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Street Art and the 'Right to the City' in a Fragmented Metropolis: The Case of Beirut[1]

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Abstract:

In this paper, we examine how the demand of the citizens of Beirut for their 'right to their city' played out during the major popular uprising, which began on the 17th of October 2019. We focus on various forms of street art that had already been in place before the uprising as well as several pieces that emerged during the days following the beginning of the demonstrations. Our intent was to flesh out how drawing on the walls of the Lebanese capital manifested itself as a key activity through which people, regardless of sect and socioeconomic status, fought to improve their city and transform it into a space where leaders are corrupt-free, people's living standards are improved, the environment is cleaner and human rights are respected. We conducted a group interview of Lebanese (street) artists to contextualize the city's street art scene. The core materials for our study consist of 147 photographs of street art, taken during a week's stay in Beirut in October 2019. We performed thematic narrative analysis on the material, revealing five distinct themes. All themes reflect demands for a 'right to the city' in nuanced ways. We fleshed them out with the use of at least one illustration per theme. While some images projected overt political slogans and art others transmitted their message in a subtler manner. We conclude that graffiti and other forms

of street art are powerful means through which groups and individuals project their messages in order to assert their self-preservation and, ultimately, their 'right to the city' in contested urban spaces, where power differentials play out on political, social, and spatial levels.

Introduction

On arriving at Beirut airport in the evening of the 18th of October 2019, little did we and our traveling companions know that the entire city and, indeed, the whole country had been gripped in the midst of a major political crisis.[2] Since the preceding day, the Lebanese people had taken to the streets en masse, expressing major displeasure against the manner in which the government had been handling a chronic economic crisis and mounting economic debt. The crowd's main demand was for the prime minister and the entire government to step down. A series of measures, including deep slashes in public funding and the imposition of heavy taxes relating to goods and services had enraged the population whose quality of life has been declining for decades due to rising unemployment and extremely low wages. The final spark that ignited this uprising was the imposition of a hefty monthly tax on WhatsApp calls as well as the embarrassing position the Government found itself in when forced to request aid from neighboring countries since it lacked the resources to fight a series of forest fires.[3]

Beirut is no stranger to sociopolitical turmoil. Over almost half a century the Lebanese capital has witnessed a 15-year civil war, invasions and occupations by foreign armies and upheavals ranging from localized sectarian conflicts between the city's numerous ethnic groups, assassinations of political figures, and bombings of public buildings including embassies. Notable events include major demonstrations, especially following the 2005 murder of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which led to the withdrawal of the Syrian army that had been in the country for almost three decades. A few years later, the country's inability to deal with the growing environmental disaster associated with large accumulations of garbage led to fresh uprisings.[4] Further dissatisfaction has often been expressed due to the post-war downtown redevelopment process led by the private corporation Solidere, which in the spirit of neoliberalism, has transformed the area into a zone of wealth that is out of reach to most of Beirut's citizens.[5] [6] [7]

The aforementioned events reflect the growing despair of most of Beirut's citizens concerning the way things have unfolded in their city and Lebanon as a whole. Forces ranging from widespread inefficiency and outright corruption on the part of politicians which, in turn, have led to widespread social problems

(e.g., high unemployment, rising living costs and suppressed wages) but also weak urban planning legislation and a disastrous track record with regards to the natural environment have caused major problems such as the elimination of public transportation, drastic loss of public open space, chronic accumulations of trash and oppressive air pollution. In turn, these events triggered a growing desire on the part of numerous people regardless of their sect or socioeconomic status to demand their collective right to their city. In other words, these citizens wish to have a say in determining their future as opposed to experiencing the consequences of the decisions of increasingly unpopular governments.[8] [9] [10] [11]

Here, we refer to the events that began on the 17th of October 2019 as our point of departure. For approximately one week we witnessed first-hand a series of practices, mirroring the citizens' efforts to stake a claim in managing their city's future. In turn, these include: (a) the take-over of public spaces, including squares and roads; (b) temporary occupation of properties that had been sealed off by the authorities for decades, and; (c) the "appropriation" of walls by street artists and others who sought to lay their claim to their city through various expressions of street art. While we briefly describe a and b, we focus mostly on the third practice. We note that despite considerable debate surrounding the meaning of street art, we have adopted the description of Taş and Taş of "'street art' as an umbrella term, encompassing any type of art (graffiti, spray paintings, installations, ready-mades and performances) whose use of the street contributes essentially to its meaning." [12] For our purposes, we focus almost exclusively on graffiti, which Hanauer defines as "a pictorial and written inscription on a publicly accessible surface." [13] [14]

