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# **The Multiple Walls of Graffiti Removal Maintenance and Urban Assemblage in Paris**

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter, we investigate graffiti removal as a crucial component of urban walls mundane governance. Drawing on an ethnography in Paris, we show that graffiti removal accomplishes a series of consecutive, sometimes simultaneous, ontological enactments that perform contrastive versions of urban walls. In official documents and during removal interventions, the 'same' wall can indeed be handled as the object of a specific kind of maintenance, as a quantified surface, as a controlled space of public expression, as part of an official decorum, and as an uncertain material composite. These versions offer a particularly interesting case of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'collective assemblages of enunciation', where the erasure of unofficial public inscriptions implies the practical articulation of the material properties of walls (stone, brick, paint, concrete...), graffiti (ink, paint...) and removal techniques (water, sponge, paint, sand, rags, chemical products...). Such ontological multiplicity is precious to better understand both the modes of existence of walls in the city and the politics of public order maintenance.

Pick a wall in the streets of Paris, let's say in the lively third arrondissement. Look at it. It's a nice wall, a facade of one of those old buildings that make the charm of the City of Light. Depending on which author inspires you most — Charles Baudelaire, Georges Perec, Walter Benjamin — you could use many different words to describe it, to explain what it looks like, what it is made of, and to characterize its place in the neighborhood. But let's complicate things a little and consider this wall as it looked four days ago, or at least at the wall that could be seen at the same address four days ago. Now, there are numerous inscriptions on it. Again, depending on your background and your expertise, you may or may not be able to read this lettering, though you would certainly agree to name them 'graffiti'. But let's go back to the wall. Is it the same wall? Hard to say. Maybe you shouldn't decide right away. Especially if, again, you move to a new vantage point, and find yourself two days after the apparition of the graffiti. Early in the morning, you see a man already at work, spraying some liquid on the wall and, as his intervention unfolds, you witness the progressive disappearing of the graffiti. A few minutes later, the wall is exactly as you found it at the beginning of this paragraph (that is, chronologically, two days after the man's intervention).

This little thought experiment is an invitation to think, and look at, walls and graffiti in a slightly different way than usual. It shows how hard it can be to identify stable properties that satisfyingly could be used to describe urban walls. Indeed, in this story, the very materiality of the hypothetical wall changed over the days. First, one or several graffiti writers added some paint to the amalgamation of bricks, concrete, stone and paint, that the wall was made of. Then, a worker spouted water, maybe sand and chemical products, on it, progressively erasing the letters and the words the wall had borne for a few days. And even after this intervention, we can doubt that the wall simply recovered its 'original' material properties. The process certainly affected some of them and probably added new ones. All these changes occurred in just a few days – imagine if we have observed the wall for a whole year, or a decade...

As for graffiti, its traditional descriptions are shifted by our story as well. Of course, the inscriptions that once appeared on the wall take place in a social world and are the outcome of cultural practices that come with their own norms and values. They can also be studied as speech acts, or writing practices – practices that have become widespread in large cities around the world for decades now. But in our story, the graffiti is described from a very particular standpoint, foregrounding a dimension that has rarely been considered as such in social sciences: its removal.

In this chapter, we aim to investigate this removal, and the policy that sets the conditions of its accomplishment. Removal is a mundane operation, yet one that contributes crucially to the constitution of contemporary urban realities. Studying graffiti removal, we believe, is notably a way to better understand the modes of existence of walls in the city. To do so, we explore the case of Paris in this chapter, drawing on an ethnographic study during which we gathered the main legal and contractual documents of the current graffiti removal policy of the city, made observations of removal interventions and verification processes, and conducted in-depth interviews within the municipality and two of its contractors. Our exploration stands at the intersection of two growing research areas: studies focused on 'urban assemblages' on the one side (Brenner et al, 2011; Farías and Bender, 2010; McFarlane, 2011), and repair and maintenance studies on the other (Henke, 2000; Graham and, Thrift, 2007; Denis and Pontille, 2014; Jackson, 2014). Far from being a reductionist instrument of territorial control, the Paris graffiti removal policy is indeed a complex assemblage of urban maintenance that performs economical, political, technical and moral

orders. The walls of Paris are ones of the crucial components of this assemblage, featuring as complex, multiple artifacts. In this chapter, we show that graffiti removal produces a series of ontological enactments (Smith 1974; Woolgar and Neyland 2013) that practically perform various versions of the walls (Mol 1999).

In the following sections, we first outline the main streams of research we draw on: urban assemblages, maintenance and repair, and ontological multiplicity. We then briefly describe how graffiti removal is organized in Paris. We identify five distinct ways through which graffiti removal policy enacts the walls of the city: as an object of maintenance, as a surface, as a space for public expression, as an official decorum, and as a material composite. Finally, we conclude by foregrounding how the notion of assemblage (*agencement*) in Deleuze and Guattari's terms (1980) helps to understand the way walls are governed and enacted in the city.

