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► **To cite this version:**

Jérôme Denis, David Pontille. The Material Politics of Graffiti Removal. *Visual Anthropology*, 2024, 37 (4), pp.354-375. 10.1080/08949468.2024.2366675 . hal-04689020

HAL Id: hal-04689020

<https://hal.science/hal-04689020v1>

Submitted on 5 Sep 2024

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The Material Politics of Graffiti Removal

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Visual Anthropology
2024, vol. 37(4), p. 354-375

Abstract

While anti-graffiti policies have been examined in various places, the concrete conditions of graffiti removal remain largely unexplored. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article considers a generative dimension of graffiti removal techniques and highlights their contribution to the visual ordering of urban reality through two main actions: making differences and making similarities. Anything but automatic and simple, graffiti removal is a complex operation consisting of technical gestures and ontological re-specifications, which are accomplished within the material entanglements of the city's surfaces. A matter of continuous transformations, graffiti removal participates, like graffiti writing, in the visual becoming of urban ecologies.

Keywords

aesthetic work; city surfaces; graffiti removal; material politics; urban order

What removing graffiti takes

Paris, 7:27 a.m. At the wheel of a van displaying his employer's logo and that of the "Cleanliness of Paris," Tom parks in the Rue du Sentier of the 2nd *arrondissement*. After switching off the ignition, he looks at the buildings nearby while grasping a plastic sleeve to pull out the list of requested interventions along this street. Each line of the table he has in front of him designates a graffiti to be removed, with its date of detection, the type of surface it is written on, and the estimated size of the area covered, expressed in square meters (m²). While checking the table, Tom regularly looks up at the building facades. He then gets out of the van, goes to the graffiti listed in the first line of the table, looks at it for a few seconds, and touches it with the tip of his fingers. He then grabs his corporate smartphone, launches a dedicated application, generates a new record, and fills in several fields: the nature of the intervention, the date, the address of the building and its precise geolocation, the material properties of the facade, the technique intended to be used (whether chemical solvent, high-pressure water, a mixture of water and sand for "sandblasting," or paint), also the size and category of graffiti. He stares at the facade again, gets a bit closer, and takes a picture of the graffiti. Before putting the smartphone back in his pocket, he repeats this operation for every graffiti there on the spot. Tom then goes back to his vehicle and opens the rear gate. He takes out several traffic cones and pluts them down so as to mark off the zone of his intervention (figure 1). That area extends from his van to the affected part of the facade. He then places a sign on the pavement reading, "graffiti removal work site."

Figure 1. Setting up the intervention (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



This is the typical series of actions that has initiated any graffiti-removal intervention in Paris since at latest the start of the 2000s. Although municipal anti-graffiti policies have been extensively analyzed for over three decades, these situated activities are largely overlooked if not completely ignored. Indeed so far, research on the fight against graffiti, and on the

organization of graffiti removal itself, have mainly drawn on political discourses and processes of regulation. Principles, and sometimes financial means, have been at the center of such an approach, one which investigates anti-graffiti policies from the point of view of documents that circulate among municipal offices, police stations and courts. What happens in the streets, how the buildings themselves are affected by these policies, has remained an analytical blind-spot of most studies—as if nothing important was taking place there; nothing political.

Following up on the call made by Latham and McCormack (2004) for “re-materializing” the analysis of the urban, we propose to reconnect the general principles of political discourses and legal documents to the seemingly mundane practices of graffiti removal. In doing so we claim that the technical operations performed by graffiti removers, their know-how, their daily routines, as well as the various challenges that they deal with to actually get rid of graffiti, play a crucial role in the practical implementation of anti-graffiti policies. The concrete conditions of graffiti removal are a key feature of the day-to-day production, and reproduction, of a specific urban order. As the professionals who utilize a “battery of maintenance techniques” to preserve St. Ann’s Church in Manchester (Edensor 2011), or the nightly street cleaners who concretely ensure that a Newcastle neighborhood can return to daytime “normalcy” after the agitated experience of its nocturnal parties (Shaw 2014), graffiti removers in Paris perform a visible infrastructural work that constantly and repeatedly makes a certain version of the City of Light possible. Such work, we argue, is by no means less political than the one accomplished by municipal and legal teams. It is however *differently* political, since to slogans, rules and categories it adds tools, bodies and a wide range of materials. Furthermore, beyond offices of all kinds, it extends to the very streets and reaches building facades and city surfaces.

To investigate the political dimension of concrete graffiti-removal operations, we draw on the notion of “material politics,” a notion that has been articulated by Law and Mol (2008) to analyze the role of boiling pig-swill in the control of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK. Both the material dimension of the social (Callon 1986; Latour 1992) and “the political charge of things” (Braun and Whatmore 2010, xxvi) have been discussed for many years in philosophy, political theory, and studies of science and technology. Law and Mol’s conception of “material politics” explicitly aims at charting a path which starts from the interest in artifactual politics, as developed in science and technology studies, but broadens its scope beyond the ordering processes performed through stabilized objects. To do so they invite us to focus on *techniques* and their generative dimensions. By considering forms of action that are socio-material in the first place, instead of insisting on the role of “non-humans,” they add a dynamic and practical perspective to the investigation of the performance of things. Furthermore, thinking in terms of such material politics implies that we take the multiplicity and uncertainty of materials into consideration, without prejudging their consistency or focusing on “sealed” artifacts or unique things. This twofold shift significantly decenters the study of ordering processes.

