covering a Zanussi ad) covered two sides of a building near the Brussels Canal (Figure 1). Following these explicit murals, new two pieces depicting violence, both inspired by 17th century artworks, appeared in short succession: one portrayed the beheading of a child that resembled The Sacrifice of Isaac by Italian painter Caravaggio, and the other was reminiscent of The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers by Dutch artist Jan de Baen (Casert 2017) (Figure 2).

Municipal authorities around the world have commissioned sanctioned public art to beautify city walls and brand their cities as cultural hubs. Brussels is not an exception to this neoliberal motivation to market cities. As alderwoman Ans Persoons argued, Brussels wants to be a “creative, artistic, urban city that people want to come and visit” (Mclaughlin 2017). On the city’s municipal website, the conditions for rendering this creativity are clearly stated. The practitioner must present an artistic diploma and receive positive feedback from an artistic jury that meets twice a year. As the home of Hergé, the creator of the comic strip Tintin, Brussels has a few street art walking routes, as well as a municipal webpage dedicated to mapping the more touristic pieces of street art.

The street art pieces mentioned here were controversial not only because they ran against the neoliberal transformation of the practice from aesthetic, grass-roots activism into a commissioned, festival-like exhibit, but also because the pieces contradicted acceptable urban aesthetics by showcasing somewhat intolerable images in a region of the world marked by an orderly and tidy concentration of wealth. The murals evoked disagreement among authorities. On the one hand, officials like Alderwoman Persoons argued that the murals depicting acts of violence were different from the sexually explicit works, in that they could serve as an inspiration for violence and therefore, must be removed quickly (CDC 2017). Other politicians and experts disagreed. Flemish Minister of Culture Sven Gatz stated on Twitter that the work was “well-meant”. He went on to clarify that “[a]rt is free. It’s forbidden to forbid. Or are we going to forbid Caravaggio too?” adding that there is no such thing as good censorship (CDC 2017). In the same vein, Bjorn Van Poucke, the curator of a major Belgian street art festival, reminded those who were shocked by the murals that they were inspired by 400-year-old paintings (Casert 2017). These sorts of discussions also took place among the public. By 2018, two of the murals—the ones portraying the...
penis and intercourse—were removed. Local authorities, despite their discontent, were forced to leave the decision of removal to the property owners, after the discussions around the penis mural took place.

Street art is not new, either as a practice or as an academic field of inquiry. Nonetheless, the controversy surrounding these pieces in Brussels offers a glimpse into the public dissensus around street art

---

Figure 1. Sexually explicit murals.

Figure 2. Murals depicting violence and the 17th century artworks they resemble. The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers, Jan de Baen (attributed to), c. 1672–c. 1675, with permission from the Rijksmuseum. Sacrifice of Isaac, Caravaggio, c. 1598–1603, taken from Wikimedia commons.
that academic work has, so far, largely omitted. In this article, I investigate the online discussions which took place on various platforms to question the politically charged ways of seeing street art. Through analysing this case, I wish to contribute to ongoing debates about the relationship between art and politics, as well as more recent discussions about street art and political meaning. A presentation of the political interpretations attributed to these murals shows that the definition of “political” does not easily sit within the production or the consumption but instead, where art creates a space for the realisation of human relations. First, the article will briefly introduce the complex relationship between art and politics and then move on to street art in particular.

**Art and politics**

The relationship between art and politics is not straightforward or deterministic. Views range from all art is political (Croidhéin, 2020) to the “political” does not belong in art. Chantal Mouffe (2001, p.100), for instance, argues that it is impossible to make a distinction between political and non-political art. She writes: “because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense—and in that sense is political—or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it. Every form of art has a political dimension”. On the other hand, Jacques Rancière’s denial of “political art” is not because all art is political in some way or another, but because no art can be claimed to be ontologically political. The politics of art for Thomas (2015) is the “distribution of sensible”, an arrangement of a “set of perceptions between what is visible, thinkable, and understandable, and what is not”. Thus, Rancière’s “distribution of sensible” refers to a rationale that governs what can be seen and heard. Art becomes political when this distribution of sensible is disrupted and redistributed, by saying and showing what cannot be said or seen. According to Rancière, artists cannot guarantee how a work of art will be interpreted by viewers. He argues that “It is the state of politics that decides that Dix’s paintings in the 1920s, … or films by Cimino and Scorsese in the 1980s, appear to harbor a political critique or appear, on the contrary, to be suited to an apolitical outlook on the irreducible chaos of human affairs or the picturesque poetry of social differences” (Ranciere 2004, 62). Political conversations can emerge from the most unlikely artwork, but Rancière (Ranciere 2004, 75) states that “they cannot be calculated”. Therefore, even commitment to a political cause does not lead to a political effect that can be “predicted” or “instrumentalized” (Lampert 2017, 189). The political effects are random and cannot be ascribed to the artwork itself; political importance is gained through the messy and unknowable process of reception. Thus, as Chambers (2013, 60) rightly suggests, Rancière “uses the word political … as an adjective”, rather than “as a fundamental, ontological category that makes politics possible”. Similar to Rockhill (2009, 206) denies the possibility of an ontological distinction for political art, arguing that “there are only sociohistorical struggles over the political dimensions of artwork”. He contends that art is politicised when political meaning takes place in and over art.