### **Urban Assemblages, Maintenance and Multiplicity**

For several years now, at the crossroads of human geography and actor-network theory, the notion of 'assemblage' has been at the center of many debates (Farías & Bender 2010; McFarlane 2011a, 2011b; Rankin 2011; Kamalipour & Peimani 2015). Borrowed from Deleuze & Guattari (1980), the term and its revival owe a lot to DeLanda, who has promoted the virtue of 'assemblage thinking' (DeLanda 2006; 2016). Its use in urban studies is also largely indebted to the earlier contributions of human geography and actor-network theory, particularly to Thrift's work (Pile and Thrift, 2000; Amin and Thrift 2002) and Latour's foray into urban fabrics (Latour and Hermant 1998).

Assemblage thinking is an attitude that allows for a 'non-reductionist' approach to the city (DeLanda 2006) and has contributed to 'decentering' urban studies' traditional objects and issues (Farías and Bender 2010). It particularly draws attention to two hitherto neglected aspects of cities: their socio-material heterogeneity, and the circumstantial character of their transformations in time. Urban life, in this perspective, is anything but a stable reality that could be analyzed 'at rest'; cities are studied as composite entities constantly in the making.

[T]he concept of assemblage is particularly useful for grasping the spatially processual, relational and generative nature of the city, where 'generative' refers both to the momentum of historical processes and political economies and to the eventful, disruptive, atmospheric, and random juxtapositions that characterise urban space. (McFarlane 2011a: 650-651)

Moreover, far from being an univocal and consistent phenomena, urban life is made of uncountable ingredients, of extremely diverse nature. Even the most mundane objects and the simplest task become part of a more or less complex assemblage. This shared interest in small objects and ordinary practices highly contrasts with most of urban studies' traditional concerns. For instance, in this approach, even a crucial notion such as space is subject to reconsideration. Instead of being the unquestioned starting point for analysis, spatial properties are considered as heterogeneous and precarious outcomes of sociomaterial practices from which they cannot be separated (Latour and Hermant 1998; Latham and McCormack 2004; Kärrholm 2007).

This stream of research thus calls for a study of both the sociotechnical complexity of cities and their very situatedness and ordinariness, ranging from large infrastructures to mundane objects. It invites us to discover how things hold together, how they collapse, and to understand the conditions in which these more or less precarious conglomerations act,

what kind of urban reality they perform, without deciding what counts as an important feature beforehand.

Among the uncountable objects and practices this interdisciplinary inquiry into urban assemblages draws attention to, some bear witness to a mostly unproblematized dimension of urban life: maintenance and repair work. Maintenance and repair activities have been of growing interest in social sciences, and have recently gathered a community of scholars from different domains: ethnomethodology, human geography, media studies, history, science and technology studies (Henke 2000; Graham and Thrift 2007; Gregson et al., 2009; Jackson 2014; Denis and Pontille 2015; Domínguez Rubio 2016; *Tecnoscienza* 2015; *continent*. 2017). Even though very different objects and settings have been investigated in this emerging literature, maintenance and repair studies share a common set of concerns that resonate with some of the issues raised in the discussions on urban assemblages. By exploring how fixing, mending, restoring, cleaning or up-keeping are concretely accomplished, maintenance and repair studies notably describe a world where sociomaterial order is constantly produced and reproduced, mostly through mundane practices. There is no place here for material reductionism and essentialism. Through the lens of maintenance and repair practices, the ability of an infrastructure to order behaviors, as the capacity of an object to last, or the potential for a 'mobile' to become 'immutable' cannot be reduced to intrinsic material properties. The material properties of things, in their very heterogeneity, are enacted through ceaseless maintenance and repair practices.

A few scholars have shown that maintenance and repair studies offer a great entry point to reveal the complexity of hitherto overlooked urban realities, and to pursue the exploration of urban assemblages. For instance, Edensor (2011; 2012), who has investigated the conditions in which the St Ann's Church in Manchester has been restored, explains how repair and maintenance work literally unfolds urban materiality, bringing to light both its fluidities and its stabilities. Discovering the processes of the church's restoration, we understand that the stone itself is not at all an inert and isolated object. Its repair goes through dealing with 'entangled materialities' and constantly changing entities that are connected to a wide geography of knowledge and labor. Other mundane aspects of urban life have also been studied at the intersection between assemblage thinking and maintenance and repair studies. Investigating the daily life of buildings, Strebel (2011) has highlighted the importance of 'block checks' during which concierges use 'conversation, gestures, craft and movement (...) tools and technologies' to bring buildings to life (p. 244). The order of the building, he explains, is a complex process that maintenance workers deal with on a daily basis. We also observed the same kinds of delicate sociomaterial ordering processes within the Paris subway stations, where the wayfinding system is enacted as a standardized set of immutable and immobile signs thanks to the constant supervision and the daily interventions of maintainers. This maintenance work goes through a regular exploration of the material ecology of subway spaces and an incessant mix of assembling and disassembling operations (Denis and Pontille 2014; 2015). The streets themselves can be understood as the fragile results of a continual maintenance work, as demonstrated by Shaw (2014). Following the cleaners who operate in the center of Newcastle at night, Shaw has emphasized that both the development of night-time leisure industry in the city and the way the neighborhood looks during the daytime are made possible by the sociomaterial competencies of these maintenance workers who, with their tools and the materials they deal with, 'form a single waste-production-machine-assemblage' (p. 190).