In her investigation of the material politics of ship disposal, Gregson (2011) has further expanded Law and Mol’s approach, claiming that the study of the political charge of techniques should not be restricted to situations in which the latter have become a sensible and publicly debated topic (as was boiling pig-swill in the UK during the 2000s, in Law and Mol (2008) paper). Opening up the “quieter sense of material politics” (Gregson 2011, 140) is crucial in taking hitherto unnoticed and under-discussed aspects of mundane situations into

consideration, and casts a new light on less disputed activities—which is the case with graffiti removal, a repetitive daily operation largely taken for granted in innumerable cities.

In line with this approach we want to question the fight against graffiti not only as a cultural matter, a symbolic politics that would only target unwanted signs in the city, but also as a material and technical issue. Such a perspective will allow us to foreground overlooked aspects of the ordering of urban reality that are at play in graffiti removal. We will especially describe two types of action that graffiti removers perform in order to enact a specific urban order. The first one, *making differences*, consists of physically separating graffiti from surfaces. In contrast, the second one, *making similarities*, involves rendering surfaces of the urban environment similar or consistent with each other. Both actions are never given in advance. They draw on different removal techniques (chemical solvents, high-pressure water, sand-blasting, or paint) that generate uncertain results, and go with material issues and visual concerns.

To do so, we draw on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Paris, during which we gathered a variety of qualitative material. We shadowed graffiti removers during their workday, taking photos and asking questions throughout their interventions. We also conducted detailed interviews with the people in charge of graffiti removal in the Cleanliness and Water Department of the City, as well as with people from the municipal graffiti removal team, and the directors and employees of the two major contracted companies that specialized in graffiti removal in Paris at the time. Finally, we gathered numerous legal, contractual and corporate internal documents from both the municipality and these companies.

After specifying the way that graffiti removal is discussed in the academic literature, we shall give insights into the main features of the Paris graffiti removal program. Then we describe three main aspects of the material politics of graffiti removal. We first show that removal interventions imply that the removers find their own ways into complex material entanglements. We then insist on two ontological operations that are performed through removal techniques: the differentiation between graffiti and their surfaces, and the production of continuity through chromatic consistency. In the final section we discuss how exploring material politics helps us to reexamine the urban ordering process at stake in graffiti removal.

Struggling against graffiti

The fight against graffiti has been largely appreciated through the study of institutional resistance and criminalization processes. From this standpoint graffiti is defined as evidence of disorder (Cresswell 1992; Ley and Cybriwsky 1974), and how municipal authorities respond to it has been through an increased control over urban landscapes (Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock 2012; Ferrell 1996). This perspective mainly focuses on repressive measures, and shows how most of them are connected to a specific doctrine known as the “broken windows” thesis (Austin 2001; Halsey and Young 2002; Kramer 2012), a political framework which has gained more and more importance, notably in the implementation of so-called “zero-tolerance” policies in numerous cities around the world (Shobe and Conklin 2018; Stewart and Kortright 2015). While these studies have staged the “graffiti problem” as a matter of elimination only, others have highlighted how the perpetuation of a particular moral, social and aesthetic order of the city also draws on enduring ambivalent meanings attached to graffiti as a practice (McAuliffe and Iveson 2011; Young 2010) and goes through

the promotion of peculiar graffiti initiatives, considered as “urban art” or “street art” that is deemed useful to economic growth and tourist attraction (Andron 2018; Kramer 2017; McAuliffe 2012; Vaslin 2021).

Only recently have scholars started to investigate graffiti removal itself. Extending the development of critical analyses of programs inspired by the “broken windows” thesis, some studies have investigated the specificities of regulatory strategies in various cities. Halsey and Young (2002) notably developed a typology of municipal actions in which removal operations can be differently combined with three other attitudes (criminalization, welfarism, acceptance). Comparing the responses to graffiti presence in four Australian states, they offered a fine-grained analysis of the spatial distribution of removal policies in diverse jurisdictions, cities and neighborhoods. In their study of Portland, San Francisco and Seattle (all on the U.S. West Coast), Shobe and Conklin (2018) have significantly emphasized a much less-known aspect: the annual financial costs of graffiti removal initiatives.