As Lampert (2017) rightly suggests, Rancière’s understanding of political art limits the “political” to the process of reception, which depends on chance. Lampert (2017) argues that the politics of art should not be constrained by the unforeseeable effects of its consumption (which for him, would be the “politics of art’s reception” rather than the politics of art), but should also include “the possibility of a politics of art production”. Lampert points out that Rancière only draws examples from well-respected works of arts and fails to address the power relations involved in the making of art. Moreover, Rancière does not address instances of failed politics, where the sensible is not “redistributed”. Thus, Lampert (2017, 197) argues that “if we can show that the artwork or production in question is a democratic disruption of the status quo, it will be enough to call the artwork ‘political’”. While not going as far as Mouffe, Lampert expands the relationship between art and politics analytically by bringing production back into the conversation. In a similar vein, Ariella Azoulay (2010) problematises the mutually exclusive opposition between the aesthetic and the political. Contrary to the idea that the “political” is a trait of the image, she places the “political” within the space of human relations. Singling out photography as one such space, Azoulay describes the notion of a “civic contract” or “a bond of mutual responsibility between spectator, photographer, and subject” (Wilkinson 2015). This formulation of the political not as a possession of an image or the intent of the artist but as a realization of human relations with respect to the object sophisticates how art becomes political without locating it on either end of the spectrum.

**Street art and its political significance**

Existing research on graffiti and street art concentrates on a number of different aspects. One such approach focuses on defining graffiti and street art by expanding or shrinking the differences and similarities between them. Some scholars think that the term street art “cannot be defined conclusively since what it encompasses is constantly being negotiated” (Bengtson 2014) while others favour elasticity in the use of these terms, yet this diversity is seen as healthy (Ross et al. 2017). Attempts to define street art and
graffiti become even more convoluted when meaningful identifiers become less defined, especially after these art forms move into mainstream culture and spheres of consumption (Brighenti 2016), or are appropriated and legitimated by various institutions (Campos 2021). However, as Blanché (2015) suggests, equating graffiti to street art, or using one as a catch all term for the other, does not end up being constructive, especially when theoretical discussions in the field are still needed.

Attempts to define, identify and classify graffiti and street art generally fall along axes such as legal/authorised/sanctioned versus illegal/unauthorised/unsanctioned (Bengtsen 2014); the techniques and platforms through which the art is consumed (Blanché 2015); the identity of the creator (Molnár 2017; Georgiou 2013); and content, aesthetic and emphasis on letter/pictorial forms (Wacławek 2011). Graffiti is frequently described as unofficial, informal and an illegal making practice (Campos, Zaimakis, and Pavoni 2021). Emerging in the 1970s, together with hip hop and breakdance, graffiti marks a presence in a territory with a meaning that generally remains obscure to outsiders (ibid.). In the early 1980s, graffiti moved into galleries and was marketed as art (Wacławek 2011). This move erased its history as a “source of empowerment for marginalized youth” (Wacławek 2008, 39), and positioned the practice as a new trend of art production. Street art, on the other hand, owes quite a bit to graffiti culture, emerging as “an evolution of, rebellion against or an addition to the established signature graffiti tradition” (Wacławek 2011, 41). While some artists started out with graffiti, extending and transforming their practice to resist the culture or move beyond it, others began through art experimentation (Wacławek 2011, 30), their techniques evolving from cryptic tags to pictorial expressions (Campos, Zaimakis, and Pavoni 2021). Since street art, compared to graffiti, is more accessible to the greater public, it is less likely to be considered vandalism (Blanché 2015, 35) and enjoys a more comfortable relationship with the art market (Bengtsen 2014; Molnár 2017). Although street art and graffiti differ in terms of their histories, ideologies, methodologies and materiality, they share features like ephemeralism (Ross 2016), an “unsanctioned” or uncommissioned nature (Bengtsen 2014; Wacławek 2011) and site-specificity (Riggle 2010).

Apart from attempts to define different forms of public expression, other strands of research focus on adolescent/youth subcultures (Lachmann 1988; Snyder 2009; Rahn 2002, 143) or gender (Macdonald 2001; Pabón 2016). Moreover, some of the most influential academic work centres on the potential of graffiti and street art to be a political act. Much of the fieldwork of this research focuses on political graffiti, as opposed to political street art (Waldner and Dobratz 2013; Zaimakis 2015; Campos, 2016; Ryan 2016). Ivor Miller (2002) addressed political graffiti as an “intrinsically rebellious” act that defies European colonial cultures (p.115), as well as the “system that puts a price tag on everything” (p. 154). In the same vein, others interpreted these urban interventions as “aesthetic sabotage” (Ferrell 1993) and a path to a more democratic city (Iverson 2010). Some scholars specifically viewed the act of graffiti as inherently political (Hanauer 2011), while others argued that labelling graffiti as political depends on the message, as some tags simply celebrate weddings or other life events (Waldner and Dobratz 2013).

Political street art and political graffiti are usually grouped together in research. Chaffee 1993, 3) categorizes different forms of political communication—posters, wall paintings, graffiti, murals and stickers—as political graffiti, viewing them as a “mass communication medium” and a “talk back” mechanism for the public against advertisements and governing bodies. For Chaffee, the publicness of these interventions gives them political meaning. Blanché (2015) suggests that while the absence of limiting categories might benefit street art as a medium, the lack of carefully defined categories is not conducive to research. Thus, following Blanché (2015), this research also adopts the approach that everything-goes-under-political-graffiti is more limiting than enabling. When it comes to politics and aesthetics, a separation between the two seems productive since images, unlike the writing of a “revolution” per se, might be politicised in different ways, as can be seen in this article. Graffiti and street art may have different politics of production and consumption. So, like Campos and Barbio (2021), these closely related terms are treated individually, with a focus on political street art rather than graffiti.

