“Straight Political”:

The Political Instrumentalization of Graffiti and Its Criminalization in Detroit

Natalee Goto

Prof. Patchen Markell

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On this 60th anniversary of the publication of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, mass society is no easier to bear now than it was in 1958. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes the disappearance of the Private/Public Realm, a world where a person can leave the boundaries of their community and safe space for “dark exploration,” to emerge onto a stage in the midst of plurality and announce their singularity (Canovan 64, 57). This is a crisis for art as well, because art, like political action, needs public space where it can be seen. The public and political realm readily offers its space to art, but without this realm the only space left for art to be seen is social - namely, the marketplace (“Crisis” 218, Canovan 209). For particular forms of art, this is problematic, and an artist may find themselves at odds with a society where, “the more people there are, the more likely they are to behave and the less likely to tolerate non-behavior,” where “deeds will have less and less chance to stem the tide of behavior, and events will more and more lose their significance…” (Canovan 43).

A form of art developed that positioned itself in direct opposition to this socializing trend. However, rather than creating Arendt’s durable forms, it consists of fleeting signatures, figures and texts. Especially for those without a political or public voice, this art, graffiti, creates a public canvas where none existed before. And in its original illegal form, it is a political act of defiance made bolder by the development of signatures in the work. Although graffiti is in the process of being commercialized and “appropriated as symbols of status,” its makers are usually people of no status - or even of criminal status (Crisis 207). As gallerists and collectors try to force graffiti into the ill-fitting category of fine art, the artists themselves are on trial for “malicious destruction of property.” Gang graffiti and so-called “toy tags” may threaten physical violence, but many tags are a mere cosmetic violation of private or publicly owned property. Just as *The Human Condition* is not “an exhaustive analysis of the activities of the vita activa,” I do
not intend an exhaustive analysis of graffiti and street art. Rather, I wish to argue the political significance of one case where two artists pushed the boundary of art as work, creating their own public in which they executed a piece that resembles more art as speech and action than Arendt’s idea of art as a durable work (Canovan 78).

Several years ago, a simple statement appeared on an abandoned water tower at 13512 Dequindre in the city of Detroit. Facing outbound traffic at the intersection of I-75 and the Davison, two major expressways connecting Detroit to the Metro area, the text read, “FREE THE WATER”. Many old industrial buildings in Detroit languish in disuse, and colorful spray-painted signatures cover much of their lateral surfaces. The text, simple and unadorned, was striking not just because of its visibility on the crowded canvass of Detroit, but also because of its strident political message. In the year before its appearance, the city of Detroit saw an exponential spike in water service shutoffs to residences with water bills overdue by 60 days or more (Monthly). This crisis continues in a city where, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 40% of the residents live in poverty, and where in 2015 Nestle Waters of North America pumped 1.1 million gallons of water per day from Michigan springs for the price of a $200 annual water use reporting fee (Use, Withdrawal).

The city of Detroit, under the auspices of the Mayor’s Graffiti Task Force, launched an investigation and eventual prosecution of the artists Antonio Rafael Cosme and William Dale Lucka that lasted years. During this time, a private gallery with foundation support continued their annual mural festival in Detroit’s food- and meat-packing neighborhood, where international street artists were invited to paint the walls of warehouses and processing plants; a commercial for Michigan tourism featured a muralist painting the wall of a parking garage in Detroit’s West Village; an internationally recognized street artist completed a commissioned 15-
story mural on the side of the downtown Compuware building. It is disturbing that a city administration, in the shadow of bankruptcy and so insolvent that it was committing what a United Nations Special Rapporteur called a “violation of the basic human right to water”, would spend so exorbitantly to apprehend, detain and prosecute two artists for broadcasting a political message (Detroit).

A defense of this art form and this specific act may be unnecessary for many, and much of my analysis like common sense to those whose every day exists in this fringe world. However, considering the outcome of this case, that the Graffiti Task Force still exists and continues to selectively pursue artists and not perpetrators of violence, it is both necessary and urgent – if not even too late. There are no better agents for this defense and continued resistance than the artists themselves, and anyone who follows Antonio Cosme’s work knows that he is an eloquent and conscientious voice for change, who hardly needs anyone to speak on his behalf. Since I began this project, Antonio’s hip-hop collective Raiz Up was recognized by the National Lawyer’s Guild as their Unsung Hero of 2017 and even more recently he presented on historical and contemporary “land grabbing” in Detroit for the series Detroiters Speak, a production of Detroit Equity Action Lab co-sponsored by Wayne State University and University of Michigan. Nevertheless, as Arendt reminds us, action reveals the who of agency, and it is this who which, though remaining hidden from the person [them]self, appears clearly and unmistakably to others (Human 179). Actions and speech being fleeting, they need to be reified and recorded to “gain in durability” and assume their place in the web of human history (Human 95). I am privileged both to have been caught up in the web of Antonio and Lucka’s human relationships and to have their permission to carry on the work of telling their story, which other historians, journalists, and artists have already begun.
My analysis of this event is based on an interview I conducted with one of the artists, Antonio Cosme, at his home in Southwest Detroit. I confirmed the timeline with court documents obtained from the law firm which defended Cosme and Lucka, the court’s online Record of Actions, and a photographic record of the artists’ work. Legally, the record of events that took place is not in dispute. Rather, the defense disputed the severity of the crimes, which were eight felony counts of malicious destruction of property, including a “key facility,” and nearly $50,000 in damages for graffiti committed by the defendants citywide ($44,806.30 before damage to the water tower) (Appendix C). Although Antonio and Lucka were victims of selective prosecution, my argument is not legal. Rather, I contend that this event conforms to Arendt’s idea of the significance of singular and rare deeds, which do not demonstrate a pattern of behavior but an aberration and departure from predictable norms.

