Who is occupying wall and street: graffiti and urban spatial politics in contemporary China

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Who is occupying wall and street: graffiti and urban spatial politics in contemporary China

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This paper examines three cases of graffiti production characterized by showing the connections between three key ideas (aura, carnival, and publicity) in the context of contemporary China. This paper attempts to construct a paradigm for this particular cultural phenomenon by analysing three cases situated in three different social levels. First, graffiti as artwork, as exhibited by the contemporary artist Zhang Dali, is discussed. Second, sponsorship of graffiti culture by the local government is studied. The last and most controversial topic of discussion is how graffiti's online circulation reflects civil society in China. This paper explores the complex intersection of street culture, public space, and media. In revolving around the questions of what defines graffiti producers and spectators, what can be said about graffiti-writing practices, and who has the ability to speak out, this discussion illustrates the extent to which graffiti can be understood as a means of public communication against the backdrop of, and amid the moments of crisis in, the construction of modern Chinese cities. This paper illustrates how the aesthetics and the politics of representational forms and their intermediality are mobilized in a variety of contested spaces, where producer and spectator change and exchange identities.

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.
Jacques Rancière (2004)

Graffiti in China: an overview of the context

In China, writing or painting public space has always been linked to a form of representation of power. Historically, writing on an open space, or even on natural landscape by an authority has long been a part of the aesthetic tradition in the Chinese cultural context. *Tizi*, or inscription on natural landscapes by emperors or political leaders is seen to add to the charisma of the place rather than destroying them. In modern China, the Mao era's wall propaganda culminated in the Cultural Revolution. *Dazibao,* a type of poster with text that served as a means of public debate, protest, propaganda, criticism, and popular communication was visually omnipresent in the Chinese cities. These public political public writings, along with other pictographic images with slogans, were important parts of the propagandistic machine for mass mobilization in revolutionary China. When this grand red wave ebbed, a painted Chinese character *chai,* which means demolition, with an official seal-like bold circle around it, spawned crazily around the streets and lanes of most Chinese cities. This is probably the most famous 'graffiti' written by the post-Mao Chinese government as an embodiment of indisputable state power over public space.

Although the tradition of writing on China's city walls is by no means unusual to the public, writing graffiti with a specific style that has been established first in western cities

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is considered a nascent cultural phenomenon in contemporary China. Allegedly emerging from the southern Guangdong province via the path of China's highly autonomous Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in the 1990s, graffiti writing is now rapidly spreading over China's big cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou. As Chinese cities have been experiencing massive urban renewal projects and reconstructions in the past decades, increasing number of half-demolished and abandoned urban structures provides a paradise for graffiti writers with spaces for scribbling. Graffitists can always find cracks in time and space to slip in their pieces on these urban ruins.

As for the writers, the local Chinese ones consist largely of the young generation, or the so-called 'post-80s and post-90s', a term referring to those born after 1980 and 1990. Most of them are either college students who have received professional design or fine arts training, or even art professionals.[1] Although the actual number of people who are interested in graffiti or graffiti writing is growing, only a limited percentage of them actually write on streets: in Beijing the number is estimated to be around 30 and in Guangzhou around 50.[2] Their work is mostly done in an underground manner even amid doubts that the public has realized the existence of these individuals. In available news reports, public reactions towards graffiti range from indifferent, curious, and welcoming, to loathing and fearful; these reactions mainly depend on geographical regions and age.[3] Graffiti, whether seen as a form of street art or not, is still an unacquainted name for majority of Chinese citizens.

In the West, the definition of graffiti has been increasingly contested as different social actors may create different discursive spaces for graffiti. Major debates over graffiti in the West concentrate on the equivocal nature of the social, artistic, and moral aspects of graffiti. Those debates focus on the question of graffiti being seen as, for example, a crime, a form of subculture, or street art. These diverse forms and intentions of graffiti in turn generate different modes of addresses and their engagement with different publics. Largely emerging as an unauthorized violation of private property, graffiti has held an illegal and provocative stance, long represented as a serious urban problem. In comparison, Chinese governmental or legal authority's attitude towards graffiti actually seems less confrontational. The authority and the public see graffiti, as shown above, as something novel or even mysterious. The act of graffiti writing entails less severe or sometimes whimsical punishment due to the less specific legal environment, which is mostly concerned over issues such as private property rights or vandalism in the West. In the meanwhile, however, not too different from the western discourse of boosting the creative economy, graffiti in China also wins much of the favour as a major symbol of the flourishing 'creative industry' for numerous Chinese local governments. These are the types of 'graffiti' that have been embraced by urban managers in their quest to capitalize on the creative economy (McAuliffe 2012) and to foster processes of urban revitalization and gentrification (Zukin and Braslow 2011). Ghettoized works of graffiti can easily be found in Chinese 'creative gardens', such as Shenzhen OCT-LOFT, Beijing 798, and Shanghai Moganshan Road. Thus, the Chinese art world 'seems willing to embrace graffiti even before it finds its home on the street' (Lally 2007, 149). All these, however, do not lead to a simple conclusion that graffiti in China are all under institutional frameworks. Sporadic struggles happen when, for example, modifications are made on state propaganda images in a humorous and sometimes ironical manner. Graffiti with overt political denunciation also exists, albeit rarely or erased swiftly.