Even though graffiti removal has been more directly studied, its technical and material features remain largely unknown. As Shobe and Conklin have noted: “Fewer studies directly examine the activities related to removing and preventing graffiti’s presence on the landscape; in this way, graffiti abatement is relatively understudied” (Shobe and Conklin, 625). Though regularly mentioned, graffiti removers, their tools and techniques, skills and gestures, are not directly considered in the growing scholarship on graffiti and street art (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017; Ross 2016). And even among the important renewal of scholarship and the multiplication of “emerging research issues” (Ross et al. 2017) on graffiti, the practicalities of municipal directives and socio-material interventions that enact anti-graffiti policies in the streets are still overlooked.

This is precisely what an approach in terms of material politics offers to investigate. It allows us to apprehend graffiti removal not only as a policy but also as a *technique* whose analysis requires us to observe rules in action, to pay careful attention to bodies and tools at work, and to follow the transformations of materials. In doing so, we contribute to two lines of work. First, we supplement the burgeoning research focused on the technical, material and aesthetic side of graffiti removal. Analyzing the militarization of everyday urban life, Iveson (2010) stressed the innovative technologies and operational techniques dedicated to graffiti removal, from chemical solvents, nonstick coatings to directional surveillance camera, real-time monitoring systems, and even spray paint acoustic or smell sensors. In their ecological study of graffiti and abatement as two deeply relational activities, Stewart and Kortright (2015) have tracked the “cracks” left by graffiti removing techniques in Sacramento, California, investigating the very materiality of paint, colors and shades as visual clues to the discontinuities and tensions at stake in the city ordering process. Arnold (2019) went a step further, focusing on the particular aesthetic tensions that result from zero-tolerance policies which are at play in the materialities of the city, more specifically in Oslo.

Secondly, our approach in terms of material politics fuels the analytical gesture initiated by scholars who investigate cities as urban assemblages (Farías and Bender 2010; McFarlane 2011). Decentering the traditional objects of urban studies, this stream of research underlines the socio-material heterogeneity of the urban fabric and its continuous transformations. Rather than stable wholes, cities are here apprehended as composite entities constantly in the making, and urban orderings are explored as processual, relational and multiple. Focusing on the generative dimensions of graffiti removal techniques, we

contribute to this perspective, and foreground overlooked aspects of the ordering of urban reality at work on its very surfaces.

The Parisian graffiti removal program

Numerous studies of anti-graffiti programs interestingly suggest that zero-tolerance policies were reinforced in many cities during the early 2000s. Following the precursor initiatives of New York City (Austin 2001; Cresswell 1992; Kramer 2012) and some Australian city councils (Halsey and Young 2002), the cities of San Francisco, Portland, Seattle (Shobe and Conklin 2018), Stockholm (Kimvall 2013), Ottawa (Landry 2017), Oslo (Arnold 2019), and Paris (Denis and Pontille 2021; Vaslin 2017), all dramatically intensified their removal policies through highly formalized and coordinated operations carried out on a daily basis.

Although the fight against graffiti in Paris is part of a long history of preventing unsolicited inscriptions there (Artières 2017; Vaslin 2017), it has become a priority since 1999 with the launch of a “clean walls operation.” This ambitious initiative, introduced by Paris Mayor Jean Tiberi in response to the proliferation of graffiti in the 1990s, was inspired by a “zero tolerance” policy conducted by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in New York City at the time. Explicitly driven by the “broken windows” thesis, this policy launched an unwavering intransigence toward graffiti, which were equated with visual signs of public disorder and associated with a “feeling of insecurity.” These aspects have been shared among most anti-graffiti policies around the world. The implementation of a zero tolerance policy is however, despite its international echoes, always related to a local history, and the Paris anti-graffiti program came with its own municipal concerns, key players, and specific aesthetic criteria (Denis and Pontille 2019, 2021).

The program went along with various specifications. First, while previously being the exclusive domain of the city’s cleaning services, graffiti removal was largely outsourced to contractors (initially one, nowadays four), each of them assigned to different areas of the city. Secondly, initially an obligation that every building owner had to fulfill, removing graffiti became a free service, one made possible by a new municipal by-law that eased contractors’ access to the facades of privately owned buildings. Thirdly, the multiyear contracts (from 3 to 5 years) signed by companies are performance-based, setting a maximum threshold of so much graffiti presence in each area, on specific sites (the building facades up to 4 meters above street level), and a 10-days deadline to remove graffiti after its detection. To control the achievement of these objectives mandatory monthly inspections are handled by the graffiti removal municipal team. Fourthly, and lastly, contracted companies are in charge of removal interventions while residents or building owners are solely involved in graffiti detection.

