

*“The ugliness of buildings
excites vandalism”*

-Raoul Vaneigem

*“Society gets the kind of vandalism it
deserves”*

-Banksy

*“The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the
endurance of those whom they oppress”*

-Frederick Douglass

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antistatestl.wordpress.com

1312press@riseup.net

ig@1312.press



In Defense of Graffiti & Those Who Write



Another position, that of those who argue in defense of immediate acts of resistance and subversion regardless of their current social legitimacy, can be summed up in a simple question. How will any of us be ready to engage in serious struggle if we have not had the experiences to prepare us? Even Tahrir Square owes something to the soccer hooligans who had for years prior fought police in the streets of Cairo. The logic here is that by engaging in the activities necessary to social struggle, of which graffiti is admittedly only one and a minor one at that, we help build a movement willing and able to perform the activities necessary to social struggle. If we continually put off the building of such skills, capacities and confidence to some later date, we will only be shooting ourselves in the foot.

But what about a non-violent resistance? Without dragging ourselves through the mud of this tired debate (Is property destruction violent? Is violence always wrong? Can one exist in this society without being complicit in violence?), we would like to clarify at least one point: no resistance movement ever has been purely non-violent. Yes, there are examples of historic tendencies which did exhibit a non-violent discipline (Gandhi and MLK being the most well known), but even they did not exist within a vacuum. And both Gandhi and King, while being quite clear about their perspectives, explicitly rejected any attempt by the State to drive a wedge between them and their contemporaries by turning one against the other. To put it simply, those who would inform the police on the activities of their fellows do a disservice to the legacy of all those who have struggled for a better world.

We can think of no better way to end, than with the words written on the window of Fifth Third Bank in downtown St. Louis:

“Solidarity with all who resist.”

Take a walk through the heart of any American city and you will see two things: a barrage of advertisements, logos, brands, and ... graffiti. The former is produced by those with power and money, the latter by those without either. While the form and purpose of corporate signage varies depending on the desired effect, their imposing nature remains a constant – dominating not only the skyline but even our collective subconscious. The advertisements, with their inducements to a never-ending shopping spree, along with the imposing logos atop skyscrapers, against which one can't help but feel small, create a functional monopolization of space wherein the individual is at all times being acted upon without any ability act upon the surrounding environment.

Enter graffiti.

Modern graffiti first emerged from the underground hip-hop scenes of New York City where those excluded from capitalist society – predominately poor, young people of color – created their own forms of self-expression outside and often against the mainstream. But writing on walls goes back even farther than that. From the caves of Altamira and the city walls of Pompei to the “tagging” of postal workers and railroad men (New York's ‘Vic 156’ and ‘Bozo Texino’ respectively), graffiti has always been an aspect of human society. But what does all that have to do with a self-conscious social movement? Not only is graffiti a means for the isolated individual or small clique to leave an imprint on the world, a way to be seen and heard, but also and perhaps most importantly, graffiti is a way to communicate. And because we do not have access to massive printing presses, broadcast towers and recording studios (at least not yet) we must make use of every means of communication at our disposal. Along with books and pamphlets, discussions and workshops, posters and leaflets, writing on walls is a valid and historic tool in social struggle.

In May, 1968 thousands of French workers took part in a wildcat general strike. Students, workers and others occupied universities and factories, built barricades and successfully defended them against the murderous CRS (French riot police). They also wrote on every available

surface. Poetry, slogans, and debate were all published on the walls of Paris. Beautiful posters were printed using appropriated workshops and materials and then pasted all over the city. This “defacement of private property” is one of the legacies of that movement which survived the repression. It is a part of the memory that informs our current struggles. Today, in an ironic turn of events the slogans and posters of May ’68 can be found in galleries and art books, but they can also be found in our antagonistic social movements and our counter-institutional spaces.

One of the most famous instances of political graffiti occurred in January 1969 in the Bogside neighborhood of Derry in Northern Ireland. The phrase, “You are now entering Free Derry” was painted on the side of a building after community residents repelled a police incursion, set up barricades and patrolled the neighborhood to keep out the RUC (British colonial police). Between 1969 and 1972, the Bogside was effectively an autonomous area within Northern Ireland where at times the colonial army and police could not operate. Forty-three years later, the graffiti remains, although it has been altered over the years – most recently with a red and black background symbolizing the anti-authoritarian ferment made manifest in the Bogside.

Jumping forward to 2006 and skipping half-way around the globe, we land in Oaxaca, Mexico then in the midst of a full scale uprising in which a teachers’ strike, occupation of the public square, and subsequent police repression provoked the entire population into an agitated state. Grandmothers were seen carrying crates of molotov cocktails to barricades surrounding the re-occupied zocalo (central square). Housewives occupied radio and television stations and defended them from paramilitary forces operating beyond the law. Young and old barricaded the streets and neighborhoods of the city shutting down all traffic, and everywhere there was graffiti. The words “Fuera Ulises” filled the walls and stencils were made to commemorate those who took part in the uprising, some of whom paid with their lives.

And most recently, the inspiration for #Occupy’s “American Fall,” the “Arab Spring,” too had its fair share of words painted on walls. Circle-

a’s, Arabic script, elaborate wheat-pastes and stencils, slogans against the dictatorships written in English for a foreign audience – all found their place in the cities of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya... Let us not forget that this cycle of uprisings saw, alongside graffiti, the storming of prisons, the burning of government offices and pitched battles with police. What does it mean that such a widespread rebellion could inspire a subsequent movement across the globe, and yet all we can inspire are denouncements, internal division and threats of informing to the police over such a simple thing as a little paint on a window or a wall?

To be clear, this is not a call for blind unification or the subsumption of difference. There are very real divisions between us, and yet we remain hopeful that some if not all of those barriers could be overcome, if we try. So, in the interest of moving forward perhaps we should examine the real substance behind all the uproar over graffiti, wheat-paste and their likes.

One conception of a social movement is that of protest. This is expressed in demands to a legitimate authority, in petitioning those in charge to change their ways, in the idea that if the “truth” were only known by all the situation as it stands could not last. Another conception is that of resistance. And it is here that we see some of our fundamental differences emerge. Resistance is not an attempt to dialogue with the powerful, it is the effort to build a material force from among the exploited and excluded. Where this all gets so confusing is in the overlap of tactics, in the shared space of protest and resistance. Occupations, demonstrations, and yes, even targeted property destruction could fit in the domains of either. So its not on a purely tactical level that we can understand the difference. We must dig a little deeper.

All sides of this debate recognize the necessity of numerical growth to any attempt to transform society. One position argues for the maintenance of legitimacy, in an effort to avoid alienating the public at large, and the slow and painful building of a “people’s movement.” All the while prophesying a future mass rebellion which will be capable of confronting the state in the manner of the Cairo insurgents.