In the last few years, some scholars have attempted to address the relationship between street art and its political significance by tackling the question of what makes street art political. Virág Molnár (2017, 394) argues that the political significance of street art4 “lies not so much in the direct political messages carried in the artwork but in the very practice of street art itself”, which reclaims the public space. So, while agreeing with Rancière that art becomes political through its reshaping of social reality, with a link that is more “situational” than “deterministic” (p.400), Molnár still stresses that the production of street art is in of itself politically significant. Addressing both production and consumption, Campos (2018) argues that the political importance of these urban interventions should consider the act as well as the content. Regardless of the content, Campos argues that the illegal nature of street art
can always be perceived as political art. However, for him these interventions’ content can also express a political statement. In a similar vein, Bolette Blaagaard and Mollerup (2021) claim that political street art transgresses not only the physical spaces controlled by authorities, but also “state-sanctioned meaning-making projects”.

Perhaps more importantly, some scholars have tried to elucidate how street art takes on political meaning. Molnár (2017, 395), as suggested above, stresses production over consumption, offering ways by which street art reconfigures the relationship between the aesthetic and the political, such as “by (1) unsettling the dominance of consumerist messages in the urban environment; (2) democratizing access to popular art by placing it in the urban public domain; (3) reflecting on local politics and urban life by subverting official discourse and tropes of everyday communication in the city; and (4) confronting the unexpected politicization of urban interventions executed by foreign artists”. In the same spirit of highlighting the production aspect, Caomhghín Ó Croidheáin (2020) offers three categories of political art (not exclusively street art): portrayal describes the events and situations that people find themselves in, and the political perspective is implicit; promotion refers to manifesting alternative solutions to the problem, and the political aspect is explicit; and projection means recombining elements to form a new image to say what could have happened or could happen, and the political perspective can be implicit or explicit. Blaagaard and Mollerup (2021), on the other hand, developed three modalities of political street art: emplacement (the resonance gained from the occupation of particular walls); traveling (recontextualisation of street art in various platforms); and conversation (the creation of dialogue through cocreations). All of these interpretations shed light on the relationship between street art and its political significance by emphasising the intention, the act and the content—or the methodological and thematic aspects—of the “political” in street art and graffiti. However, how the reception of the pieces, or what Lampert (2017) calls consumption, contributes to their political significance has received less attention. Campos, Zaimakis, and Pavoni (2021) approaches political graffiti as building a relationship between the artist and citizens over socio-political issues and social change. This relational approach seems to be in line with Azoulay’s (2010) placement of “political” art within the space of human relations at a particular historical moment. With this in mind, in this study I will present the discussions surrounding murals in Brussels depicting violent and sexually explicit acts as producing such a space for human relations, by which street art gains political significance. I suggest an analytical differentiation between the political praxis and the political impact, both of which inhabit a space that is produced by a multiplicity of persons. By touching upon various themes, such as national identity, dirt, children and Islamophobia, an empirical case is presented of how the “political” becomes tangible in this space, opened up by street art visuals. It is proposed that political praxis can only act as an invitation to open up such a space, but it remains a manifestation of personal politics if human relations fail to materialise. Political impact occurs not through the act or the content but through art’s ability to invite viewers to engage with it, as well as reflect on the particular socio-political context. It is within this particular space that 17th century Caravaggio becomes tied to Islamophobia, biblical scenes and ISIS.

Methodology

This study focuses on online discussions about the controversial Brussels murals, how they were used, who they were identified with, and how they were made meaningful. An attempt to capture all crucial online and offline moments was made during the data gathering process, including news reports, political speeches and promotional materials. First, the murals were mapped and registered geographically. Following the physical documentation of the pieces, the online presence of the visuals and their diffusion was traced through a Google reverse image search. Together with the Google image search, Google searches were conducted with combinations of keywords, such as “Brussels penis mural”, “Brussels gory mural”, “Brussels Caravaggio”, “Bruxelles Zizi fresque”, “Bruxelles fresque saglagante”, and “Brussels Penis Muur” in English, French and Dutch. While searches in French and Dutch only resulted in news, English searches resulted in five forums, one personal blog entry and two discussion boards embedded in news websites. Thus, all available digital traces were incorporated into the study, including a Facebook group dedicated to preserving the penis in Saint-Gilles, five forums on Reddit and Voat but also more niche platforms, discussions from Mail Online and Yahoo News, as well as a personal blog post and the responses it elicited were used. In sum, the analysis included 302 comments from 53 Facebook posts (Helmore 2017), and a total of 328 entries from discussion boards on forums and news webpages. I used Netvizz application for Facebook data and I analysed other sources manually. Although all the digital outlets were publicly accessible, I am aware of the ethical complexities online research raises. Nonetheless, I did not seek informed consent from members, so that the
research “does not result in indirect censorship of critical research” (Townsend and Wallace 2016).

To reference publicly accessible digital material or the contributions of people, real names and nicknames were replaced with “neutral identifiers” (Savolainen 2015), such as F11c (F corresponds to Facebook, 11 to the post and c to the comment) to safeguard privacy and not “out” people (Varis 2016). Moreover, the Facebook group discussions were mostly in French and translation of the comments makes re-identification harder. Although, there is considerable groundwork demonstrating that even anonymised datasets can be identified, putting privacy at risk (see Zimmer 2010), given the public nature of these comments and the topic being relatively less sensitive, I aimed to apply an all-out effort for ethical conduct. A thematic analysis was applied to the online conversations. Here, I also would like to note that finding the essence of the argument took a less structured turn. Seminars offered by Jackie Orr presented the opportunity to engage with art-based research methods (ABR). Patricia Leavy (2015, 21) argues that ABR offers ways to make the inaccessible accessible; to connect and intersect what otherwise is unintelligible; to pose different questions or to revisit the old ones; to represent research to audiences outside of narrow elite academic circles; and to represent research that triggers new ways of seeing, thinking, feeling and learning. Taking up her suggestion, I attempted to create a platform to tell this story digitally, where theory and visuals reinforce or undermine each other, where they work together or against each other in material, immaterial, visible, invisible, defined and unpredictable ways. The realisation of how this story should be told emerged from this rewarding and challenging task.  