Arguably, graffiti and other forms of street art are increasingly seen as a significant lens through which contemporary China can be better understood. As Look rightly pointed out, for a country whose economic growth is largely regarded as being based on the labour-intensive industry and is blamed for its capacity of mass faking, works of graffiti

are symbolic representations of creativity and wisdom (2012, 33). Moreover, the relatively tolerant attitude of Chinese authorities towards graffiti evokes an interesting contrast between the politically 'repressive' China and the democratic western societies. In China, graffiti as 'a form of resistance' must be:

> specifically contextualized in Chinese culture, using indirect protest, irony, and allusion to convey a message, while Western movements use 'louder', more black and white methods such as enemy-targeting and solution-finding, which don't work in China. The roles of individual actors are more ambiguous and less dramatized than a Western lens may lead us to believe. (Look 2012, 33)

Against the above-mentioned general backdrop of the graffiti scene, this paper tries to unfold these three cases of graffiti production, all of which seem to be the 'alternative scenes' of the more commonly seen graffiti practice in China. Yet this exceptionality does not separate the three cases from the curious situation of graffiti in China as a whole. On the contrary, they highlight some of the most subtle and sophisticated moments in the making of graffiti culture in Chinese cities, which largely crystallize the most underlying tensions among various social actors in play. I attempt to construct a paradigm for understanding the cultural phenomenon by analysing three cases found on three different social levels. First, graffiti as an artwork, as exhibited by the contemporary artist Zhang Dali is discussed. Second, sponsorship of graffiti culture by the local government is investigated. The last and most controversial topic is how graffiti's online circulation reflects civil society in China.

Aura, carnival, and publicness as method

Set in contemporary Chinese context, the most intriguing features of the three cases presented in this paper also derive precisely from the difficulty of delineating them within/ outside a specific kind of definition of graffiti. Graffiti shall be critically examined as a blanket term that includes multiple types of practices with nuanced meanings. However, in illustrating how these definitions and discourses are entangled, used, and misused (with or without intention) to fulfil certain purposes, this paper will formulate key conceptual characteristics of graffiti that lie largely outside any form of institutionalization or institutionalized discourse. Thus, each of the three cases in question will provide a corresponding complication of one of the characteristics.

First, graffiti is premised on its site-specificity and therefore occupies a unique topology in time and space. The 'aura' of graffiti lies in the direct relations between the human body and the body of the built environment, doing away with any form of media.[4] Unlike a singular painting, graffiti relies highly on its contextual environment. In a sense, the canvas is no longer an empty homogenous texture, but the material existence of the 'here and now' of the city. As most graffiti involves the art of autographing, the letter combinations speak of the uniqueness of the writer's bodily existence. The value of graffiti thus lies in the aura of human *dasein*.

Second, graffiti celebrates the carnivalesque humour and disorder of everyday life. Graffiti, in a strict sense, always comes with a certain kind of illicitness, a constant, though possibly unnoticed or unwelcomed, disturbance against a predominant order. Graffiti boasts a 'carnivalesque' nature described by Mikhail Bahktin. For Bahktin, carnival is a ritualistic event whereby the reversion between all that is spiritual and noble, and all that is decadent and material, entails the restoration of order, through which repressed energy is managed and cultivated. Graffiti's illegitimacy and eccentricity release the energy of the unyielding to turn a site of indifference and numbness into an electrified space of

differences. Graffiti thus manifests itself, just as carnival, as 'an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms' (Bakhtin 1984, 122). For this reason, graffitists call themselves 'writers' rather than artists or painters. Graffiti's foreseeable ephemeral quality also speaks of the carnival nature of involving both life and death simultaneously.

This carnivalesque nature of graffiti is thus closely related to the final point made here: its publicness, which concerns the relationship between the producer and the spectator, rather than the work itself. With or without the consciousness of using graffiti as an artistic expression, the writers expect an audience (of different size, literacy, and intention) to at least see their creation, realize their existence. In contrast to the artworks enshrined in museum, which in fact claims their eternal and divine death, graffiti is ultimately anti-museum, with its doors open to anyone willing to either produce or look. In this sense, graffiti is not a representation of an imagined utopian society of the *demos*, but rather the immediate actions of the *demos* to do and make, for the *demos* to see.

With the help of these three key ideas, the role of graffiti inside a nexus of urban spatial politics, I argue that graffiti production in today's China crystallizes the contests over a 'postsocialist' visual modernity, whose definition is understood variously by the state, the writer, the artist, and the general public. On the one hand, all these actors endeavour to produce their own kind of common sense in the current Chinese urban crises, such as forced demolition, ruined post-industrial cityscapes, post-revolutionary aphasia, or schizophrenia of the visual language in the rapid capitalistic modernization. On the other hand, the western predominance of global visual order is further re-territorializing domestic perceptions and evaluations of contemporary China's visual productions. These contests may well reverberate what Rancière calls 'distribution of the sensible' in any aesthetic moment, which he believes is simultaneously a political moment. The 'distribution of the sensible' leads to 'dissensus'. Rancière argues that dissensus 'is not a conflict between individuals or groups possessing different identities, interests, opinions, or values. Dissensus means a conflict between one sensible order and another' (Rancière 2007, 560). In this vein, in revolving around the questions of who the producers and spectators of graffiti are, I will discuss a series of acute questions of spatial aesthetics and politics among different sensible orders in contemporary China.

Zhang Dali's 'dialogue' with the city … or with whom?