While Hanauer argued that graffiti is "a specific communicative act used by a variety of subcultures to provide personal voice in a public domain" [15], in the Lebanese case, we contend that 'doing graffiti' or, indeed, any type of street art, is not confined to subcultures. Rather, these practices have become a cultural conduit for a broader sociopolitical response to the persistent 'non-governability' of the Lebanese state. Non-governability concerns the inability "to make consistent and stable public policy" [16] stemming, *inter alia,* from ignoring public input in decision-making processes. The attempt to make (un)stable public policy preceding the unrest in October 2019 was yet another manifestation of non-governmentality, public sector dysfunction and paralysis, extreme clientelism, corruption, and impingement on citizens' rights. The act of doing graffiti, simultaneously subversive and artistic, reflected an attempt to reclaim public space as much as the message of the graffiti was geared towards the same goal.[17] Thus, our purpose is to analyze the street art in Beirut as a means toward claiming the right of citizens to their city; a spatial act with political objectives. The study fills a lacuna since it constitutes a rare investigation drawing from primary research of street art pieces rather than an analysis of secondary data.

Searching for the 'Right to the City'

In *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey reminds us that our times are dominated by a neoliberal market logic "where the rights of private property and profit trump all other notions of rights one can think of". [18] For decades, we have witnessed in numerous cities worldwide the actions of policymakers, planners, architects, and builders, which have transformed downtowns, waterfronts and abandoned manufacturing or warehouse districts into standardized spaces, which are subjected to a high degree of regulation.[19] [20] [21] These areas regularly lend themselves to the development of luxury-oriented housing, hotels and entertainment facilities while also commonly staging spectacle-oriented events. They are spaces where security guards and surveillance equipment ensure that those who do not belong – the poor, the homeless, certain ethnic groups - are unwelcome. [22] [23]

The commodification of these urban spaces and their transformation into exclusive zones catering to a minority of a city's population lead one to ask to whom the city really belongs. As Pugalis and Giddings state "this in turn raises crucial questions about the 'right to the city', when particular users, uses and activities are privileged over others." [24] This 'right to the city' is not only a right of access to what the city has to offer in a physical sense. As Harvey argues, it is more about citizens collectively having the freedom and opportunity to transform their living environment according to their wishes.[25] Harvey states that, occasionally, various groups (e.g., those demanding the rights of women, gays, minorities, workers, and those campaigning for the environment) demonstrate, and these uprisings can have implications with a global reach. The 'Arab Spring', when people in various North African and Middle Eastern countries rose in protest constitutes a good example of such movements.[26] [27] [28] The recent 'Black Lives Matter' campaign reflects collective action, which has rapidly spread to numerous cities throughout the United States and further afield.[29]

Questions that commonly arise when talking about the 'right to the city' are, according to Marcuse, "whose right, what right and to what city?"[30] Responding to the first question, he argues that it is those who feel marginalized or excluded. These are groups that are often economically oppressed and/or persons who believe they have little or no say in decisions that directly affect their quality of life. In terms of the "what right", Marcuse contends that we are not talking about a single legal right like the right to use a particular public space or a right to receive certain services but rather a "collectivity of rights", which the community demands not only from a legal but also a moral standpoint.[31] Finally, in response to "what city", Marcuse refers to Lefebvre who was not so much talking about the city in its present form but more so about a future state in which the "right to urban life" emerges as the key objective.[32]

During the peak of the global economic crisis, Brenner et al. argued that cities, especially during the throes of widespread economic restructuring, are far more than growth engines leading to profit for a minority of individuals and businesses. Instead, they should be treated as places that address their citizens' rights to have a greater say over the social and environmental conditions they experience in everyday life. In other words, these cities should be primarily "for people, not for profit".[33]