Within the conceptual framework of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, I explore the idea that Antonio and Lucka were involved in a project to create a public space of expression, which in this case they used as a platform for political speech; that their true social transgression involved taking their work out of the market, Arendt’s social world of exchange that has displaced the public realm. Building on the work of the larger graffiti community, they commandeered a stage for their work, forcibly creating a moment of public revelation that further moved their community to action and complicated not only the bureaucratic approach of the city but also Arendt’s categorical distinctions between labor, work and action. Every activity pointing to its place in the world, *FREE THE WATER* and other graffiti texts point to a place where work, labor and action intersect (Canovan 73). This “rare deed” blends the memorable impression of poetry with the work of painting (not to mention the acrobatics involved in painting a water tower in the middle of the night), but is also an expressly political statement that
reveals the singularity and humanity of its actors (Canovan 42). These are not unique complications of one act, but rather complications that belong to the art of activism more generally, as it eschews the confines of the market and socialization and searches for a more categorically “public” place in the world.

I. The Human Condition and Hannah Arendt’s Trinity Formula: Labor, Work and Action

Three activities, labor, work and action, performed in one of three locations, the private, public, or social, comprise Arendt’s vita activa and condition human life here on earth. Unlike their locations in the modern world, which “constantly flow into each other like waves,” Arendt’s categories of labor, work and action are distinct (Human 186). Cosme and Lucka test Arendt’s firm boundaries between labor, work and action. Nonetheless, Arendt’s insight into the historical development of the vita activa, if not her love of categories or identification with the classical world, resonate today because work and deed are struggling to be recognized in a world that is increasingly “socialized” and “behaving.”

Labor, the activity which dominates modern, contemporary, and near-future life, has historically created for immediate human consumption the products needed for the commission of daily life. The process itself is devouring and metabolic in its never-ending cycle of consumption and reproduction. Despite the apparently futile character of labor, which expends energy in preparing material for its immediate destruction and the historical “contempt for labor in the classical tradition,” its importance cannot be overstated (Human 81). As Marx recognizes, the potential for liberation from scarcity and privation is in the awesome productive power of labor (Canovan 88). Yet, if labor is truly the fertile reproduction of one’s own life that is nature’s command, then it is a cruelty and an injustice to remove a person from the cycle that is the only lasting happiness humans will know (Human 108).
While labor supplies the immediate, consumptive human needs, work creates the tools for labor and the durable world in which people live. The process of work is reification, the shaping of material based on an image, creating a “thought thing” (Human 169). Distinguished sharply from both labor and action, work has a definite and predictable end, unlike labor, which cycles in perpetuity, and action, whose consequences can never be wholly anticipated or controlled. Yet, today’s society of the consumer has eroded the distinction between durable and consumable goods to the point that if there are any workers or craftspeople left, they are artists. Even before it was one of the few products of work left in the world, art was distinct from other objects because it is removed from use and therefore the most durable structure of the “human artifice” (Human 167). *Homo faber*, the craftsman and artist, achieves their greatest purpose as “artist, poet, historiographer,” the roles of which are to preserve action and speech (Human 173). Nevertheless, as a reification of these vital expressions, art has a sense of lifelessness compared to even the reifying thought or memory that was its spark. For this reason, art forms which are embodied, such as performance and theater, most resist the “deadness” of art (Human 169).

Although by Arendt’s definition work is performed in private, like action its objects have a space of appearance. While this space is usually the marketplace, the public realm of action often lends its space of appearance to art (“Crisis” 218). The exchange market, however, which is not a place for humans but for the objects they create, “excludes men *qua* men and demands...that men show themselves only in the privacy of their families or the intimacy of their friends” (Canovan 210). Unlike the direct exchange of art that historically took place on the market, more recently art has begun to appear as one of the “immaterial qualities” of commodities, creating “style, novelty, brand prestige, scarcity, or ‘exclusiveness’” (Gorz 9). Similarly, entrance to the public realm of action grows more elusive as publics are replaced by
societies of laborers, united in the task of collective economic housekeeping and willing to sacrifice the unpredictability of action for economic stability. According to Arendt, the last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning,” so that “it is quite conceivable that the modern age - which began in an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity - may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known” (Canovan 322). Tasked with enforcing this functioning, bureaucracy is the tyranny of society and deals with misbehavior using the prepolitical means of force and violence (Canovan 27).

