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Signs of Resistance: Marking Public Space Through a Renewed Cultural Activism

For several years prior to the catastrophic events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was the site of an ongoing tension between artist-activists, progressives, and revolutionaries and what some might call an antigraffiti vigilante. Fred Radtke, president and founder of Operation Clean Sweep, Inc., a nonprofit anti-graffiti organization, vowed that his group would remove graffiti within 7 days after it was reported to a 24-hour a day hotline. Radtke reported that graffiti had dropped 65% in New Orleans, and more specifically, 85% in the French Quarter (“Pride Reflected,” 2002). Earlier cleanup campaigns in the city involved New Orleans public housing residents and were funded by the city and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Unlike these “beautification programs,” which turned communities into “beehives of productive summer activity” (“Residents Key,” 2002), Radtke single-handedly created a group of community advocates to enforce a zero tolerance policy for graffiti, often with the help of members of the City Council and the local police districts (“Crusading Graffiti-Busters,” 2002).

In various arenas of the public sphere, Radtke is known by his proper name. However, at the (sub-)cultural level in which he is in competitive dialogue with artist-activists, Radtke is also infamously known as the “Gray Ghost” because of his practice of indiscriminately covering all types of graffiti with gray paint, regardless of the color of the surface behind it. If indeed, there was a reduction in graffiti in New Orleans during his campaign, as Radtke reported, there most certainly was a proliferation of another type of pervasive markings on the city streets. For a time, monotone gray squares speckled the colorful walls of the French Quarter and lined the historic avenues throughout the city (see Photo 9.1). If you ever travel to New Orleans, you may see widespread traces of the notorious Gray Ghost on walls of several streets, which remain after the Hurricane Katrina flooding and cleanup.

Photo 9.1 Traces of the Gray Ghost in the French Quarter



Even though many residents, business owners, and politicians commended Radtke's efforts, including former President Bill Clinton and former Mayor Marc Morial (“N.O. Man,” 2002), some

citizens were upset about the approach to the graffiti problem, contending that the “Band-Aid solution of one fanatical volunteer” actually accelerated the rate of graffiti instead of decreasing it” (“Gray Paint,” 2000). In addition, scholars on cultures of graffiti argue that youth cultures create new spaces of pleasure by evading the authority's efforts to suppress their activities (Ferrell, 1997). For example, stencils depicting a portrait and the words, “I LOVE FRED,” began appearing on the streets in direct response to the eradication efforts (see Photo 9.2).

Even more, cultural responses to Radtke also emerged on the streets of New Orleans in the form of political stickers posted on stop signs that read, “Fred Radtke: Stop the Gray Ghost.” These glossy stickers revealed direct resistance to the name of the symbolic authority in both its forms, real and fictitious; a subject who is silencing expressions on the street with a bucket of gray paint and producing an acceleration of political action and agitation.

Despite the efforts to eradicate graffiti through intensified civic and (il)legal avenues of social control, these fascinating examples of symbolic exchanges on the street reveal the productive as well as repressive nature of policing subcultural practices. Policing of cultural activity is potentially productive in the sense that it opens up possibilities for new forms of discourse and new displays of cultural and political resistance.

Photo 9.2 I LOVE FRED on Baronne Street.



Adding to discussions on the nature of power, Foucault (1977/1980) posits,

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can

be integrated in global strategies. (p. 142)

I use Foucault's words alongside the whole complex of mediated social interactions between the Gray Ghost and artist-activists, progressives, and revolutionaries in New Orleans as a point of departure to develop a notion of visual resistance that can be integrated into discussions of sociocultural agitations and relations of power. In this sense, policing graffiti is not a unidirectional display of power that is independent of forms of resistance. Instead, the examples provided here demonstrate how relations of power and resistance tend to operate and circulate through the streets in an endless cycle of markings and cover-ups. In this chapter, I use visual and ethnographic methods to document and discuss various exchanges on the streets of New Orleans between 2001 and 2004. This research explores the mediated dialogues that exhibit the intersection between power and resistance and, ultimately, the productive nature of social control. In what I will call visual resistance strategies, the artist-activists transform the street space into an alternative cultural space for political dissent and engage in conversations on the street with other activists and also with structures of power and authority. Through visual resistance strategies, activists engage in a conversation of signs in an innovative and radical pursuit of democratic participation in cultural areas saturated with discursive power.

Research Goals and Methodology

I have been car-free for several years, and this entire research project was conducted while traveling the streets of New Orleans by bicycle. This urban mobility accomplished with two wheels enabled new ways of seeing the city and, by extension, new ways of knowing the social world. This method of travel enabled a way of experiencing a city by moving through it. It was in this movement-oriented experience that I first encountered the strangely intriguing images on the walls of Baronne Street in New Orleans' central business district. Luckily, on that day I had my camera in my bag.

Amazed by the complex political commentary and extraordinary detail of the visuals, my first impulse was to document and preserve the images as I saw them on that day. I was motivated by an overwhelming suspicion that the images and messages would undoubtedly be covered or removed in the immediate future. Because of the political content of the messages and the city's zero tolerance policy on graffiti, which treats these artistic and political expressions as criminal practices, the visual sentiments I observed were vulnerable to being erased.

So I pulled out my camera and photographed the political graffiti, moving between long shots to capture the breadth of the image and close-ups to capture the details. By photographing the

images, I fixed what might otherwise be fleeting phenomena: cultural products weathered by exposure to the elements or removed by individual or institutional forces. It was only later that I tried to make sense of these fleeting cultural expressions that often reveal the political sentiments of the time and location; some of them are included in this chapter.