Meanwhile, Mitchell argues that one way to address the 'right to the city' is by gaining right of access and appropriating public space in a physical sense. Drawing from Lefebvre, he conceptualizes urban public space in two different ways. On the one hand, spaces that have been configured to be used for a particular purpose can be seen as *representations of space*.[34] Fitting this category are the aforementioned highly-regulated spaces that materialize in the form of well-lit and policed public plazas, pedestrian shopping streets and festival marketplaces.[35] On the other hand, the public spaces that have been overran by one or more groups such as political organizations or the homeless can be seen as *spaces of representation*. Mitchell then states that "public space is a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that *allows it to be seen* [emphasis added]. In public space, political organizations can represent themselves to a larger population. By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public".[36]

The uprisings in several places worldwide in recent times, including the anti-globalization rallies in Seattle and Genoa, the angry marches in Athens concerning the state of the Greek economy, the Occupy Wall Street movement, as well as the revolutionary movements throughout the Near and Middle East represent the struggles of large groups of people to embrace their 'right to the city'.[37] This claim commonly reflected through the physical occupation of public spaces such as streets, squares and parks. Within these spaces, demonstrators engage in various practices (e.g., chanting, singing, setting up tents). This urban resistance is often also mirrored through various forms of street art, including graffiti. Taş and Taş describe these actions "as a participatory political practice", suggesting that the street artists "transform urban public space, as a means of both challenging established power relations and transforming prevailing notions of politics, art, and publicness".[38]

Previously, various urbanists discussed graffiti's role in neighborhood transformation. For instance, Zukin and Braslow argue that the art produced on walls allows certain communities (e.g., immigrants from a particular country) to assert their presence as creative in-migrants (in a global city like New York).[39] Nevertheless, despite these studies, research that specifically examines the role of graffiti in the context of the 'right to the city' is uncommon. Other than the case of Istanbul by Taş and Taş, few others have examined the role of street art as an expression of claims on public space.[40] [41] [42] [43]

Zieleniec interprets graffiti's role in the context of the 'right to the city', arguing that drawing on walls leads to "reclaiming and remaking the city as a more humane and just, social space". He believes that despite the increasing popularity of street art in localities worldwide, we lack understanding of how creating this art relates to producing urban space. To conceptualize this interplay, Zieleniec contends that Lefebvre's outlook on the 'right to the city' is the ideal lens through which to "see and read graffiti as an active and creative engagement in and with urban space that emphasizes the possibility of refashioning, reclaiming the city and the urban for people and not just for profit."[44] [45] Thus, street art becomes a means through which those who feel marginalized in contemporary urban spaces assert their own individual identity by creatively transforming the walls into art. "Graffiti provides alternative ways to seeing the city,

not just for those who write or paint the walls but also those who read and see it. Graffiti is a means to communicate a range of ideas, perspectives and opinions and to ensure a more egalitarian use of the city and its streets . . . Graffiti then, is an embodied creative colonization of public space."[46]

While certain scholars highlight the 'resistance' element in street art, such approaches often underplay the messages of other artistic expressions within the same urban context.[47] Sprengel questions the "fetishization of 'resistance' in English language scholarship" relating to street art.[48] Although she focuses on performative street art (music and plays in public spaces) in Cairo and Alexandria following the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, her premise is that not all artists perceive their work as explicitly 'political'. Rather, Sprengel believes that certain artists convey their messages in a "quiet" way. "Instead of endeavoring to transform the state, these artists worked in the gaps of state power to repair the social cleavages that state power exacerbates".[49]

We now proceed to investigate how Beirut's citizens have been expressing their demand for their right to determine the future of their city, especially through practices of street art. While we focus mostly on the events surrounding the uprising of October 2019, we recognize that these demands for the 'right to the city' have existed for several years.

Method, Data and Framework for Analysis

Our study was part of a larger interdisciplinary project relating to street art. Our 4-person research group represented different academic disciplines: fine arts, architecture, human geography, and political science. Over six days in October 2019 we took 1,092 pictures of graffiti around Beirut. After sorting out duplicates, illegible or unclear images and those unrelated to the narrative under investigation, we settled on 147.[50] This dataset includes images created during the riots, but also those created before the unrest. We conducted thematic visual narrative analysis on graffiti images, the message of which was immediately obvious.[51] Consequently, interpretation was an integral part of the analysis, enriched by the interdisciplinarity of the researchers. We worked on the interface of the visual and the textual since the text-based street art itself concomitantly constituted written word and an image, while the image-based street art told a story. In other words, we told "a story *about* images that themselves told a story".[52]