Arendt takes as her reference point classical civilization in Greece, where action was the activity *par excellence*. For a brief and fleeting moment, as Pericles immortalized in his funeral oration, great deeds and public distinction were the monuments around which the united polity would be organized. The Athenian democracy was to serve as both the platform for the performance of action and the repository that would store the memory of greatness for eternity. For both Arendt and the Athenians, excellence is the measure of action. Distinction itself, that is, the disclosure of the singularity of every human individual, is action’s distinguishing feature. As opposed to *what kind of labor you perform* or *what kind of maker you are*, the answer to the question of human distinctness is Heidegger’s *who you are*.

II. Graffiti in Detroit and the Labor of Creating a Public Discourse

Although this is not an exhaustive analysis of graffiti or the late-capitalist exploitation of Detroit, a familiarity with the form as it has been expressed in Detroit will help clarify how Antonio and Lucka instrumentalize it for their own purposes, in the process violating Arendt’s categories as well as the ubiquity of the marketplace. According to Antonio’s account, Detroit became a destination for graffiti, locally and internationally, in the years preceding 2014. Stories
abound of police squad cars passing artists at work in the middle of the night and admonishing them to be careful, because dangerous folks are out (Freitag 8). By Cosme’s own account, the scene thrived and was largely unchallenged especially during Detroit’s bankruptcy, when “police resources were really pulled from the communities and centralized in certain areas, especially downtown” (Cosme 13). The courts had little reason to pressure graffiti artists until enforcement became part of Mayor Mike Duggan’s broken-window policing strategy in 2014 (Motor). As a print like Detroit Graffiti, a visual monograph of graffiti in the city from 2010 to 2014, demonstrates, artists were prolific and truly accomplished themselves during this narrow window of opportunity. While a few of the artists were homegrown, many traveled from all over the world to make stunning “burners” in Detroit. There are probably few places in the world that offered the visibility and scope of Detroit’s buildings (Appendix A Fig.3).

Like any medium, graffiti is a category containing many forms and styles. Likely because of the anonymity necessary for the practice of an illegal art form, most pieces are a stylized signature of the artist’s nom de guerre, such as NEATS, AFRIKA, INDIO or, in the case of our artists Antonio and Lucka, NSTRS and ASTRO respectively. Without any consistency in figure or name, public recognition of the artist’s identity would be difficult to the point of discouraging interest. Detroit Graffiti documents primarily the pieces known as “burners,” which are the measure of artistic and creative ability. As Antonio describes it, a burner consists of a monochromatic background, on which “then you paint the letters one color, then go over that with some sort of interesting fill, and then you do the outline finally at the end.” “That’s a burner.” The many colors and different designs of burners make them the form in which artists can be “extra, extra, extra creative,” whereas the two-color “fill-in” can be executed quickly and therefore more often and more prominently (Cosme 6).
Cosme’s tool of choice was the roller, and the pieces he seems proudest of, that is, the pieces which he shares personally and on social media, are not fill-ins but rather flat monochromatic text or the figure of the fist - in order of importance, “DECOLONIZE,” the fist, and finally “NSTRS” (Appendix A Fig. 1). Lucka was less single-minded in his execution, and his burners, fill-ins and slaps were well-documented by Mayor Duggan’s Graffiti Task Force (Appendix B). However, he was certainly single-minded in his dedication. Far more prolific than Antonio, in only a few years Lucka covered even the most traveled avenues of the city with his tags, small, hand-sized scribblings or stencils that read “ASTRO.” (According to Detroit’s records, the Buildings Services Graffiti Removal Team identified and cleaned ten of Lucka’s burners, covering a total 10,100ft², but cleaned 50 ASTRO tags off transformer boxes, 300 ASTROS off of light poles and 200 tags - not to mention that in most instances ASTRO often returned to re-tag these spots.) (Appendix C Fig. 1, Appendix ).

Whereas Lucka was able to create in excess of 300 ASTRO tags in crowded, well-traveled areas because of their diminutive size, the relative difficulty of executing larger pieces makes “getting up” the other measures of excellence in the graffiti community. Although Lucka was able to cover a vast territory by bicycle, Antonio commanded respect because of his ability to get-up to the most visible places, to be seen often and in prominent places. Before Lucka and Antonio had been introduced, Antonio’s reputation preceded him. Lucka recognized Antonio from his high-visibility rollers, and even if Antonio understates the graffiti community’s respect for him, his monumental Brewster-Douglass roller piece, the largest in Detroit’s history, is featured in Detroit Graffiti.