This anti-graffiti program is largely rooted in a long-term concern for cleanliness that arose under the impulse of André Malraux during the mid-20th century. In that period building surfaces became a crucial part of the city’s cultural heritage, something to be preserved. Rather than a fight against delinquency—as the legal and police actions against graffiti writers are not managed by the municipality of Paris—the current graffiti removal policy was implemented for the sake of aesthetic consistency (Vaslin 2017). These visual considerations are notably translated in the maximalist definition of graffiti that appears in the technical specifications of the successive contractual documents: “Graffiti is considered to be any graphic inscription made on a surface using staining agents of any kind, regardless of the method of application. Any spillage of paint, whether accidental or

deliberate, falls within this definition of graffiti” (Bidding Documents, Technical Specifications 2018, 5). Interestingly the concern for aesthetic harmony relates not only to graffiti but also to removal itself, notably regarding the methods that are considered acceptable for each kind of urban surface. Annexed to the aforementioned contracts is a table with prohibited “removal technique/graffitied surface pairs,” and authorized combinations. It reads, for instance, that sandblasting cannot be used on polished stone, marble or brick, and similarly that the application of chemical solvents on a plaster with minerals, or tiles and ceramic, is banned. Any damage to the surface due to noncompliance with these instructions results in the company’s paying restoration costs. This table summarizes the singular concern for facades heritage preservation that is constitutive of the material politics of graffiti removal in Paris.

The technical specifications are not enough, however, to seamlessly implement concrete graffiti removal operations. Even though removing graffiti is defined in documents pointing out what and how to perform it, the political and aesthetic singularities of the Paris anti-graffiti program have also to be materialized in the streets. As the introductory scene suggests, carefully watching and touching are, for instance, key to feeling of the material properties of the various things present, exploring their resistance and their fragility, and choosing an appropriate removal technique. Let’s go back to Tom’s course of action to discover what the graffiti removers actually experience before the graffitied surfaces.

Material entanglements

After having clearly defined the site of intervention, Tom goes to the first graffiti he is about to remove from a shop window. He carefully runs his fingers over the graffitied window. As he explains to us, he touches the surface to feel the thickness of the ink and to infer its composition, as well as to detect the possible presence of an adhesive film. After several passes he confirms the absence of plastic-coated film; which means that chemical solvents can be used. But he keeps touching the glass for another reason: as he tells us, the ink is sometimes mixed with acid which corrodes the glass. Consequently, even though it is possible to remove the ink, the inscription may remain partly visible or even clearly legible. After a slight hesitation Tom decides to give it a try. He goes to his vehicle and comes back with a chemical solvent canister, a green scraper (a sort of dish-scouring sponge) and clean rags. He pours a small quantity of the pink and granular product on his scraper, smears it onto the window by making small circular sweeps, and lets it react with the graffiti for a short time. After a few seconds he resumes his circular movements without pressing too much on the surface with the scraper, until the ink liquefies, the letters deform, and the assemblage begins to form a dark blue paste (figure 2). Tom seems quite reassured: “It’s good, actually! I can feel the ink coming off and it’s not rough underneath. With my fingertips [protected by gloves] I can feel it’s smooth.” He continues to make circular sweeps with his scraper, then takes a clean rag and starts to remove the pasty mixture. Once only a small part of it remains, he takes another clean rag and removes the rest by drawing down straight strips from top to bottom. The window is now free of graffiti and Tom exclaims in satisfaction: “I thought this one was going to be difficult, but in fact it was easy. You never really know what’s going to resist or not.”

Figure 2. Making the graffiti react (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



Among the various things at play here, two interrelated aspects are most significant. First, we can see that removing graffiti is not a straightforward operation, merely consisting in applying a pre-established technique to a marred surface. Rather, each intervention comes as a performance which constantly requires a fine-tuned, peculiar pace. This particular removal intervention, we can see, aimed at making the graffiti components react while preserving the window composition and transparency. Had the action been too light or too short, the inscription would have remained there, while had it been too long or too vigorous, the surface would have been permanently damaged. In such a performance the instruments and products composing each graffiti-removal technique play an active, essential role. Successfully removing this graffiti depended on the amount of product to be applied, on adjusting the use of the scraper and rags, and on a short wait for the solvent to act sufficiently without it affecting the glass. And the consideration of the specific transforming instruments and products may, on purpose or not, be part of the process. After his intervention Tom made this constant concern explicit to us:

“The choice of rags is important. They mustn’t scratch the paint. The recent purchase order the managers made doesn’t work, as the new cloths damage the surfaces. It’s the same with the scrapers, by the way. I keep some old, tired ones that hardly scratch anymore, for cases like this one.” (Tom, a graffiti remover).

Removing graffiti is thus a matter of tempo, of finding the right pace in the gestural coordination, of proportionate alternation between the removal products and the reactions they are likely to engender between the graffiti and its surface.

The second aspect lies in the heterogeneity of the elements at play. During their interventions graffiti removers encounter a wide range of materials: in the above scene, glass, potentially plastic or acid, chemical solvents, the inscription ink, rags and scraper residues; in other situations, graffiti removers may encounter wood, marble, concrete,

plaster, bricks, water, sand, cement, stones, graffiti inks and paints, the paints that originally cover surfaces... Among these heterogeneous materials some appear as part of the graffiti to be removed, while others seem to be part of its surface (here, the shop window). In contrast, some others do not automatically fit with this binary categorization, and their status remains uncertain. Much more than facing stabilized objects with clearly identifiable characteristics, the graffiti removers constantly deal with an “ecology of materials” (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2012). They explore bodily and sense these various materials throughout the removal operation, and are concerned with what actually emerges from it. Doing so, they apprehend the materials of graffitied surfaces, not for their respective physical or chemical properties, but for what they generate in relation with each other, as part of “entangled agencies” (Edensor 2011). This crucial ecological appraisal is explicitly underlined by Tom when he says that he feels the ink “coming” without any perceptible roughness under his fingertips.

