

# Walls and Places: Political Murals in Iran

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## Abstract

This paper is rooted in the photography and observation of Graffiti that presents an overview of presence and absence of anonymous public writings in Tehran. It is based on over 150 digital photographic examples collected from Tehran, where the flourishing of artistic dissent is formed by widespread poverty and the recent political history followed by an economic collapse that radicalized youth of middle-class. According to Gehl's argument that art objects and places which form their causal milieu share social agency with the artists who produce them, the aim of this paper is to show how Graffiti confront institutional power by expanding semiotic street arts in the west areas of Tehran like Shahrak-e Gharb and Ekbatan Complex. The active role of open public spaces in the cultural and political performance of social changes is investigated in this study. Why murals are not part of the visual public discourse in Tehran, as they are in other divided societies? What is the Graffiti writers' role in the existence of murals? What political meanings are articulated in the interactions of Graffiti writers in specific areas of Tehran? How does whitewashing fit into a much larger civic discourse that includes individuals, groups and authorities? This paper tries to find acceptable answers to these questions. In particular, this paper aims to analyze the group-oriented visual discourse and discourse related to individuals. The Graffiti that studied in this paper have been selected from specific parallel areas located in the west of Tehran.

**Keywords:** Graffiti, Tehran, public space, modern space.

## 1. Introduction

Wall Paintings can be usually divided into two groups: wall paintings that represent ideas of people and paintings for reviewing ideas of government. The first category is most telling political opposition to the government. The second is letters served to highlight the government's ideologies. Written under a highly elaborated apparatus of censorship, Graffiti is a form of belief expression that records domination and intervenes in it, simultaneously<sup>2</sup>. Graffiti represents freedom of expression in its purest sense. It is unruly related to egalitarian associated by democracy. It manifests in many forms, such as the art of the underdog, the voice of the youth, the expressed anger of the dispossessed, and instantaneous thought processes that blurt out. Contemporary Graffiti would be considered less refined than its

classical ancestry, but Graffiti has always meant a drawing or writing scratched on a wall or other surfaces.<sup>3</sup> The wall, as a site for Graffiti, provides an edifice that converts the public space to an arena where “such a thing as public opinion can be formed”.

Of the year 2005, a new type of street art has been emerged in Tehran, Iran. It is a new style of youthful Graffiti that represents political insight of the new generation. This study introduces the characteristics and political insight of producers of these Graffiti and their reasons to develop this type of street art in spite of segregation and limitative control of urban environments. This research tries to show how participants of underground Graffiti undermine the efforts of legal and political authorities to control them. Finally, it is shown that this collective production of Graffiti not only confronts and resists existing urban arrangements, but constructs alternative social, cultural, and economic arrangements.

## **2. Where is Tehran?**

Tehran is the most populous city of Iran and also ranks amongst the prominent cities of the world.<sup>4</sup> Tehran has a comparatively short, but very fascinating history of turning from a small village into a metropolitan area populated by millions of people. The location of the city is shown in Figure 1. Middle-class settlements of Tehran mainly moved from the north of the old town towards the north-east of Tehran in 60s. From 70s, especially after the passing of the 1968 comprehensive plan for expansion of Tehran in east-west direction, middle-class moved toward the western zones of the city. Meanwhile, during the 70s, Shahrak-e Gharb and Ekbatan Complex were designed for the upper-classes of society and middle-classes, respectively. Public spaces in west side of cities are often idealized as spaces where discourses and demonstrations are at least tolerated, if not celebrated by government. Nevertheless, this ideal matter does not often exist and it is under institutional and popular pressure.