Graffiti resists Arendt’s categorizations of art in both The Human Condition as well as her essay “The Crisis in Culture.” In “The Crisis in Culture,” an object is cultural to the extent
that it can endure,” “its durability...the very opposite of functionality.” By this standard, graffiti is not cultural, but it would be the most functional of the anti-arts. One of the most outstanding and arresting qualities of graffiti is that it is fleeting. While on the market art is no longer removed from the process of consumption that it was once sheltered from, by virtue of a consumerist society in which durability is positively related to novelty, graffiti’s existence is fragile because it is in danger of effacement from public authorities as well as other artists. Critics will spend exorbitantly to remove graffiti, such as the $45,841.30 Detroit spent to remove ASTRO burners from disused public works with low visibility, as reported by the General Services Department’s invoice (Appendix C). Detroit’s recent “broken windows” policing policy also includes fining owners for graffiti on their property (Motor). Yet graffiti itself exists in a process of discourse that involves artists painting over each other’s work if they believe they can leave a more impressive piece in its place (Cosme 19).

The succession of paintings that appeared on the water tower is a revealing example of graffiti’s discourse. Although Antonio Cosme was known for hitting water towers because of the high visibility they offered his political messaging, AFRIKA’s tag on the Dequindre tower remained largely untouched until NSTRS and INDO hit it with rollers, painting INDO, DECOLONIZE, and the fist. In response, AFRIKA’s crew returned to the tower and defaced the fist. They added an extended pointer and pinky finger, which handily transformed the militant fist into the colloquialism for “party,” while covering the text with their own signatures (Appendix D Fig. 3). Because the tower had been on his list to reclaim, it became the ideal site for their “FREE THE WATER” tag and gave Antonio the opportunity to restore dignity to his fist (Cosme 8).

In Arendt’s geography, the public place of display for most art is the exchange market, the space of appearance for homo faber where their products are able to appear. The market,
however, has the tendency to dissimulate the human relationships that constitute it and, according to Arendt, reveal the product and not the person (Canovan 209). Graffiti is the practice of removing art from the place of exchange and placing it in the realm of display where no one but the artists themselves can claim their work. Indeed, it is more likely that graffiti will be “buffed” from existence than it will be preserved or exchanged. Rather than being the place where the exchange value of their work is determined, the public created by the practice of graffiti is a place, like Arendt’s public realm, “reserved for individuality…the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were” (Canovan 41). This is evidenced by the fact that most pieces are themselves names or signatures, “tags,” rather than signed figurative paintings. A piece’s appearance in public is as fleeting as action, quickly eclipsed by a larger, more colorful, or intricate work – or simply buffed by the Detroit’s Graffiti Removal Team. The exchange of texts that occurs in the graffiti community on the stone, brick, and concrete of cities is the erection of a public space for artists to “appear to others as others appear to me” (Canovan 197). As described earlier, a system of judgment and standards of excellence as well as fair participation have been established by custom rather than decree. Even more impressive, these custom have been accepted and widely practiced although the only representatives of this community that have congregated in any physical location are their artworks.

This work of erecting a public space and structure for distinction and intercourse cannot be taken for granted. It is “more specifically ‘the work of man’ than is the work of his hands or the labor of his body” (Canovan 208). Arendt explains that the space of appearance is held together by power, “a potential created by the togetherness of people, who are kept together after the ‘fleeting moment of action has passed’” (Canovan 200). Neither can the passive togetherness of people be taken for granted, and it seems like it is this work of creating a public that creates
the potential for power. Michael Warner addresses this work in his essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” part of a larger collection of the same name, where he describes the process of generating and maintaining a public as constant and cyclical. While Arendt’s web of human relationships is held together by speech and personal revelation, Warner expands the narrower category of speech to texts, from radio address to new media, asserting that all publics are text-based and rely for their maintenance on the reflexive circulation of texts, new and old. While a public sustains itself through the “mere attention” of its members, this attention must be generated through frequent address and relevance. Moreover, the texts must constitute a dialogue, reflexive in its response to the addressee in addition to other texts. The fleeting nature of graffiti, while frustrating to those who would preserve or commodify it as “durable” art, is actually a consequence of the discourse it involves, and its constantly shifting landscape often resembles more a conversation than the dead letter of reification.