Removing graffiti does not therefore amount to identifying a static matter that would have to be removed, but instead requires one to be attentive to the active relationships and continuous modulations in a heterogeneous and “vibrant” matter (Bennett 2010). It is during these sensible encounters that the material politics of graffiti removal are enacted in the streets. Experienced in front of each building facade, every intervention comes with the challenge of removing the graffiti from its inscription surface, even though the materials are intimately mixed and interact with each other. These material entanglements regularly give rise to uncertain struggles, within which the distinction between the materials to be preserved and those to be eliminated is played out. In the next sections we will see that removing graffiti, or more precisely performing its invisibility, in such complex material ecology implies two different actions—the production of *differences* and the production of *similarities* – which both involve dealing with “political charges” (Braun and Whatmore 2010) of removal techniques in the aesthetic ordering of urban reality.

Making differences: separating graffiti from a surface

John moves toward a spray-can graffiti that appears on an ashlar wall. Staring at the graffitied surface, he runs his fingers over it several times to gauge the thickness of the paint and its penetration into the stone. He then puts on his gloves and mask, unwinds the bulky cable from the sandblasting gun on the pavement, and starts the compressor at the rear of the vehicle. He grabs a bag of sand, opens it with a trowel, and positions it above the tank. Once everything is ready John again takes up the sandblasting gun and tests the pressure: “Always check where the wind is coming from! Otherwise you might throw everything at people, or take the jet in the face!” Keeping the pressure toward the pavement, he waits for the water to be mixed with the sand before directing his lance toward the facade. He starts at the top to soak the graffitied surface, then slowly goes down in a pattern of zigzags or circles (figure 3). Despite the high pressure, the sand and water splashes seem to be barely having any effect. This operation is delicate: while repeated spray passes are necessary to remove the graffiti, each new movement also raises the risk of irreversibly carving the stone. After several moderate runs the presence of the graffiti is much weakened. Then John stops, removes his mask, and watches this part of the facade carefully. He feels that he cannot do any better. Though the graffiti is very faded, it has not disappeared completely.

Figure 3. Sandblasting a graffiti (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



This new scene shows how making differences is at the core of graffiti-removal interventions. First of all John engaged with the diversity of materials in order to differentiate them progressively. While jetting the mixture of water and sand, he was particularly sensible to the gradual transformations of both the texture of the paint and the granular structure of the stone. The separation of one from the other took place in successive passes of the sandblaster, from the material interactions at play at one movement to the next. Contrary to what the common expression “a graffiti *on* a wall” suggests, any removal intervention is far from handling two clearly recognizable, stable entities—a graffiti made of paint with precise delimitations and a mere wall as its flat and smooth inscription surface (Andron 2019). Rather, removing graffiti is a delicate operation that involves composing with constantly intertwining and changing materials (Barad 2007; Ingold 2012), and from which two distinct, isolated entities are gradually enacted. The production of a discrepancy between what a wall is and what a graffiti is occurs as a situated achievement.

As the above scene also illustrates, making differences is never easy nor is it played out in advance. In spite of the provoked reactions John failed to remove the graffiti fully, as it remains barely perceptible or even clearly visible, according to the brightness. Yet no precise moment or gesture suggested to him when the materials composing the graffiti can no longer be detached from those forming the building facade. Each new pass of his removal tool constituted a test in an iterative process that remained uncertain. This shows that making differences is an ambiguous practice, performed through situated trials and judgments, rather than a clear-cut operation. In many respects removal interventions come with resistances that are difficult to anticipate, and sometimes they end in a different outcome than that expected. Moreover, even when it is successful, the differentiation of materials may go with the visual persistence of graffiti paint or ink on urban surfaces (Stewart and Kortright 2015). If separation is a tricky and never completed process, this is

due to its inescapable reverse: to go too far in attempts to make differences means simultaneously to remove some material from the surface, that is, to more or less damage it.

Among the outcomes of interventions, one is a well-identified result in the professional jargon of removers: they refer to it as a “ghost.” Commonly emerging on porous surfaces treated with sandblasting, the ghost image can result from the performance of any of the removal techniques:

“Ghost is a kind of graffiti skeleton that doesn’t disappear, for several reasons. Because some graffiti come with paint, acid or Indian ink, on very porous surfaces, it penetrates, and thus it’s very difficult to fully clean it off. Yet some ghosts can be caught up with, while others are definitive.” (Operations manager in a Paris graffiti removal company).

Even though a large amount of ink or paint has been separated from the surface and removed, the persistence of graffiti shapes stands between an ephemeral presence and a perceptible absence in the process of making differences (figure 4). Some graffiti still haunt building facades and charge the urban surfaces with a particular history and aesthetics (Arnold 2019; DeSilvey 2012).