The first case of graffiti production discussed here is that of the Chinese artist Zhang Dali's graffiti project, 'Dialogue' (1995–1998). This project was situated in the to-be-demolished walls of Beijing folk residential units. The capital, like other major Chinese cities, has undergone dramatic transformations since the 1990s. Whereas the massive demolition of the urban, built environment has constantly been associated with, and appropriated into, the larger discourse of the nation's grand modernization, the poignant conflicts that occur between the government and the local residents are typically invisible. The immense, citywide tableau of evacuated, then half-demolished, and finally disappeared houses seemed to have stripped them of any meaningful moments in history, leaving the everyday space and community of Beijing's non-places. It was against this vast and bleak backdrop that Zhang's graffiti heads emerged. His 'heads', sometimes accompanied by the words 'AK-47' or '18 K', implied a sense of violence (Figure 1).[5] The 'violence, uneasiness, and insecurity (*bu'an*)' contained in the graffiti 'give us a completely antithetic mental picture compared to the alleged successful, eulogistic official image, which is based on the key-concept "to preserve order and stability"' (Marinelli

Figure 1.   Zhang Dali's graffiti on Beijing Walls (Copyright Zhang Dali).

2004, 440). Zhang's work suspended the modernization narrative as a national project for the people and of the people.

In 1996, one year after Zhang Dali had painted more than 2000 bald-head graffiti pieces in Beijing's streets and lanes, the uninvited, but omnipresent, markings of an unknown source finally caught the eye of the mass media. The graffiti then drew the attention of huge local print media, which regarded it as art (be it ecological, outdoor, conceptual, or performance art), rather than the result of vandalistic misbehaviour. This was the key point of the debate on the nascent avant-garde art scene in China. Meanwhile, foreign mass media and academic journals, including the *New York Times*, *Asia Art Future* (UK), *Art Asia Pacific* (Australia), and *Anan* (Japan), also joined the review team, disclosing the profound meaning of these profile paintings, which possibly conveyed the key realities of contemporary Chinese art, society, politics, and urban changes.[6] This resurgence of graffiti as a means of latent or overt resistance seems to have established graffiti's legitimacy, which is ironically based precisely on its lack of legitimacy. Interpretations of graffiti are geared towards easing the anxiety of Chinese individual citizens under the strict surveillance of the Chinese state. These explanations focus mainly on the idea of the 'dialogue-ness' of Zhang's graffiti with the city and history. The images were therefore also linked to previous civic protests to the political status quo in China's contemporary history, in particular, the two unsuccessful pro-liberal acts of resistance. The first was the 'Democracy Wall' in 1979. The other was the student movement in 1989, whereby an equal 'dialogue' with the government was a vital attitude proposed by the students.[7] Although Zhang admitted in his interview that he had never tried to enrage the government, his graffiti were still easily regarded as emerging signs of rebellion and criticism either to the government's hegemony (Woodworth 2009, 209–212) or to the public's apathy and passivity (Bruce 2010, 112).

However, Zhang Dali's production of graffiti-style art and his visual means of 'dialogue' did not stop here. While painting the bald heads on Beijing's walls, he photographed them as a documentation not only of the images themselves, but also of the adjacent environment and people (Figure 2). 'Photography gradually took over to become his means to represent such visual dialogue, often dramatic confrontations of architectural images with his sprayed self-images' (Wu 2000, 760). Zhang further developed these mechanically reproduced images into light boxes, which were understood as standing 'between the spectacle of the advertising industry and the propaganda of the state'

Figure 2.   Dialogue 1999 (Copyright Zhang Dali).

(Borysevicz 1999, 57). In this way, Zhang's graffiti transformed from an anti-cultural or low-cultural entity into high-cultural art that is accepted and valued by the institution. It may be true that more people on the Beijing's streets would have seen the hollowed wall. Definitely, however, even more people see its photographic reproduction in exhibitions in art galleries. In this sense, the most fundamental change that happened was the spectators: rather than local residents of Beijing, they are predominantly art professionals, artwork buyers, and the global (but limited) publics.

Zhang's carefully compiled archival photographs of his graffiti and other derivative products enabled the artist to work closely with commercial galleries and art institutions. In this manner, the positions of graffiti producer and spectator completely changed. The success story of Zhang Dali's graffiti lures us to remain in the comfort of watching how an outlaw graffitist, by actively engaging himself in artistic communication with the city, the authorities, and the public, metamorphosed into one of the most highly reputed Chinese artists in the world. However, for the public, as Zhang Dali turns from invisible to visible, the graffiti concurrently turns from visible to invisible. The formerly unqualified graffitist had become a qualified artist; in this sense, Zhang became his own curator. If the artistic value of the graffiti is seen as rooted in its rich reservoir of unleashed possibilities of looking at the city with fresh eyes – a re-arrangement of the senses on the totalizing visual reality of the destruction of the city – then the question becomes, 'looked by whom'? The audience has shifted from local Beijing residents to art professionals, artwork buyers, and the global public. Having two different groups of spectators speaks of an ironic process: whereas graffiti is supposed to eliminate the media between the bodies of the graffitist and the city, Zhang's graffiti art restores these media (photography, painting, or lighted box). By capturing the ephemerality of the graffiti through these media and by repetitively circulating them, Zhang paved for himself a smooth way to the commercialization of his

works. In contrast to the heated acclaim from the media and the art world, according to media reports as well as Zhang Dali's own observations, the Beijing public's reaction to the graffiti was either indifference or confusion. [8]

Here we encounter an interesting sleight of hand in the production of graffiti's aura based on two kinds of site-specificity. In contrast to the apathetic reaction of the local public, the entrance of Zhang's graffiti into the mainstream art world established a thoroughfare between graffiti in its raw form and Chinese contemporary art. It was Zhang's documentation of the graffiti, rather than its on-site existence in a specific environment, that made the otherwise unnoticed space visible. If, according to Walter Benjamin, 'The presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be', bestowed the graffiti with a sense of authenticity and aura, then the photography/documentation/installation of the graffiti was a reproduction of the original. The curated graffiti photographs enhanced, rather than reduced, the status of the actual graffiti as the original, based on the mechanisms of contemporary art. The spectator's attitude is decisive here. On the first level, both artist and spectators randomly moved their bodies around the graffiti. On the second level, the artist stopped moving around and the audience came *on purpose*. Groys interprets what Benjamin means by 'the original' not as some innate and immobile quality of the entity itself, but as a matter of producing time and space: 'The reproduction is a de-location, a de-territorialization – it carries the piece of art into the net of topologically uncertain circulation' (Groys 2002).