All publics have boundaries that are less intentionally drawn and more the consequence of certain limitations on communication, such as “social conditions of access, means of production and distribution, as well as social enclosure (genre, idiolect, style, address…)” – not to mention simply negligent methods of inclusion (Warner 73). The graffiti community has, defying the dominant social norms of artistic practice, created a highly democratic public with a remarkably low barrier to entry. If they are brave enough, any person can participate in the dialogue at least at the local level. Materials may cost the artist nothing, because they are often stolen, and the availability of public walls circumvents the exorbitant cost of canvas and framing (Cosme 8). More importantly, the artwork is free to view, and the only limitation is physical proximity.
Like Arendt’s public, the public of the graffiti community is a solution to the futility of being an artist without a space to display work or on the exchange market. Tagging buildings enables artists to “appear to others as others appear to me,” to create visibility and thereby durability, and to maintain an ongoing dialogue (Canovan 197-198). Yet, the physical and creative labor of the graffiti community to hold a public space for expression and discourse is not recognized as a valuable contribution to a community’s sense of “belonging and activity,” as empowering and enabling its members, because it is constituted as a “counterpublic.”

As a “dominated group [that] aspires to recreate itself as a public,” counterpublics position themselves in opposition to the dominant social group and norms that they have been excluded from or subordinated to (Warner 112). Although much graffiti in Detroit, including that of Cosme and Lucka, was limited to vacant or public structures in dilapidated disuse, the act itself was both intended to be and perceived to be obscene (Cosme 8). The artistic and plastic use of obscenity, as Herbert Marcuse reminds readers in “An Essay on Liberation,” reveals contradiction and hypocrisy. For some addressees, the juxtaposition that Cosme and his collaborator INDIO drew of a shuttered school against the backdrop of the Motor City Casino and the water security message on a decommissioned water tower are poetic and meaningful (Appendix A Fig. 3 and 5). Marcuse writes, “the obscenity of capitalism” is its “indecent” display of “stifling abundance while…depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life” (Marcuse 12). In both cases, the artists use the *mise en scène* of the city to frame capitalism’s obscenities at home, inhibited access to education and water, respectively. Although the principle of disposability in pursuit of profitability caused these structures to fall into disuse and disrepair, the artists were held legally responsible for their “malicious destruction.” It requires a “repressive rationality…rational only in its efficiency to ‘contain’ liberation,” to come to the
conclusion that obscene defacement could cause this kind of physical devastation (Marcuse 26). As Arendt explains, this loss of common sense occurs in extreme isolation of perspective, the consequence of the loss of a common world. The dominant society is “imprisoned in the subjectivity of their singular experience (which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times),” that the symptoms divestment are actually its cause (Canovan 58).

In a “socialized” and “behaving” world, certain accommodations were made to allow graffiti into the fold of art and respectability. This involved primarily herding graffiti artists back to the exchange market. Gallerists and cities, in public-private partnerships, have opted for a market-mediated redirection of graffiti in the form of commissioned murals. By slapping some artists with felonies and paying others, market selection decides which artistic voices are allowed to be heard, that is, who is allowed to appear in public, nullifying the democratic advantages that graffiti cultivated. Detroit’s corporate-sponsored mural festival resembles more the dead letter of art than the living discourse of graffiti, as the murals are in no danger of effacement, but rather remain at the whim of the festival’s planners. Without a true public, speech and appearance are mediated by the market. Graffiti artists in Detroit now must rely on a system of patronage to determine which art is acceptable for public consumption.

Although admitting that his audience is small, Cosme suspects that he has never been invited to participate in Detroit’s mural festival because there is no funding for his political perspective (Cosme 23). Considering the vehemence with which Detroit’s Graffiti Task Force pursues artists are and the concurrent elevation of commissioned “street art,” it follows that these graffiti artists were not criminalized for the unlikely “malicious destruction of property” or even for their political message to FREE THE WATER, but rather for circumventing the market.
Shortly after Cosme and Lucka were released from jail, they were commissioned by Ford Automotive to paint a water security mural on a recently developed commercial building known as the Pickle Factory in Detroit’s Islandview neighborhood (Cosme 18). However, the marketplace can never be a substitute for public space, just as the Pickle Factory mural would be an inadequate substitute for Cosme and Lucka’s first FREE THE WATER act and the cascade of events that followed it.

III. “Improper Intercourse with Art”: Antonio and Lucka’s Technique of Liberation

In Detroit Graffiti, elaborate burners are often painted in obscure locations, while fill-ins and rollers can be quickly painted in more prominent locations. The ability of an artist to produce both a “beautiful burner” and to “get up” prolifically with simpler fill-ins and slaps makes a well-rounded graffiti artist. By distributing their work in areas of varying levels of visibility, graffiti artists are addressing a narrowly enclosed public of other graffiti artists and appreciators of graffiti. Cosme, though less than his collaborator Lucka, notably remained an outsider because of his use of the most accessible graffiti forms. Always on the lookout for spots with the most visibility, Cosme was concerned with the distribution and political impact of his work. He instrumentalized the graffiti form, using it as a platform for his political messaging. Not to say that he is incapable of elaborate work, which he has executed in sponsored projects, his portrait of Columbus and the fifteen-story NSTRS on the Brewster-Douglass Project tower (Appendix A). Rather, Cosme has an acute awareness of his own positioning. He confined himself to the most visible locations and, with the notable exception of the Brewster-Douglass Project tower, his DECOLONIZE tag features the most prominently, occasionally accompanied by the smaller NSTRS (Appendix A: Fig. 1). As he mentions in the interview, “because I was straight political, and
because we were doing nothing but rollers in prominent places,” this put him at odds with the larger graffiti community, which, as he says, was the reason that “a lot of the graffiti artists didn’t respect the work I was doing” (Cosme 6).