The city – its neighborhoods, its infrastructures, its furniture, its activities, etc. – is thus the outcome of a continuous maintenance work that goes through more or less known practices, instruments, documents, rules, and of course workers. This is where assemblage thinking and maintenance and repair studies meet: instead of questioning urban reality as a ready-made phenomenon, or as the encounter only between planners' strategies and users' tactics, they investigate it as a series of practical enactments. What we would like to add to this landscape is attention to the multiplicity of these enactments, and thus to the ontological variations of the city components.

The recent conversation about multiplicity in social sciences has participated in an ontological moment – if not a 'turn' – that pushed a bit further certain epistemological displacements initiated by early Science and Technology Studies on differences and variability (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). Instead of considering reality as a stable given ground, where plurality can be seen as the result of various interpretations or constructions, it invites us to recognize that reality is always practically enacted, and that these enactments support a variety of ontologies (Mol 1999). Reality itself is then multiple. This has important consequences on how social research is carried out and what can be its outcome. The researcher here does not provide a single overarching description of a phenomenon, nor does she gather distinct perspectives on it. Rather, she explores the conditions in which different versions of the studied phenomenon are enacted. Such attention to the performativity of descriptions and practices bring to the light hitherto unnoticed or overlooked differences. In their seminal work, de Laet and Mol (2000) have studied for instance a 'fluid' bush pump, an innovation that is ceaselessly reshaped and never takes the form of a closed black box. In a very different setting, Mol's inquiries into the multiple versions of atherosclerosis (Mol 2002) foregrounded the technical, practical, and linguistic dimensions of their enactments. Woolgar and Neyland (2013) have expanded on these works investigating the multiple ontological enactments of ordinary objects and the mundane governance it participates in. Investigating these differences not only allows for an inventory of various versions of an object but also tackles the issue of their relationships: versions may have partial connections, align with one another, one version may include or be dedicated to another, and of course, versions may ignore one another, and sometimes even be contradictory (Law 2010).

Because ontological enactments do not install the conditions of existence of isolated, autonomous objects, but of worlds in which the relational identities of various entities are held together, they are a particularly rich entry point to expand on the works on maintenance and urban assemblages. Describing such enactments helps us to question the performative character of urban maintenance practices, and to investigate the multiple and relational ontologies enacted in urban assemblages. It is especially a fruitful means to reconsider the mode of existence of one of the paradigmatic artifacts of territorial ordering and disciplinarization processes – the wall. If it is difficult to decide the status of the wall we took as an example in the beginning of this chapter, it is precisely because its ontology varies. Graffiti removal itself, an operation of urban maintenance that could be seen as a stabilizing and disambiguating practice, participates in these variations.

### **Removing Graffiti in Paris**

At the end of 1999, the city of Paris launched a call for tenders for a particularly ambitious program: the removal of '90% of graffiti' within one year. Following this 'clean-walls operation', a 5-year period of maintenance was planned, during which contractors would

ensure that the walls of Paris would remain free from unsolicited inscriptions. Since then, new calls for maintenance have been issued every two to five years.

This framework, which has remained roughly the same save for small adjustments, has dramatically changed the way graffiti have been taken care of in Paris. Until then, graffiti removal was an obligation that every building owner had to fulfill. The first call for tenders drew on a municipal by-law that had centralized the process and had organized it in such a way that it could be provided as a free service. Since then, a number of private companies (initially one, nowadays three) have been bestowed the task to 'clean' the walls of Paris day after day.

The contracts signed by the municipality and the private companies are performance-based. Besides identifying the areas of intervention (all building facades of a specific neighborhood, up to 4 metres high from street level), they set objectives (a maximum threshold of graffiti presence in each area) and intervention deadlines (10 days to remove a graffiti after its detection). The service is operated in two steps. First, a report is sent via an online form by either a civil servant, a company worker or private citizen. Second, reports are gathered every morning and distributed to the removal squads. Four main removal techniques are employed: paint, solvent, high-pressure water, and sandblaster. Each month, the contracted companies activity is verified. One of its managers and three or four representatives of the City organize a walk in the streets of Paris, during which they collectively check whether the amount of graffiti remains above the contractual threshold, or not – if not, the companies face failure penalties.

Besides private companies, a team from the municipality remains in charge of specific places not included in contracts, such as public gardens, schools and some courtyards. The private and public agencies work hand in hand. The managers of the local team run the inspections, and on exceptional occasions, such as when the interventions take place after a protest, the teams work altogether.

Seen from a distance, this removal policy might look like a monolithic 'disciplinary apparatus' (Foucault 1977) that places walls under an intense scrutiny. From such a perspective, the removal policy could be examined as a powerful device of governance that results in growing social control of urban spaces, aimed at preventing any disruptions of the order in place – notably, regarding who is authorized to display public inscriptions. Yet, after reading carefully the rules and regulations, and shadowing the workers during their interventions, things appear more nuanced and complex. The 'mundane governance' (Woolgar and Neyland 2013) at the core of this removal policy is multiple, and its enactment does not reduce either walls or graffiti to unequivocal objects.