The case of Zhang Dali shows us how aesthetics works *as* politics: if graffiti first functions as a marker of the confrontation between the two sets of visual logic in the public space, as 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making a well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility' (Rancière 2004, 13), then Zhang Dali's graffiti fails somehow. This failure is a result of unintelligibility, or its unsuccessful redistribution of sensibility to 'what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization in the local soil' (Rancière 2004, 18). Thus, the medium, the audience and consequently, the ways of seeing changes, and the 'ways of doing and making' actually transited to the global cultural and political context. It is not until then that aesthetics seems to begin its mobilization of the sensible with intelligibility. It is therefore inappropriate to describe Zhang's case either as an aestheticization of politics or as a politicization of aesthetics, but rather as one of aesthetics functioning or playing as politics.

A twisted carnival: state-sponsored graffiti

The second case in this paper uses state-sponsored graffiti campaigns to illustrate the contradictory state of the Chinese urban governing body amid the increasingly ambiguous expression of current Chinese ideology in visual culture. Although commercial advertising occupies the majority of public visual imagery in the cities of post-1989 China, the state maintains strict control over what should and should not be seen. Government slogans still enjoy the privilege of displaying themselves in the most obvious places. More precisely, the Mao era was never totally abandoned but 'has been modernized and updated to suit the needs of the current period ... Guides on propaganda and thought work published in the 1990s aimed to make China's propaganda "attractive, entertaining and inspiring"' (Brady 2008, 74). Meanwhile, now that the core idea of propaganda and thought work shredded away the ultra-leftist and revolutionary tone, the legitimacy and management of the Chinese Communist Party's political power is to a great degree secured by the propaganda of persuasion (Brady 2008, 71).

This domestic turn in national visual production, in my view, can best explain large-scale graffiti wall campaigns such as the 'Chongqing Huangjueping Graffiti Avenue', which was completed in 2007. In this particular case, we even see a return of the narrative of mass participation in art production in the communist ideal. As stated in official reports, residents in the neighbourhood actively supported the construction of the art street, and paint companies provided free paint. With a neighbourhood approximately 50,000 square metres in area and 1.25 kilometres long, the local district proudly claimed itself as China's or the world's largest graffiti work (Figure 3). More than 800 art academy students, school students, and hired workers participated in the painting process.[9] As one of the nine 'creative industry bases' in Chongqing, the inauguration ceremony of the 'Graffiti Avenue' was celebrated in the form of a rigorous 'graffiti festival'. There was a parade, performances, and interactive art production activities involving local residents, who were encouraged to share the joy.[10]

These events in China auspiciously take graffiti as an evident solution or advantage, rather than, as in a lot of western cities, a problem of urban environment. It is easy to argue that this graffiti can no longer be considered graffiti, but rather a mural. However, we have to bear in mind that, in all these cases, the word 'mural' was never used interchangeably with 'graffiti' (*tuya*). We can, of course, further argue the extent to which this self-claimed graffiti is truly graffiti in the primitive sense. What makes the phenomenon meaningful here is how and why the government insists on a linguistic genealogy that confirms graffiti's style and nature.

If we carefully examine how the semantic structure of the concept of 'graffiti' (not mural) plays a central role in these campaigns, we immediately face an interesting dislocation. In the West, graffiti's commercialization into the fashion industry, or even its movement towards high art, is based specifically on its original spirit of criticism of mainstream values. In China, the state's internalization of this symbolic meaning of graffiti as a formerly miscounted puzzle of an 'open and tolerant society' is apparently misplaced. On the one hand, here graffiti has not been commercialized, yet it remains a part of state advertising. On the other hand, the premise of graffiti's marginal and critical

Figure 3.   Chongqing Graffiti Avenue.

status in mainstream western culture constituting its political signification is largely absent. According to Bakhtin (1984, 122), graffiti writing is understood as a carnivalesque act, which accommodates the reversion, unification, and profanation of non-carnivalistic categories and hierarchies. Moreover, carnival is not a performance or a contemplation but life per se, in which 'everyone is an active participant ... its participants live in it ... it is to some extent "the reverse side of the world"' (Bakhtin 1984, 122). Anchored on these concepts, this paper will use 'a twisted carnival' to describe a graffiti scene where the official and the public share the joy. These mega events and accompanying graffiti campaigns, which feature mass participation in festivals, reveal a 'grotesque body in disguise' that runs exactly against the carnival-ness of graffiti. The creation of graffiti as carnival in China is only an imitation because it is a carnival that does not destroy the order. First, even the symbolic destruction never occurred: the alliance between the police and graffiti writers cannot be seen as a disturbance to the existing order but as evidence of the harmonious society – after all, it is true that their relationship has never really been antagonistic. Second, the expression of individualism inherent in graffiti writing is contrasted by the anonymity of the writers, whereas the elites and political institutions are remembered in successfully mobilizing the masses. In this case, the creation of graffiti was only an imitation of a carnival. If a carnival is a kind of outburst of disciplinary repression, then graffiti production in these cases twists twice: it is an artificial 'artificial madness', without the possibility of explosion or implosion, having been regulated from the very beginning. At first glance, the narrative of the creative industry 'catches up' with what can also be found in western cities. However, taking the situation of graffiti in China and the relationship between the graffitist and the authority into consideration, the discourse of graffiti's symbolic meaning is borrowed and decontextualized. On top of exhibiting the signifiers of Chinese creativity, the creative city is actually devoid of its signified. If graffiti in the West can be seen as a 'pirated mass-mediated prestige' from the corporations and the social authorities by the graffitist (Iveson 2007, 166), in China, such graffiti works are a pirated prestige from the graffitist by the state pragmatics.

