

Art of Protest [Banksy's paintings on the wall separating Israel from Palestine]

by Tianxing Ma, *The Harvard Crimson*, February 18, 2014

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A child draws a tall ladder on the wall. A young girl grasps onto numerous balloons, attempting to fly. Trapped inside the wall, a horse peeks pitifully out from its small square. Two children rendered in black and white stenciling play with a sand pail. However, they are not part of the beautiful, idyllic beach scene in color, shown through a tromp-l'oeil crack in the wall. This graffiti, found anywhere else, may seem cynical. But on Israel's West Bank barrier, the pieces are no longer just examples of dark humor; they serve as a political tool, intended to shed further light on a particular social issue.

Sometime in early August of 2005, Banksy, a pseudonymous graffiti artist and political activist from the United Kingdom, created nine pieces of graffiti on Israel's West Bank barrier. He had already been known as a subversive artist wearing a notorious paper bag over his head to protect his identity. In 2003, he painted on animals in an exhibition titled "Turf War." In 2004, Banksy produced counterfeit ten-pound notes, substituting the Queen's head with Princess Diana's. Someone dispersed the bills at the Notting Hill Carnival that year, creating a logistical nightmare as some people tried to use the bills at local shops. With the rest of Banksy's tongue-in-cheek repertoire, the paintings on the barrier wall in 2005 come as no surprise. But his works on this wall are especially significant because of their use of graffiti specifically as a political medium in situ—that is, they place a work of social commentary in the very origin of the issue.

The Israeli West Bank barrier has been a site of extreme controversy, facing international scrutiny since construction began in 2002. While Israel argues that the barrier protects Israeli civilians from terrorists, the United Nations and the International Court of Justice asked that the barrier be removed in 2004. However, Israel ignored this request. The barrier is a separation wall that lies along the West Bank, partially along the 1949 Armistice line between the Israeli and Palestinian West Bank. The wall's length was supposed to be around 430 miles, and in 2012, 273.2 miles had been completed, while 35.2 remained under construction.

For Banksy, the controversy that surrounds the wall is what makes it such a perfect location for his art. Shortly after completing his graffiti on the wall, Banksy wrote on his website, "How illegal is it to vandalize a wall if the wall itself has been deemed unlawful by the International Court of Justice? The Israeli government is building a wall surrounding the occupied Palestinian territories. It stands three times the height of the Berlin Wall and will eventually run for over 700 km—the distance from London to Zurich. The International Court of Justice last year ruled the wall and its associated regime illegal. It essentially turns Palestine into the world's largest open-air prison." Banksy created his graffiti under the belief that the wall should not exist.

Not only are Banksy's works considered contentious, they are also sometimes treated as criminal. According to his website, while Banksy was creating his artwork a soldier asked him, "What the fuck are you doing?" before threatening the artist. Jo Brooks, Banksy's spokeswoman, elaborates further on the precarious situation: "The Israeli security forces did shoot in the air threateningly, and there were quite a few guns pointed at him."

What sets Banksy apart from other protestors are the aesthetics of his protest. Although illegal in many areas, graffiti also maintains an undeniable artistic appeal. The beach scene, shown through the stenciled crack of the wall, is beautifully painted on with bright hues of blue and green. Even the child with the chalk, in its stark shadowing of black and white, maintains a certain sense of beauty. Banksy's conversation with an old Palestinian man emphasizes this bizarre interlacing between aesthetics and protest. When the man said Banksy made the wall beautiful, he initially thanked him. However, the man responded, "We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall. Go home."

Banksy's graffiti on Israel's West Bank barrier wall is significant in that it renders a form of illegal protest beautiful and posits it as an artistic activity. In using an illicit medium to express opposition, Banksy draws on a historical notion of protest—fighting against an established set of rules. But in using graffiti to do so, Banksy presents political protest as art. Art is no longer the marker of high civilization, and conversely protest is no longer only for marginalized members of society. No matter what issue Banksy fights against, he refashions protesting in his art. Through his graffiti, Banksy takes the problems of a few that are begging to be exposed and transforms them into art for many. He travels to the source of a problem and transforms it into a beautiful piece of protest.

Videos

- Banksy at work on the Palestine / Israel separation wall:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=996lIk-041A>

- The first 2.40mins of Channel Four News (at an unmentioned date) dedicated to Banksy's work on the Palestine / Israel separation wall:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36HPDgofNQ4>

- A 2mn beautifully edited photomontage alternating pictures of Banksy's wallpaintings with sometimes unbearable images of the political reality of everyday life along the separation wall:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LACHIoJQPg>

- Banksy's Murals Left Trail Of Conflict In Palestine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ki0ayi4RV10>

This is a much longer video (13mn45), which establishes a connection with my other file, on the removal and offer at auction of one of Banksy's wall paintings in London. Here, the geopolitical context is much more complex, and the gap between the average income of the inhabitants of Gaza and the prices the works can reach on the western art market is much more huge... The cruel reality of a Palestinian exploiting another Palestinian by buying a work painted on a door of his house for a ridiculously low amount of money features among the most impressive scenes in this film, which explores in depth the disruptions the artist's sincerely good intentions caused in the neighborhood of the division wall.

Questions you could ask yourself to check you have understood the issues at stake:

- Do you think Banksy was sincere when he decided to go and paint poetic, dreamlike, critical, ironical images on the division wall? Was he, in your opinion, naive himself with regard to the possible power of his art?
- Do you agree with Tianxing Ma's opinion that « the pieces are no longer just examples of dark humor; they serve as a political tool, intended to shed further light on a particular social issue »?
- Do you understand the Israeli soldier's response to Banksy's unauthorized intervention on the wall?
- Do you understand the old Palestinian man's response to the presence of the works on the wall?
- Are you surprised that some people thought of removing some of Banksy's paintings from that wall too, as the owners of the London building did?
- Are you shocked by Stephan Keszler's shameless discourse (in the 13mn45 long video) on his undebatable right to buy paintings stealthily removed from any wall, including the Palestine / Israel separation wall, and make a huge profit by selling them to Miami art collectors in his gallery or at art fairs?

- If you are deeply interested in this issue, watch these two short videos on Banksy's highly debatable other initiative in Bethlehem: opening a hotel in a house where all the windows open on to the wall, thus offering "the worst view in the world":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QjssnPPFn0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHtcy0VLa7I>

Do you think this cynical project trespassed the boundaries of good taste and decency, or do you enjoy the dark and grim humour involved, which is very much part of the British (and Irish!) tradition of political satire, whose most terrifying expression is most likely Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal For preventing the Children of Poor People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For making them Beneficial to the Publick?*

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