The online discussions

In place/out of place: dirt and the children

The public display of nudity is a complex issue. In January 2017, Facebook banned a photo of a statue of Neptune, claiming it was sexually explicit (Helmore 2017). Neptune was not the first censored image. A photo of Gustave Courbet’s painting The Origin of the World (1866) shared a similar fate. The disharmony within visibility regimes regarding the body becomes more pronounced when considering how easy it is to buy countless objects, ranging from a yoga mat to a coffee table, emblazoned with the likeness of Courbet’s piece. Likewise, violence is highly regulated and can be acceptable in some movies, but is highly policed in other contexts. This discrepancy is not limited to the media, including social media. With a growing share in urban visual and communicative cultures, street art is also subject to similar heated debates. Murals depicting sexually explicit and violent acts have ignited controversial debates about the use and order of public spaces.

Arguments against these murals revolved around notions of dirt and children. The murals were described as “dirt”, “garbage” (Y50) and “crap” (MO42), and the city was called an “utter dump” (MO9) by some users in favour of removing the murals. Mary Douglas (1966, 36), in her seminal book Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, defines dirt as “matter out of place”. She suggests that dirt is always contextual, never existing in isolation. Dirt is the by-product of the classification, ordering and rejection of out of place elements. A comment from the renter of the property where the Caravaggio-inspired beheading was painted demonstrates this sort of relationship between place and piece. The renter stated: “It just does not fit in this municipality. Maybe it has a value in another place” (Bruzzi 2017). While she found the placement inappropriate, the renter avoided making any judgment about the “value” of the piece. Similarly, for most of the people who were offended by the murals, placement was important in relation to content: “There has to be a line drawn . . . I know it is supposed [to be] art . . . save it for a museum not on a public wall” (MO48). This museum versus public space contrast was echoed across platforms by other users as well. One example is the following comment: “Caravaggio painted on canvas; it was meant to seen indoors” (Y14).

All of the arguments referenced above highlight the importance of the coupling of content and what Blaagaard and Mollerup (2021) call “emplacement”, or what other scholars call “site-specificity” (see Waclawek 2008; Riggio 2010; Bengtson, 2013b; Ross 2016). Poucke, the curator of the Crystal Ship festival, argues that he sees this coupling as hypocritical, since these kinds of images appear to be acceptable “in the media and even seen as art and culture when they are on display in a Catholic church but not on the streets” (Vroomandvarossieau 2017). The importance of content in this context becomes clearer when considering the artist Space Invader, who has 40 “invasions” made of mosaics, inspired by iconic games like Space Invaders and Pac-Man, placed in highly touristic locations in Brussels (Figure 3). Since his invasions have a “clean” and recognisably commercial aesthetic, as well as a smaller scale, the works blend in with the surroundings and are seen as less offending. Space Invader’s “work is illegal (invasive), yet whose imagery is light-hearted and non-threatening” (Waclawek 2008), and is therefore not generally considered “dirt” that needs to be purified. On the
contrary, the work of Space Invader is a demonstration of the creativity that Brussels aims to foster with high public visibility.

Together with the notion of “dirt”, another prominent pro-removal argument was related to the social construction of children. What it means to be a child has cultural, temporal and social implications. In various global contexts, childhood is increasingly constructed as a time of “happy innocence” (Bendo et al. 2019, 407), with children themselves portrayed as vulnerable and at risk (Piro et al. 2019). Capturing the ambivalence in this conception of childhood, Gill Valentine (1996) argues that in North America and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, concerns about the disruptive behaviour and safety of children rose, leading to the creation of a public space that is “produced as ‘naturally’ or ‘normally’ an adult space”. He contends that heightened “concern about young children’s vulnerability to stranger-dangers in public space” and growing anxiety over “the violence and unruliness of older children in public places” bolstered spatial separation (Valentine 1996, 205). As a result of this separation, children are seen as out of place in public spaces (Karsten 2005; Flacks 2018; Carroll et al. 2019). Thus, public spaces become areas where children should be protected, but also where children pose a danger to the social order. In discussions around children and their association with public space, the coupling of placement and content was once again pronounced.

I have two very precocious and very young children. I would rather expose them to this by taking them to an art museum when they are at the right age and discuss the material. This would be terrifying to them. (MO27)

Comments such as this are typical of the outcry seen in press coverage (The Star, AP News), and in social media discussions about the need to protect children. However, some users disagreed. These comments did not openly contradict the vulnerability of children but instead, shifted the focus of the danger from the streets to the media and culture of consumption. Regardless, some comments openly argued against the idea of children viewing the murals:

I don’t see how seeing a penis can be harmful to my children. Half of the humanity has one, and the majority of the rest has already seen one … I have much more difficulty to see my daughter being exposed to advertisements which impose an ideal feminine beauty or push my kids to consumption. Removing this beautiful mural and letting our urban space being invaded by advertising? It doesn’t make any sense to me. (F18t)

As the discussions suggest, the synergy between emplacement and content created debate around symbolic boundaries, wherein the politicisation of this street art took place, preserving or challenging the status quo. Bigger questions of who and what belongs where, what can be seen and heard publicly, and who that public includes are also discussed. While we do not know the artist(s) or their intentions for coupling this particular content with a place, with the exception of the partly covered Zanussi ad (which verbally connected to the visual depiction of an anus), these controversial street art pieces can have political praxis. However, we can only guess at what that praxis is, which at best might be that the artist wanted a public reflection on these pieces. Even though the artist(s) were unable to anticipate the reception, they might have guessed that these murals would generate some concerns about the use of public space by children, as well as what counts as art that can be
enjoyed publicly. The discussions in the next section might have gone beyond the intentions of the artist(s) and the political impact might have taken its own trajectory, which could be loosely related to its political praxis.