This misplaced internalization is highly telling of post-Mao China's self-making and contradictions. The new training and guidance of contemporary China's state-backed visual production both flirts with its own haunting past and attempts to break away from it. The sudden collapse and negation of visual language in the Mao era and its mass basis was appropriated and turned into a newly coated collective dance in global political modernity. When graffiti, as in the case of western graffiti, makes its way to fashion (that is, becomes the kitsch object it had originally rebelled against) and even to high art, the postmodern appropriation of low art, or even of anti-art, comes to the fore. In China's case, because of a misplaced, 'de-socialist modernism', this postmodern appropriation is done without an earlier demarcation between high and low art in the discourse of graffiti. As a result, graffiti becomes a text with an absent or undefined context when it is used by the state as a part of its totalizing visual tool. While, according to Groys, 'contemporary Russian culture finds itself without any institutionalized tradition against which it might transgress', contemporary Chinese culture only appears to embrace both transgressions: 'either in the modernist sense (by making its own autonomy more and more radical) or in the postmodernist sense (by appropriating the Other)' (Groys 1997, 82). Furthermore, as a result of its continuous use of socialist modernism apparatuses and the absence of a context of postmodern transgression (for instance, 'any appropriation of the Other'; Groys 1997, 82), China has made no actual transgression and actually remains in the same position.

Moreover, the major difference between the graffiti campaigns in contemporary China and the agenda of revolutionary-style propaganda is the government's active intervention

in graffiti projects. In China, the government is not only the producer, initiator, and patron, but also the most attentive spectator of many other imagined spectators. The real graffiti painters, however, have been relegated to minor positions. In Communist China, the mobilization of students and youth in producing highly propagandistic visual representations is seen as a politicization of aesthetics to make 'certain political attitudes attractive (or unattractive) to the public' (Groys 2010, 12). However, the highly depoliticized Chongqing graffiti project seems to be an ambiguous advertisement of the political message. In this case, the aesthetic and political order of graffiti actually collides with the aesthetic and political order of the communist propaganda work, where aesthetics attempts to redistribute the sense of 'the gaze of the others'. These 'others' refer not only to the global audience, but also to the altered socialist self as well. [11]

Therefore, as a cultural strategy in contemporary China, the endeavour to mobilize visual sensorium by using graffiti is not wholly intended to evoke aesthetic contemplation. In fact, the use of graffiti is meant to link the producer's attitude with the world. In this sense, the state realizes that to be a good spectator, one must first be a good producer and invite other good spectators to share. In this age of 'total design', the spectator does not take an external view when looking at the designed object. The real problem is not the seeming disappearance of the real content behind the sheer spectacle, but rather the transformation of the spectacle itself into the real content. In this regard, both aesthetics and politics work to reshape and reconfigure what is, and is not, common sense.

Internet and graffiti: new media and the possibility of resistance

The last case here aims to focus on a unique combination of two resistant gestures that are found in the intersections between graffiti and the Internet, triggered by public fury in response to the disappointing follow-up of the officials after the train accident. As is seen in the first two cases, graffiti works in China seem to be eventually appropriated into different institutions. The final case here demonstrates other situations concerning the production of graffiti and its circulation. Notwithstanding some sporadic efforts in writing graffiti with overt criticism to the state power, politically sensitive graffiti production is still under strict state surveillance and can hardly survive. In this case, an intense graffiti war occurred, one that happened in actual urban space, reproduced by digital camera and transmitted via digital reproduction on the *Weibo* (or mini-blog) community.

In contemporary China, both local and overseas new media enterprises suffer from an awkward situation, in which the need of the market and the guidelines of censorship have to be carefully considered and managed simultaneously. The status quo of the Chinese Internet environment can be characterized by a tug-of-war among the coexistence of the 'Big Brother' censorship, the self-censorship of the media company, and a largely spontaneous and loosely self-organized Internet user's communities. The first is implemented through a set of various mechanisms called 'supervision of public opinions' (*yulunjiandu*): deletion of sensitive content, emphasis on apolitical news, employment of 'undercover' online commentators to confuse the public opinion, and others. The last refers to different opinion groups. The resistance of Internet users (or 'netizens') to the monopoly of official versions of a public issue can be seen in a variety of techniques. Self-composed jokes (*duanzi*) are popular in *Weibo*, where the limit on words makes it perfectly concise and powerful. In opposition to the invention of the 'Newspeak' from the state propaganda machine, netizens in China have also been forging their own new vocabulary to ridicule or to evade censorship.