## **3. Study Areas**

In order to study the Graffiti forms in Tehran, two city areas are selected where people from middle and upper social and income levels live in. These areas are shown in Figure 2. Shahrak-e Gharb, an upper class area, was designed by French architects in the 70s. This quarter has its own infrastructure of schools, clubs and shops. In addition to its elite status, the quarter is marked by a distinct sense of being different, worldlier, and more “modern” than other quarters. Residents oddly position themselves as being “the victim of the state’s policy” and “being the best”. Unlike in the most other capital cities, this wealthy and educated elite does not represent the state and takes up an awkward position as a simultaneously powerful

and powerless social class. Forced to hide some cultural preferences and social practices, this group has nonetheless more freedom to transgress rules. More than elsewhere in Tehran, signs of globalization, like global media culture or patterns of consumption, are visible in Shahrak-e Gharb. Because of this vague and precarious freedom and the superior access to global culture using satellite TV, internet and international travel, Khosravi emphasizes that Shahrak-e Gharb is a center for “diffusing westernized youth culture”. He insists that this deterritorialized quarter is a “state of mind and a symbol” that has become a stage for cultural experiments and defiance, where youth of different classes participate. For some lower class youths, Shahrak-e Gharb is a dream space to escape from cultural and economic limitations.

Ekbatan Complex is a planned town built as a project of modern apartment buildings in western part of Tehran. It is located approximately 5 kilometers west of center of city. The Construction of the Ekbatan Complex started in 1975 for the purpose of mass housing for Iranian middle class. It has 15,500 residential units on an area of 2,208,570 m<sup>2</sup> located in western Tehran. Ekbatan Complex has three separate sets of buildings that each called a phase and these phases have independent buildings categorized as a block. In all these phases, it could be found 1, 2, 3 or 4-roomed apartments that begins from about 50 m<sup>2</sup> to 240 m<sup>2</sup>. Ekabatan Complex is famous because of its green fields between the buildings.