Thematic narrative analysis focuses on what is told, the content of speech, rather than the telling, or the speaker.[53] Thematic visual narrative analysis draws on the same principles though when it comes to "sites of inquiry"[54], the researchers may interrogate the production of the image that is, who produced it, where and when and with what medium. Alternatively, the researchers may examine the image itself—the content—or concern themselves with audiencing. This entails focusing on possible readings and the dialectic relationship of the onlooker. In this project, we pay attention to each image's content. In contrast to other

studies, we pay less attention to the stories and identities of the people who produced the images, though we leaned on a group interview with Lebanese artists in order to situate the analysis of the images. This was a group interview of five people (men and women) involved in street art (as well as other kinds of artistic expression), ranging in age and religious affiliation. Our discussions lasted a period of approximately four hours. One of us documented what was discussed by taking extensive notes. For ethical purposes, we preserved our respondents' anonymity. The group interview was unstructured; after briefing the artists on the aim and objectives of our research project, they told us their stories and the story of their art.

The focus of our analysis is the cultural responses to the non-governability of the Lebanese state by citizens asserting their 'right to the city'. We worked inductively with the material, aiming to uncover how the main themes expressed in the images relate to these demands. Thus, we avoided *a priori* decisions about what kind of graffiti to include in our data collection, nor did we impose our judgements about the quality of the art or the message at the time of data collection. We had various discussions regarding the material, during collection and afterwards, resulting in the development of the narrative. These conversations included an expression of our feelings and relationship to research in general, in addition to the material in particular.[55] Iterative communication not only brought our disciplinary specificities to the surface, but also made the negotiated coding process transparent and the analysis more creative.[56] The collaborative process enriched the analysis through the dialectic process of the inductive analysis.[57] We must note that none of us speaks Arabic. An Arab-speaker with knowledge of the Lebanese context translated the material during a three-hour recorded session. Finally, we used the software Atlas.ti to organize and systematically analyze the images.[58] This enabled us to identify key emerging themes, which we elaborate upon in the following section. We do so, through a detailed analysis of one or more representative images per theme.

Beirut and the 'Right to the City'

Before embarking on our analysis, we briefly explain the background leading up to the events we witnessed in October 2019. To begin with, the protests were very much fueled by the non-governability of the Lebanese state, the seeds to which were sown in the aftermath of the 15-year long civil war that ended in 1990 and which followed the Taif agreement of 1989. While it is extremely simplistic to blame the sectarian structure of Lebanon's society for the war,[59] an unanticipated outcome of the agreement was that it intensified society's 'sectarianization'. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Taif agreement, the non-governable nature of the country, resulted in sectarian warlords taking over the provision of services. This intensely clientelist system led to a political economy that during times of crisis destabilized the political system in a manner which favored the elites and exacerbated intra-sectarian competition.[60]

The widespread demonstrations that began on 17th October 2019 in Beirut saw citizens regardless of sect (e.g., Sunni or Shia Muslims, the Druze, Armenians, Greek Orthodox and Maronites) or of socio-economic status spill out into the streets with one prevailing common cause in mind: to bring down the government they regarded as extremely corrupt and ineffective. The crowd's specific aim in the midst of the turmoil was to abolish the sectarian system of governance. This is what we experienced first-hand during out visit to the city. Although, initially, our purpose for being in the Lebanese capital was to examine how street art plays out in contested urban spaces, the events that unfolded in front of us were vital in shaping the nature of our study.

We quickly realized that we were witnessing a widespread, and for the most part peaceful, movement whereby people of varying ages and backgrounds were making a case for their 'right to *their* city'. To paraphrase Robert Park,[61] people were expressing en masse their demand to live in a transformed world, reflecting their desire for, among others, the elimination of corruption, the right to a living wage and affordable housing, and also the ability to breathe clean air in an environment where green spaces have been vanishing[62]. As mentioned in the introduction, three predominant actions reflect how Beirut's citizens put forth their demands: the takeover of public open spaces, the temporary occupation of buildings that had been boarded up for years, and through street art.