On 23 July 2011, a breaking news report shocked China and the world. Two high-speed trains running on the Yongtaiwen Railway collided with each other, resulting in a catastrophic derailing of the trains in the suburbs of Wenzhou, Zhejiang province. The subsequent actions taken by the officials of the Ministry of Railways, and the irresponsible answers given by the Ministry spokesman during the subsequent press conference, greatly outraged the public. In addition to the unexpected critical stance of the state-owned media in this case, the role of new media, above all the Chinese version of *Twitter*, *Weibo*, in providing a more open platform for information transmission and opinion expression for the general public is highly remarkable. Three days after the accident, freshly painted graffiti on a wall in the Shanghai Jiaotong University campus featured a skull-like high-speed railway train with blood-red paint along its bottom (Figure 4). This image was widely circulated via Sina *Weibo*, the Chinese version of *Twitter*. The graffiti's critical message was straightforward in the context of the agitated public opinion at the time. Subsequent events intensified the drama. The following day, July 27, a photo of a man in the process of covering the graffiti with concrete in broad daylight, and an image of the covered-over section of the wall where the graffiti once was, were published. That evening, as if anticipating the erasure, the graffiti was repainted under the cover of darkness. The same whitewashing was repeated the next day, July 28, although the next graffiti that appeared was no longer the original skull-train, but a verbal message beside the

Figure 4.   Graffiti in a university in Shanghai.

site of the erased original. An arrow had been drawn pointing to the whitewashed area, accompanied by the phrase, 'understanding China in here' (Figure 5).

In this case, the Internet and *Weibo* demonstrated their powerful information transmission effect. The site-specificness of the physical space of graffiti was replaced by virtual space on the Internet. Government censorship on free expression in real public spaces prompts the active participation of Internet users in circulating the images of that particular graffiti, which generated a surprising cacophony. The image's popularity strengthened the graffiti's defiant gesture and theatrical effect. We see here a fundamental change in the site-specificness of graffiti production: the physical space on which the graffiti relied heavily was replaced by the virtual space of the Internet. The question is, with the advent of new media, is it possible for graffiti to gain a new kind of access to the core of Chinese society?
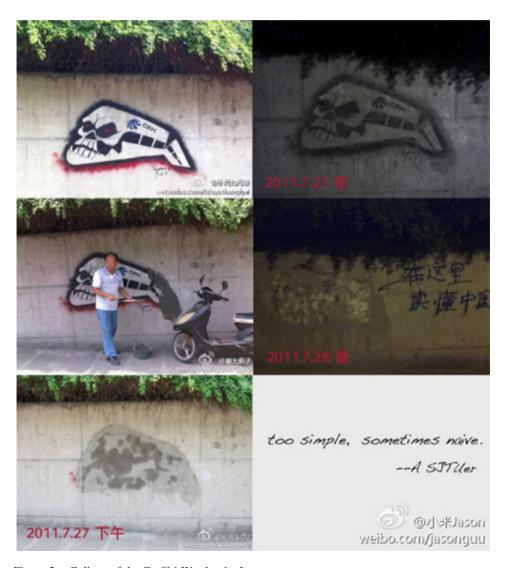

Figure 5.   Collage of the Graffiti War by the Internet users.

Arguably, we see an interesting resemblance between the role of graffitist/graffiti in the city and the role of netizen/the Internet in the social realm, that is, both graffiti and online community-based platforms act as forms of We-media/Self-media. [12] First, they both embrace a bottom-up production and distribution of information through a massively accessible media platform. Similar to graffitists who write on street walls or moving trains and subways in order to circulate texts and images for free, online communities enable grass-roots netizens to disseminate information at a minimal cost. Second, graffitists stride the line between producer and spectator just as netizens do on the Internet. For both, the roles they play in the (counter-)publics are not fixed and therefore do not conform to either activeness or passiveness only. Hence, the key principles of Bruns' conceptualization of 'produsage' can be more or less related to the practice of graffitists and netizens as 'produsers' (2008, 24–30).[13]

In this way, when the circulation of graffiti is done through digital reproduction, new possibilities of understanding, poetics, aesthetics, and politics are opened up. I will examine these possibilities through the lens of what Benjamin calls 'distraction' in his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1968). According to Benjamin, 'Distraction and concentration from polar opposites maybe stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art' (Benjamin 1968, 239). Distraction, as further illustrated by Benjamin, can be seen in human-built environments, architecture, and buildings as prototypes of work of art through two means: 'By use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight' (Benjamin 1968, 241).

Returning to the examination of the relationship between the producer and spectator of graffiti, the case of graffiti that is forwarded and discussed on the Internet may bring to mind the case of Zhang Dali. Shifted topology, or deprivation of site-specificity, happens in the first and the current case. Digitally produced and circulated graffiti images are detached from physical space and flow around, mobilizing citizens aware of their membership in civil society. Thus, the power of the graffiti's authenticity is no longer only a matter of aesthetic or cult value that is parasitical to technique or ritual (or an 'authentic and original time and space'), but a matter of exhibition value, which is not produced through preservation but through re-territorialization. In this sense, unlike the graffiti art of Zhang Dali that is hung within the white cube of an art gallery, the digital reproduction (of graffiti existing in a physical urban environment) that floats in a virtual exhibition space speaks of a double process where the division between distraction and concentration becomes porous. Now, without the material basis of the reproduction and dissemination of the image, the direct tactile appropriation between the subject and the object is transformed into a relationship between the subject and the hardware making the invisible object visible. In the case of graffiti, this tactile perception that largely resides in the bodily relationships among the writer, the actual graffiti, and the space is also deprived.

Moreover, digital reproduction creates not only a free flow of exhibition space, but also a free flow of the audience who are both spectators (distracted) and producers (concentrating). In the current case study, the anonymous graffitist/s who actually wrote on the wall was/were not the only the producer/s. While watching a TV-series-like live show of the combat between the graffitist/s and the government, the *Weibo* users not only looked on as spectators but also acted as producers in two ways. First, the images were taken, published, and collaged by more than one author. Second, by re-publishing (*zhuanfa*) the images via the postings of other people, the *Weibo* users repeatedly produced and reproduced the digital images. Although graffiti reproductions in art galleries and art catalogues are still based on tangible material, with the spectators coming into haptic

contact with the reproductions, digital reproduction renders a non-material and invisible base of reproducibility. Whereas the viewing objects are not fixed to a specific locale, the viewing and sharing experience constitutes a group of flâneurs who also spend very little time looking at anything, and consequently, are more constantly distracted. We can therefore say that Internet users are now freer to jump back and forth between concentration and distraction than ever before. The audience can now decide their trajectory or identity as a sender or recipient, a casual onlooker or attentive creator. Whether this oscillation would transform into a rebellious force in the real world, or only further complicate the distraction, is still a matter of debate.