*Appropriation and the “other”: creative “us” vs violent islam*

Values and norms formed the pillars of discussions about national identity in relation to these street art pieces. Underneath a post mentioning the removal of the intercourse mural, a user stated: “It’s a fucking shame. This mural was totally part of our culture … It’s despicable (ignoble) to censor our heritage without the opinion of the most interested” (F48d).² A world-renowned Belgian surrealist, René Magritte’s famous *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* was linked to the penis piece, with claims that Belgium was “the country of surrealism par excellence!” (F16h).¹¹ These comments complemented discourses around how censorship belongs to developing countries, and not democratic and prosperous countries like Belgium. The penis mural was seen in a positive light and linked to the open-mindedness of Belgium as a country. Creativity, freedom and humour acted as symbolic boundaries defining what it means to be Belgian. Some commenters expressed their frustration by asking whether the Manneken-Pis (F27c) and Jeaneke-Pis (F27e) would also be removed. This highlighted the controversy about how some penises were seen as national/local markers, while others needed to be discarded. The visuals were consumed in creative ways, producing a space where the components of national identity could be discussed.

While the penis mural served as a symbol for defining the boundaries of ‘we-ness, the murals depicting acts of violence did the opposite. Most comments revolved around key themes such as Islam, unwanted migration and the (non)future of Europe. Just like the European Union motto, “united in diversity” is becoming more questionable. Public spaces in European cities are becoming central to debates surrounding increased migration flows, the growing number of asylum seekers and unfortunate terrorist attacks. As Göle (2006, 129) suggests, the accession of different social groups calls for the redefinition of “frontiers and … normative values”. In a subsequent study (2013), Göle goes on to state that Europe’s confrontation with Islam brought about a propensity to secure national borders, giving rise to neo-populist movements that feed on concerns over this confrontation and position themselves as defenders against the invasion of Islam. It is within this socio-historical context that the murals acquired a particular set of political meanings.

The child beheading piece was located in the Molenbeek neighbourhood, where there is a considerable immigrant population. Discussions about the violence that was portrayed in the murals was mostly linked to Islam: “I am guessing that the Muslim refugees living there feel right at home with a gutted body painted on the side of their low rent living space (Y59)”. Although there was a clear aesthetic inspiration drawn from European artists, some users insisted on linking the murals to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), even though the pieces predated ISIS aesthetics.

Due to the “invasion of Islam”, Europe was seen as having no future. One comment provides an example of such arguments: “They shouldn’t let all the muzzies in. Whatever chance they had is lost forever” (A15). While Islam was seen as representative of a rotten, irrational and suppressive tradition, the West was conveyed as the binary opposite, imbued with the colonial perspective of a “sound civilization, embodying the peak of idealism”, “human achievement” and “liberation of human potential” (Sharify-Funk 2013, 446). One of the users went even further by bringing this binary into a gendered domain: “A perfect metaphor to what is happening to Western women at the hands of the invading hoards” (Y3). In most comments, Islam as a religion and Islam as extremism were merged and reduced to one concept.

Moreover, the discussions around these murals excavated latent discontent with the European Union (EU). A local urban intervention was tied to the inevitable “failing” of the EU (MO40). The trajectory of criticisms presumably differed based on the political inclinations of the commenters. Liberal politicians were especially in the line of fire: “This is what happens when liberals take over” (Y5). Others pointed their fingers at politicians aligned with Bat Ye’or’s (2005) notion of Eurabia, which presumes a secret collaboration between European politicians and the Arab world: “Police and other city ‘officials’ knew very well what was going on and let it happen. No wonder this is Daesh central in Europe” (Y6). Lastly, global capitalist forces were also targeted, with George Soros being accused of having a hand in these interventions (V7).

As the above discussions suggest, the Brussels case presented here attempts to bring complexity to how political street art is understood, by examining the politically charged ways the pieces are viewed separate from the possible intentions of the artist(s). The reception of the pieces is incalculably politicised (as Rancière would say), yet highly dependent on the interaction between “emplacement” (Blaagaard and Mollerup 2021), content and the socio-political historicity of the spectators. Some of the visuals might be seen as “reflecting on local politics and urban life by subverting official discourse and tropes of everyday communication in the city” (Molnár 2017, 395). Yet, others avoid the easy classification offered by Croïdheán (2020), as it is hard to decide whether the beheading of a child from a biblical scene, placed in
a cosmopolitan neighbourhood, can be interpreted as “portrayal” or “projection”. In line with the messy politicalisation of these pieces, I suggest considering the political praxis and political impact of street art in a relational manner. While political praxis can include the intentions of the artists, the act itself and the content, political impact is akin to Rancière’s understanding of disruption of the “distribution of the sensible” (Table 1).

This disruption, while being unknowable, depends on the synergy between various categories, the ways and methods by which the relationship between street art and politics is imagined by scholars (in this case between emplacement and content). These parts move freely and arbitrarily to produce a political impact that is incalculable from the onset of production. However, neither this incalculability nor the potential lack of political praxis has to erase the “politicalness” of street art production. Whether the “political” is positioned in the act of creation or in the image, and not solely in the reception of the pieces, this case demonstrates how political praxis may (or may not) open up spaces for viewers to reflect on socio-political context through art. Neither political praxis nor political impact is singularly deterministic in the political significance of street art, but the realisation of relations between people around the art piece is. What is political in this formulation is not street art’s methodological or thematic qualities, but its ability to build bonds between the artist, the viewer and the work in such a way that the art becomes a commentary on a particular socio-political context. Within this relational space created by street art, a biblical scene by Caravaggio may be seen as related to ISIS and Islamophobia politically.