At the time, several neighborhoods in New Orleans were experiencing rapid redevelopment through urban renaissance projects. Just a few miles away, a Wal-Mart Superstore was meeting intense opposition by citizens and preservationists as developers tried to secure a space within the historic Lower Garden District. In the area surrounding the proposed building site, artist-activists launched a major canvassing campaign that commented on the negative impacts that an entity like Wal-Mart would have on neighborhood cultures and local economies. In addition to economic shifts in the city, politicians and state officials were launching a campaign for the second war on Iraq. Again, the streets were canvassed with political posters as part of the local anti-war movements.

What began as a small project to document the political images on those blocks turned into a case study of visuals on Barrone Street, and it also led to an exploratory study of political images and the Gray Ghost cover-ups in several other New Orleans neighborhoods. Shortly after developing this first roll of film, I became much more attuned to similar markings throughout the city. As I passed by on the street, I noticed that in some places, the markings were removed completely, and in others, the markings were transformed almost daily.

I began seeking out graffiti on public streets and creating an archive of poster art and political images, as well as the monotone gray squares indicating the Gray Ghost's eradicating efforts—an archive that now is composed of hundreds of images. I used 35 mm and digital photography as the method of data collection. Because of my method of travel, the amount of research equipment I could carry was limited to the space available in my bag. This constraint usually meant that I traveled with only one camera at a time, but on rare occasions, I carried multiple cameras. Because of the ephemeral nature of the data, I used whichever camera was with me at the time. In the event that I did not have a camera with me, I noted the location in notebooks, on scrap paper, even on my own skin, and I returned as soon as possible to document the images. If I was far from home and without a camera when I came across the markings, I would go as far as finding a local drugstore to purchase a disposable camera.

Most of the time, the images were still there when I returned. However, on several occasions, the posters had been ripped down or the markings painted over between the time I first saw them and the time I returned with a camera. In the most extreme case, I saw a street-level billboard that had been transformed with several layers of mounted posters. This cultural

practice, often referred to as *culture jamming*, is well documented by Naomi Klein (2000). I rode to my home less than a mile and a half away to retrieve my camera and returned within half an hour. To my surprise, the images were covered by a new billboard advertisement. The glue was still wet and running down the wall when I arrived. I include this narrative description to highlight the fleeting nature of this cultural resistance.

Because of the speed and portability of the camera, I find photography to be the most useful form of collecting these cultural artifacts because it enables me to document the expressions and transgressions before they disappear. The research instruments consisted of 35 mm and digital cameras, and my own interpretive experiences of the settings were documented in fieldnotes and memos. Using my access to a university darkroom, I printed the images myself to stay as close as possible to the images. However, because of issues of economy, several of the images were machine printed at a local lab or left in digital form. After completing my university degree and subsequently relinquishing my darkroom access, I had all other images machine printed. I noticed differences in the individual photographs based on the type of film and camera used. I lost rich colors when I shot in black and white, and I would often return to the field setting with different cameras and film to capture those differences.

Throughout the analysis of visual resistance, I arranged the content of various political slogans, images, and texts in much the same way as a literary scholar might study genres. Through this sorting practice, I searched for themes within the content, topical areas, style, and authorship. In addition to focusing on content, I focused on forms, practices, and techniques employed in the execution of the sign in the resistance movements. While interpreting the photographs of visual resistance practices, I also contextualized the work by noting the surrounding cultural and geographic spaces in which the agitations occurred while historicizing the images and texts within sociopolitical climates.

Anonymous postings, illegible scribbles, and nameless graphics on street surfaces pose several methodological considerations that make studying these transgressive practices both challenging and exciting. The interactions among those in resistance subcultures, as well as their interactions with structures of authority, are often invisible (Ferrell, 1996). I describe a few dimensions that characterize a political subculture of artist-activists employing these practices by means of describing the messages left visible. In other words, the conversations and social interactions taking place on the street are often mediated; the dialogue is stretched out over time and space, and it takes place through the symbols, markings, and images left on the surfaces.

Rather than focusing solely on human subjects, this research employs an ethnography of

images, as illustrated in cultural criminology studies of urban graffiti subcultures (Ferrell, 1996, 1999). Using photography along with fieldnotes to describe and contextualize research settings, Jeff Ferrell explores *intertextual dynamics* and subcultural styles, codes, and shared meanings through an examination of freight train graffiti. Ferrell (1996) writes, “In just two years of research I have photographed many hundred examples of such graffiti throughout the western and midwestern United States, and watched as fast-moving trains have carried many thousands more beyond my photographic reach” (p. 238). Using visual data and ethnographic descriptions, Ferrell's work highlights the local production of many graffiti images but situates them within a *context of dislocation*, in which the images are constantly shifting in relation to other images. Drawing heavily on postmodern and anarchist theoretical assumptions, Ferrell's (1996) work engages the playful mobility of the freight train graffiti, which “capture[s] particular patterns of meaning and style, but in doing so follow[s] no set temporal or geographic order” (p. 240).

Once again, moving away from direct fieldwork with human subjects to the mediated symbolic exchange, researchers can use the visual method to understand social relationships discursively through an *ethnography of images*. Consistent with a grounded theory method and the process of open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, my first theoretical orientations emerged from the initial data. The visual resistance confronts political issues that could be organized under a variety of categories and concepts. I initially organized the images under a geographic schema divided into local issues, regional issues, and global issues. As I continued with this exploratory and interpretive project, I found that this thematic categorization was inadequate because the discrete categories mask the interrelationship and movement between the themes. Even more, the artist-activists blur these spatialized boundaries of classification when the signs of visual resistance are absorbed into the digital arena. Through the interplay between high technology and low technology communication, local issues become global issues, global issues become localized, and regional boundaries collapse and expand into both local and global categories of analysis. Finally, I conclude this chapter by discussing how visual research has the potential to disrupt the disciplinary boundaries of mainstream sociological knowledge production and how this research itself is a form of visual resistance against structures of disciplinary boundaries. More specifically, in light of the focus of this edited collection, I will demonstrate the utility of visual research methods in understanding parts of everyday life by fixing fleeting moments and mediated interactions to reveal deep social and structural arrangements.