Antonio and Lucka reversed Arendt’s relationship between the public realm and art, where public political structures lend their space to the display of art, to use instead the public created by art as a platform for their political defiance. They inserted themselves onto the scene and discourse after a counterpublic had already been established, but recognized that its scope had a broader potential. They did not limit their addressees with obscurity of location, style, or graffiti vernacular. Aware that his most common address, “DECOLONIZE,” was not resonating with his audience, Cosme worked with Lucka to craft a more direct and poignant address for the water tower. As Cosme describes it, they wanted to return the shutoffs to the public’s attention in time for the midterm election and reverse the narrative that “free water” was just another handout the poor felt entitled to (Cosme 12). Yet, language they used as organizers, such as “affordability,” was even more obscure and awkward with a roller than “DECOLONIZE” (12). Lucka landed on the phrase “FREE THE WATER,” achieving the “both personal and impersonal [address], giving general social relevance to private thought and life, to the effect that our subjectivity resonates with others” (Warner 77).

In the course of broadening the scope of their address and instrumentalizing graffiti for their own purposes, Lucka and Cosme diluted graffiti’s relatively pure space of appearance by being straight political. “Always interested in painting things other than [his] name,” choosing political tags, and “doing nothing but rollers in prominent places,” Antonio, though not Lucka, sacrificed a certain standard of excellence for visibility, in good humor admitting that excellence in graffiti is definitely not based on its politics (Cosme 4). Artistic achievement aside, they both
exemplify an admirable moral and aesthetic sensibility. Working in their own community, they avoided painting local businesses, occupied homes, or “fucked up neighborhoods,” focusing their efforts instead on publicly owned infrastructure, such as electrical boxes, water towers, underpasses, and bridges, or institutions they perceived as oppressive, such as banks (Cosme 8, Appendix C: Astro Graffiti Offender Locations). In response to the Mayor’s offer to intervene on Antonio’s behalf if he would promise never to paint graffiti again, Antonio countered with the offer to never paint graffiti again if the Mayor would end the practice of shutting off water to the poorest residents (Cosme 24).

Being “straight political” also puts Cosme at odds with Arendt. Although they both find the erosion of the culturally stable world of objects fueled by capitalism to be obscene, Arendt remains steadfast in her adherence to stability and immortality while Cosme embraces a medium which sacrifices physical durability for memorability. “The Crisis in Culture” defends the privileged status of art, but elevates it to a lofty, lonely position. Reflecting on the appropriation of culture for purposes of “social position and status,” which substituted entertainment and consumables for art, Arendt countered that the only “authentic criterion for judging these specifically cultural things is their relative permanence and eventual immortality…” and that “only what will last through the centuries can ultimately claim to be a cultural object” (“Crisis” 202). Graffiti does not appear on the market as other art does, where it is commodified or instrumentalized to create creative scarcity out of style and novelty. Graffiti artists opt for an undiluted space of appearance, where their work appears as an interjection, a bang that forcefully, defiantly interrupts the visual landscape. Its appearance is as fleeting as action, and relies on the memory of witnesses or documentation for its preservation. Graffiti artists embraced impermanence and incorporated it into the very meaning-making structures of the practice.
As Arendt describes it, this “improper intercourse” with art demonstrates a creative, persistent approach to building “a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in capitalist society” (Warner 113). Antonio and Lucka’s approach especially bears a strong resemblance to the New Sensibility of Herbert Marcuse’s “An Essay on Liberation,” where Marcuse proposes a similar instrumentalization of the artistic aesthetic. Even more grimly than Arendt, Marcuse fears that “capitalist progress...not only reduces the environment of freedom, the ‘open space’ of human existence, but also the ‘longing.’ the need for such an environment” (Marcuse 18). To free our modes of thought and action from this “continuum of repression,” humans can harness their artistic sensibility and use the “sensuous power of the imagination” to conjure new ways of life and intercourse (Marcuse 26).

For Antonio and Lucka to realize that global systems of capitalism were at the heart of the city’s devastation, and to realize the potential of the same devastation as a site for poignant address, is to use “art as a productive force of social production” (Cosme 10, Marcuse 35). Empowered and disavowing responsibility for blight that the city administration tried to shoulder them with, they very publicly rejected a “world of hypocrisy and violence in which [they] do not wish to live” (Marcuse 13).