**Conclusion**

Images have the power to ignite political passions and seeing in particular involves power relations. The sexually explicit and violent imagery that appeared on the streets of Brussels since 2016 served as a jumping off point for discussions, both online and offline, among officials and internet users. These discussions took place at the intersections of notions of dirt and children, as well as belonging and the “other”, demarcating the boundaries of what belongs to whom, and who belongs where. The sexually explicit murals were seen as both a danger to children and a source of pride for Belgium, as a country that fosters creativity and freedom. The murals depicting acts of violence, on the other hand, were viewed as dirt by some commenters not because of their aesthetics, but because of the coupling of content and placement. Moreover, the murals that portrayed violence revealed latent fears or discontent with the European Union’s present and future in relation to migration. The way these discussions unfolded raises questions about how broader social influences shape what is seen, what is allowed to be seen, and where and what is allowed to be seen, publicly or otherwise. These murals are a reminder that seeing is always contextual, relational, and often politically charged and ideologically animated.

In an effort to contribute to the larger body of work on political street art, I argue that the existing literature regards different aspects of the practice of street art as “political” and I tried to differentiate these different aspects analytically as political praxis and political impact. The empirical case study of the Brussels murals included in this paper, where the artists and their intentions are unknown, demonstrates how street art can become political. Based on this empirical case where we do not know the artists and their intentions, I demonstrated how street art becomes political. I suggest that political praxis can only invite to open up a space of interaction but remains a manifestation of personal politics if the human relations around it fail to realize. Political impact occurs not through the act of creation or the content, but through art’s ability to open up a space where relations between people around the piece can take place. When viewers engage with a piece and draw particular socio-political contexts from the work, then street art can generate unpredictable and surprising political meanings that can tie Caravaggio to ISIS. Street art continues to persist in urban spaces in different forms, be it neoliberal or protest pieces, commissioned or illegal. Increasing political turmoil and economic inequality around the world impacts how street art

| Table 1. Overview and categorization of literature on political street art |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| a) intention of the artists | emplacement and conversation (Blaagaard and Mollerup 2021) |
| b) the act itself | challenging the dominance of the neoliberal urban space marked by consumerist messages (Molnár, 2017; Chaffee 1993; Miller 2002; Iveson 2010 …) |
| b) the act itself | democratising urban space (Molnár 2017) |
| Political Praxis | conversation (Blaagaard and Mollerup 2021) |
| b) the act itself | challenging the dominance of the neoliberal urban space marked by consumerist messages (Molnár, 2017; Chaffee 1993; Miller 2002; Ferrell 1993 …) |
| b) the act itself | democratising urban space (Molnár 2017) |
| c) the content | reflection on local politics (Molnár 2017; Rolston 2010; de Ruiter 2015; etc; Waldner and Dobratz 2013) |
| Political Impact | reception ‘disturbing the sensible’ (Rancière 2015) or failure to do so (Lampert 2017), but also the synergy between ‘emplacement’, content and travel (Blaagaard and Mollerup 2021) |
is produced and consumed, as well as how it becomes “political” in complicated ways. A better understanding of the implications of this urban visual culture is needed, as it seems to keep an account of social history in various stages of transformation.

Notes

1. The term “mural” refers to “large, often multi-colour, and labour-intensive paintings such as wall, airbrush, and spray can paintings” (Philippis, Herder and Zerr, 2017).
2. Here, the term “public art” is in line with Bengtsen’s (2013a) notion of both sanctioned and unsanctioned works of art and public expression.
3. https://visit.brussels/en/article/Street-Art-in-Brussels.
4. Molnár (2017) differentiates between street art and graffiti, but uses street art as an umbrella term and includes graffiti in her analysis of the politics of street art.
5. While Croidheain (2020) refers to art in general, he also used street art examples in his discussion. For this reason, it seemed relevant to discuss his categories together with theories focusing on street art.
6. Campos uses this term as an umbrella term that includes different styles of expression, such as marking, tagging, stencils, murals and street art.
7. The digital story can be found at: https://berfina.wixsite.com/amwall

Working on the website has been an exciting intellectual and affective journey for me. It served as an invitation to reinvestigate the boundaries of thinking and expressing oneself through different material forms. Thinking with images, collages and videos, and thinking with words, converged and diverged in surprising and sometimes devastating ways. My personal feeling is that I was able to use images to stress the commodification around visuals much better than I was able to with words. I felt as if words and images had an agency that reshaped the way story was told, which disturbed my autonomy over the story.

8. Following Epstein (1992), symbolic boundaries are understood as imperceptible lines that define, include or exclude people and things.
9. Translated: “D’une part, s’il est bien visible, il est quand même en hauteur. Beaucoup de gens passent à côté sans le voir. D’autre part je ne vois pas en quoi ça peut déranger mes enfants de voir un pénis. La moitié de l’humanité en a un, et la majorité de l’autre en a déjà vu un. J’ai beaucoup plus de mal à voir ma fille exposée aux pubs qui lui font miroiter un idéal de beauté féminine, ou qui poussent mes enfants à la consommation. Enlever cette belle fresque mais laisser notre espace urbain être envahi par la publicité? ça n’a juste aucun sens.”
10. Translated: “C’est une putin de honte c’est frequence faisait totalement partie de notre culture. C’est ignoble de censurer notre patrimoine sans l’avis des plus intéressés.”
11. Translated: “Les ’histoires belges’, c’est pas fini!!!On en a encore des tonnes en stock ! ! ! On n’a pas fini de vous étonner!!!La Belgique, C’EST le pays du surreallisme par excellence!!!”