Developing a Concept of Visual Resistance

From the beginning of this project, I searched for language to describe the complex

phenomena without drawing on terms that invoked a moral evaluation of the practice as inherently problematic. This process proved to be extraordinarily difficult. As I sifted through images, I tried to make sense of these cultural expressions using the term *graffiti*. But as I continued to study these expressions, and also during conversations with many others about this project, I began to see how the term graffiti is problematic. Despite research that shows the productive effects of graffiti subcultures for creating relationships and identities among practitioners through shared values and understandings of style, graffiti itself has a long history of being understood as deviant and criminal (Ferrell, 1995). Choosing to label these works as graffiti risks trivializing the complicated relationships that exist between criminal/state, victim/offender, and public/private, thus reducing subjects of study to relationships of binary opposites and masking the ways in which these terms are often mutually supportive, codependent, and contingent.

After discarding the use of *graffiti* as a working definition for studying these expressions, I tried to employ the term *street art*. Street art has a more positive connotation and seems more likely to get an approving nod than the practice of graffiti. However, I now find the phrase problematic as well because it seems to aestheticize these actions and political expressions, when the phrase might be better reserved for legitimized artistic expressions such as community murals or city-sponsored artwork. The content on Baronne Street is uneasy, politicized, disrupting. The act itself can be understood as a violent form of resistance against legitimate spatial relations. It is here that I found the phrase *visual resistance* more useful than either the term *graffiti* or the term *street art*.

In using the phrase *visual resistance*, I seek to move beyond discussions of the criminalized practice of graffiti, which is often associated with deviance and delinquency and thus is rigorously policed by the state, community activists, and neighborhood associations. Instead, I look at the discursive functions of practices of visual resistance at the very sites where power exists.

Visual resistance seems to speak to the spirit of these expressions on the street, both in the content of the messages and in the acts of transforming and challenging the meanings of the street spaces within relations of power. I use the term to express any human transformation of a surface, such as written or sprayed graffiti, painting, line drawings, stickers, T-shirts, cartoons, stencils, and mounted posters. This is not meant to be an all-inclusive list of visual resistance expressions. Rather, I provide these examples to show a few of the many possible resistance techniques that are not included in a more narrow definition such as *street art* or *political graffiti* and that emerge within relations of power. Future research can locate other forms of visual resistance in places and relations where the visual is used as a disciplinary technique of social

control.

Visual resistance is situated at the intersection between the action as a cultural practice of disseminating expressions of dissent; the resulting cultural, material, and symbolic products; and the efforts to police these practices. In other words, visual resistance exists in the milieu of institutional and individual power and social control. Even though the visual resistance may have been displayed on private property, I use the term *public space* because anyone on a public street has visual access to the expression. Unlike political commentary that enters museums or private galleries, visual resistance on public streets sidesteps certain cultural gatekeepers, such as curators or gallery owners, who often regulate the distribution of other artistic expressions.

The regulation of visual resistance as an illegitimate and illegal practice functions within the cultural boundaries of deviance and the legal definitions of state intervention. As stated in other research, graffiti as a cultural practice is often considered a criminal practice, most often by structures of authority that criminalize alternative spaces to perpetuate systems of domination and to maintain mainstream cultural boundaries (Ferrell, 1997). In other words, because of the cultural dimension of these political, social, and identity-based expressions, I will continually refer to these techniques of communication as *resistance* rather than *art* or *crime*, although I recognize the act of vandalism involved. It may be true that resisters thrive under conditions of intense surveillance and social control and that the whole apparatus of state intervention may intensify the practices described here. However, proposing new language to describe the practices at the level of discourse undermines the state's power in criminalizing the cultural practices by showing that it is precisely at the moments of exerting control that these visual resisters thrive.

In the spirit of Ferrell, I assert that visual resistance in the city actually contributes to the production of new spaces, as well as new cultural meanings and social interactions, through the transformation of surfaces often assumed as static. Not only is visual resistance a marking of space, it is a marking *against* certain spatial relations. In this sense, visual resistance is functional in several ways. The resistance occurs in both the form and content of the message itself, challenging explicitly a variety of social-political powers and legal structures.

Drawing on interpretive traditions, visual resistance also functions at the cultural level by disrupting, negotiating, challenging, and contesting any stable meanings and understandings of the city street. We often see architecture as just buildings, and although we often view these walls simply as structural constraints, visual resistance encourages us to recognize the interpretive process involved in our understanding of the city streets and the extent to which we

reinforce these understandings of space in everyday life. When the wall becomes a text that must be read and then interpreted, the meaning of the surface is continuously (re)constructed and maintained. Thus, our efforts to understand the relationship between (criminalized) social actors, structures of power, and their relationships to the street must take into account how the meanings are changed, challenged, reinforced, and negotiated through a process of interpretation.

Before moving into the specific ways in which visual resistance functions in this case, a discussion of the preliminary theoretical orientations will help ground my argument.

Cultural/Interactionist Criminology

The artist-activist, operating as an individual or as part of a collective, can use the street as a canvas, a forum, and a tool for social change. As mentioned earlier, because of the cultural dimension to these political, social, and identity-based expressions, I will continually refer to these techniques of communication as resistance in the company of power, rather than as art or crime. Like cultural practices such as street art and graffiti, visual resistance is often considered a criminal practice, most often by structures of authority that criminalize alternative spaces to perpetuate systems of domination and maintain mainstream boundaries (Ferrell, 1997). The regulation of visual resistance as an illegitimate and illegal practice is a function that falls within the cultural boundaries of deviance and the legal definitions of state intervention. Just as deviance is a characteristic conferred on a behavior rather than a property inherent to the behavior (Erikson, 1966), crime is a function of the state and as a result, the “criminality of crime is defined by law” (Black, 1983, p. 42).