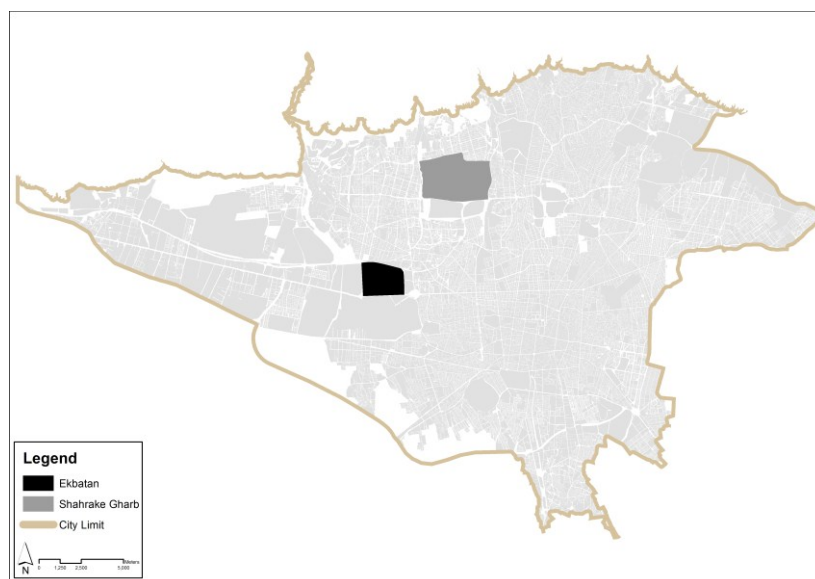


Figure1. Location of Shahrak-e Gharb and Ekbatan Complex in Tehran

Realization: Narciss M. SOHRABI

## **4. What are the Graffiti forms in Tehran?**

Graffiti is defined here as a planned and oversized image executed on a large expanse of wall that conveys a specifically local socio-political message in an evocative manner. Graffiti, even if publicly funded, arise thematically from local initiatives to express live and site-specific experiences, social identification with place, and a desire to express aspirations for the future of the community, by the community. May vary, official murals are usually painted using a brush instead of color spray or stencil. These Graffiti are usually painted by non-local and semi-professional artists who often act in collaboration with community leaders. Graffiti is located on the sides of buildings, houses, highway retaining walls and so on. In this kind of environment, Graffiti becomes a salient feature of visual public discourse. The youth that are spraying the walls, are born after Iranian Islamic Revolution and grew up in west neighborhood. It is nearly exclusively a young male interest, even though female Graffiti writers are more recognized and active in other societies. Graffiti forms have a history as long as the urbanization history. Writings about romantic relationship which were written on the walls or carved on the trees are the samples of Graffiti. Other examples of Graffiti are the writings in praise or tail of different ethnic groups. Next prevalent examples are the writings and drawings in public restrooms that are included everything from sexual subjects to political topics and they can be found everywhere. Finally, Graffiti on the chairs and desks of schools and universities should be noticed. These types of Graffiti have contents variable from romance to politic matters base on the social and political situation of the country.

### **4.1. Graffiti in the history of Iran**

The Graffiti forms in Iranian Islamic Revolution and after that can be considered as the first experiences which are close to today meaning of Graffiti. The simplest form of Graffiti in Iranian Islamic Revolution period and after that is stencil. Stencils were made by cutting intended shapes in the talc radiography image and they were applied on the walls using just a color brush or spray (Figure 3). These drawings which are made by stencil still remained on the walls from that time and look like the large scale of political posters. Recently, samples of these kinds of wall pictures with the citizenship educational purposes or propagandas are painted by municipality.

The first sample of new Graffiti in Iran dates back to 1994 made by the “ESENS”. However, some researchers believe that the first with the new and modern criteria was initiated in 2003 by the person with the pseudonym “Tanha” (Figure 4). His works were usually seen in

Shahrak-e-Gharb and Ekbatan buildings complex. After a short time, other youth such as Salommeh, Aldnik, Maghoi, S.K.ON joined him.



Figure2. Samples of stencil in Iranian Islamic Revolution period  
© Mortrza Momayez



Figure3. Graffiti that is made by “Tanha” ©Tanha

#### 4.2. New applications of Graffiti in Tehran

New applications of Graffiti have confirmation with the main critical and cultural purposes of the youth. If we have a glance on the creators or fans websites of the Graffiti, we will find out that Iranian Graffitists believe that their work is mostly related to the underground art concepts. Therefore, the new artists are the young generation which don't work in the official cultural frameworks. Sometimes they enjoy working against the official cultural frameworks to represent their identity. This is a thing that cannot be neglected in subculture theory. In the concentration of subculture theory, the concept of “style” is highlighted more than everything.

One of the sentences that is sometimes written in Graffiti is “Painting is not crime” which is shown the interpretation of young generation from this type of art (Figure 5). As it is seen in this figure, The Graffiti is made on one of the city walls which is banned for any kind of advertisement or painting by authorities and mentioned that passing this law has a prosecution as a consequence. This sample shows that how the space can change to the place of showing contrast in the society. In this example, in one hand, this space belongs to government which can concede the right of writing to everyone. In another hand, there is a young person who believes that this wall belongs to him and tries to indicate this wall as his routine living space.



Figure4. Graffiti with the words: “Painting is not crime” ©Tanha

## 5. Popular Culture and Street Art

Graffiti here is openly defined as rapidly produced anonymous public writing by an individual person. Study on the amount and types of Graffiti reveals that it is deployed as a medium for expression of identity in the divided society of Iran. Why does the individual person, the Graffiti artist, take the place of more collaborative efforts like murals? What kinds of political sentiments get expressed? Who are the intended readers? What is the relationship between architecture and Graffiti? For this paper, it is essential to distinguish and set aside the style of Graffiti associated with popular culture, and that emerged as the significant visual apparatus associated with the rise of the hip-hop music and skateboarding scenes in the 90s. Spray-can Graffiti is originated in New York and Philadelphia in the 60s and rapidly became popular in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. It was a direct response from so-called middle class by the advancing differences between rich and poor in capitalist and consumer societies. Through a simple act of writing one’s moniker on a wall, commercial architecture, advertising billboards and other strategic areas (‘tagging’), these spaces became special locations for social criticism. In this way, Graffiti can be interpreted as a form of class struggle that articulates dissent against corporations which hijack the gaze of local. The border between

Graffiti and vandalism is difficult to define, usually contingent on point of view, and often situational. Graffiti is often associated with youth and sometimes with territoriality. There is a huge volume of websites, published papers and newspaper articles that classify Graffiti as an art form.