Figure 4. Ghosts left behind after removal interventions (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



The presence of a ghost does not mean that the surface is left without any solutions, though. As mentioned earlier, in Paris the legal dispositions for accessing building facades were modified by a municipal by-law so that contractors could intervene regularly without the owners’ prior authorization. Under these circumstances two ways of making differences are considered when faced with a ghost. First, a graffitied surface can see its status changed by joining a new administrative category. Defined as “irrecoverable,” it is excluded from intervention sites, since its “nature or state of degradation do not allow the implementation of elimination methods listed and provided for in this contract” (Bidding documents, technical specifications 2018, 23). Pushed to their technical limit, removal

interventions are suspended, even though the surface still displays traces of “graffiti.”¹ Secondly, a further and more radical shift can occur with the material transformation of a concerned facade, in whole or in part, with its owners’ agreement. For instance, a marble surface that has been graffitied again and again and no longer supports the sandblasting technique can be completely repainted. Such a shift in its very material composition leads to this freshly revamped facade being handled with a technique suitable for “painted surfaces.”

This generative dynamic of graffiti-removal techniques is indicative of the material politics at play. Making differences in the material ecology of cities amounts to performing re-specifications of urban entities that get materially, administratively and politically transformed in the process. It simultaneously entails bringing particular entities into existence directly in the streets, notably a removed graffiti, a clean wall, or some partial achievements such as a remaining ghost. In addition to these enacted differentiations, the ordering of urban reality at stake in graffiti removal also involves a seemingly opposite process: namely, the production of visual consistency on the surfaces of the city.

Making similarities: chromatic harmonization

Mike stands in front of a painted building facade that displays a spray-can graffiti. He stares at the graffitied surface and touches it carefully. After going to his vehicle he comes back with a roller, a pole and three buckets of paint. He begins by coating the graffiti with a thin layer of light grey paint. At this stage, the graffiti still appears in transparency. He explains to us his method: “For this kind of case I don’t prepare the blend in a separate bucket, I do it directly on the wall. I don’t quite go to the edge, so I have a marker of the original color.” Mike then opens the bucket of dark beige paint, dips the same grey roller into it, then immediately spreads a thick layer of paint in two horizontal stripes over the light grey he has just passed over. He repeats the same operations with the white paint, drawing several horizontal stripes, some below the light grey ones and others overlapping the dark beige and light grey ones (figure 5). By moving the pole with vertical movements, he then blends the three colors on areas where grey, dark beige or white color were initially dominant. The mixture gradually takes on a uniform, homogeneous shade, one almost identical to the other parts of the facade. To refine the corners of the specific zone on which he’s painting, Mike picks up a brush and coats it directly onto his roller, with the final color mixture still on it. Now fully covered, the graffiti is removed. This intervention is still not quite finished though. Mike takes another bucket of paint out of his vehicle and heads for the fully graffitied switchgear cubicle just a few meters away. He first cleans the flat surfaces with a clean rag, opens the can of brown paint, which is identical to that of the switchgear cubicle, and then he comments: “This is a standard color in the city of Paris, used for a whole range of street furniture.” He then paints each corner with a brush and rolls it over the entire switchgear cubicle. After just a few movements, it has taken on a uniform color.

¹ This withdrawal is considered temporary, since a surface can be included again among the regular surfaces, especially following restoration work at the owners’ expense.

Figure 5. Repainting by strokes (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



This scene shows that covering graffiti with paint, the most commonly used and apparently the simplest “removal” technique, is still not a straightforward operation. Colors matter: some are standardized, such as the specific brown covering the surface of the switchgear cubicle. They are then available in buckets, ready to use. It also suits some cases, with retailers’ facades whose colors are normalized. Graffiti removers can get the standard reference of their color (the RAL codification) from the owner and order the exact paint to cover their walls. Compared to the daily number of interventions, however, such situations are quite rare. Unlike a painter who can compose as he pleases with a wide range of colors, the official palette of graffiti removers, authorized by the city of Paris, includes only six of them: white, ivory, beige, grey, black and “greige” (a mixture of grey and beige). This limitation is intended to maintain the visual harmony of facades, which is the historical foundation of the urban aesthetics of the City of Light (Vaslin 2017, 305–313). Those authorized hues form the primary colors of Paris (white, beige, ivory for the facades, grey for

the roofs, and black for the asphalt), from which the graffiti removers must work in adjusting their painting technique.