The development described above remains contingent and uncertain as to where state surveillance ends and individual responsibility begins, to what extent spectators can be called a community of action, and whether possibilities of action can also be explored in distraction. The netizens in this case study closely resemble carnivalesque spectators for their partially 'imagined' reversion in virtual space, which is also parallel to the panopticon state apparatus in reality. In other words, the graffiti in this third case was so popular because of its 're-publishing' action, which was done by the static bodies of the netizens. This graffiti is a much less risky substitute for real action of the real body writing graffiti (as an act not only of provocation but of fashion as well), and allows the netizens to stay anonymous, absent, or invisible in the real political world. What they tried to form was, without calling it resistance, a sensible order that contains an ambivalent legacy: they are stuck in a highly ambiguous, fragmented and heterogeneous identity that oscillates between the individual and the collective, private and public, visible and invisible, the qualified and the unqualified for making real changes. The publicity of graffiti in this case re-theorizes new possibilities for understanding public space and its relation to social solidarity and withdrawal.

Conclusion: the public and 'The Distribution of the Sensible'

In *The Human Condition* (1998) Hannah Arendt argues that the space of politics must take on an appearance through either action (visual) or speech (audio).[14] This appearance is equal to reality and what she considers the realm of 'the public'.[15] For Arendt, the importance of action and speech is what distinguishes humans from animals, and allows humans to communicate, organize, and decide.[16] Without explicitly specifying a definition of 'the public', Bakhtin's 'carnivalesque' and Benjamin's 'distraction' suggest alternate means of understanding the public realm. In both configurations, it is the social public freedom, not the Arendtian political public freedom that is under investigation. Both configurations illustrate how society, culture, and other 'non-political' apparatuses deal with life using their own action strategies. For Bakhtin, the carnival requires a vast public space or a square. The literal and metaphorical space speaks of a public where the social does not try to move to a revolution that subverts the normal conditions, but tries to maintain a balance between private/individual repression and collective/public indulgence.[17] The interchangeability of the inside and the outside, the spectator and the performer, and the high and the low renders a form of freedom that disturbs the norms of logos. Everyone enjoys the freedom to take action in the carnival and share the public space, which functions as an escape from the impenetrable totalitarian political life. For Benjamin, the meaning of discussing aura and mechanical reproduction in the modern age also indicates his concern over how the modern social public is mobilized and formed. When the haptic and visual relationships between the audience and the object changes, the 'behavior and action' (in Arendtian sense) of the masses as the public likewise change. In

contrast to Bakhtin's one-time, ritualistic distraction, Benjamin's distraction is more long-lasting and commonplace. As modern life that constantly permeates mass culture and consumerism becomes more distracting, concentration becomes more difficult. Still, Benjamin implies that the hidden potentials of distraction are not entirely passive. Rather, distraction may be used by the public as a tool to tackle the impotence caused by exhaustion in both the private and the public realms.

As we see in the three cases of how graffiti in China is produced, reproduced, circulated, and interpreted in different kinds of spaces and realms, there exists not only an inconvenience in neatly demarcating between the private and the public, but also an entanglement of the aesthetic and political realms. The conflicts among the graffitist, artist, general public, and the state are not seen and mediated through purely political methods, but more important, through the apparatus of aesthetic experience per se. The idea of 'the public' is therefore not only a way to think and act, but first to see and touch. In his *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2011), Jacque Rancière revisits the relationship between aesthetics and politics by revealing an underlying similarity between the principles of the two regimes. The major difference between Rancière and Arendt is that Rancière 'does not wish to reconstitute politics in a sealed space that would be preserved from contamination by other spheres of activity' (Chambers 2010, 198). At this point, Jacque Rancière's idea of the 'dissensus' discusses these conflicts from the perspective of 'the sensible'. According to Rancière, dissensus is:

> a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies' ... This 'natural' logic, a distribution of the invisible and visible, of speech and noise, pins bodies to 'their' places and allocates the private and the public to distinct 'parts' – this is the order of the police. (Rancière and Corcoran 2010, 139)

Rather than juxtaposing these concepts in their own purely conceptual enclosure as Arendt did, and unlike Benjamin's criticism of the 'aestheticization of politics' and its related synthesis, the 'politicization of aesthetics', Rancière regards politics as 'the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, [it denotes] the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems of legitimizing this distribution' (Rancière 1999, 28). This (re)distribution is in turn a 'distribution of the sensible', occupying a specific position of both separating and sharing with other parts in the same order (Rancière 2004, 12). The ability and inability of what is to be seen and what is to be heard in time and space thus implies 'an "aesthetics" at the core of politics' (Rancière 2004, 13). Unlike the common aesthetic attitude that focuses largely on the impact of art on the spectator, this renewed point of view emphasizes the necessity of thinking over the role of the producer, be it 'the poetic, technical, authorial position' (Groys 2010, 18), not in socio-historical terms, but rather how the author reorganizes the sensible and intervenes in an already existing order. What is significant here is therefore this relational contestation between the truth and noise.