## **6. Street Art: Throws and Pieces, Tags and Crews**

The most visible types of contemporary Graffiti are the large and colorful, fat-lettered ‘throws’, ‘tags’ which are quickly scribbled, and simple signatures or markers that serve as personal logos, sometimes related to an act of daring. More evolved works include recognizable imagery, story and often portraiture, combined with expressive. Throws and tags appear with proficiency in the west areas of the city. Street artists apply different goals (primarily aesthetic) to similar (and often still illegal) methods, but the most important distinction is that street art is inextricably linked with cosmopolitan trends in style (*e.g.* hip hop music, skateboard culture). Given Graffiti’s origins, it seems that there is a paradox in the fact that many of the young street artists come from upper-middle and upper class families; and they are the part of population that can afford to take an interest in popular culture through exposure in travel, access to the internet, and in some cases by communicating with each other. Iranian’s street art is different, because it was always an appropriated art form, hitched to a romanticized understanding of urban culture and life. Now, by appearing societal fractures, Graffiti has become more importantly interpreted as an articulation of dissent than before. The number of Graffiti writers is small. By one Graffiti writer’s estimation there is a group of approximately 20 active and inactive artists in Tehran. From the point of view of the establishment, it seems that street art is more or less understood as a way for youths to express cosmopolitan (even if romanticized).

## **7. Street Art Discourse**

Street art is varied in terms of the reflexive discursive properties of each mode. Throws can appeal to the general public because of their graphic and colorful aesthetics, regardless of the literal content, which is only sometimes self-evident. Discourse related to tags (both individual and crews) are specific to the in-groups; the writers themselves. Tags are usually considered to be a public nuisance, because they are prolific and can become a palimpsest of scrawls indecipherable by the general public. For a grand size work, reluctantly commenting something like: “they work at night”, or “they run”; but these sentences are usually used for street arts. While Graffiti intended as an affront to the religion and politics, it confronted the

general public because of its spectacular location. In spite of the largeness of the statement, no one is accused in street art exposure. Instead of launching an effort to find the responsible actor(s), it is thought that it is better to let the matter drop saying: “the best response to crazy people is not to respond”. Where Graffiti occurs, writers tend to identify themselves as individuals and in a few places these writers tend to identify themselves as members of groups. Graffiti is not associated by popular culture and it articulates dissent or conformity of individual and group identification. These ethnic, political, social and historical postures can be interpreted through verbal and visual graphic content, symbology, placement strategies, over-writing and erasure. Exoteric influence may explain some of this difference. Graffiti is a historical feature of public spaces in Iran. This is not particularly the same in Arab and Ottoman public spaces and the type of street art associated with popular culture. Even if the difference in Graffiti is purely result of external influence, it is quite a strong indicator of differing concepts of social identity as well as different orientations concerning uses of public space. Hooligans write anywhere, but most regularly on top of Graffiti by the opposing groups (Figure 6). There is no apparent order or reason for hooligans to deface and corrupt what was written underneath. Hooligans’ symbols and phrases are crudely followed in the context of group identity and often not equated with social reality. On the other hand, municipality of Tehran erases all the Graffiti rapidly and wall painting with authorized bespoken concepts will be placed instead of Graffiti made by youth (Figure 7).