References

Azoulay, A. 2010. “Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political.” Theory, Culture & Society 27 (7–8): 239–262. doi:10.1177/0263276410384750.
Bendo, D., T. Hepburn, D. C. Spencer, and R. Sinclair. 2019. “Advertising ‘Happy’children: The Settler Family, Happiness and the Indigenous Child Removal System.” Children & Society 33 (5): 399–413.
Bengtsen, P. 2013a. “Beyond the Public Art Machine: A Critical Examination of Street Art as Public Art.” Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History 82 (2): 63–80. doi:10.1080/00233609.2012.762804.
Bengtsen, P. 2013b. “Site specificity and street art.” In Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing through the Discipline, edited by J. Elkins, K. McGuire, M. Burns, A. Chester, and J. Kuennenn, 250–253. 9780415877947.
Bengtsen, P. 2014. The Street Art World. Lund: Almendros de Granada Press.
Blaagaard, B. B., and N. G. Mollerup. 2021. “On Political Street Art as Expressions of Citizen Media in Revolutionary Egypt.” International Journal of Cultural Studies 24 (3). 1367877920960731.
Blanché, U. 2015. “Street Art and Related Terms.” SAUC: Street Art and Urban Creativity 1 (1): 32–39.
Brighenti, A. M., 2016. “Graffiti, Street Art and the Divergent “Synthesis of Place Valorisation in Contemporary Urbanism.” In Routledge handbook of graffiti and street art (pp. 198–207). Routledge.
Bruzzi, B. 2017. ’Kunstenaar werkte met rolkast van vijf meter’. [online] Available at: http://www.bruzzi.be/nl/actua/kunstenaar-werkte-met-rolkast-van-vijf-meter [Accessed 19 January 2018].
Campos, R. 2016. “From Marx to Merkel: political muralism and street art in Lisbon.” In Routledge handbook of graffiti and street art, 341–357. Routledge.
Campos, R. 2018.”The Crisis on the wall: Political Muralism and Street Art in Lisbon.” Crisis, Austerity, and Transformation: How Disciplinary Neoliberalism Is Changing Portugal.: 109–132. London: Lexington Books.
Campos, R. 2021. “Urban Art in Lisbon: Opportunities, Tensions and Paradoxes.” Cultural Trends 30 (2): 139–155. doi:10.1080/09548963.2021.1897779.
Campos, R., and L. Barbio. 2021. “Public Strategies for the Promotion of Urban Art: The Lisbon Metropolitan Area Case.” City & Community 30 (2), doi:10.1177/1535684121992350.

Notes on contributor

Deniz Berfin Ayaydin is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology at Boston College. Her research interests include gender and global capitalism and visual cultures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Deniz Berfin Ayaydin @ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7689-3955
Campos, R., Y. Zaimakis, and A. Pavoni, eds. 2021. Political Graffiti in Critical Times: The Aesthetics of Street Politics. Vol. 28. London: Berghahn Books.

Carroll, P., O. Calder-Dawe, K. Witten, and L. Aisiasiga. 2019. “A Prefigurative Politics of Play in Public Places: Children Claim Their Democratic Right to the City through Play.” Space and Culture 22 (3): 294–307. doi:10.1177/1260331218797546.

Casert, R., 2017. “Brussels Residents Upset over Shocking, Gory Street Art.” [online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/02/brussels-residents-upset-over-shocking-gory-street-art.html [Accessed December 2021].

CDC. 2017. “Decapitation Scene on Streets of Brussels.” Available at: http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/english/News/12871170 [Accessed 17 March 2017].

Chaffee, L. G. 1993. Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries. Vol. 40. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Chambers, S. A. 2013. The Lessons of Rancière. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chantal, M. 2001. “Every form of art has a political dimension.” Grey Room 2: 98–125. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1262544

de Ruiter, A. 2015. “Imaging Egypt’s Political Transition in (Post-) Revolutional Street Art: On the Interrelations between Social Media and Graffiti as Media of Communication.” Media, Culture & Society 37 (4): 581–601. doi:10.1177/0163443714566901.

Douglas, M. P. 1966. In Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Epstein, C. F. 1992. “Tinkerbell and Pinups: The Construction and Reconstruction of Boundaries at Work. Cultivating Differences.” In Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality, edited by M. Lamont and M. Fournier, 232–256. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Ferrell, J. 1993. Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality. New York: Garland.

Flacks, S. 2018. “The Stop and Search of Minors: A ‘Vital Police Tool?’” Criminology & Criminal Justice 18 (3): 364–384. doi:10.1177/1748895817720485.

Georgiou, M. 2013. Media and the City: Cosmopolitanism and Difference. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Göle, N. 2006. “Islam, European Public Space and Civility.” Religion in the New Europe 2: 122–130.

Göle, N., 2013. “Islam’s Disruptive Visibility in the European Public Space.” Eurozine. Available at: http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-10-11-gole-enhtml http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-10-11-gole-enhtmlhttp://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-10-11-gole-enhtmlhttp://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-10-11-gole-enhtml [Accessed 29 January 2022].

Göle, N. 2013. “Public space democracy.” Transit 44 (2013): 1–10.

Graffiti Tourists Flock to Brussels.” (n.d.) Available at: http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/english/News/1.1212216 [Accessed 17 March 2017].

Hanauer, D. I. 2011. “The Discursive Construction of the Separation Wall at Abu Dis: Graffiti as Political Discourse.” Journal of Language and Politics 10 (3): 301–321. doi:10.1075/jlp.10.3.01han.

Helmore, E., 2017. “Facebook Blocks Photo of Neptune Statue for Being ‘Explicitly sexual.’” Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/02/facebook-blocks-uranus-hermes-statue-france

blocks-nude-neptune-statue-bologna-italy [Accessed 6 December 2017].