Many scholars have been engaging in this conversation in the area of cultural criminology. In developing a *cultural criminology*, Jeff Ferrell and Clinton Sanders (1995) demonstrate that

shared symbolism and mediated meaning, subcultural style and collective imagery, define the nature of crime, criminality, and social control not only for criminals engaged in the daily enterprise of criminality but for everyone caught up in the larger social process of constructing and perceiving crime and control. (p. 298)

I find this conversation in criminology useful because visual resistance, as an artistic/political/cultural practice, uses symbolism and mediated meaning in a consistent, patterned style as a way to resist social control (Manning, 1999a). I agree with Ferrell (1997) when he argues that in the production of new cultural spaces, perception, meaning, and identity are constructed within relationships of power, inequality, and marginalization. Thus, I argue that those engaged in visual resistance tend to produce cultural spaces as they reclaim

the city surface by disrupting the institutionalized avenues of political expression and by contesting formally prescribed understandings of the street.

Lyman Chaffee From Street Art and Political Protest

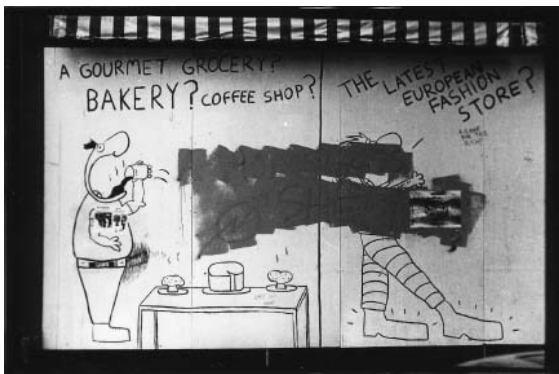
Understanding the fleeting visual communications on Barrone Street requires more than a redefinition of criminality. It also requires analysis of the visual media. Despite the varied approaches to resistance on the street surfaces and the construction of the activist as criminal, the visual in this public space does, indeed, function within several defining characteristics of public imagery. Lyman Chaffee (1993, p. 8) writes extensively on alternative communication and political propaganda and characterizes street art with five key features: collectivity, politicization, democratic competition, direct expressiveness, and adaptability. First, he suggests that street art is a primarily collective process, by which groups formulate political agendas and use the visual space to convey shared sentiments and confront social problems. The second characteristic of street art, according to Chaffee, is the nonneutral politicized medium. It serves as a forum for advocacy, usually from the marginalized, that discards any notions of objectivity. As the third feature, Chaffee recognizes the competitive, nonmonopolistic, democratic character of street art and defines the fourth characteristic of street art as direct expressive thought as seen in the powerfully simple words, symbols, and images. Extensive essays are not written on the walls. The messages are succinct, direct, and efficient, often condensed to a single word, slogan, symbol, or image. Finally, Chaffee suggests that street art is a highly adaptable medium, varying in relation to the changing political and social conditions. These five characteristics of street art, as defined by Chaffee, can be seen in the visual resistance that I have categorized under local issues, regional issues, and global issues.

Discussion of the Visual Data

Visual resistance carves out alternative spaces. I started this project by documenting the artist-activists' transformation of a public street space into a highly visible, yet socially contested site for visual resistance. Located between the historic French Quarter and the Central City neighborhood, the 300 to 600 block of Baronne Street in the Central Business District of New Orleans provided a site of rich visual data because the artist-activists marked the boarded windows of several vacant buildings with sophisticated political commentary, localized commentary, and critical dissent through ephemeral artwork. Together, symbols, slogans, posters, and written words confront numerous social issues, including some issues unique to the region and still others unique to New Orleans specifically. In this section, I present selections from the images collected on Baronne Street and organize the discussion under the categories of local, regional, and global issues presented in the images.

The visual resistance on Baronne Street employs several artistic communication techniques, including painting, written and sprayed graffiti, and mass-produced posters. At the immediately local position on Baronne Street, the artist/activists use satirical cartoons and visual symbols of affluence and materialism to mock the potential commercialization of the urban space. The line-drawn figures, almost life size, are highly visible from the street. The markings on the wall—short and succinct slogans—convey the many possibilities for the vacant space's development: a gourmet grocery, bakery, coffee shop, or trendy European fashion store (see Photo 9.3).

Photo 9.3 Questioning development on Baronne Street.



Through a surface read of the images and texts, symbolic inferences can be drawn from the simple, yet powerful life-size cartoons. Even more, a closer inspection of the multiple layers may reveal the presence of an ongoing cultural conversation between those who have come in direct contact with the visual commentary. The artist-activist's depiction of the economic possibilities for the space's transformation confronts the complex issue of capitalist production and consumption, exhibited by the symbolic sparkling shoes, the array of baked goods, ingestion of coffee products, and the related transformation of this local urban neighborhood by a new professional class.

Another marking uses the words *homeless shelter* along with the unofficial symbol of the international squatter's movement. Efforts were made to cover up this addition, but the comments remained legible through the paint. These layers indicate that even though the artists promote a radical, progressive critique of the possible development of the space, there are some boundaries formed and maintained in satirical celebrations of the detrimental effects of gentrification. Perhaps the idea of including a homeless shelter at this site did not support the satirical celebration associated with the invasion of young professionals and thus, warranted a cover-up to maintain a coherent visual message. If, indeed, the addition of the words *homeless shelter* is either too literal to fit within the satirical critique or too liberal in that it may not promote a radical overturning of the existing system, the cover-up indicates that artist-activists are also implicated in methods of social control, in efforts to close the conversation on

the street. This also exhibits how power is multidimensional and dispersed in fragmented ways, even in displays of oppositional politics. Again, visual resistance inhabits territories that are pluralistic, fragmentary, and in some ways contradictory.