If the encounters of sensual systems are the origins of the clashes of aesthetic/political orders, the question therefore comes down to how the 'spaces of appearance', the actions, and therefore, the publics, are formed through *travelling* of sensual systems. The change in the sensual system is perceived, the common sense is produced, and the aesthetic/political order has to be re-negotiated. Thus, the three cases in the paper also speak to three types of travels of the sensible. In the first case, Zhang Dali's graffiti on the street were illegitimate and meaningless in the eyes of passer-by. Once redistributed via light box, photography, painting, and art criticism, the unsophisticated signs became artworks in exhibition spaces. In the second case, signs of graffiti from the West were transformed into tokens for

'Chinese creativity'. The sensibility towards the 'graffiti' in Chongqing was reframed by the state rhetoric within a newly designated realm. In the last case, the site-specific graffiti on the wall of the campus is translated into the digital reproduction of image on the Internet. The Internet users' sensual experience of the graffiti was thus altered by the materiality of (re)distribution of the image. In all these cases, the altering locations of media and human body, rather than their innate attributes, generate the actual social communications. The publics, therefore, refer no longer only to a group of fixed subjectivities or identities that are necessarily associated with certain features and therefore are qualified for certain actions. What we see here are the constant mutations between dissensus and consensus that refuse to be essentialized by any static conceptualization of equality, democracy, and openness. While Slavoj Žižek believes that Ranciere definitely provides some clues about 'how we are to continue to resist'(Ranciere 2004, 79), this paper goes on to ask how we 'discontinue' to see, hear, and touch as we used to do to resist?

Notes

1. See news reports from, e.g. *Information Times* (2006) and *Nanfang Daily*. Similar conclusions can also be found from my own constant observations of the online forums and communities of Chinese graffiti lovers.
2. Ibid.
3. Although concerns on the negative influence of graffiti on urban appearance and its potentially unappreciated cultural meanings (which largely come from the unintelligibility of the graffiti) are expressed among the general public, there are also reports on public reactions towards graffiti that are seen to be less anonymously hostile; instead, curiosity and tolerance can easily be traced. See reports in *Information Times* (2006), *Nanfang Daily*, and other news reports.
4. See Cresswell (1992) on the differentiation between form and process of graffiti in terms of the mediation involved.
5. Figures 1 and 2 are photographed by and © Zhang Dali, Figure 3 is photographed by Yong Wang, Figure 4 is photographed by 设屋攻業 X2R2, and Figure 5 © 小米 Jason
6. More than 20 articles on Zhang's graffiti can be found in Chinese and overseas media from 1998 and 1999, all convincingly talking about Zhang's painting as art.
7. *Asiaweek* (magazine, Hong Kong), April 1999, pp. 40–41, 'Democracy Walls' by Frankie Fathers
8. Wu Hung points out the lack of dialogue in one of the graffiti photos by Zhang Dali: 'In fact, even though the head seems to thrust forward in an aggressive manner, it does not generate any interaction or dialogue, neither with the words/images next to it nor with the man napping underneath it. A more appropriate title for the photograph may be *No Dialogue*. Back in Beijing, Zhang could now speak in his native tongue, but the Beijingers had to learn the language of graffiti art' (Wu 2000, 754).
9. The Construction of Huangjueping Graffiti Avenue (黄桷坪涂鸦艺术街的建设情况), 8 June 2007. http://www.cq.xinhuanet.com/2007/2007-06/08/content_10248702.htm
10. 'World's First Graffiti Avenue Opens Tomorrow at 9 a.m.', Live Broadcasting by Xinhuanet (世界第一涂鸦街明开街明早9点本网现场直播), 8 June 2007. http://www.cq.xinhuanet.com/2007-06/08/content_10240779.htm (accessed 27 March 2012). According to these official representations of the campaigns, both cases share three common purposes: first, mobilizing the masses to participate in state-directed events, be it international sports events or urban revitalization projects, in a festival atmosphere. Second, graffiti is seen to construct new guidance for visual language and creativity. Finally, graffiti is meant to speak to a certain actual or imagined public in mind, to display the achievements of these campaigns.
11. At this point, one may also reconsider the idea of 'open-society' in the post-socialist context. Groys astonishingly argues, 'One can also speak of openness with regard to a communist subject ruling in an isolated country. The internal division, and the internal tension to which this division gives rise, even allow openness to become manifest much more clearly in the thinking of a solitary and finite subject than in the bad, undialectical infinity of a boring

repetition of ever-same communication, the work of difference and the establishment of heterogeneity ... The open subject instead comes into being by appropriating the open and divided field of language as his own, dividing himself and making himself paradoxical and heterogeneous' (2009, 96). It is therefore no wonder to see a 'recent article published in *The Huffington Post* was titled "'Beijing Was More Open-Minded': Street Artists Speak Out Against London's Olympic Clean Up"' (Look 2012, 33). The extent to which the dialectical nature of communism continues, discontinues, and transmutes in the post-socialist China is a tricky but stimulating point to reflect upon the very definition of 'openness'.

12. The concept of We-Media is well elaborated in *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* by Dan Gillmor (2004). The book's theorization of the grass-roots-based journalism calls the attention for a new method of information production, where members of the popular mass provide and share the realities and news themselves with the help of digital technology and the global knowledge system.

13. According to Bruns, produsage is characterized by (1) 'open participation, communal evaluation", (2) 'fluid heterarchy, ad hoc meritocracy', (3) 'unfinished artefacts, continuing process', and (4) 'common property, individual rewards'.

14. Ardent on space of appearance: 'Action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly' (1998, 198–199).

15. See Arendt (1998, 199).

16. See Arendt (1998, 26).

17. See Bakhtin (1984, 129–30) on Carnival.

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