Removing graffiti is therefore as much a problem of elimination as it is a matter of chromatic homogeneity. Interventions “must respect in all cases, the initial color of the surface, the nature and the aspect of the initial painting (mat, gloss)” (Bidding Documents, Technical Specifications 2018, 15). Yet, the real colors of Paris surfaces, the ones that graffiti removers encounter every day, in fact vary significantly from one neighborhood to another, or along the same street, and even on the same facade. There are numerous reasons for such variations, from sun and rain exposure, to pollution, or previous unexpected interventions, which thus make every surface of the city quite unique. These idiosyncrasies make the effect of harmonization particularly difficult to achieve. Far from being self-evident, sameness is the outcome of the situated production of similarities in the heterogeneous chromatic ecology of Paris. Graffiti removers perform such operations through two main acts. The first one consists in finding the right hue, that is the one that matches the surface’s color at the time the graffiti appeared: generally it’s a patinated, altered color which can differ a lot from the “historical” one, and thus from the official palette. Even the graffiti removers who master this operation, as Mike did in the previous scene, explained to us that it is not only a matter of technical skills.

“Sometimes finding the right hue is a nightmare. It doesn’t come. You don’t know why, but you don’t catch it. You spend an hour doing nothing, and then the next day, you try again and there, in five minutes, bingo! It’s good. That’s how it is, no question about it.” (Tom, graffiti remover).

Just as the active relationships between materials are tested out for any surface to be separated from a graffiti, the chromatic correspondence between the added paint and the surface is progressively achieved through small adjustments. The color that results from each covering intervention is the outcome of a mixture of hues, those of the graffitied facade and those which are added during the operation. In this process a color becomes anything but a static property. It is moving and temporary, sometimes elusive. Even though it is possible to “catch” the right hue on the fly and keep it, graffiti removers may sometimes lose it, or hardly bring it back.² Such a provisional outcome means that the distinctive value of colors is always relational: the perception of each one varies with the tone and nuance of those surrounding it.

Secondly, unlike artists covering a canvas or artisans repainting a whole wall, graffiti removers intervene on a small section of a surface. As Mike reminded us several times over, “we come to remove graffiti, not for a facade renovation!” Hence, covering graffiti over with paint calls for defining a restricted work-zone. During interventions the architectural configuration of the facades, such as the presence of windows, shutters, curtains, borders, edges, grooves or moldings, helps graffiti removers circumscribe such zone. While this demarcation is intended to save paint, it also aims at making interventions as imperceptible as possible. This concern is so that some removers have made it their philosophy of the trade, “My idea is that when we leave, one has the impression that nothing has happened, as if there had been no graffiti and as if we did not intervene” (John, a graffiti remover). Such consideration gives an insight into what making similarities may amount to. Beyond the disappearance of graffiti, the actual removal work itself, from traces left behind by the

² Experiments to automatically determine the right color match have been implemented by the Department of Sanitation in New York City with special trucks since the late 1990s; cf. Kramer (2017, 112–113).

interventions to the removers' body itself, has to remain unnoticed. Despite the recurring presence of graffiti, the building facades would ideally appear untouched, to generate its own invisibility.

This concern for unnoticeable intervention highlights another aspect of the production of similarities. If the color remains too visible on its zone of application, the visual homogeneity of the facades is somewhat impaired. Like the “ghosts” previously mentioned, removers have coined several expressions, such as “squares” or “plasmas,” to stigmatize traces left behind by painting interventions. These marks are also identified in the technical specifications in the 2018 bidding documents, as “cleanness stains” (figures 6 and 7), an oxymoron that perfectly expresses the tensions at play in the production of chromatic similarities required to remove graffiti successfully.

Figure 6. A selection of cleanness stains (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



Figure 7. Some cleanness stains with ghosts (© J. Denis & D. Pontille)



In the Paris anti-graffiti program these stains (identified during monthly inspections) are subject to fines. They also may end in litigation from building owners who consider their facade has been degraded. This curious expression underlines how much the Paris facades, promoted to the rank of heritage under the impetus of André Malraux early in the 20th century, are called to contribute to the cultural influence of the City of Light by remaining without stains—that is, not only free of graffiti, but also clear of any other traces, even “clean” ones.

The chromatic homogeneity emphasized by the Paris anti-graffiti program is thus not solely a visual matter. The production of similarities is performed through a subtle art of blending colors together but also of composing with the geometrical properties of each facade. A generative process, this technique can fail though, and may end in unwanted traces or stains that can have economic and legal consequences.

Discussion and conclusion

While previous research has already highlighted the fluidity of urban materiality (Fariás and Bender 2010; Latham and McCormack 2004; McFarlane 2011), only a few have examined the techniques used to intervene in the visual fabric of cities (Edensor 2011; Shaw 2014). By investigating the material politics of graffiti removal in Paris, we have aimed at shedding light on an overlooked aspect of the production of urban texture. In this exploration we showed that graffiti removal is a complex intervention made up of technical gestures and ontological re-specifications, which are accomplished within the material entanglements of city surfaces. This situated intervention draws on two delicate operations: separating graffiti from the surfaces and producing visual similarities. Even though they are generally

performed distinctively these two actions go hand in hand, and are the two sides of a same coin, dedicated to the eradication of unwanted inscriptions, either through their disentanglement or their covering up. If a graffiti is particularly recalcitrant and separation from the surface proves impossible, painting remains an option. But, as we have shown, neither making differences nor making similarities is a simple technique that leaves the texture of the city intact.