Iveson, K. 2010. “The Wars on Graffiti and the New Military Urbanism.” City 14 (1–2): 115–134. doi:10.1080/13604810903545783.

Karsten, L. 2005. “It All Used to Be Better? Different Generations on Continuity and Change in Urban Children’s Daily Use of Space.” Children’s Geographies 3 (3): 275–290. doi:10.1080/14733280500352912.

Lachmann, R. 1988. “Graffiti as Career and Ideology.” American Journal of Sociology 94 (2): 229–250. doi:10.1086/228990.

Lampert, M. 2017. “Beyond the Politics of Reception: Jacques Rancière and the Politics of Art.” Continental Philosophy Review 50 (2): 181–200. doi:10.1007/s11007-016-9369-1.

Leavy, P. 2015. “Social Research and the Creative Arts: An Introduction,” Ch.” In Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice, 2nd. Vol. 1. 1–38. New York: Guilford Press.

Macdonald, N. 2001. The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York. New York: Springer.

Mclaughlin, K., 2017. “Blood and Gore: ‘Hellish’ Brussels Street Art Depicting a Gutted Body and a Child with a Blade to His Neck Outrage Locals.” Available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-163546/Blood-gore-Brussels-asks-far-street-art-go.html [Accessed 8 October 2017].

Miller, L. 2002. Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City. Ann Arbor: Univ Pr of Mississippi.

Molnár, V., 2017. “Street Art and the Changing Urban Public Sphere.” Public Culture 29 (2 (82)): 385–414. doi:10.1080/08992363-3749117.

Pabón, J. N. 2016. “Ways of being seen: gender and the writing on the wall.” Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art, 78. Routledge.

Philipps, Axel, Sergej Zerr, and Elco Herder. “The representation of street art on Flickr. Studying reception with visual content analysis.” Visual studies 32, 4 (2017): 382–393.

Piro, V., N. De Luigi, C. Reutlinger, and D. Zimmermann. 2019. “Making a Home in the City: How Young People Take Part in the Urban Space.” In Young People and the Struggle for Participation, edited by A. Walther, J. Batsleer, and P. Loncle, 97–112. London: Routledge.

Rahn, J. 2002. Painting without Permission: Hip-hop Graffiti Subculture. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Ranciere, J. 2004. The Politics of Aesthetics. Trans. G. Rockhill. New York: Continuum Publishing.

Riggle, N. A. 2010. “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces.” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 68 (3): 243–257.

Rockhill, G. 2009. “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art.” In Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics, edited by Gabriel Rockhill and P. Watts, 195–215. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rolston, B. 2010. “Trying to Reach the Future through the Past: Murals and Memory in Northern Ireland.” Crime, Media, Culture 6 (3): 285–307. doi:10.1177/1741659010382335.

Ross, J. I., ed. 2016. Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art. London: Routledge.

Ross, J. I., P. Bengtsen, J. F. Lennon, S. Phillips, and J. Z. Wilson. 2017. “In Search of Academic Legitimacy: The Current State of Scholarship on Graffiti and Street
Art.” The Social Science Journal 54 (4): 411–419. doi:10.1016/j.soscij.2017.08.004.
Ryan, H. E. 2016. Political Street Art: Communication, Culture and Resistance in Latin America. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
Savolainen, R. 2015. “Expressing Emotions in Information Sharing: A Study of Online Discussion about Immigration.” Information Research 20 (1): [Accessed 29 January 2022].
Sharify-Funk, M. 2013. “Pervasive Anxiety about Islam: A Critical Reading of Contemporary ‘Clash’literature.” Religions 4 (4): 443–468. doi:10.3390/rel4040443.
Snyder, G. 2009. Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York’s Urban Underground. New York University Press: New York and London.
Thomas, Duncan. 2015. “The Politics of Art: An Interview with Jacques Rancière.” https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere
Townsend, L., and C. Wallace. 2016. Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.
Valentine, G. 1996. “Children Should Be Seen And Not Heard: The Production And Transgression Of Adults’ public Space.” Urban Geography 17 (3): 205–220. doi:10.2747/0272-3638.17.3.205.
Varis, P. 2016. Digital Ethnography. The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication. Oxon and New York: Routledge 55–68.
Vroomandvarossieau, C., 2017. New Mural shocks Brussels. [online] Available at: http://www.vroomandvarossieau.com/news/2017/new-mural-shocks-brussels [Accessed 17 January 2018].
Waclawek, A., 2008. From graffiti to the street art movement: negotiating art worlds, urban spaces, and visual culture, c (pp. 1970–2008). (Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University).
Waclawek, A. 2011. Graffiti and Street Art. London: Thames & Hudson.
Waldner, L. K., and B. A. Dobratz. 2013. “Graffiti as a Form of Contentious Political Participation.” Sociology Compass 7 (5): 377–389. doi:10.1111/soc4.12036.
Wilkinson, J. 2015. “Art Documents: The Politics of Visibility in Contemporary Photography.” InVisible Culture 22. Available at: https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/art-documents-the-politics-of-visibility-in-contemporary-photography/ [Accessed 29 January 2022].
Ye’or, B. 2005. Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Pr.
Zaimakis, Y. 2015. “‘Welcome to the Civilization of Fear’: On Political Graffiti Heterotopias in Greece in Times of Crisis.” Visual Communication 14 (4): 373–396. doi:10.1177/1470357215593845.
Zimmer, M. 2010. “‘But the Data Is Already Public’: On the Ethics of Research in Facebook.” Ethics and Information Technology 12 (4): 313–325. doi:10.1007/s10676-010-9227-5.