## **An Object of Maintenance**

First, the Paris graffiti removal policy enacts walls as objects of a specific kind of *maintenance*. To understand this, we have to go back to the early 1980s when a theoretical and political model of maintenance known as the 'broken-window theory' (Wilson and Kelling 1982) emerged. This theory famously influenced graffiti removal programs in the US, notably the 'war on graffiti' that was initiated in the NYC Subway by Mayor Ed Koch in the early 1980s, and then expanded to the whole city by Rudolph Giuliani during the 1990s. Giuliani was himself a great inspiration to Jean Tiberi, the Paris Mayor who launched his own removal policy in 2000. Still today, broken-window theory is considered as the cornerstone of most graffiti removal initiatives (Stewart and Kortright 2014).

But what exactly is ‘broken-window theory’, and how is it related to graffiti? In their landmark paper, Wilson and Kelling (1982) – respectively, a professor of Government at Harvard, and a former director of the evaluation team of the Police Foundation – addressed the issue of community life quality and, more generally, public order. The authors insisted on the importance of foot police patrols and their ‘order-maintenance function.’ We shouldn’t forget, they claimed, that policemen are essential to such maintenance, and this goes beyond the sole fight against major crimes. To explain why a day-to-day order maintenance matters, they relied on a psychosocial experiment conducted in the 1960s and, more importantly to our concern, on a seminal policy paper discussing the effects of graffiti on subway trains in New York (Glazer 1979). They drew two main conclusions from these sources. First, public order is a matter of visibility. Some things, such as broken windows and graffiti, work as signs of disorder, ‘signs of official failure’, as Glazer wrote. These symptoms should be eradicated, Wilson and Kelling held, not only because they can be the cause of a sense of fear within communities, but also, and this is the second foundation of the theory, because they are contagious. ‘(I)f a window in a building is broken *and is left unrepaired*, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken’ (Wilson and Kelling 1982: 31, emphasized in the original). Understood as signs that ‘no one cares’, each single instance of broken urban furniture, each piece of graffiti, is seen as an encouragement that may lead to other cases. Each is a potential step toward the delinquency of social order<sup>1</sup>.

The authors contrasted the broken-window approach with the usual criminological focus on crime solving. Their theory calls for a constant supervision of places focused on signs of disorder, and it requires numerous and regular interventions to get rid of them as soon as possible. This way of dealing with graffiti has important and concrete consequences for how the walls of the city are treated. Indeed, if graffiti are signs of disorder, it means that walls do have a normal, ‘ordered’ condition which graffiti disrupt. The removal interventions are a way to bring back walls to this original shape, and thus to restore order. Yet, configured as a maintenance activity, graffiti removal is an endless process that entails thousands and thousands of interventions per year. It is an ongoing task that can virtually never stop. Hence, what is regarded as the ‘normal condition’ is not a prior stable condition for walls, but the ephemeral outcome of a continual undertaking: clean walls are both a premise and a result in the graffiti removal assemblage.

The idea that walls have an ‘original’ condition, and that graffiti removal should lead to its restoration is at stake in each intervention. Letting the walls as if neither graffiti nor removal interventions happened is not an easy task though. One of the difficulties in using paint to cover a graffiti is, for instance, to find the right hue that will match exactly the color of the wall. And even if they manage to obtain the right color, workers still have to find a way to delimit the zone of their intervention, so that the new painting remains as invisible as possible. Otherwise, they would produce what they call a ‘cleanness stain.’ The same kind of problem occurs when using high-pressure water or a sandblaster: if graffiti is removed simply following the outlines of the letters and drawing, what workers call a ‘ghost’ would remain. The ink or the paint used to write the graffiti would be erased, but its shape would still be distinguishable. Bearing such traces, the wall would not be considered cleaned, and maintenance work would not be successfully accomplished. Moreover, graffiti removal interventions are also steered by a certain ideal of ‘invisible work’ (Star and Strauss 1999). As one of the workers we followed told us:

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<sup>1</sup> For a more general discussion on the role of observable traces in the continuous upkeep of urban spaces, see Murphy (2017).



I have this kind of philosophy: that you do not see anything. Ideally, no one would notice that we came, and no one would even remember there was graffiti. (Interview with John)

What is at stake in each intervention and in the constantly reiterated 'restoration' of wall order is thus the production of a double invisibility: of course, invisibility of the removed graffiti, but also invisibility of its removal, namely the erasure of any traces of materials used (e.g. chemical, water, paint, sand...), of actions performed during the intervention, and of the workers themselves.

## **A Surface**

The constant (re)production of clean walls is a requirement explicitly stated in the contracts the City Hall signs with contractors. The organization of the supervision of walls, and the strict deadlines each company has to meet once a graffiti is detected, are a direct translation of the broken-window theory principles. Yet, these principles are not organized in terms of rhythm of interventions only. Maintenance contracts also define the graffiti removal process in spatial terms. The presence or absence of graffiti is measured in Euclidian units and interventions are described in square meters and 'thresholds'. The question, 'how much graffiti should be removed?' is thus translated into 'how many square meters of graffiti should be erased?'