Taking over public open space

The most visible citywide expression of a 'revolution' in October 2019 was people taking to the streets where they marched or rode in convoys of vehicles. Occasionally, especially during the first two days, they barricaded some of the city's main arteries, including the one leading to the international airport. A common theme in all these instances was the flying of the Lebanese flag, in an expression that this uprising was one where every citizen was rallying behind the flag and not along sectarian affiliations. Importantly, the epicenter of the demonstrations was Martyrs' Square and several blocks surrounding this. This area is close to the rejuvenated downtown and many government offices. In Martyrs' Square itself, demonstrators set up tents as well as food and drink stations and held speeches, rallies and concerts. The takeover of the square was well organized, even to the point where a recycling station had been set up.

Temporary occupation of 'boarded-up' buildings

Another illustrative expression of people's 'right to the city' was reflected through the occupation of two landmark buildings, both of which had been shut off to the public for decades. In turn, these were the Grand Theatre and a building that, because of its unique shape, has been dubbed The Egg (an unfinished cinema from the 1960s). The theater was a major landmark in Beirut, was built in the late 1920s and was the focus of Beirut's cultural scene until the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. Since the 1990s, it has been fenced off on the premise that it was not structurally sound due to damage it had received during the hostilities. During the 2019 uprising demonstrators managed to break through the barricades and, for a few days, they and other curious individuals invaded the space. Young persons had never been inside this building while older individuals spoke of their fond memories of a different (peaceful) time before the outbreak of the civil war. "You could buy refreshments here before" an older man told us, unprompted, while we were in the theater documenting the writing on the walls. He said he used to go there with his friends when they were young and had not been in the building in decades. He came out that day to claim the space in his memory and the recollection of an earlier time, when the theater was a space of entertainment rather than a contested space of failed revitalization efforts and repeated governmental failures. Within this space the temporary occupiers painted the walls, and from the higher floors they could look down on the crowds in the streets[63]. Meanwhile, the occupation of the Egg led to this building being used as a space for lectures as well as many street art activities. The Egg was also transformed into a 'safe space' where women as well as the LGBTQ community were able to participate in various discussions.

Street art

The act of using public space and specifically walls to generate a statement and convey a narrative is, in itself, a way to claim the 'right to the city'. During our time in Beirut, it was obvious that there was a flurry of revolutionary graffiti being created, especially within the main area where the demonstrations were unfolding. These pieces were the latest iteration of a street art corpus that has come to dominate large swathes of the Lebanese capital in recent years and, as we have mentioned, many of these – despite not being as clearly anti-government as the ones produced during the uprisings – were also included in our analysis, since they also convey messages, ones which assert a 'right to the city'. Our thematic visual narrative analysis revealed several threads emerging in the street art. As one of our respondents noted. "Fiction is a form of a resistance and a luxury in Lebanon" (R2), and so are the stories that the walls say to the passers-by.

Coexistence: Feel-good beautification

Large, mural-like pieces on the side of buildings require, if not explicit permission by the authorities, consultation with the local community (R4). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that they tend to not be overtly subversive or offensive and, often, they are painted by known artists. Permission notwithstanding, the act of drawing the mural remains a means for citizens to assert their 'right to their city'. Several large murals in multi-story buildings convey a message of coexistence through feel-good beautification. An example of these is "The Rhino and the Oxpecker" by Miami-based artist Ernesto Maranje in collaboration with local children, [64] depicted in Figure 1.

This piece is colorful, in stark contrast to the all-too quotidian, for Beirut, dirty mustard-beige of the apartment building. It depicts a large rhinoceros and, sitting upon this big animal, a small bird, an oxpecker. The art speaks for the possibilities of symbiosis in the midst of blue, pink, orange and yellow flowers. The bird grooms the rhinoceros, the rhinoceros provides nourishment to the bird: a positive educational tale of coexistence. A closer look at the image may convey that this symbiosis is 'other-wordly', a concept not indigenous to Lebanon. After all, neither the rhinoceros nor the oxpecker is indigenous to Lebanon. What is more, the horn of the rhinoceros is quite pronounced and the most colorful part of the mural. The colors, blue, red, orange, yellow, white, and black are stark, constituting a colorful constellation, a feel-good rhinoceros' horn. However, the polychromatic focus on the horn transforms the entire animal into a hybrid overweight unicorn, a creature that is mythical. Therefore, coexistence does not exist.