Removing graffiti is a generative process from which the urban visual order comes into play. While some materials of the graffitied surfaces (ink, paint, brick, concrete, cement, plaster, varnish) are removed, whether on purpose or not, other substances (water, chemical solvents, sand, paints) and shapes (“ghosts,” or “cleanliness stains”) are added to the facades. A material, ontological and political gesture, graffiti removal engenders two different entities, a graffiti and a graffiti-free surface, which both emerge from the uncertain entanglements between the absence of graffiti marks and the presence of removal traces. It materializes urban continuity, not as a static and inert reality, but through the slight differences brought into being by the generative part of repetition itself (Deleuze 1994).

Such an investigation invites us to respecify what the term “removal” (and its vernacular synonym “buff”) generally conveys. Numerous earlier studies of anti-graffiti policies have insisted that “removal strategies are founded upon the assumptions that graffiti is a blot on the visual field and that its erasure returns the urban landscape to a pristine condition” (Halsey and Young 2002, 175). In this vein they have convincingly documented how graffiti is articulated in official discourses as disruptive instances of the visual and social harmony of the city. However, they hardly have examined the actual outcomes of this attempt to a return to identical surfaces. Only a few have stressed the discontinuities and tensions in the practices of urban control (Shobe and Banis 2014; Stewart and Kortright 2015) and highlighted the peculiar aesthetics provoked by zero-tolerance policies (Arnold 2019).

By pointing to the techniques of differences and similarities directly performed on city surfaces, our study helps to go a step further. It underlines the transformative iterations at the core of urban ordering processes. Fully or barely visible, coined as “ghosts” or “cleanliness stains,” residues, mismatched hues, or “cracks” (Stewart and Kortright 2015), the traces left behind after graffiti-removal interventions compose material and visual outcomes that are added to unsolicited inscriptions. They are constitutive of the different layers of urban texture. As the repetition of removal interventions transforms the envelope of many buildings at a frequent rate, graffiti removal neither brings the urban landscape back to its “initial” state, nor is it a zero-sum operation. It actively contributes to the dynamics of urban assemblages (Farías and Bender 2010; McFarlane 2011) through iterative material variations that keep the city’s surfaces in continual move.

These transformations have already attracted some attention, even leading to categorization attempts. In his experimental documentary entitled *The subconscious art of graffiti removal*, Matt McCormick (2001) has promoted the removers’ productions as an art form in their own right, and distinguished different styles: “symmetrical” or “conservative,” “ghosting,” “radical” and “redactive.” Subsequently Avalon Kalin (2015), a graphic designer who inspired that documentary, has introduced two new categories: “non-removals” and “reactionary.” More recently Burke and Corcoran (2017), respectively a plastic painter and a photographer, have further refined this typology, adding the “maltreated” and the “etched.” And a complementary set of categories has been freshly published by an ex-graffiti writer as part of a series of “bookzines” dedicated to the streetscape (Servi 2022). By identifying

specific types of removal traces and shapes, these categories give them an artistic significance, explicitly placed in the lineage of art pieces by Kazimir Malevitch or Mark Rothko. This gesture comprehends the removal work through an evolving framework, which articulates graphic forms to some techniques, and acknowledges their aesthetic value fully. It extends the already identified “symbiotic” relationship (Shobe and Banis 2014, 603) and “layered conversations” (Stewart and Kortright 2015, 85) between graffiti removers and writers and street artists. In line with our investigation, such a focus on the techniques used by graffiti removers, from municipal workers to anti-graffiti activists (Good 2011), points out one important aspect of their material politics: they produce painting performances in the streets.

Among many others, graffiti writers and removers contribute to the texture of the city. Investigating the material politics of graffiti removal opens a reconsideration for the dynamics of urban ordering. By bringing their own strokes to the city’s surfaces, with chemical products, abrasive matters or layers of paint, graffiti removers act in an iterative way with writers, the ones covering up the productions of the others, again and again. In parallel to the “war” against graffiti, fueled by a competitive vision between writers and removers (Austin 2001; Shobe and Banis 2014; Stewart and Kortright 2015), our exploration sets the stage for acknowledging their unintended subtle collaborations and successive graphic compositions. As erasure is a common practice in the graffiti game, to go over “toys” or competitors (Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Schacter 2008), some writers and street artists also anticipate, or even provoke, municipal removal interventions in their own actions (Pontille 2020).³ By considering the two practices in combination we can better understand that the material and visual orders of the city are ceaselessly reenacted through the vibrations of performances of differences and similarities. Writing and removing graffiti both contribute to the visual becoming of urban ecologies.

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³ Note how the street artist Mobstr places inscriptions which dialogue directly with the graffiti removers, so they will participate fully in the pictorial offering: [https:// huh.art/acceptable-shade-of-grey](https://huh.art/acceptable-shade-of-grey) or <https://huh.art/red>

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