Through this ontological enactment, walls are enacted as *surfaces*, and the city is handled as a quantified territory. Walls are comprehended as two-dimensional areas, converted into planes that can be measured, added and combined, so as to be statistically commensurable. Before the first call for tenders, an 'Observatory of graffiti' had been set up to do first measurements and split the city into different zones. Henceforth, quantification has been integrated within the maintenance process itself through the constant production of statistical data. Each intervention begins with a picture of the graffiti about to be removed (figure 1). The picture is saved in a database, as well as a form providing additional information: the nature of the wall, its location, the type of graffiti, and its size. Once the intervention is finished, another picture of the 'empty' wall is added to the file.

The data are regularly sent by contractors to the municipality, where monthly and annual reports are edited. In these reports, two indicators are particularly important: the average quantity of cleaned surface during a certain amount of time, and the 'recurrence rate' (after how long a cleaned surface has to be treated again). Not only are these indicators accounting for the activity of the contractors, but they also provide precious information to the city's staff in order to recalibrate the zones that will appear in the next call.

Measured surfaces are employed to control the contractor's activity, too. As said earlier, every month, an inspection is set up to verify if the terms of contracts are met. This inspection is conceived of as a representative sample of the whole area: a new point of departure is picked randomly each time, from which a systematic path is followed for a specified length (first street to the right, next to the left, next to the right, and so on). During this collective walk, every spotted graffiti is noted on a paper form, along with its 'size', that is the amount of surface it occupies. At the end of the tour, the sum of all the affected surfaces is calculated (figure 2). If the total exceeds the required threshold for the zone, the contractor is charged a fee.

**Figure 1.** Taking a picture before removing the graffiti (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



**Figure 2.** Reporting the amount of surfaces with graffiti (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



Walls are also enacted as surfaces in a further sense. The removal policy tackles the interfaces between public and private spaces, which divide and connect the streets and the buildings, to determine what falls under the municipality's responsibility and what under the tenants'. Interestingly, redefining the conditions in which these surfaces are 'cleaned', the Paris removal policy has dramatically transformed the role of walls. Previously seen as the responsibility of building owners, graffiti removal has now been turned into a municipal matter. This was made possible thanks to a by-law that has rendered wall surfaces 'more public' than in the past.

Two things should be noted, though. First, the territory quantified as measurable surfaces, and taken care of by the municipality and its contractors, is far from exhaustive. The city captured by this policy is fragmentary. Several walls – notably those owned by certain public and private companies – slip out this policy. Second, this framework is not a matter of contracts and legal texts only, rather, it has to be constantly reenacted in the streets. During the monthly verification, for instance, the definition of what counts as a cleaned surface, and how it is measured, are discussed and adjusted. Likewise, the frontier between public and private spaces is regularly re-enacted. Sometimes, the workers might have to negotiate the access to a wall with local inhabitants and tenants. Metal shutters are also an excellent example to understand the necessity of such reenactments: when they are down, they count as surfaces, and the graffiti they bear have to be removed. This means that they have to be taken care of in the early hours of the morning, before the stores open and they disappear as walls<sup>2</sup>.

### **A Space for Public Expression**

Obviously, graffiti removal is not simply based on measuring surfaces and calculating rates of recurrence. As public inscriptions, graffiti are also considered an expressive means: any particular drawing or written word can be examined for its expressive and aesthetic features<sup>3</sup>. This is another important feature of the Parisian graffiti removal assemblage: the meaning, forms and colors of all graffiti are scrutinized in their own right. This close examination draws on particular, official characterizations. Such an approach towards public inscriptions entails a specific ontology of walls as *spaces for public expression*.

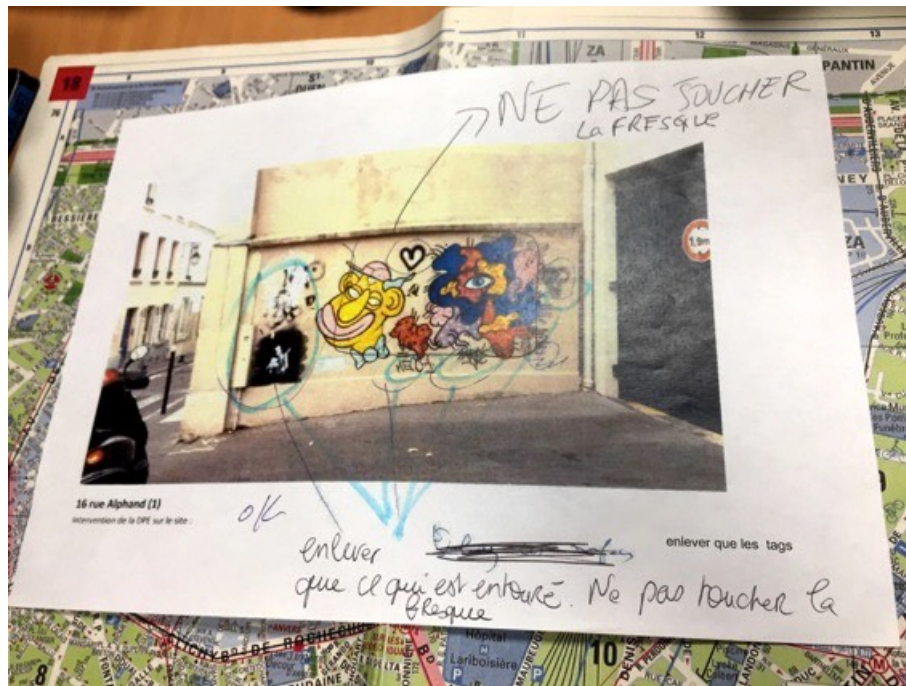
A first characterization is the difference between authorized graffiti, often called by removal workers 'artworks' or 'murals', and the rest. To make this distinction possible, local authorities regularly send to contractors an updated list of walls with graffiti that should not be removed. This list works as a supplementary document to the initial contract signed with the municipality: it designates exceptions. Such a distinction is also made through specific demands from the municipality. For instance, contractors sometimes receive pictures similar to the one in Figure 3, where the graffiti that have to be removed are clearly distinguished from the 'mural' that should remain intact.