Finding Common Ground: The Use of Cultural Icons

Conversely, Ashekhman[65] often weave cultural icons in their art. In the piece depicted in Figure 2, Kermit is in the middle of two sentence fragments. The Arabic reads: "to be free or not to be", meaning that if one cannot have freedom, one might as well be dead. It does not specifically mention what it is that one wishes to be free of, although one could infer that the artists are alluding to the dysfunctional government system. (Figure 2)

The light-heartedness of the smiling Kermit from the Muppet show belies the seriousness of the message, which alludes to the famous opening phrase of Hamlet, who is contemplating suicide. In doing so, Hamlet also recognizes that there are no good alternatives to life, problematic though it may be. The writing also alludes to "give me freedom or give me death" by Patrick Henry, ushering the American revolution. The laughing, innocent-looking Kermit, bright and green, a famous Muppet, is also, of course, a puppet, controlled, manipulated by the hand of a man in a suit. Only the man's arm is visible. The mural is fraught with tensions along binaries: Arabic writing/western cultural symbols and allusions; bright colors/

dark message; Muppet/puppet, and laughter/manipulation. The wall on which it was painted becomes the public space that Tsavdaroglou who builds on Lefebvre sees as, "the constant field of conflicting social relationships, desire [for something other than the status quo] and revolutions".[66]

Advocacy: Fragmented Mobilities Interrupted

The chronic retreat of the state has resulted in a practically non-existent public transportation system, oppressive pollution, and an insufficient waste management system. (Figures 3a and 3b)

For several years, environmental groups in the Lebanese capital have demanded, among others, the need to expand green space, improve waste-management systems, and to clean the air.[67] Further, they have claimed their right to urban space in ways that would sustainably enhance mobility. After all, this large metropolitan region has no public transit system to speak of, and infrastructure catering to cyclists and pedestrians is seriously lacking. This has led to efforts such as the one initiated by a collective of artist-cyclists known as the 'Chain Effect' who engage in a series of street art projects throughout the city that promote cycling.[68] [69] In their case, the art is simple. Their image of the bike in Figure 3b is stenciled, minimal, designed to deliver the message, nothing more, nothing less. The multiplicity of the bikes speaks to the critical mass needed to make a difference— one is not enough. An additional statement, which claims the right to public space is seen in Figure 4, amid a constellation of anti-American and anti-Western slogans.

Rather than being an art piece of mere text, this stencil is used as a communication tool, pointing the reader to the social media pages of the environmental group responsible for its creation. It also makes a statement, which advocates maintaining public accessibility to the area immediately above the Raouche seaside rocks, which has been fenced off. Advocacy is the common thread in these three aforementioned images, whereby the respective environmental groups are active, through their street art, in claiming their right to urban mobility and for accessibility to open (nature-based) spaces. (Figure 5)

Further evidence of people's demand to access public spaces was expressed during the riots. Specifically, the Grand Theater became a flash point of the indignation of the public against the misappropriation of public space. In the image depicted in Figure 5, the call for the recovery of public space is explicit as seen in the banner at the top of the building: "calls for the recovery of public property". Notably, the color scheme on the banner is that of the Lebanese flag, alluding to the entire country's desire to move beyond sectarian power differentials and the corruption associated with that system. It is also worth mentioning that street artists have drawn white cutouts clinging on the outside walls of the theater. These shapes resemble white doves, the symbol of peace. A closer look reveals that the stenciled cutouts are human, harlequin-like figures with no visible hands in a free-fall—individually and in clusters. The figures are both whimsical and ominous, perhaps conveying the idea of Lebanon in free-fall.

Inclusion: A Lebanon for All

The Egg, another Beirut landmark that has not been accessible to the public for decades, also became the site of a distinctly inclusive narrative during the riots. Specifically, the building's interior was covered with various messages.