The risks that graffiti artists take to appear in and maintain their space of appearance speak to the human need to be seen and heard. Lucka and Antonio ultimately settled with the city for under $10,000, probation and immunity for prior graffiti. It would be remiss to not mention the price that other victims of Detroit’s graffiti task force have paid. Convicted and sentenced with prison time for his graffiti, LOAF, one of Antonio’s friends and colleagues, took his own life after his release (Cosme 16). During the course of his court battle with the task force, another artist, facing eight felonies for graffiti, succumbed to addiction although he was ultimately able
to settle for much better terms. Despite having no prior personal history, he was following the pattern of his family history (Cosme 17). Battling challenging personal backgrounds and obstacles to their success that most people will never have to contend with, both artists “had built their esteem and sense of self very heavily on the identity of a graffiti artist” (Cosme 17). By Antonio’s account, “to take that away from them and subject them to felonies for it, I think was very stressful for both of them, and I think contributed to putting both of them over the edge” (Cosme 17).

Although we must suffer the Arendtian “imperishability and unpredictability” of our action, for those who assume the struggle against oppressive institutions, the legal risk should not be so great (Canovan 233). Just as Marcuse observes and anticipates, the vested interests transferred guilt for the city’s blight from themselves to this counterpublic. The work of Mayor Duggan’s Graffiti Task Force eviscerated the community, and “young people, creative people, brilliant people lost the ability to express themselves in their hometown” (Cosme 17). Considering the human cost, the end of the graffiti era in Detroit is heartbreaking. But as the end of an era, it is less so. That graffiti was able to become a political platform at all speaks to the resourcefulness of the city’s artists and activists as well as their ability to work within the cracks in institutional systems of control. No doubt many of the same artists, undeterred, have already adapted to the shifting landscape and are even now shaping new methods of political expression.
Works Cited


“Monthly Water Shutoffs and Emergency Management in Detroit, July 2012-July 2015.” We the People of Detroit, We the People of Detroit, 2016, wethepeopleofdetroit.com/communityresearch/water/.


Appendixes

Appendix A

Figure 1. (DECOLONIZE, NYTEX, “raiz up” logo). Detroit. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 2. (DECOLONIZE, INDIO, POW, AFRIKA; screenshot). Corktown, Detroit. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 3. (CASINO CAPITALISM in foreground, Motor City Casino in background). Detroit. Cosme, Antonio.
Figure 4. (Columbus Day GENOCIDE). Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 5. (FREE THE WATER, view from I-75 and Davison Highway interchange). Detroit. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 8. (NSTRS Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects tower). Detroit. Freitag, Chris.

Figure 9. (View from water tower at I-75/Davison; photo from confiscated camera). 3 Nov 2014. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 10. (View of interchange from water tower; from confiscated camera). 3 Nov 2014. Highland Park. Cosme, Antonio.
Figure 11. (Lucka views Detroit from water tower; photo from confiscated camera). 3 Nov 2014. Highland Park. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 12. (Lucka climbing water tower; photo from confiscated camera). 3 Nov 2014. Highland Park. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 13. (View of Detroit from water tower; photo from confiscated camera). Highland Park. 3 Nov 2014. Cosme, Lucka.

Figure 6. (Antonio in squad car after arrest). Highland Park. 3 Nov 2014. Cosme, Antonio.

Figure 7. (Cosme and Lucka painting Noel Night 2014). Detroit, Michigan Citizen.

Appendix B
“Colored Photos from Pros”
Defense Discovery Part 1
Fig. 2 (Close up of mural at Lucka’s residence.)

EXHIBIT #2

EXHIBIT #3

Fig. 3 (Signature on mural from Fig. 1 and 2).

EXHIBIT #4

Fig. 4 (Close up of signature from Fig. 3).

EXHIBIT #5

Fig. 5 (ASTRO burner).
Fig. 6 (ASTRO stencil).

Fig. 7 (Stencil and ASTRO tag).

Fig. 8 (ASTRO burner, signed).

Fig. 9 (ASTRO fill in on abandoned hospital, view from I-75).
Fig. 10 (ASTRO burners with locations).
GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT
BUILDING SERVICES GRAFFITI REMOVAL TEAM
August 31, 2016