Photo 9.4 Bad musician on Baronne Street.



In several places, the artist-activists invoke the term *yuppie* to describe the figures presented in the artwork (see Photo 9.4). One life-size, line-drawn figure depicts a musician playing a guitar for an imagined yuppie audience. In Photo 9.4, the figure speaks through a text-bubble written on the plywood, which reads, “I’m a shitty musician who wants to pimp my music to tone deaf yuppies.”

The invocation of the term *yuppie*—juxtaposed with posters that warn of the gentrification of the neighborhood, stating, “their plans don’t include you. TEAR IT DOWN + START OVER”—alludes to the class-based politics and processes embedded in the transformation of urban centers, which may disproportionately affect marginalized groups (see Photo 9.5). Similarly, the detail of a Cadillac tattoo on the arms of a line-drawn body builder acknowledges the issues of materialism resulting in class struggles, meaning the conflict between residents who own status-symbol automobiles and those who do not.

Photo 9.5 Workout Willy on Baronne Street.



Indeed, the body builder's figure represents the human body as a material commodity, not only the achieved status of an ideal masculine body but also the perception of a socially desirable

good. The tattoo on the body parallels the marking of bodily space, like the visual markings on the wall.

Although much of the content of these images focuses on the material realities of class conflicts, the presentation draws heavily on the symbolic meanings. Mark Taylor (1997) associates the proliferation of media images with the human derma: "This explosion of images implodes on the surface of civilization and skin of our bodies. We are all tattooed by the media whose creation we have become" (p. 143). Taylor's critique focuses on the superficiality of surfaces and the disappearance of meaning beneath the surface in an examination of tattoos and dermagraphics. The ornamentation of the body and the wall, through tattoos and visual resistance, respectively, marks an association between the visual, media, and identity in a way that is skin/surface deep. The superficiality points to the importance of the symbolic dimensions of visual resistance strategies as discursive representations of social problems that are constructed through text and visual arguments. To some degree, the visual resisters are also implicated in the very processes that are critiqued in their messages, and this points to the paradox of their work. Following a postmodern politic, visual resistance is often contradictory. Drawing on existing symbols of material success—for example, the Cadillac—also reproduces the existing strength of the name within branding cultures. Unlike examples of culture jamming, which force corporate messages and advertising to work against themselves, the artists described here are caught in a circular system of strengthening corporate culture. It is no wonder some authors have argued about the "death of urban graffiti," as graffiti advertisements capitalize on the cultural practice of marking urban spaces for marketing purposes (Alvelos, 2004). Even more, the visual resisters may also be participating in an invasion of space themselves through the marking of visual territories, a process they critiqued as problematic for groups with more social mobility or cultural capital like the so-called yuppie class.

That said, these images of visual resistance confront issues both symbolically and materially and require an analysis that takes both into account. Manuel Castells (1977, p. 460), on the other hand, argues that *collective consumption* in advanced capitalism is the base of urban struggles, rather than a struggle over signs and signification. The artists confront the commodification of space by satirically questioning the prospective transformation of that specific abandoned space within the larger context of urban political/economic/spatial conflicts. The artists display the notion of the urban struggle base in a way that directly addresses the perceived and real disadvantages of a consumer society in late capitalism. Class conflict is embedded in this specific series of visual resistance examples. Even more, visual resistance is embedded in class conflict.

In addition to the drawn figures, the mass-produced posters also raise the issue of

neighborhood fragmentation with the words, “Their plans don't include you. TEAR IT DOWN + START OVER,” representing the larger conflict between those who benefit from urban renewal and those who are exploited and displaced by it. Another poster effectively gauges political sentiments with the title, “WARNING! *THIS NEIGHBORHOOD IS BEING GENTRIFIED!*”. While this space was vacant and has still not been fully redeveloped,¹ the visual resistance symbolically marked the space as representative of the common spaces affected by urban renaissance projects and private investment, disinvestments, and profiteering when capital makes its return to older, redeveloping neighborhoods. Yet again, the art on Baronne Street confronts class struggles, this time in architectural and real estate consumption.

Unlike community murals, which are often legitimated through state sponsorship and planning, the techniques of visual resistance such as the mounting of mass-produced posters and of tagging written or sprayed graffiti have a temporary function in the public street space. This alternative form of communication also creates an open avenue for visual political thought outside of conventional, corporate-owned media. It is argued that conglomerating, for-profit media institutions, by pursuing their interests and agendas within closed commercial spaces, threaten democratic debate (Kellner, 1992). Thus, to challenge this media monopoly, “democracy demands an active participation and this can only be achieved today with renewed cultural activism” (Wallis, 1990, p. 10). Engagement and participation in political systems can take many forms—and visual resistance strategies are just a few—possibly to embrace the idea of cultural activism in the pursuit of democracy through creative cultural agitation. Using posters printed in large numbers, the artist-activist can paper community surfaces overnight, quickly and efficiently spreading a political opinion over a wide geographical area, thus participating in public debate and grassroots political activity. Although the corporate media promote government and military policies and contribute to the current “crisis of democracy” that disrupts the balance of power (Kellner, 1992, p. 45), it has been stated that “street art breaks the conspiracy of silence” (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4). Visual resistance, like independent and pirate media projects, becomes a source of agitation against centralized forms of power and sources of information, diffusing both power and resistance in microlevel transgressions.