Figure5. Hooligans’ phrases on Graffiti

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(a)



(b)

Figure6. (a) Graffiti made by the youth in Tehran and (b) Erased wall by municipality ©Tanha

## 8. Graffiti and Individual Identity

With a few noteworthy exceptions, most of the wall writing in the west is personal: about love, names, nicknames that called in football, human concepts like truth and so on. Self-proclaimed anarchist groups often contribute humor to the political discourse with Graffiti and stencils. The highly visible placements of this Graffiti are in shopping districts and malls in Ekbatan Complex. The lettering or stenciling on these walls points out that there is an intended audience (middle-class consumer) and an anti-corporate, anti-political and anti-hegemony ideology has being promoted. This kind of Graffiti is therefore entirely different in look and intent from the Graffiti produced by the hooligan or the street artist, and these ideological and aesthetic characteristics appear on both sides of the city. All kinds of Graffiti including street art suggest a current picture of local identities. It occurs much more often in Shaherak-e Gharb. This difference is carried through in the manner in which authorities deal with Graffiti as a way that two societies exercise social control by exploiting critically different modes of identity construction and maintenance.

The social and political messages carried in Graffiti vary, as do the presumptive audiences. These messages are specific to the particular kinds of Graffiti writers: street artists, athletic, hooligans, anarchists and other politically or personally motivated individuals. Even though messages contain slogans and symbols that may possibly be misunderstood by the writer, this kind of public discourse could be regarded as a kind of hegemonic means to access or mediate civic or social aims. This is not always for the better: who is or is not writing is one aspect of the discourse; who is whitewashing needs also to be examined. Even as the discourse becomes more political toward the contested area in, it indicates confusion about political direction and a lack of local or community identification.

## **Conclusion**

Murals work in the opposite type of space. They are effective where there is already a collective identity established in relation to place. Murals represent the imagination of a group that inhabits the areas directly around the site of the art work. Interestingly, and symbolically, murals are usually painted traditionally with a brush and bucket— a bucket that can be shared by others painting. Graffiti can be done with a spray can or marker: by using a pen, or pressing a cap. Graffiti is a solo act and can be cooperative. As part of urban renewal programs, murals are credited with a decline in tagging and with an increase in social cohesion where neighborhoods had been troubled by crime. Proponents of murals claim that they construct a visible, even if imagined, social reality in urban areas that have undergone major economic, social and physical transitions over the last generation of inhabitants. Murals are not a good recommendation for a community that may anyway be culturally disinclined or discouraged from public writing; no matter how engaging murals are in the eyes of reconciliation program coordinators and others interested in peace building and visual media. A blank wall includes the possibility of future artistic action (imagined or real), while also being a stark surface for the play of shadows (symbolic or real). In fact, an empty wall is a mural. Public mural programs may seem educational in view of diversity and collaboration, but they negatively rejected by the participants who are, in study and in practice, already comfortable with expressing on walls notions such as solidarity, dissent, and informal verbal political conflict. Graffiti and mural arts programs are forms of popular expression, but not modalities by which a society can be formed. Communities and individuals should be already self-identify as part of a place or location, before effective mural arts programs are instrumentalized as a step toward reconciliation.

There are certainly other modalities for cultural reconciliation that could be explored, and preferably ones that are essentially shared on both grand neighborhoods. Graffiti writers might then have a chance for transformative exposure. In this imagined scenario, Graffiti could appear and evolve naturally, instead of within a paradoxical scope of permission and guidance from peace-builders. Viewed from a practical level, the Graffiti artists and writers in the city who share agendas —adherents to all kinds of popular culture and anarchical and socialist writers — their work might seem to be a good starting point for considering a project. Approval or identification of their activities by any authority, however, would likely mean a self-negotiated end to their already shared dialogue.

Murals are usually located where the viewers understand and possibly feel validated by the content, which they have usually generated themselves based on their experience of living in

that place. Putting aside the social divergences on public wall expression in the two communities, the biggest challenge to a mural program are the relationships between community and public space or property. The challenge is to find a wall where murals can emerge in place naturally, from local stories of shared experience among a group of people that is adhered as a community to the place. Nevertheless, given similar material circumstances, the study shows the differences between Iranian identify and emblems of their identity.

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**Notes**

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