Astra Graffiti Offender locations:
Buildings, viaducts, underpass and overpass

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>SQ.FOOTAGE</th>
<th>INITIAL DATE CLEANED</th>
<th>NOTICE DATE OF RE-TAG</th>
<th>METHOD OF REMOVAL</th>
<th>MATERIAL COST</th>
<th>LABOR COST</th>
<th>TOTAL COST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Scotten/Clark</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>4/20/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Paint</td>
<td>$720</td>
<td>$800</td>
<td>$1,520</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. West Grand Blk/Magnolia viaduct</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>4/10/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Paint</td>
<td>$3,475</td>
<td>$1,400</td>
<td>$4,875</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Kronk Recreation Center</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>4/20/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Paint</td>
<td>$750</td>
<td>$800</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Vineyard/Tide Trot viaduct</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>5/20/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Paint</td>
<td>$1,800</td>
<td>$1,100</td>
<td>$2,900</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Joy Hilgower</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>4/20/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Elephant snot</td>
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<td>6. 453 Milwaukee/Stevenson</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>4/20/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Elephant snot</td>
<td>$3,450</td>
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<td>7. 445 Wacker/Memorial</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>4/20/16</td>
<td>7/30/16</td>
<td>Elephant snot</td>
<td>$450</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>$950</td>
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<td>8. Michigan/Klack</td>
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<td>Elephant snot</td>
<td>$725</td>
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<td>9. Washington/44</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>6/30/16</td>
<td>9/30/16</td>
<td>Elephant snot</td>
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<td>$3,600</td>
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<td>10. Vineyard/Magnolia viaduct</td>
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<td>SUB-TOTAL</td>
<td>10,100</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$23,850</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light Poles</td>
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<td>$3.00</td>
<td>$900.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transformer Boxes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>$32.00</td>
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<td>SUB-TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-Total</td>
<td>$1,050.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative &amp; Overhead Cost</td>
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<td>TOTAL COST</td>
<td>$3,522.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Mack/Mitchell – has not been cleaned yet
Astro Graffiti Offender locations:
Buildings, viaducts, underpass and overpass

1. Scotten/Clark
2. Michigan/Clark
3. West Grand Blvd/Magnolia viaduct
4. Vinewood/Magnolia viaduct
5. Kronk Recreation Center
6. Southwest General Hospital
7. 3401 Michigan Ave.
8. Joy Rd/Epworth
9. 455 Milwaukee/Beaubien
10. 3433 Warren/Moran
11. Mack/Moran

Total Tags: 200
Light Poles: 300
Electrical Boxes: 50
Total Sq. ': 10,000

Resources to be used to remove graffiti:
Elephant Snot: 50 gallons
Paint: 20 gallons
Shadow Max: 15 gallons
Staff: 6
Hours of labor: 100

Total Cost to remove graffiti: $45,841.30
STATE OF MICHIGAN COUNTY OF Wayne

IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF MICHIGAN: The prosecuting attorney for this county appears before the court and informs the court that on the date and at the location described above, the Defendant(s):

COUNT 1: MALICIOUS DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY - BRIDGES/RAILROADS/LOCKS
PLACE OF OFFENSE: VINEWOOD/ MAGNOLIA
did, wilfully and maliciously break down, injure, remove or destroy a public or toll bridge; contrary to MCL 750.379. [750.379]
FELONY: 4 Years and/or $5,000.00

COUNT 2: MALICIOUS DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY - BRIDGES/RAILROADS/LOCKS
PLACE OF OFFENSE: W GRAND BLVD/ MAGNOLIA
did, wilfully and maliciously break down, injure, remove or destroy a public or toll bridge; contrary to MCL 750.379. [750.379]
FELONY: 4 Years and/or $5,000.00

COUNT 3: MALICIOUS DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY - BRIDGES/RAILROADS/LOCKS
PLACE OF OFFENSE: MICHIGAN/ CLARK
did, wilfully and maliciously break down, injure, remove or destroy a public or toll bridge; contrary to MCL 750.379. [750.379]
FELONY: 4 Years and/or $5,000.00

COUNT 4: MALICIOUS DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY - BRIDGES/RAILROADS/LOCKS
PLACE OF OFFENSE: SCOTTEN/ CLARK
did, wilfully and maliciously break down, injure, remove or destroy a public or toll bridge; contrary to MCL 750.379. [750.379]
FELONY: 4 Years and/or $5,000.00

COUNT 5: MDOP - UTILITY PROPERTY
PLACE OF OFFENSE: THROUGHOUT OF THE CITY OF DETROIT
did without lawful authority, wilfully cut, break, obstruct, injure, destroy, tamper with or manipulate equipment, to-wit: light pole(s) and/or electric box(es), being the property of City of Detroit, a utility; contrary to MCL 750.383a. [750.383A]
FELONY: 5 Years and/or $5,000.00

COUNT 6: MDOP - UTILITY PROPERTY
PLACE OF OFFENSE: THROUGHOUT OF THE CITY OF DETROIT
did without lawful authority, wilfully cut, break, obstruct, injure, destroy, tamper with or manipulate equipment, to-wit: light pole(s) and/or electric box(es), being the property of City of Detroit, a utility; contrary to MCL 750.383a. [750.383A]
FELONY: 5 Years and/or $5,000.00

Appendix E
Charges against William Dale Lucka
36th District Court Detroit