Because artists use culturally available symbols to promote certain agendas and, in executing these symbols in different social/spatial contexts, manage to create new cultural spaces, it is also necessary to locate the significance of the sign in the urban environment. French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1976/1993) observes the power of symbols in the urban system in his study of the relationships between community murals, political art, and street graffiti in New York City during the 1970s. No longer the site of mass industrial production, the city has shifted from being the site of economic power to being a space of sign and code production, he argues. For

Baudrillard, it is the “terrorist power of the media, signs, and dominant culture” (p. 76) that constitutes the new intervention in the city. Using the influx of graffiti in New York City for his arguments, he compares the symbolic meanings of politically significant community murals with the violent act of graffiti. He suggests that graffiti messages, in their claims to space with pseudonyms, are essentially *empty signifiers* because they reject any proper names and reference. In many ways, graffiti artists mark territory and make personal claims to space, including the vast transit systems, which put the appropriated spaces in motion.

I argue that the Baronne Street series falls somewhere between community murals, which focus on political issues, and graffiti, which functions only as an empty signifier. Visual resistance is more offensive and challenging than community murals; thus, this visual communication is not widely accepted as legitimate use/discourse/symbolism in the public domain. Consequently, visual resistance disrupts conservative and traditional spatial relations. The signs are unpredictable and radical, interrogating and challenging the common functions of the street surface. Yet, because there is a definite political message within the Baronne Street series, I suggest that it is not as empty as the graffiti in New York City that Baudrillard labeled *terrorist* in their complete dismissal of formal spatial relations. In any case, visual resistance continues to construct the spatial relationships by disrupting, challenging, and negotiating the meanings of the surface on the public street.

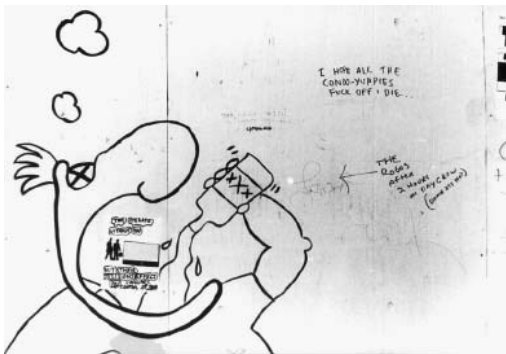
Like Baudrillard, W. J. T. Mitchell (1990, p. 37) also locates violence within the image and the sign in a discussion of the violent dimensions of public art. Mitchell distinguishes three forms of violence in public art: the image as *act*, *weapon*, and *representation*. First, the image is a violent occurrence in the act/event of vandalism or defacement. Next, the image is a weapon in that it can be used as an instrument to incite or coerce the public to react. Finally, the image is representation of violence in its reference to historical events or individual experiences.

The Baronne Street series exhibits all three forms of violence described by Mitchell. To begin with, the act of violence first occurred in the event of defacing the clean surface. Then, because of its political content, the series incited a reaction in the audience, in the form of yet another act of violence in the counterattack. This develops into an ongoing, violent street dialogue in which the original work was rejected by another street commentator.

Completing Mitchell's triad of violence, the representation of violence is one of self-infliction on behalf of the represented working-class figure (see Photo 9.6). The political cartoon depicts a figure with crossed-out eyes drinking from a bottle marked “XXX,” inferring the ingestion of poison or at least alcohol. The 8.5 × 11-inch poster inside the figure's mouth reads, “They operate without you, but their decisions effect you (*sic*).” The visual representation of the

alienated, suicidal worker is accompanied with the words, “The robos after 2 hours on day crew (damn its hot).” The combination of the exhausted worker with the satirical comment about the duration of the workday suggests that the figure, dehydrated from the heat, knowingly (and possibly in an act of suicide) turns to alcohol or a poison at the end of a long shift of mindless, alienating work in advanced capitalist societies.

Photo 9.6 Self-medicating on Baronne Street.



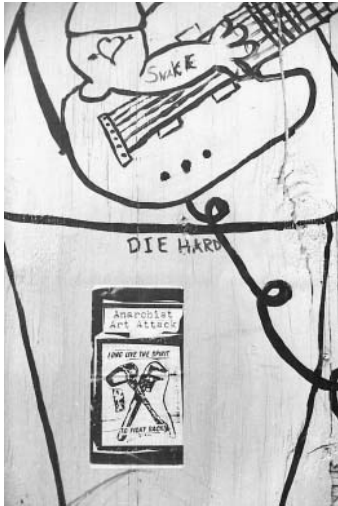
Visual resistance cannot be discussed without making an attribution to the artist. In terms of authorship, the Baronne Street artwork is not attributed to an individual actor because it lacks any identifiable markings such as an initial or a signature. However, it appears that a local anarchist group sponsored this work (see Photo 9.7), illustrating Chaffee's idea that street art is a collective process; the linkage is indicated by a poster with the words, “Anarchist Art Attack: Long Live the Spirit to Fight Back,” and by a URL to the website. The website makes no reference to the graffiti on Baronne Street, but for an observer curious about the artists' political stance, the site clearly gives reference to anti-establishment, anti-capitalist, anti-corporate sentiments. The URL posted in the vicinity of the Baronne Street graffiti series marks the connection between use of links in street space and community organizing within alternative art spaces.