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<sup>2</sup> For a broader elaboration on the diverse rhythms of walls, see Brighenti (2009).

<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic examination has been at stake since the very beginning of NYC graffiti writing (Cresswell 1992), and is still disputed nowadays (McAuliffe and Iveson 2011 ; Brighenti 2016).

**Figure 3.** Making a clear distinction between graffiti and artwork (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



This characterization is at play during day-to-day interventions as well. As we were following removal workers in the streets of Paris, they regularly explained to us why this or that inscription should not be erased, mobilizing situated criteria such as ‘It’s clear that this inscription is intended to be here’ or ‘This one is signed’. Sometimes, the situation is not obvious, though. Each time workers incur into doubts, they take a picture of the wall and, once back to their headquarters, they show it to their manager, so as to discuss and make a decision. Some of these doubts may also be dispelled *in situ* by the tenants. For instance, a shopkeeper may ask the workers to spare what she regards as an acceptable beautification of a metal shutter or a front gray wall close to her shop. The characterization of public inscriptions is thus far from automatic and the list of authorized graffiti is supplemented by situated judgments, hesitations and collective discussions made on a daily basis. Therefore, even though each wall constitutes a unique ‘where of graffiti’ (Cresswell, 1992), depending on the conclusion these adjustments lead to, it may be enacted in different ways: from a dirty surface that has to be cleaned to a display for artworks meant to last.

A second official characterization, which refers to a very different aspect of expressivity, plays an important role in the graffiti removal policy. The municipal contract identifies a distinct form of graffiti: those that are ‘offensive, pornographic or prejudicial to public order’. Such categorization has tremendous consequences. It calls for a specific treatment and a particularly demanding contractual framework. Indeed, whereas ‘regular’ graffiti have to be removed within ten days after their detection, the contractors are compelled to erase the offensive ones within three hours, 24/7. Each time insults appear, walls are thus treated as discursive devices, and their cleansing becomes part of a ‘politics of the performative’ (Butler 1997).

Yet, once again things are not linear. Even though most graffiti do not raise any doubts, some may appear equivocal, while some others may remain indecipherable for a certain period of time. For instance, during our fieldwork a worker came back from his daily tour impressed by ‘the amount of graffiti the artist ACAB wrote’ in a certain area. His manager

promptly retorted that 'ACAB' actually meant 'All Cops Are Bastards' and was thus an offensive graffiti that had to be removed immediately. She called another worker, still around this neighborhood, and asked him to intervene. Since then, a notice has been displayed in the office recalling the meaning of 'ACAB'. The injurious categorization is therefore an ongoing open process, with its hesitations and its reconsiderations. Again, the notion of assemblage is useful here, since it helps recognize the situatedness of the policy and its ontological enactments.

## **An Official Decorum**

In some cases, notably when a politician or a public official is scheduled to appear in a specific location for a special occasion, such as the celebration of a national holiday, or the inauguration of a building, graffiti removal takes on a very particular pace. Public celebrations and the presence of authorities involve specific removal interventions, which enact the walls of the city in a manner that dramatically differs from the ones we previously described.

These interventions are exceptional in many respects. First, they are not included in the contracts that define the day-by-day task of contractors, and are charged separately. Graffiti removal is here handled on a case basis. The location or the route that has to be cleansed is sent to the concerned contractual company several days in advance, and a reinforced staff of operatives is often called forth. Second, the contractors do not work alone. The municipal team dedicated to graffiti removal participates in these operations, as well as the teams that are in charge of other aspects of street-cleaning. Lastly, and most importantly, these "high-impact operations" are not in line with the broken-window theory framework. Indeed, what is at stake here is not the eradication of a phenomenon considered as harmful to the public order through a regular supervision and fast, repeated interventions. Instead, graffiti removal takes part in 'one shot' operations, and temporarily enacts the walls of Paris as an *official decorum*, a pristine scene on which no sign of dirt, of any kind, must be seen.

These situations recall that of the renovated and repainted graffiti-free subway trains especially prepared in 1984 for the four hundred Europeans invited for a weekend stay in New York City by a tour agency based in London. This anecdote, with which Austin (2001:2-3) starts his book on the history of NYC graffiti, reminds us that the public image of a city is of crucial concern, and that its control is sometimes considered so important that it leads to the production of real theatrical performances, in Goffman's sense of the expression (1959). The walls that can be seen in the background of an official celebration are crucial components in the decor of the event. Free of graffiti, they display a stabilized and cleaned environment, meant to manage the impression of the participants: passersby and active members, officials themselves, security squads, but also the audience of the newspapers and websites that display photos or videos of the event.