The writing in black in Figure 6a, located towards the top of the wall, was the slogan written (and stenciled) in numerous walls: "revolution". The first word was commonly rendered with an upward arrow, implying the need to rise up for a revolution. In the rendition in Figure 6a, a stick figure atop the text is doing just that. While feminist slogans and calls for the inclusion of LGTBQ populations in claiming their right to their city are uncommon in Lebanon, within the Egg but also along a barricade outside the Grand Theater, we observed several such messages. The image in Figure 6b includes slogans such as "women for revolution", and "Leila project for the homeland" alluding to Mashrou' Leila, an indie music group considered controversial partly due to its openly gay lead.[70] Slogans in both images convey how jaded people have become with their government: "the blind leading the blind" and "damn the sectarian system" (in Arabic, image to the right in Figure 6b). In addition to the rainbow flag, the images display slogans (in English) "queers are here" and "poor, black, gay trans", "Lebanon for women and gays", "the woman voice revolution", "female revolution" and "women for revolution". The narrative of the last group of writings is one of staking a claim rather than a call for action. There are no verbs in these slogans, even in the imperative (such as fight, or rise up, for example). This renders them static. These are messages conveying the idea that these groups are here too. They are claiming their right to their city; they are claiming their right to be seen, to be heard and, in a nutshell, to exist.

Finally, the narrative of anger was palpable. Several street art pieces produced at the time of the riots was raw and angry, calling for dissolving the governmental structures and devising an alternative to sectarianism—a revolution. In contrast to the previous theme, which was inclusive in the sense that it privileged the unseen 'other' in the demanded new order, the image depicted in Figure 7 suggests a violent disruption of the status quo. The piece is large, itself painted on the shattered glass of an expensive commercial space, colorful and playful. It strikes a similar tone (though not as cerebral) as Figure 2, although the playfulness of the image belies its seriousness. Furthermore, it depicts a bottle of Almaza beer turned into a Molotov bomb. Although Lebanon is not known for its production of beer, Almaza is a traditional lager that has been produced for decades. The established and the traditional become the vessel for the fuel that is about to ignite. Here, the aim of the artist(s) is to transmit the wish that, in case of an emergency, the status quo must shatter. In this instance, the emergency had arrived.

Concluding Remarks

Beirut's walls where street art flourished, especially during the 2019 unrest, were transformed into 'spaces of representation'[71], the vehicle through which individuals and groups asserted their imperative to be seen and heard. Both the act of 'doing' the street art and the various messages it conveyed related to the public's pronounced discontent with the chronic non-governmentality of the Lebanese state. The analysis of 147 images, revealed five distinct themes. These were, in turn: co-existence through feel-good beautification; the use of icons from pop-culture to reflect the identification of common ground demands; the advocacy for enhanced access to better and more sustainable mobility, cleaner air and access to open space; slogans and images referring to the inclusion and rights of often marginalized groups in Lebanese society including women and the LGBTQ population; and finally, outright revolutionary calls to overthrow the government and replace it with a non-corrupt political system that reflects the wishes of the population.

The assertion of the right of the citizens to their city, expressed along these themes, was both overt — 'loud'— as seen in the slogans produced during the unrest and more subtle — 'quiet'— ambiguous and conflicting[72] as expressed in various art pieces, including the large-scale murals, which preceded the uprising. Essentially, however, as articulated by one of our respondents (R4), painting the walls, regardless of what the intended message is meant to be, constitutes an act of defiance. The artists and slogan writers engage in a very public way and, by doing so, they assert their right to exist in a city governed by politicians who for years have failed to represent them. "The whole place is ours" our respondent went on to say. Referring to some of his own past graffiti pieces, he asserted that writing his opinion on the wall was an act of self-preservation, the manifestation of a conscious choice to not be the victim of a power-sharing political system that strips the powers from its citizens. Within a contested urban space such as Beirut, the act of 'taking over' the walls of the city, even temporarily, served as a powerful reminder that the street artists regard the city as belonging to everyone regardless of religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic standing, or political leanings. Citizens contested established pathologies, structures that were aimed at perpetuating inequality and exclusion, and projected a diverse array of identities in the public gaze. In conclusion, the street art in this city but also in many other localities worldwide, provides the agency through which those whose voices have long been ignored can assert their right to the urban mosaic within which they live.

Images

Figure 1. The Rhino and the Oxpecker. Source of photograph: the authors.