Creating Borders and Crossing Boundaries: Colonialism and the Louisiana Purchase

While violent street dialogue/visual resistance is localized through development policies, the rhetoric claims additional authority by tapping into issues of a different scale that affect regional, national, and global issues. Next, I step out of the local block issues and see how the street surface is also used to confront both regional and national issues. For instance, 2003 marked the 200-year anniversary of the signing of the Louisiana Purchase. Many individuals and organizations in the New Orleans area were promoting the Louisiana Purchase bicentennial celebration with items such as license plate holders, highway signs, U.S. currency, and postage stamps that commemorate the event. In addition to such novelty items, President Bush, President Jacques Chirac of France, and King Juan Carlos of Spain were invited to visit

the reenactment of the signing of the largest real-estate purchase in history, which was scheduled in December 2003. The New Orleans Botanical Gardens hosted a show titled, “Plants of the Louisiana Purchase,” and the zoo in Monroe, Louisiana, featured an exhibition called, “Animals of the Louisiana Purchase.”

Photo 9.7 Anarchist art attack: Long live the spirit to fight back on Baronne Street.



But against the institutionalized fervor of state celebrations, bicentennial conferences, and exhibitions at local museums, the Baronne Street space in New Orleans provided a public counteropinion outside of formal ideological systems in the form of a political poster stating, “How Will You Expose Louisiana's Purchased 200 Years of Sin and Suffering: forced migrations, mob violence, genocide, environmental shambles” (see Photo 9.8). The artist uses the street to vent political thoughts that might not enter the region's mainstream media, which remains increasingly inaccessible to the public thanks to efforts by both hegemonic corporate conglomerates and its corresponding political affiliations. In this way, visual resistance practitioners present oppositional views to political and social constructions of history and boundary formation. Through these methods, resistance groups attempt to inform the public about significant community issues.

Photo 9.8 How will you expose Louisiana's purchased 200 years of sin and suffering? On Baronne Street.



The anonymous artist's local posting of the Louisiana Purchase poster in New Orleans is part of a larger international posting in Hungary, Italy, and France, which was documented photographically and then displayed more traditionally in an exhibition titled, "The Louisiana Purchase Dismantled: Re-visions of our History," at the Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Art Center located in the Central City neighborhood of New Orleans in April and May 2003. Even in the gallery exhibition, the artist chose to remain anonymous. In this way, visual resistance in form and content presents critical views of boundary formation and the social constructions of geographic borders of the nation-state and allows these critical views on colonialism to reach the public as issues for conversation.

Photo 9.9 No more prisons on St. Charles Avenue.



About the same time, another slew of messages appeared on the streets of New Orleans that confronted issues related to the American South. In the week prior to the Critical Resistance South Regional Conference held April 4 through 6, 2003, "No More Prisons" slogans were written on surfaces on several major thoroughfares, including S. Claiborne Avenue and even the famous St. Charles Avenue (see Photo 9.9). Critical Resistance, a national grassroots movement trying to abolish the prison industrial complex, maintains that prisons do not make communities safer by putting people behind bars.² The local visual protest on public streets echoes the broader message of the regional conference.

Visualizing the Localized Global Anti-War Movement: War Keeps Kids off the Streets

The complicated struggles on the streets surrounding the “no more prisons” slogans centered around the idea of controlling the city's surplus population in capitalist economies. The relevance of the idea of surplus populations ranges from regional issues like the prison industrial complex to global issues such as war. The streets became testament to local anti-war sentiments. Another poster posted on Barrone Street reads, “War keeps kids off the streets.” This mounted poster (see Photo 9.10) appeared on the streets of New Orleans during the first weeks of the second Gulf War in the spring of 2003; gravestones accompany the text. In keeping with the theme of localizing global sentiments, Photo 9.11 shows a gray square painted on the metal of an electrical box on Baronne Street. To the left of the Gray Ghost markings, a poster is mounted questioning Operation Iraqi Freedom through an image of a youth injured in the conflict.

Photo 9.10 War keeps kids off the streets on Baronne Street.



Both ends of the (horizontal) political spectrum use the street as a propagandistic tool, especially when the subject is world affairs. The grassroots techniques developed historically by the opposition and the political left have been employed in return by the political right, embracing the tactics to show grassroots support for conservative sentiments. For example, a popular and timely slogan for the anti-war movement, “No War on Iraq,” was stenciled in various locations around New Orleans, and supporters of the war responded by painting over the *No* to use the street space as a venue for advocating war. And so, the street dialogues continue.

While the local newspapers downplayed anti-war efforts in New Orleans, the streets became testament to the local sentiments of activists on both sides of the political spectrum. These efforts may not be covered in the commercial media, but the artist forced the political commentary into the realm of everyday life, not in the media or organized protest, but through navigational spaces through the city. Stop signs in high-traffic areas were stenciled with *WAR* or *Bush* under the word *STOP*: STOP WAR and STOP Bush. Even Do Not Enter signs were

transformed into political street signs: Do Not Enter *Iraq*. Yet, within days, supporters of the war responded by covering the additions with paint or otherwise countering the original marking on the surface.

Photo 9.11 Operation Iraqi Freedom? And a Gray Ghost cover-up on Baronne Street.



Unlike community murals, political graffiti emerges and disappears almost overnight. The cases on Baronne Street presented here illustrate an ongoing political conversation between resistance groups and authorities or individuals that seek to cover up these expressions. Thus, over time, the exchange of ideas in the street space exhibits the competitive and sometimes playful nature of street dialogue.

The above sample of images from urban visual resistance focuses on the three emergent themes: local issues, regional issues, and global issues. The local issues were gentrification and class conflict on Baronne Street in the Central Business District in New Orleans. At the regional level, the visual resistance looked at the construction of boundary formation in the Louisiana Purchase and was critical of celebrations that mask colonialism and genocide. Another regional concern was the growing prison industry in the southern United States. At the global level, the art focused on issues like capitalism and war. Even though all of these images appeared on Baronne Street as decipherable claims about local, regional, or global concerns, these themes unavoidably recur and overlap on each other. Corporations are both local and global, the Louisiana Purchase is a regional issue taken up globally in the exhibit, and war and lo-tech resistance make global policy local.