Such enactment of walls as a ceremonial decor has important consequences on the urban reality that graffiti removal performs. Even though the locations of public appearances for inaugurations or memorials obviously change from one event to another, they do not take place all over the city. In Paris, only a few arrondissements are concerned. This means that, even from the standpoint of graffiti removal, not all walls of the city are similar. Inequalities emerge between those that exceptionally, but regularly, fall into officials' program and those, cleaned on the regular basis of the graffiti removal policy, that are merely dedicated to the everyday life of inhabitants, and non-VIP tourists.

Two kinds of territories are performed in this asymmetry. The first one is the one of the 'regular' city, which is managed by the regime of broken-window theory, and covers virtually the totality of the streets and the neighborhoods. Walls are here taken care of on a daily basis, cleaned so as to recover a state considered as 'normal', that is devoid of graffiti. The second territory, which is performed by exceptional interventions, is ephemeral. It pops up once in a while like a fragment detached from the day-to-day urban ecology. It takes place in the assemblage that performs the local setting of an official staging, and that is also meant to circulate in multiple visual representations – newspapers, television, websites, etc. The walls of this second territory are enacted as components of a legitimate image of Paris. This enactment goes through rendering them temporarily pristine, a condition way beyond 'normal.'

### **A Material Composite**

Either routinely accomplished, or exceptionally operated on an event basis, graffiti removal is anything but a simple activity. As interesting as the vocabulary of erasure may be, walls are not paper sheets from which graffiti could be wiped off with a rubber. It is, actually, a challenge. Beyond the risk of generating what workers call 'cleanness stains', most removal techniques represent themselves a non-negligible threat to the integrity of walls. How these threats are taken into consideration highlights a fifth crucial ontological enactment made by the graffiti removal policy: walls are treated as *material composites*.

One only needs to look at the first move that inaugurates every intervention to measure the importance of the material side of graffiti removal. Each time removal workers enter into action, they make the same gesture before proceeding further: they stretch their hand out and touch the surface they are about to treat (figure 4). By doing so, they told us, they assess the material properties of both the wall and of the graffiti. This first gesture provides direction for the following operations.

Thanks to this material appraisal, workers are able to properly engage in their intervention. Above all, they can choose the right technique, and dismiss those incompatible with the materials to be faced. In the presence of a porous stonewall, for instance, it is inconceivable to use high-pressure water or sandblasting. As one of the workers explained to us, this is due to the behaviors of both the stone and the graffiti:

With porous material, it's really complicated. The graffiti migrates within the stone very quickly, it is almost impossible to remove it entirely. And the stone itself is extremely fragile. If you use high pressure, you carve into the wall, really. The damages would be irreparable. (Interview with Steven)

There is only one solution in this case: the use of paint in order to cover the unwanted inscription. When the surface is already painted, other problems occur. The workers have to evaluate the consistency of the paint, and its capacity to resist a certain dose of chemicals. They have to find the right balance between the preservation of the original paint and the ability for the product to erase the paint or the ink of the graffiti.



**Figure 4.** Touching the wall and the graffiti (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



But the material enactment of walls is not done only by a visual and tactile evaluation. It also goes through the workers' corporeal postures and their bodily adjustments during the removal intervention. The use of high pressure water, for instance, requires the right distance. Workers need to tune their gestures with a series of meticulous trials and errors during the first seconds of the operation that allows them to gently erase the inscriptions without deteriorating the wall that bears it. Likewise, applying chemicals require a careful use of sponges and rags. It is of critical importance to deploy them in the right space and at the right time. If the product is let for too long on the wall, it would irremediably damage the wall and prevent any 'normal' state to be restored.

Several aspects are particularly interesting in this ontological enactment. It notably shows that walls are fragile. This is an important dimension of maintenance practices: they foreground the material vulnerability of things and their need to be taken care of (Denis and Pontille 2015). Even though walls may appear as one of the most solid material components of cities, their sturdiness should not be considered an intrinsic and universal property. Our exploration of graffiti removal can be seen as an invitation to study other kinds of walls maintenance, such as renovation, refacing, or more mundane operations.

Furthermore, beyond this generic vulnerability, we have noticed that when it comes to materials, to the 'stuff the walls are made of', things may get hazy. During removal interventions, what constitutes a wall is actually not an obvious matter. What workers are dealing with is a material composite, a composite that is not the mere addition of previously identifiable things, but foregrounds a 'material ecology' (notably made of chemicals, water, sand, stones, concrete, plaster, bricks, mural paint, graffiti paint, ink, etc.) with which the

workers have to engage in order to successfully proceed to removal. By doing so, they follow, without knowing it, Ingold's plea for taking the materials complexity of things into consideration:

We see the building and not the plaster of its walls, the words and not the ink with which they were written. In reality, of course, the materials are still there and continue to mingle and react as they have always done... (Ingold 2007: 9)