Figure 2. Kermit. Source of photograph: the authors

Figure 3a. Bikes. Source of photograph: the authors

Figure 3b. Bikes. Source of photograph: the authors

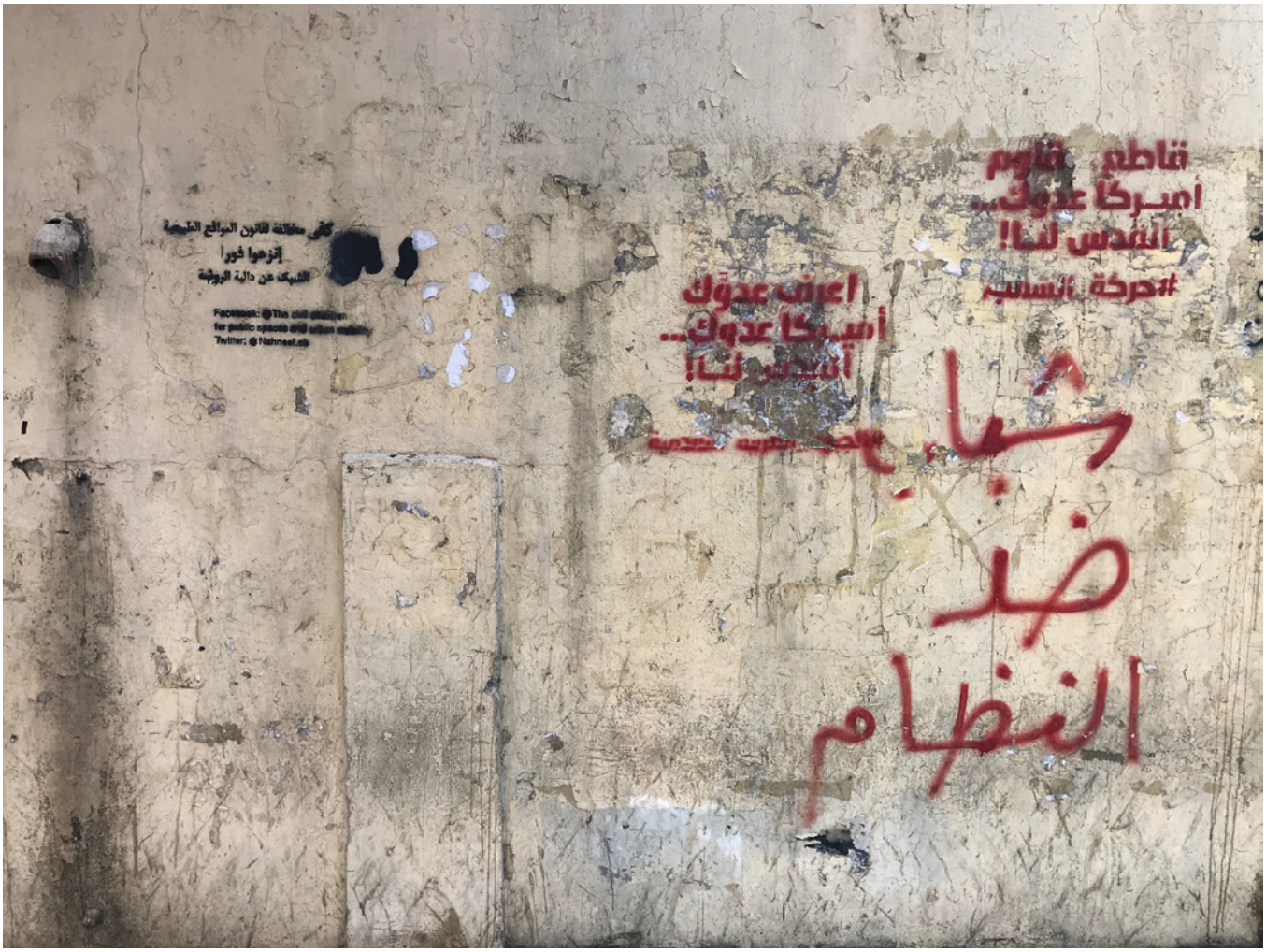

Figure 4. Stencil and slogans. Source of photograph: the authors

Figure 5. Grand Theater. Source of photograph: the authors

Figure 6a. The Egg. Source of photograph: the authors

Figure 6b. The Egg. Source of photograph: the authors

Figure 7. In case of revolution, break glass. Source of photograph: the authors

Notes

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2 On October 17, protests erupted throughout Lebanon, including Beirut, because of several reasons, which Lebanese people view as adding to the long-term hardships they have suffered for many years. Their main demand was the removal of a prime minister and government, which they view as corrupt. Our arrival a day later coincided with these events and very much shaped the manner in which we conducted our research.

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