As I continued to collect these images of visual resistance in urban social movements, another theme emerged from the data in addition to the local, regional, and global issues. This fourth pattern was the inclusion of links to online resources in the form of posting a URL on the street along with the political graffiti. I have seen these URL links in three different forms: (1) alongside the political message, (2) incorporated into the mass-produced poster, and (3) posted by itself, a type of floating URL. The use of the URL posted as a form of resistance is significant because it uses the same resistance techniques as the other visual resistance, and

more important, it changes the extent to which the sentiments are bound to that specific location. That is, the boundaries of local, regional, and global issues must now continuously be redefined as the messages make their way into electronic and hyper-communities. What first seems a local issue can become global, and what appears global can become local.

For those who are interested in the messages in the political graffiti, the URL serves as a link to more resources that may contain similar political sentiments. In this way, the political graffiti serves not only as social/political commentary but also as a possible recruitment tool to mobilize people with shared political leanings; visual resistance becomes a resource for community organization and group mobilization. It is no surprise that these efforts incorporate new technologies into methods of low-technology communication to draw support for grassroots movements. Jesse Drew (1995) proposes,

A popular movement for social change must take advantage of the new technologies to further democratize the nation and to empower the disenfranchised. It is not the technology that will revolutionize society, but a movement of millions that must transform society. (p. 83)

Conclusion

Vito Acconci (1990) notes the advantageousness of public art in the city, especially for marginalized groups working against ideological hegemony. He writes,

The built environment is built because it's been allowed to be built. It's been allowed to be built because it stands for and reflects an institution or dominant culture. Public art comes through the back door like a second-class citizen. Instead of bemoaning this, public art can use this marginal position to its advantage: public art can present itself as the voice of the marginal cultures, as the minority report, as the opposition party. Public art exists to thicken the plot. (p. 179)

Visual resistance shows artist-activists engaging in an ongoing political dialogue with other activists and with state authorities. Visual resistance is a primarily collective process, as well as an interpretive process, involving the constant negotiation of style, meaning, and space in everyday criminality, authority, power, and resistance. In this competitive exchange for political visibility, the street becomes a battleground of words, signs, representations, and the effort to enforce the cover-up.

Consequently, it is easier for artist-activists to gain power by creating new symbolic images and new cultural spaces than it is to enter the restricted organizations, institutions, bureaucracies,

and political structures (Dubin, 1992) that use authority to close or fix the meanings of symbolic representations (Hall, 1997). Hence, artist-activists compete for space and political visibility in a subversive fashion by using these visual resistance techniques. In doing so, visual resistance practitioners reject the closed media circuits, reclaim the public space for the marginalized, and discard the governmental rules of authority identified as state law.

Visual resistance interrogates and challenges the common functions of the street surface. Even more, it integrates technological tools, both high-technology mass communication and low-technology mass communication, into the visual resistance strategies as a possible method of mobilizing social movements. People pass artistic expressions on the street during the course of everyday life and pay no attention to the conflicts that give rise to the behaviors. But complicated relationships exist between the creation of alternative cultural spaces, the affirmation of group beliefs and values, and the conversation between resistance groups, social movements, and structures of authority.

In a moment of self-reflexivity in the picture/knowledge-making process, I see my actions replicate the actions of those engaged in the techniques and strategies of visual resistance (see Photo 9.12). In both cases, these expressions are made within structures of authority and the boundaries of legitimate knowledge production. Many of the cultural artifacts and sentiments that are made on the street go unnoticed. And in the same way that visual resisters contribute to the production of new cultural spaces, those scholars currently engaged in visual research methods, like the contributors to this volume and those who paved the way, are in a sense resisting the dominate modes of knowledge production that saturate Western rational thought. Here, the parallel between visual resistance and a subversive research politics has never appeared so clear.

Photo 9.12 Photograph of author photographing Gray Ghost cover-ups in the French Quarter.



The work in visual sociology is visual resistance. Instead of making the discipline's boundaries clearer, visual research is a resistance to the milieu of social researchers who choose not to look at the world. While recognizing the marginalization of the visual relative to the verbal in

mainstream social research, the literature in the field of visual sociology suggests that social scientists are paying attention to the role of the visual in social relations and to its potential contributions to the production of scientific knowledge (Becker, 1981, 1982, 1998; Chaplin, 1994; Collier & Collier, 1986; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Fyfe & Law, 1988; Holliday, 2000; Manning, 1999a, 1999b; Prosser, 1998).

Just as visual resistance on the streets forces us to continuously negotiate the meanings attached to street spaces, visual sociology blurs disciplinary boundaries and forces researchers to negotiate the lines around the discipline of sociology, which are constantly managed. Mainstream sociology is now opening its eyes, or at least, it passes this kind of work with increasing interest, like those passing the messages on the street who begin to register them. In this way, visual sociology is an act of resistance, much like visual resistance on the street, which attempts to carve out a space in relation to structures of academic authority and the gatekeepers that maintain the borders of the discipline. Visual resistance, on the street, in academia, and in everyday life, makes visible the conspiracies and pervasiveness of power: the power of those who choose not to look and the privileges created and maintained from a politics of invisibility. It is precisely at these (dis)junctures that scholars of visual cultures can begin to agitate. To paraphrase Acconci's comments on public art, visual resistance and visual sociology exist to thicken the plot.

Notes

1. Following interruptions related to Hurricane Katrina, construction resumed on high-end condo conversions in the Baronne Street building discussed in this chapter.
2. In a similar critique of the prison system in the context of crime and economics, radical criminologist Richard Quinney (1980) suggests that prison systems emerge in capitalist societies as a way of controlling unemployed surplus populations.

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