What is particularly striking in this aspect of the removal process is that the distinction between the wall, on one side, and the graffiti, on the other, is not given beforehand; rather, it is a situated achievement, the outcome of the interventions themselves. Above all, this outcome is difficult to obtain. The whole operation could fail – and in some situations it does. A bit of what eventually proves to be the graffiti can remain in place. A bit of what eventually proves to be the wall may disappear. Yet, bringing walls back to their 'normal state' entails removing only 'the stuff graffiti is made of'. Graffiti removal requires therefore a delicate material ontological operation that simultaneously enacts what the wall is and what the graffiti is.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we showed that graffiti removal in Paris, as in other cities, is a crucial part of a politics of public order maintenance. The removal policy, a paradigmatic application of broken-window theory, is indeed organized as a daily never-ending process, through which what is considered as visible signs of disorder are constantly wiped off of walls and taken away from the sight of inhabitants and passersby. Taking into consideration what could be considered as insignificant maintenance practices profoundly changes the traditional understanding of the modes of existence of walls in the city, and the sociomaterial order they participate to perform.

First, from legal and contractual documents to the removal techniques, and workers' gestures and words, we showed that graffiti removal enacts walls. This is obviously not the only domain of activity that participates in the definition and the conditions of existence of walls, yet this enactment is extremely important: without a graffiti removal policy, a great majority of walls in Paris would neither look nor exist the way they do today.

Yet, we also showed that such enactment is nothing but unidirectional. Even though graffiti removal is conceived of as a way to maintain public order straight on the walls, its exploration foregrounds the multiplicity of ontological enactments that are performed to do so. The 'same' wall can be handled as the object of a specific kind of maintenance, as quantified surface, as controlled space of public expression, as part of an official decorum, and as an uncertain material composite. The 'same' wall is, in other words, the result of the consecutive, sometimes simultaneous, enactments of very contrastive versions that each raises specific concerns.

Investigating the enactments of walls as crucial parts of a specific urban assemblage is important in many respects. It is a means to emphasize how these enactments make language and matter hold together. Following Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages are intrinsically made of words-and-matter. Graffiti removal is particularly telling in this regard. It deals with traces and inscriptions unofficially displayed in the city, whose erasure implies the articulation of the material properties of walls (stone, brick, paint, concrete...), graffiti (ink, paint...) and removal techniques (water, sponge, paint, sand, rags, chemical products...). Graffiti removal is thus a singular case of 'collective assemblages of



enunciation' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) in which what is produced and reproduced is the absence, rather than the presence, of some enunciative entities. Silencing, too, is an essential part of the collective enunciation of the city.

We also showed that, as part of an urban maintenance assemblage, the ontological enactments that occur in graffiti removal are relational. Indeed, a specific enactment of walls implies, at least, a specific enactment of graffiti, of order maintenance, and of urban reality. Moreover, these relational enactments are not inert, and cannot be described as a mere set of rules and principles. The original French word used by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) is precisely *agencement*, a term that insists not only on material and linguistic heterogeneity, but also on agency. Graffiti removal, and urban maintenance in general, are processes; obviously, they draw on documents, laws, standards that are extremely important, but they would remain *lettre morte* without workers, interventions, exceptional operations and verification processes. These situated actions perform a certain territorialization, but they are also subject to deterritorialization processes. Indeed, we saw that the removal interventions cannot be automatized. They imply improvisations, adjustments and situated judgments. They also have to deal with the environment of the city, for instance with weather conditions that constraint the use of certain removal techniques. The practice is also subject to changes: new kinds of walls materials regularly appear (such as porous coating or rusty metal surfaces making graffiti removal tricky), innovative graffiti removal techniques are tested (for instance, to intervene on trees without damaging them), and so on.

Finally, our exploration foregrounds the connection between graffiti removal and other assemblages, other ontological enactments. This is obvious when it comes to streets cleaning, as we have seen in the case of the enactment of an official decor. But two other assemblages, briefly encountered in our descriptions, are also directly connected to graffiti removal. The first one enacts graffiti as artworks or murals. The lists of authorized pieces that are transmitted to the municipality contractors are one of the numerous ingredients of this assemblage, in which graffiti writers themselves, specific budgets and numerous other things are also crucial. If graffiti writers are almost absent from the removal assemblage, they are at the center of the 'cultural' assemblage, in which they are enacted as artists. An important aspect is that, even though they differ dramatically in rhythm and components, both assemblages participate in the same ontological enactment of walls as sites of public expression. A second assemblage is worth mentioning, which is also essential to order maintenance: the legal 'struggle' against graffiti. Here, graffiti is enacted as a crime. Graffiti writers, again, appear to be at the center of preoccupations, yet this time as delinquents who have to be tracked, arrested, and punished. The connection with removal interventions is made through the database where the pictures of each operation are stored. Sometimes, the police ask access to this database. The walls on these occasions are not enacted as objects of maintenance, surfaces, sites of public expressions, decor, or material composite, but as evidence of crime.

Hence, the answer to the question, 'what is an urban wall?' is by no means simple, direct, and univocal. Walls are enacted in practices. They take place in, and contribute to, a variety of assemblages. Each assemblage does not perform single and distinct ontological enactments of walls, though. Some partially share the same version, while others bring different versions to existence. Graffiti removal and urban maintenance in general, though they may seem univocal ordering processes, are of this kind. They enact contrasted ontologies of walls and of urban reality.

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